

# Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

EVARISTO BASCHENIS

(1617 - 1677)

*A Concert*

Oil on canvas, 44<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 61<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in (114 x 157 cm)



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

## PROVENANCE

Sotheby's, New York, 12 January 1989, lot 62, as Jan van Bijlert (Utrecht, 1598/1603–1671); private collection.

## LITERATURE

Unpublished

The *Concert* presented here brings together an ensemble of six players who turn to the beholder striking elegantly sober poses and evoking an anti-Baroque aesthetic. The most direct impact comes from the face of the man playing a *viola da braccio bassa*: he is seated in the immediate foreground, in front of the others, as if leading them, and gazes proudly at the author of this painting, and therefore at us. The other musicians, except for the two on the right, also look out frontally. One almost has the feeling that in order to be portrayed they had to be interrupted while playing, as they turn towards the painter with a hint of embarrassment. The result is a measured scene that unostentatiously and immediately relates us to its subjects, prompting our curiosity as to their identity through an exchange of gazes.

The theme of the concert was part of the iconographic culture that spread among cultivated private patrons of art during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when music held its own place among typically aristocratic forms of entertainment. In this instance, the presence of a Spanish guitar, played by the second man from the left, and the group's relatively simple clothing, situate the scene in a context of domestic secular music<sup>1</sup>. Apart from the guitar and *viola da braccio bassa*, we find a harp and another string instrument requiring plucking (probably a lute), thus forming a canonical ensemble of bass instruments to support the two treble ones: a violin and a "flautino". The interest for the painstaking reproduction of these instruments is clear from specific details such as the relative thickness of the strings of the viola and violin, and the signs of discolouring in the wood of the violin's top plate, to the left of the fingerboard, where the violinist holds the instrument. One can also see – again on the violin, near the bow – traces of excess "Greek pitch", the rosin applied to the bow hair to enhance the friction between it and the strings. The painter even describes the leftover strands of the harp strings and viola, showing us how they create disorderly curls at the top of the instruments.

This fascinating *Concert* was auctioned at Sotheby's in New York in 1989, attributed to Jan van Bijlert<sup>2</sup>, the Dutch painter active in Rome during the 1620s. This Utrecht-born follower of Caravaggio was indeed the author of several compositions with musical subjects, but such an attribution cannot be supported on grounds of style. It is thanks to Enrico De Pascale and Francesco Frangi that the authorship of the painting has now been rightly returned to Evaristo Baschenis (Bergamo, 1617-1677), the inventor of the musical still life; and the two scholars have identified features that are typical of the Lombard painter as regards basic cultural context, artistic influences and iconographical interests.

First and foremost, the face of the violinist on the left reflects the art of Gian Giacomo Barbelli (Crema,

1606-1656), in whose workshop Baschenis spent fundamental years of training, until 1643. The older painter's legacy was combined with that of the principal portrait-painter of the seventeenth century in Bergamo, Carlo Ceresa (1609-1679).

Ceresa's significant influence is noted by the scholars both in the painting technique which favoured thin brushwork that allows the preparation of the canvas to emerge (this is especially visible in the brown of the background) and in the "raw realism" of the figures. The resemblance with prototypes by Ceresa is also clear from the meticulous rendering of chiaroscuro passages and a particular predilection for "the use of a uniform, notably compact application of pigment, giving clothes and trimmings a stiffened appearance", as for example in the violinist's red coat.

To corroborate the attribution of the *Concert* to Evaristo Baschenis, De Pascale and Frangi draw close parallels with the few paintings with figures that are part of the painter's oeuvre: the *Kitchen with copper pots and a maid* (private collection; fig. 1), the *Boy with a breadbasket* in the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo (fig. 2), and the lost *Market Scene* (fig. 3), only known through a photograph<sup>3</sup>. They note in particular how "the features of the young harpist in the middle background of the scene offers a precise precedent, in his self-conscious mood and irresistibly fixed gaze, of the later *Boy with a breadbasket* at the Carrara", and underline that the features of the fruit seller in the *Market Scene* "closely resemble those of the violinist in our painting, with the repeated detail of the shiny curls that frame his fleshy face".

As regards a date, one must consider the only painting by Baschenis that can be dated with relative certainty based on the age of the sitters – the famous *Agliardi Triptych* of about 1665. According to the two scholars, our *Concert* evinces less mature characteristics with respect to the *Triptych*, which together with the strong and enduring influence of Barbelli and Ceresa prompts a proposal for an early date, in the 1640s.

Enrico de Pascale's research has led to the discovery of an inventory drawn up on Baschenis' death (17 March 1677) which documents the presence in the painter's studio of about one hundred paintings including 58 autograph works and 32 by Gian Giacomo Barbelli<sup>4</sup>. Among Baschenis' own works it is worth mentioning "a large painting of someone playing the bass" – that is, the *viola da braccio bassa*, the instrument played by the protagonist in our painting.

Evaristo Baschenis was born in 1617 into a family which had specialized in fresco painting for two centuries. Under Venetian dominion in the 1500s, Bergamo hosted Lorenzo Lotto (between 1513 and 1525) and the great portraitist Giovan Battista Moroni. In the middle of the following century, Luca Giordano, Pietro Liberi, Antonio Zanchi and other painters arrived in the city, contributing to the grand project for the decoration of Santa Maria Maggiore. Orphaned following the plague of 1630, Evaristo pursued the study of art and in 1639 began a four-year apprenticeship with Gian Giacomo Barbelli (1604-1656). He learned the perspective technique of "quadratura" used by Barbelli to paint frescoes of figures and objects from the most unusual viewpoints. Having received his father's inheritance in 1643, he took holy orders and continued his artistic career independently, visiting various Italian cities (including two months spent in Rome in 1650) and maintaining connections with many Italian and foreign painters. His commitments as painter were so numerous that he was reprimanded for lack of diligence in his priestly duties.

Baschenis specialized in two kinds of still life painting: kitchen scenes and compositions with musical instruments. This last type of subject, which we may consider a specific invention of his, was to guarantee him success and renown among his contemporaries and future generations. When he died in 1677, his studio contained about one hundred paintings, various musical instruments and some preparatory drawings, and since these were inherited by his assistants, Cristoforo Tasca and Giovan Battista Cavallini, this led to a number of copies and variations of his own still lifes; but more than the

two apprentices, it was Bartolomeo Bettera who carried forward Baschenis' legacy by continuing to produce musical still lifes.

## Notes

[1] According to the historian of Renaissance and Baroque music Lorenzo Girodo, the fact that the composition has no vocalist means that the players could be performing dance music or instrumental music of a madrigal or a three-part *canzonetta*, or one of the first forms of *sonata a due canti* and basso continuo, which were extremely popular throughout the seventeenth century. Among the Bergamasque composers contemporary with the painting were Tarquinio Merula (Busseto 1595-Cremona 1665) and Maurizio Cazzati (Luzzara 1616-Mantua, 1678), both active in the mid-seventeenth century at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo, as well as Giovanni Legrenzi (Clusone 1626-Venice 1690), organist in the same Basilica from 30 August 1645 to October 1656. See M. Eynard, "La musique a Bergame au XVIIe siècle", in *Evaristo Baschenis (1617-1677). Le triomphe des instruments de musique dans la peinture du XVIIe siècle*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Galerie Canesso, 6 October-17 December 2022), Paris 2022, pp. 26-31).

[2] *Old Master Paintings*, Sotheby's, New York, 12 January 1989, lot 62.

[3] The canvas signed by Baschenis formed part of the Treccani Alfieri collection before it was destroyed by fire in 1932. A good photograph exists in the Edoardo Arslan photo archive (Pavia, Università degli Studi).

[4] For the relationship between Baschenis and his teacher see E. De Pascale, *Evaristo Baschenis e la natura morta...*, cit., 1996, no. 24, pp. 184-185 and no. 42, pp. 228-231. For the canvases in the artist's studio in 1677, see E. De Pascale, "Baschenis 'privato'. L'eredità, la bottega, la collezione", in *Evaristo Baschenis e la natura morta...*, cit., 1996, pp. 59-64.