

Bondì di Mazo

La Spada Maestra
(The High Sword)

1696

**Translation by Matteo Butera, Francesco Lanza and
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Introduction

In 1696 Bondi di Mazo published his *La Spada Maestra*, in Venice (currently in Italy), providing us with one of only a few late 17th century Italian treatises on fencing. In his treatise, Di Mazo provides an interesting view on fencing in Venice in 1696 (i.e. exactly 90 years after Nicoletto Giganti's *Scola, overo Teatro* was published there). The current document provides a partial translation of Di Mazo's treatise.

In presenting this work, we would like to note that Di Mazo's treatise is often hard to read and understand. This makes translating his treatise difficult. It is a testament to the persistence and enthusiasm of the main translator, Matteo Butera, and of my fellow editor, Francesco Lanza, that we have come so far. We hope you will enjoy this partial work, and that we can present a more complete translation as soon as possible!

Reinier van Noort



The High Sword¹

by me

Bondì di Mazo of Venice

A book

In which is treated of the advantages of the most noble Profession of fencing as of walking, turning, & retreating, as well as of wounding safely and defending.

Dedicated to the most illustrious and excellent lords

The Counts of Collalto and San Salvatore

In Venice, by Domenico Lovisa in Rialto, financed by the author. 1696.

With approval and privilege by the Authorities².

¹ The title "La Spada Maestra" is somewhat difficult to translate. A literal translation might be "The Master Sword". However, the title may well be a pun on "La strada maestra", "the high road", "the main road" or "the correct way".

² This is a fairly standard feature of printed Italian books of the 16th to 18th centuries, indicating a copyright acknowledged by the authorities.

Dear Reader,

In this short volume that I present to you, beloved reader, I do not intend to tickle your mood with fabulous tales of the poets, but rather to teach you an art that is as necessary to you as the air you breathe, because protecting our life from the insults and violence of brutes has always been considered the first rule of nature. This SPADA MAESTRA of mine is going to show you, together with the figures that are shown, a simple way to practice yourself in defending from every enemy blow and to hit back at whoever will threaten your life. The figures that show you their back are the enemy, while those who show their face represent the offended, who defends and wounds back. By using this SPADA MAESTRA you will then become familiar with the use of iron so that you will need no other guide to lead you along the street with a safer defence. Even if you were weak by nature, just like David you will ground all strong and fast Giants that may try to attempt your life. In this way you will be able to overcome the limitations of nature that for some is benevolent and malevolent for others when it donates physical strength and constitution. Make use then of all this useful advise, and live happily.

On guards

The guards that you can take with his sword in hands are four and no more in my opinion. We are going to see how to correctly hold these four guards, which postures could save your life during an enemy attack, and you must hold the sword in such a way that on one side you are covered, and on the other side you can easily deny any harm. Due diligence is required in placing your body and sword, as in them you trust while waiting for the enemy to give you an occasion to strike. That is the true way to cover, defend and easily wound.

On taking guard in accordance with the following figure

You should solidly stand with a straight posture; the toes of your back foot slightly pointed backward and straight above them the edge of your bent knee. The foot should solidly rest on the ground, as it has to sustain the whole body. The elbow on that side should be low and one palm away from the chest, while the rest of the arm should be one palm distant from the chin, fingers held together. The heel of the front foot [should be placed] with the foot itself facing the interior of the rear one which is, in a straight line, three *quarte*³ and a half from the other, more or less, and also in accordance to your stature and the kind of attacks you want to do. Your toes should only slightly touch the ground so that your foot is ready to be moved with a little lift and does not pound the ground while thrusting; thigh and leg straight [down] to the heel. The sword arm should be about one palm further outside than the low one [knee] so that the arm is straight with a small angle and free. The tip of the sword points at the face of the enemy while in *terza* so that the outside is well covered, the rest of the body stands strong, the chest slightly opened on the inside to offer a smaller target; the face in line. The sword is held well according to these principles: the point of the thumb should be held against the quillion block, that is right in the midpoint between the two quillions on the inside; and on the outside between the two joints of the following [i.e. index] finger, in such a manner that the fingertip does not go over and beyond the quillion. The remaining three fingers should be strong around the handle, bottom part of the hand, which is called the body, is laid over the pommel of the aforesaid. That is, from the midpoint between the two quillions below the hand is held in accordance, so that the foe can only attack on one side, as it is easier to deny him the entrance on one side than on both.

On knowing tempo and measure; on distinguishing forte from debole⁴

Now that I have described the basic position, I believe it is convenient to explain what *tempo* and *misura* are, since those two things are preeminent in this noble profession. The first is that when we notice, during the minimal movement of the enemy who approaches with his body or sword, an opportunity to attack. Since the opponent also needs a *tempo* to defend, it is natural that one *tempo* is faster than two; *Misura*⁵ is no more and no less than knowing how far an attack can reach. Both *tempo* and *misura* can be learned through exercise.

I believe the distinction between *forte* and *debole* to be the most important feature of fencing, since when we carry an attack, even a cut, with the right tempo in *quarta* or *seconda*, the enemy will not be

³ "*tre quarte*", which most likely refers to the *quarta*, a Venetian length measurement. This is equal to a quarter arm, or one palm measured from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the index finger. (See: "Dizionario del dialetto veneziano

Di Giuseppe Boerio", (1867), page 69. These three *quarta* equal about 2 feet.

⁴ I.e. strong from weak

⁵ Measure

able to defend them with his *debole*. On the contrary, those who attack without care with the *debole*, will risk the opponent to turn his wrist into *quarta* or *seconda* and counterattack. To explain what is *forte* and what is *debole*, I will divide the sword in two parts: from halfway to the guard it shall be called *forte*, from the other half to the point it is the *debole* (as shown in the following figure). If two opponents with the same intention attacked at the same time in *quarta*, or *seconda*, and one of them managed to slide only two fingers towards the *forte*, he would hit the enemy, while the other would miss. That is what many call “*botta d’incontro*” which is not correct, as *incontro* is when both carry an attack at the same time and with the same line, and hit each other. The *forte* should be further divided in two parts, and the same with the *debole*. The part between the first sign [in the picture] and the guard is called the *vero forte*⁶, while the one between the last sign and the point is the *vero debole*. When we launch a *stoccata*⁷ in *quarta*, or in *seconda*, we must be sure to push the *vero forte* against the *vero debole*, because the true *forte* is used to oppose against an attack to the head coming from the right, while the part between the two signs is used to parry an attack to the leg on the left side. A fencer could also use those moves, but always with attention and at the right measure, to invite the opponent to attack. While he is bringing his *stoccata*, we can make a *cavazione*⁸ and extend as above. That is called a *contra-tempo*.

On footwork

From footwork you can gain considerable advantage, so that even if the opponent had a sword a palm longer than yours, thanks to the movement of the back foot, you would be at his same measure with a shorter sword; and if both swords were of the same length, you should always be three inches out of measure, because just by closing in with your back foot without making it evident with your body, you will be in measure, while he is not.

The correct foot movement will be clearly described later on. In order to better explain them, I prepared the following figure with lines and circles at its feet. From that you will understand steps forward and back and straight and oblique. Just by knowing half of them you will be able to improve in the profession, not retreating always on the same line and using more suitable moves when needed. When circling we use half steps, like those that we do when we want to turn our feet to another direction, left or right, but in this case we should make sure that our back foot stays back and the front one at the front, because that is the best position to attack and defend.

Moving the right foot from the straight line to the inside, as in points 2 and 9 in the figure, or the back one to the outside (1 and 7), you leave the outside exposed, while moving the front foot to the outside (2 and 9) or the back foot to the inside, the inside is exposed. Therefore when turning in circles at measure, one must protect the opposite [side], in case the enemy makes a move towards the exposed side.

Straight Line	3-4
Straight stance	1-2
Straight step forward to reach measure while ending with the front foot at the back	3-2
Straight step moving the left foot forward	1-4
Straight step backward to regain position	4-1
Straight step backward to take distance	2-3

⁶ The true strong, or very strong, i.e. the full strong

⁷ Thrust

⁸ Disengagement

Straight half-steps forward	1-6
Straight half-steps backward	2-6
Oblique step outside	1-5
Oblique step inside	1-5
A half of those	1-8
Circular half steps	1-7
Circular half steps	2-9

On how to draw the sword

I will begin with the simple way to draw a sword in case of trouble, which might always occur. If you find yourself with your front foot (which is the right one unless he is left-handed) too close to the opponent (as in 2 and 4 in the previous figure) in such a way that the sword cannot be extracted from the scabbard without stepping back, then you should move the front foot behind the back one, but a little sideways so that you do not hit it. Then you shall move the other foot behind the right one (2 to 3) and stay in guard out of measure, so that you will have the time to see the position and angle of the enemy and do whatever you deem appropriate.

And in case you found yourself with the left foot ahead (2 to 4) while being too close to the enemy, you shall move it behind the other one from 4 to 1, and take the appropriate guard; in case of necessity you could then bring the right foot behind the left one between 1 and 3 and again the left behind the right (1 to 3). These are half steps and they are the most useful to turn in circles, to close distance and to retire in a straight line. They can be used to get close to the enemy and observe his actions before bringing the most appropriate attack.

This is how the four guards – *prima*, *seconda*, *terza*, *quarta* – and their related *stoccate* originate. A sword is made of four parts: two edges and two flats.

The *vero filo*⁹ is the one that stands upward when you draw the sword from the scabbard in *prima*.

When the outside flat is upward, is the second position¹⁰: *seconda*.

The *filo falso*¹¹ looks upward in the third position: *terza*.

The inside flat looks up in the fourth position: *quarta*.

Stoccata of Quarta

The *stoccata* of *quarta*, as shown in the next figure, is the first thrust that you should learn to adjust your position and [learn how to] become quick in all the others, as this one and the next one in *seconda* are the first fundamental of fencing. I will first start saying that, whoever you are you are practicing with, you should learn the aforementioned thrusts, without [him] wearing a breast protection so that you get used to understand measure, because when the teacher is not wearing the aforementioned protection he will take a grazing thrust, because he won't let the sword bend when he

⁹ True edge

¹⁰ Literally: "turn"

¹¹ False edge

lets the other bring a blow against him, and so you stand in the correct position, without support, at the perfect measure, which is right where the thrust can reach, no more and no less, and not in too within measure. The thrust should be in one moment pushed through the opponent's *debole* with your *forte*, without bending the arm, turning just slightly the sword during the step in *quarta*, stepping at the same time with the front foot as far as you can go –and no more– holding firm the back foot on the ground without using it for running or even lifting it a little, keeping the end of the arm with the sword on a straight line with the same calcaneus and the left arm back at the heel but not beyond it –as the movement of the shoulder would open the chest and topple at the waist– with the palm opened inside both in the *stoccate* and the *imbroccate*. The eyes should be above the guard of the sword, with the head well protected against offences. All of this you must do in one *tempo*.

And because when you have brought the thrust you could, while recovering with no regard, be hit by the opponent, you should make sure when you have brought the thrust you must rapidly return backwards in guard to be ready for defence. Of this I will discuss better later.

Stoccata of Seconda, called Imbroccata

When attacking your opponent from the outside, you produce a thrust of *seconda in terza*¹², with the *forte* [of your blade] above the *debole* [of his] and low, so that once this is finished the pommel of the sword is usually opposite the middle of your flank, just outside it, so that his sword remains engaged. Because if you executed the attack with the sword's guard held high, the enemy could easily do a *cavazione* and perform many contraries. Should he wield his sword high, you should thrust higher; if, after wounding the opponent you are not fast in returning in guard, to escape his response you should nimbly cover with the strong third of the blade above his weak part, in *terza in quarta* if it is on the inside, in *seconda in terza* if it is on the outside, so that if in this inferior position he tried to advance, you could thrust again along his edge in his tempo.

Parrying on the inside

When the opponent launches a *stoccata*, you should push rapidly and with decision the *forte* of your blade, slightly turned in *terza in quarta*¹³, above his *debole*, just enough to shut him out; possibly, you should rapidly bring him a *stoccata* of *quarta*.

Parrying on the outside

While the opponent is launching an *imbroccata*, you should parry with a *seconda in terza* using the *forte* of the blade. Once you have stopped the opponent's sword, you should rapidly bring a thrust to his chest moving a bit more towards *seconda*.

Some parry the aforementioned attack in *quarta*, which then forces them to switch to a *seconda* with a large turn of the blade. Hence, it is better to parry as said above, because the sword is more ready for any eventuality, and since you are already in the correct line, you lose less time for bringing your attack.

¹² I.e. in a bastard position between *seconda* and *terza*.

¹³ I.e. in a bastard position between *terza* and *quarta*.

On bringing an attack while the opponent is thrusting

If a man is able to parry as I said, he could, while the enemy is resolutely thrusting, bring a *stoccata* in the same *tempo*, with the *forte* over his *debole* as I explained regarding [parrying with] a *quarta* on the inside and a *seconda* on the outside, since there is no cover or response to this.

On walking steadily

When you need to advance, you should close the distance with your back foot as much as needed, as you can see on the circled figure (1 and 6) and once that foot is well planted, you can move the one in the front as far as the back one got close, because in this way you can always look after yourself, and remain steady.

On retreating

For the same distance at which you moderately retract and plant steadily your front foot (2 and 6), you can also retract the back one; in case you need to take more distance from your opponent, you could also bring the front foot behind the back one, as I said for number 2¹⁴, and once that is on the ground, you should bring the left one accordingly behind the other one and remain in guard; you should make sure that in bringing the foot behind you do not hit the other one, as this could make you stumble.

On cavare¹⁵ the sword

Using only your wrist, you should perform a *cavazione*, in fourth on the inside, and remain in third, and perform a *cavazione* on the outside, and stay in fourth, but tight and elegant, and well protected with your body at distance so that, should the opponent bring an attack while you are performing the *cavazione*, you shall be ready to parry, and should he instead not make any move, you could attack him while stepping.

Feint

Many define the feint as deceitful, because the opponent is deceived into believing in something that he fears; but he who performs it is not a deceiver, because in this profession you must be as cunning as you can be. And since it is also said that it [the feint] could be dangerous for he who executes it, you should better do it with a second intention, both safely and beautifully, in this way:

Starting in guard about one palm out of measure, you should close with your back foot as much as needed for you to arrive at your opponent's measure but for him to be out of measure and incapable to reach you. Should the opponent stay on hold, or in the moment when he decided to get closer, you should do half a thrust in *quarta*, aiming for two fingers below the *forte* close to the guard of his sword without doing a *cavazione* on the inside or the outside, at the same time you should bring your front foot ahead as if you were in guard and shout out to make him believe even more that you are performing a full attack. And when the enemy parries he will not find your sword, which will find itself *cavata* and free, and at that moment you shall bring to him the full attack with a whole step, but you should be warned that while performing the feint, you should keep the body backwards and be

¹⁴ This refers to figure 2, and the accompanying description in the chapter "On how to draw the sword".

¹⁵ Disengaging

ready to parry if the enemy attacks.

Some do the aforementioned attack by attacking first until around the middle of the opponent's sword and, if he parries, by bringing it on the other side, which is slower and more difficult because they are forced to do a *cavazione*, giving the enemy time to do many things.

Some others begin with a thrust on the inside towards the opponent's face and then make the thrust drop until it gets under his sword's quillon, but by pushing down recklessly you are likely to end in a precipice.

Against a feint

For this reason I highly esteem the kind of guard by which a man can stand warding over a single side, and therefore, being he covered wholly on that side, his foe will study how to bring offense towards the place into which he can [actually] gain entry. And such foe will make a show of bringing the hit over to the covered side, where such entry is barred, so as to coax a wider road where he will finish [the action]; and expecting such a thing, you can perform all the counters that you would do against a first tempo attack¹⁶.

Gaining the Blade

If the opponent wields the weapon with the point of the blade high on the inside and you want to gain the weak third of his blade with your strong third, [you should go] slightly in *terza in quarta*, so that you are prepared [to cover] on both sides in case of necessity; and if the opponent decided to wield the sword on the outside, or did a *cavazione*, you could similarly gain the blade with a *seconda in terza*; and if he engaged with the point and the body low, you should gain a little bit more with your *forte*, making your body follow his guard.

Some people put faith in the swiftness of a blow carried from a sword held low and take a chance to attack deceitfully without any defense by holding the sword in the middle of the handle so that they gain an advantage of about three fingers, positioning themselves out of measure they reach it rapidly and, once at measure, attack below the [opponent's] sword with a first intention *stoccata in terza*, sometimes almost in *seconda*, and as soon as that is done they retreat rapidly. When you see someone approaching in such a way, you must arm low and gain his blade, so that he cannot accomplish his plan; otherwise you should be ready and, as soon as he brings the attack, do an *inquartata*, or even move your front foot behind the other one while performing a *stoccata* to his face, as I will explain at number 36.

Gaining the Blade

When you draw the sword you should remain solidly just out of measure to carefully observe what he [the opponent] does; if the opponent stands with the same intention as you, you can gain his blade and, if he does not perform a *cavazione*, you can close distance neatly with your back foot and, if he remains as said, with your body kept behind and well protected you can bring an attack; if he does a *cavazione*, you should gain again on the outside and bring the front foot forward just as much as you

¹⁶ This is a literal translation of "botta di primo tempo". What is intended it most likely an "attack of first intention". In this case, Di Mazo most likely means that you react to the attack that follows upon such a feint as if it was an attack of first intention.

closed distance with the back one; and if the enemy does not move back, he cannot do a *cavazione* anymore; and when he does a *cavazione* during the first attacks you could also bring a thrust.

Gaining the Blade

When you are at measure with your opponent, you should close in with your back foot a little bit; you give him a chance to bring a thrust on the inside, in that same tempo you should bring your front foot forward as much as you closed with the back one, and slightly cover his sword, and immediately after you stopped it, you should bring a full thrust, because since the opponent will find himself oppressed by the increasing parry he can neither perform a *cavazione* nor retreat.

You can also do that in this way: when the opponent attacks in measure, you cover his sword as said above, close in with your back foot, and rapidly deliver a thrust fully using your front foot in such a way that you should let the sword pass him through by two palms beyond his shoulders; but while thrusting you should not take the forte away from his debole; nay, you should move your arm slightly into a *quarta*¹⁷ while thrusting; your left palm should almost touch the opponent's sword as a defence, you should remember not to throw that arm behind; and the same thing you could do with a *seconda in terza* should your opponent attack on the outside, in which case while thrusting you could also throw the arm behind.

Against a gaining

When your opponent comes to attack your blade, you should do a *cavazione* before he touches it with his own, deliver a thrust; the enemy blade won't find a resting place, and thus will fall a bit lower, while your attack will go either on one side or the other.

Against a gaining

If your opponent gains the blade at the edge of measure, you can do the same. And if he brings a straight thrust, you can do all the counters you would do against a first tempo attack.

Against a gaining

If the opponent gains your blade with his, closes with his rear foot, which is also called the grounded foot, you should rapidly do a *cavazione* the way I said, and step back according to the occasion, and then you can do what you deem more appropriate.

Gaining the Blade

You gain the blade in measure and close in with your rear foot a little; instead of bringing a straight thrust you perform a feint as mentioned on page 44, the opponent will try to parry, and since he won't find the blade you can bring the attack with confidence.

¹⁷ Based on the context, "*inquartare*" was interpreted to mean you move your arm to *quarta*, and not to make an *inquartata* (i.e. with the feet).