

Don't Lose Your Head!

An introduction to the use of single sword and sword and buckler, according to the work of Achille Marozzo

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Don't lose your head!

Practical applications of Marozzo's first assault for sword and buckler, part one, and an introduction to the principles of Bolognese swordplay.

Part I

Introduction

Achille Marozzo (1484 -1553) is perhaps the most widely recognised name associated with the Dardi school. In 1536 he published his treatise, *Opera Nova dell'Arte delle Armi*, which details the use of the sword with a variety of companion weapons. It also covers the use of the spadone, the dagger, various polearms and includes a section on unarmed combat against an opponent armed with a dagger. Marozzo's treatise remained in print (and thus in demand) well into the 17th Century – the heyday of the rapier.

No matter which weapons are used, the same core principles are taught and are quite effective. These principles are also common to many, if not all the Bolognese masters. Marozzo exemplifies his principles of swordplay using a series of *assalti* – assaults – which are paired exercises that have been likened by some to the *kata* found in many Asian martial arts, although a *kata* tends to be a fixed series of movements, whereas Marozzo offers a choice of actions for both agent and patient.

In the first workshop, we will study the first part of Marozzo's first assault, found in Chapter 10 of *Opera Nova*. This assault deals with the use of the sword and small buckler (*brochiero stretta*) and is the first point at which Marozzo begins to discuss technique. This is a notable contrast to *Dall'Agocchie*, who begins with the single sword as the foundation of all other fencing and the best means of showing one's valour and courage. Marozzo does not discuss the single sword until chapter 94, and then in far less depth. The principles of single sword are the subject of our second workshop.

Part II

Guardia

There has been a lot written about the theory behind the guards of Marozzo, and we do not want to duplicate all that material here. Below is a selection of the guards shown in Marozzo and *Dall'Agocchie*, with a brief description of each.

In most cases, observe the following points (*guardia alta is the main exception*):

- the step is about one shoulder width
- the back foot is turned out slightly
- the heels are not in line so that passing is easier
- the weight is more on the front foot, so the back foot is free to move
- The heel of the back foot can be raised slightly

The guards can be split into high and low, inside and outside, and with the sword in presence [pointing at your opponent] or out of presence.

In general, low guards are defensive in nature and high guards are used offensively.

Every action should begin and end in a guard and some guards are simply transitional positions between actions.

Also, between every guard there should be a definite action – no lazy transitions!

The low guards:

Coda lunga – right foot (RF) forwards, sword on the outside of your knee (guards named “coda lunga” will be on the outside)

Porta di ferro – RF forwards, sword on the inside of the knee (guards named “porta di ferro” will be on the inside)

Coda lunga e stretta – as above, with the sword pointing at your opponent (stretta = narrow, so your sword is in presence)

When used, the buckler is held extended, and serves in this case to defend the high lines of attack (as we shall see in the assault).

Porta di ferro e stretta

The buckler is withdrawn slightly to protect the upper body.



Coda lunga e stretta



Porta di ferro stretta



Coda lunga e stretta

Coda lunga e larga – as above, with the sword pointing towards the floor (larga = wide, so your sword is out of presence)

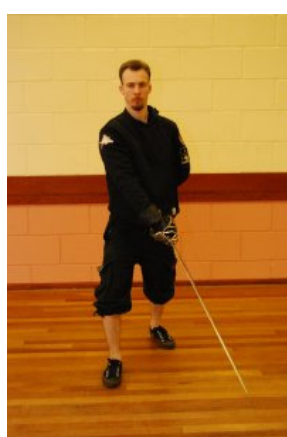
Porta di ferro larga

Cinghiara porta di ferro – as above, but with the left foot forwards

Coda lunga e alta – as above, but with the left foot (LF) forwards and with the hand held slightly higher (somewhere between waist and chest). The sword is held across the body with the point “covering” your enemy. (Roughly pointing across at their sword arm – do not point to high.) This is the main guard for Marozzo’s single sword assault.



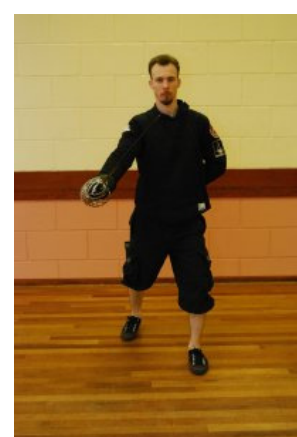
Coda lunga e larga



Porta di ferro larga



Cinghiara porta di ferro

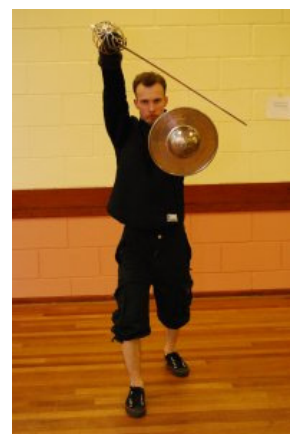
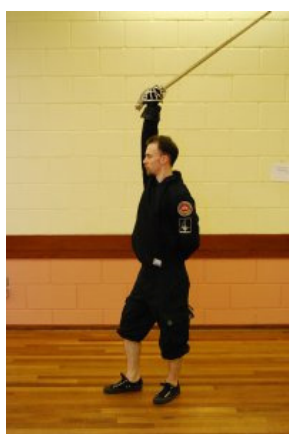


Coda lunga e alta

The high guards:

Guardia alta – either foot forwards, with the feet close together. The sword is held over the head, with the arm vertical. The sword should point somewhere between the vertical and directly backwards. This is the starting and finishing guard for the sword and buckler assault.

Guardia di testa – most commonly used to defend the head (hence the name). Marozzo shows this guard differently to Dall'Agocchie; in the former case, the blade points slightly upwards whereas the latter shows it pointed slightly downwards. The buckler should be extended, to defend against any follow-up attacks coming under the sword or from the left. The key is to make sure the blade is held high enough so that it does defend your head!



Guardia alta from the front and the side

Two variations on guardia di testa

There are other guards that we won't really use in these workshops. As there are differences between the naming conventions used by different masters, I will not describe these guards for now to avoid any possible confusion.

Part III

Strikes

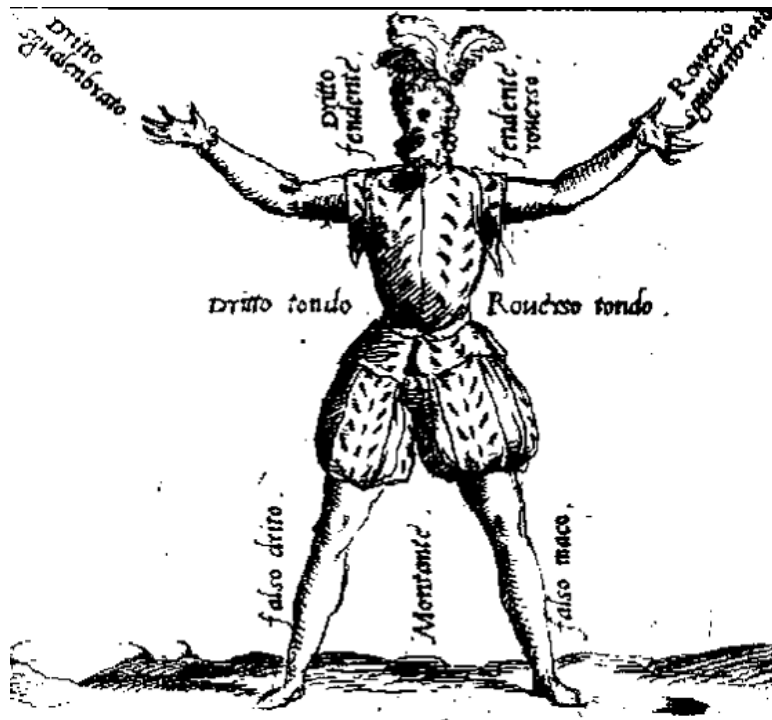
The main cut used in this exercise is the *sgualembrato*, a descending diagonal cut with the true edge. The cut may be *mandritto* (from the right) or *roverso* (from the left).

The *trammazone* is also used in the assault. This is a circular cut from the wrist, breaking to the inside. Again, it is a descending true-edge cut.

The *tondo* is a horizontal true-edge cut. It may be *mandritto* or *roverso*.

The *montante* is a rising, vertical cut with the false edge that finishes in *guardia alta*.

One thrust will be used, the *stoccata*; the blade is held vertically, true edge down, and the point thrust upwards into the opponent's chest or face.



Part IV

Defensive actions

Defensive actions have a distinct style in Marozzo and Dall'Agochie and are based around four elements.

- A parry made with either the true edge or the false edge of the sword, or even the buckler
 - There are some static parries, where the sword is simply placed in the way of the incoming blow (see the use of guardia di testa in the sword and buckler assault) but many are cuts into the opponent's blade, particularly with the false edge. Cutting with the false edge from a low guard into a high guard sets you up nicely for a counter attack with a cut of your own.
- A step, taking you off the line of the attack
- A riposte
 - Having made a dynamic parry, you can use the opening you have created and the momentum of your parry to riposte. The false edge rising, true edge descending combination on the pass is typical in single sword.
- Redoubling and flying out.
 - Both authors recognise that the riposte may not be enough to stop your opponent on its own and that you are vulnerable as you step back out of measure. Therefore, as you step out of measure, you redouble your attack and deliver further blows to your opponent. These may inflict further wounds or simply prevent your opponent from countering as you step away.

Part V

The first assault with sword and buckler

Marozzo's first assault is a lengthy sequence split into seven parts. The first part begins with a short solo exercise before moving into the paired section. The solo part shows some of the important guards and cuts for the following section, and includes much swashing of the buckler. This is a good warm-up and a splendid way to show off, but the focus here will be on the paired section of the first part, which illustrates a number of defences against attacks to the head.

The paired section begins and ends in *guardia alta*. The key actions are shown in the flow chart overleaf. Marozzo indicates that one individual should be *agente* and the other *paciente*; the *agente* actions are shown on the left and the *paciente* actions on the right. However, at some points in the sequence the *paciente* has initiative so to avoid confusion and maintain consistency with our earlier published work we shall instead refer to them as Gentleman 1 and Gentleman 2. This is a historical convention that we have drawn from Alfieri and should in no way be seen as a discouragement to our female students!

For convenience in learning and discussion, we have divided this sequence into three actions indicated by dashed lines in the flowchart. Please note, however, that the assault should be performed as a complete sequence with no pauses once you have learnt the sequence.

First action

Gentleman 1 begins this action by delivering a *mandritto sgualebrato* to Gentleman 2's head (Gentleman 2 voids); the path of the cut should take it over the buckler arm. Gentleman 1 returns to *guardia alta*, withdrawing his right foot. Gentleman 2 responds with an attack to Gentleman 1's head (this may be any downwards cut, or a thrust; we suggest that you use a *mandritto sgualebrato* initially) and Gentleman 1 steps forward with a *roverso sgualebrato*, displacing the attack. The line of the attack closes off further attacks from the right while the buckler is held forwards to protect against any attacks from the left. Gentleman 1 finishes in *coda longa e stretta* and Gentleman 2 finishes in *guardia alta*.

Second action

Gentleman 2 begins this action with a downwards cut to Gentleman 1's head. Gentleman 1 defends by raising his buckler to meet the blow, and delivering a *stoccata* under your buckler if you wish. Gentleman 1 follows up, advancing, with two successive *trammazone*. The blade passes outside the buckler, which is brought across to defend the shoulder of the sword arm. Gentleman 1 finishes in *porta di ferro stretta*.

Third action

Once again, Gentleman 2 begins the action by delivering a downwards cut to the head; Gentleman 1 is open to this attack in *porta di ferro stretta*. Gentleman 1 defends by raising his sword into *guardia di testa*. This is a static block. Gentleman 1 then passes his right foot in front of his left, delivering a *mandritto tondo* to Gentleman 2's leg, keeping the buckler high to defend the head. Gentleman 1 immediately brings his left foot around back into stance, delivering a *roverso sgualebrato* to the head. Gentleman then delivers a *montante* to return to *guardia alta*. This ends the sequence.



Gentleman 1 (*agente*)

Gentleman 2 (*paciente*)

Mandritto sgualebrato to head, angled to pass over your buckler arm. Immediately return to guardia alta while withdrawing right foot adjacent to left

Rovorso sgualebrato to displace patient's cut, advancing right foot, finishing in coda longa e stretta

Defend head with buckler while delivering a stoccata; gathering step with right foot

Deliver two trammazone in quick succession, both on a gathering step with right foot. Finish porta di ferro stretta

Defend head with guardia di testa, a static block

Pass right foot in front of left while delivering a mandritto tondo to the leg

Bring left foot around to reset, delivering a roverso sgualebrato to the head

Deliver a montante to clear the line and return to guardia alta, right foot forwards

Void cut backwards

Recover forwards from void, delivering an attack to the head

Deliver a downwards cut to the head

Retreat, maintaining measure

Deliver a downwards cut to the head

Recover to a guard

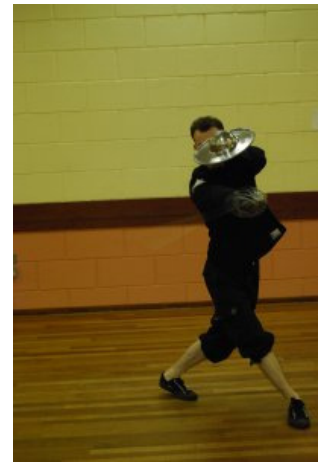
Return to guardia alta, right foot forwards



The buckler block and the counter thrust seen from the front



A trammazone going outside the buckler. Avoid letting the buckler drop too far like this.



The final counter – a mandritto tondo while traversing to the left

Putting it all together

Obviously, the three parts that we have outlined above are designed to be performed as a single sequence, so this is our main goal for the workshop. Once you and your partner have practised the actions in isolation, you should try performing them in order with no pauses in between. As the sequence begins and ends with both partners in *guardia alta*, you should be able to perform the assault multiple times, changing role each time, minimising the pause in between each run-through.

As a final exercise, you should try applying the techniques to disrupt the sequence and change places. For example, when Gentleman 1 delivers the *trammazone* in the second action, Gentleman 2 should try executing one of the defences from the assault. If he performs it successfully, he continues the sequence as Gentleman 1. A more challenging option is the *roverso sgualebrato* in action 3. Still more challenging is the use of the defence from action one against the *stoccata* in action 2. Play with these options, as well as any others that occur to you. If you ever reach the end of the sequence, change roles and restart it. Have fun!

Part VI

Single sword

What follows are some “typical actions” as found in Marozzo and Dall’Aggocchie. In the single sword workshop we would like you to experiment with these actions – the precise combination of footwork, bladework and counter attack is up to you. However, you must ensure that you cover all the four defensive principles listed earlier. RF and LF mean right foot and left foot.

Action 1 – a false edge parry

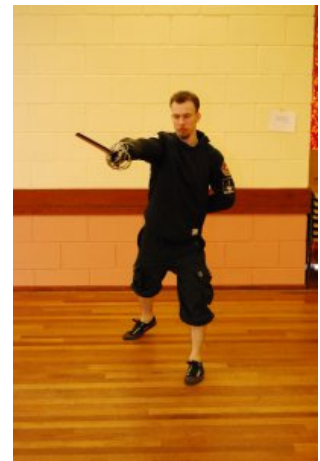
Agent in any guard, patient in porta di ferro stretta (RF forwards)

Patient move to porta di ferro larga (an invitation)

Agent attack to the face with a thrust or a cut

Patient pass to the outside of the agent with the LF and parry with a rising false edge cut. Immediately riposte with a roverso to the agent’s head. (Note the timing: the parry and the riposte happen on the same step. The descending cut should land with the left foot)

Step back with the LF and cut with a mandritto tondo at the agent’s sword arm, finishing in porta di ferro stretta. (Adjust you right foot as necessary to finish in a balanced guard.)



This sequence of photos is an attempt to show the timing of the blow with the step. The parry has happened as the left foot passes the right in the second picture. The descending cut lands as the left foot lands in the final picture.

Action 2 – another false edge with a traverse

Agent in any guard, patient in coda lunga e alta (LF forwards)

Agent attack to the face with a thrust

Patient pass to the outside of the agent with the RF and parry with a rising false edge cut. Immediately riposte with a roverso to the agent’s leg. (You could also pass the LF at this point and close to a grapple while delivering a roverso to the head)

Step back with the RF and cut with a fendente at the agent’s head or sword arm, finishing in coda lunga e alta.



The falso parry on the traverse



The roverso to the leg in the same tempo



The fendente to the arm as the RF is passed behind the left.



Passing forwards with the LF after the traverse and closing to a grapple.

Action 3 – a true edge parry and a thrust

Agent in any guard, patient in coda lunga e stretta (LF forwards)

Agent attack to the face with a thrust

Patient pass to the inside of the agent with the RF and parry with the true edge. Immediately riposte with a thrust to the agent's face (a punta roverso).

Step the LF behind the RF and redouble with a trammazone, ending in porta di ferro stretta.

Action 4 – another true edge parry and a cut

Agent in any guard, patient in coda lunga e stretta (LF forwards)

Agent attack to the face with a thrust

Patient pass to the inside of the agent with the RF and parry with the true edge. Immediately riposte with a roverso to the agent's face

Step the LF behind the RF and redouble with a trammazone, ending in coda lunga e stretta.

Action 5 – true edge is better than false edge from the right...

Agent in any guard, patient in coda lunga e stretta (RF forwards)

Agent attack to the face with a thrust

Patient step forwards (lunge) with the RF and parry with the true edge by turning the knuckles to the inside and the point towards the ground (like a hanging guard).

Immediately riposte with two trammazone to the agent's face, using gathering steps.

Step out of measure to your right with any counter ending in any guard.

Action 6 – guardia di testa

Agent in any guard, patient in coda lunga e stretta (RF forwards)

Agent attack to the head with a fendente

Patient step the LF close to the RF and turn the body side on, while parrying with the true edge in guardia di testa.

Immediately riposte with an imbrocatta [descending thrust] to the agent's chest and then redouble with a trammazone.

Exercises

One step

Decide, with a partner, who is agent and who is patient.

Start static, in guard and in measure.

Basic: The agent will attack the patient with a thrust to the face

Intermediate: Attack with a thrust or a cut to the head

Advanced: Any attack

The patient should use one of the defences listed above, or a variant thereof.

Alternate agent and patient, with a clear pause between actions.

Start by performing the actions slowly – maybe half speed – and see what variations work for you.

Two step

As one step, but after the patient has made their first defence and counter, the agent should attack again. This tests whether or not the patient has finished the preceding action with balanced footwork and in a good guard – if they haven't, defending against the next attack gets much harder!

A play - cooperative

As one step, but start with agent moving and the patient following to maintain measure. The agent may attack whenever they wish and the patient must defend and counter.

After each defence, successful or not, reset to guard and continue with the same agent with as little pause as possible.

The agent should make 10 attacks before changing agent and patient.

A play – antagonistic

As above, but the agent may defend themselves against the counter and continue their attacking sequence as soon as they wish.

Note 1: if the action pauses, only the agent may restart with an attack. The patient must wait for an attack and then use that to launch a counter.

Note 2: the agent must attack, otherwise the exercise is dull and useless.

Note 3: the patient is trying to hit with a successful counter. The agent is trying to draw out a counter attack and then hit with a new/redoubled attack while the patient is out of guard.

Final thoughts on the style

In order to fight in the correct style, you should observe the following points:

- In each case you should adjust your defence to meet the blow – particularly the line and the angle of any false edge parries
- Stop the blow with your blade
- Step away from the direction of the attack
- Riposte quickly – keep the momentum going and the blows natural and fluid – one action should lead into the next without pauses
 - One way to achieve this is to make sure each action starts and ends in a guard, e.g. a false edge rising/true edge descending combination will pass through guardia alta. Passing through the correct guards will also allow you to change your actions smoothly should the need arise.
 - You must also cut correctly, drawing the sword across the target. (A percussive blow will tend to get stuck and break your rhythm.)
- The blows must be timed with the footwork
 - In almost all cases, the main thrust or cut (usually the first counter attack) lands with a step (either a pass or a lunge).
 - Parries can be made while static, on a preparatory step or during a step, as long as the riposte lands with a step.
 - Preparatory moves can also be made while static, on a preparatory step or during a step.
- Redouble the attack
- Always finish in a balanced guard

Afterword and acknowledgements

These workshops cover a small part of two lengthy sequences from an immense treatise and hopefully go some way to introducing the fundamentals of Bolognese swordplay, including ways in which the buckler may be used in both an active and a passive manner. Future workshops will cover other single sword techniques, the remainder of the sword and buckler assaults, other companion weapons and grappling. Until then, though, practise the techniques discussed here as they represent the basic principles of Marozzo's style.

During the preparation of this workshop, reference was made to the translations and interpretations of William Wilson, Gary Chelak, Tom Leoni and Steven Reich, as well as our own work. Thanks must also go to Caroline Stewart, Simon Alford and Carl Bianco for assistance with the interpretation and design of the notes.

You are advised to always train with an instructor and ensure that you always use adequate protective equipment, including a mask, jacket and gauntlets. These notes are for reference only and The School of the Sword takes no responsibility for students training from these notes away from our direct supervision.

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