

Introduction

This collection of interpretations of fencing sequences described by Vincentio Saviolo[2] is structured as follows.

1. The original is presented with a parallel transcription in which I have normalised some spellings and rendered the text into a form more easily digested by a modern reader.
2. Presentation of my interpretation of what is written by Saviolo. This is condensed from the original text (normal font) based on what I consider to be the crucial elements of Saviolo's text from the point of view of reconstructing the training sequence. Into this text I have inserted explanations (bold italic font) of what I think Saviolo's description means in terms of body and blade movement. Sometimes this section is accompanied by floor patterns which show how the fencers are moving on the ground.
3. A final section consists of my personal observations and conclusions. Here I also identify any remaining uncertainties in regard to each reconstruction.

The First Ward and Exercise

Vincenzio Sauuolo his Practise.

cause him to stand vpon this ward, which is very good to bee taught for framing the foot, the hand, and the body: so the teacher shall deliuer the Rapier into his hand, and shall cause him to stand with his right foote formost, with his knee somewhat bowing, but that his bodye rest more vpon the leste legge, not stedfast and firme as some stand, which seeme to be nayled to the place, but with a readines and nimblenes, as though he were to performe some feate of actiuitie, and in this sorte let them stand both to strike and to defend themselves. Now when the maister hath placed his scholler in this sorte, and that the scholler hath receiued his Rapier into his hand, let him make his hand free and at liberty, not by force of the arme, but by the nimble and ready mouing of the ioynt of the writte of the hand, so that his hand be free and at libertie from his body, and that the ward of his hand be directye against his right knee: and let the teacher also put himselfe in the same ward, and holde his Rapier against the middest of his schollers Rapier, so that the pointe be directye against the face of his scholler, and likewise his schollers against his, and let their feete be right one against another, then shall the maister begin to teach him, mouing his right foot somewhat on the right side in circle wise, putting the point of his Rapier vnder his schollers Rapier, and so giuing him a thrust in the belly.

L. And what then must the scholler doo?

P. At the selfesame time the scholler must remove with like measure or counter-time with his right foote a little aside, and let the left foote follow the right, turning a little his bodye on the right side, thrusting with the point of his Rapier at the belly of his teacher, turning

V. [...] I come therefore to the point and say, that when the teacher will enter his scholar, he will cause him to stand upon this ward, which is very good to be taught for framing the foot, the hand, and the body: so the teacher shall deliver the Rapier into his hand, and shall cause him to stand with his right foot foremost, with his knee somewhat bowing, but that his body rest more upon the left leg, not steadfast and firm as some stand, which seem to be nailed to the place, but with a readiness and nimbleness, as though he were to perform some feat of activity, and in this sort let then stand both to strike and to defend themselves. Now when the master hath placed his scholar in this sort, and that the scholar hath received his Rapier into his hand, let him make his hand free and at liberty, not by force of the arm, but by nimble and ready moving of the joint of the wrist of the hand, so that his hand be free and at liberty from his body, and that the ward of his hand be directly against his right knee: and let the teacher also put himself in the same ward, and hold his Rapier against the middle of his scholar's Rapier, so that the point be directly against the face of his Scholar, and likewise his scholar's against his, and let their feet be right one against another, then shall the master begin to teach him, moving his right foot somewhat on the right side in circle wise putting the point of his Rapier under his scholar's Rapier, and so giving him a thrust to the belly.

L. And what then must the scholar do?

V. At the selfesame time the scholar must remove with like measure or counter-time with his right foot a little aside, and let the left foot follow the right, turning a little his body on the right side, thrusting with the point of his Rapier at the belly of his teacher, turning

The first Booke.

9

ning readily his hand that the fingers be inward toward the body, and the joint of the wrist be outward. In this sorte the saide scholler shall learne to strike and not be stricken, as I alwaies advise the noble-men and gentlemen with whome I haue to deale, that if they cannot hit or hurt their enemy, that they learn to defend themselves that they be not hurt. Then to make the scholler more ready, the teacher shall cause his scholler first to part, wherefore he shall remoue with his right foote on the right side a little in circle wise as the maister did before to the scholler.

L. What then must the maister or teacher doo?

V. At the same time that the scholler removeth his foote, the teacher shall play a little with stirring of his body, and with his lefte hand shall beat away his scholars rapier from his right side, and shall remoue his right foot behinde his left striking a crosse blow at the head.

L. And the scholler what shall he doo?

V. When I remoue with my foote and lifte vp my hand, let the scholler passe with his lefte foote where his right was, and withall let him turne his hand, and not loofe the opportunity of this blow, which must be a foyne in manner of a thrust vnder his Rapier, and let him lifte vp his hand with his ward that he be guarded and lie not open, meeting with his left hand the rapier of his teacher, and let him not beat aside the blow with his Rapier for hee endangereth the point and bringes his life in hazard, because he loseth the point: But I will goe forward. At the selfsame time that the scholler goes back, the maister shall play a little, and shifting his body shall breake the same imbrocata or foyne outward from the lefte side, remouing with his left foote, which

readily his hand [so] that the fingers be inward toward the body, and with the joint of the wrist be outward. In this sort the said scholar shall learn to strike and not be stricken, as I always advise the noble-men and gentlemen with whom I have to deal, that if they cannot hit or hurt their enemy, that they learn to defend themselves that they not be hurt. Then to make the scholar more ready, the teacher shall cause his scholar first to part, wherefore he shall remove with his right foot on the right side a little in circle wise as the master did before to the scholar.

L. What then must the master or teacher do?

V. At the same time that the scholar removeth his foot, the teacher shall play a little with stirring of his body, and with his left hand shall beat away his scholar's Rapier from his right side, and shall remove his right foot behind his left striking a cross blow at the head.

L. And the scholar what shall he do?

V. When I remove with my foot and lift up my hand, let the scholar pass with his left foot where his right was, and withall let him turn his hand and not lose the opportunity of this blow, which must be a foyne in manner of a thrust under his Rapier, and let him lift up his hand with his ward that he be guarded and lie not open, meeting with his left hand the rapier of his teacher, and let him not beat aside the the blow with his Rapier for he endangereth the point and brings his life into hazzard, because he loseth the point: But I will go forward. At the selfsame time that the scholar goes back, the master shall play a little, and shifting his body shall break the same imbrocata or foyne outward from the left side, removing with his left foot,

Vincentio Saviolo his Practise

which must be carried behinde the right, and withall shall giue a mandritta at the head of his scholler, at which time the scholler must remoue with his right foote, following with his lefte, and let him turne his Rapier hand as I haue saide, and that the scholler obserue the same time in going backe as the teacher shall, to the end that his point may be toward the bellye of his maister, and let him lifte vp his other hand with his ward on high, that he be not stricken on the face with the mandritta, or in the belly with the thrust or stoccata. Wherefore at the selfesame time that the scholler shall deliuer the fore saide stoccata to the teacher, the teacher shall yeelde and shrink with his bodye, and beate the stoccata outward on the lefte side, and shall bring his right foot a little aside in circle wise vpon the right side, & shall giue an imbroccata to the face of his scholler, at which time the saide scholler shal go backe with his right foote a little aside with the same measure, and shall beate aside the imbroccata of his maister with his left hand outward from the lefte side, and withall shall deliuer the like imbroccata of counter-time to the teacher, but onely to the face, and then the maister shall goe backe with his right foote toward the lefte side of his scholler, in breaking with his lefte hand the saide imbroccata outward from the lefte side, and shall strike a downe right blowe to his head, because that by beating aside his foyne with his hand, he shall finde him naked and without garde.

L. And what then, cannot the Scholler defend himselfe?

V. Yes very easlye with a readie dexteritie or nimblenes, for at the same time that the maister shall giue
the

which must be carried behind the right, and withall shall give a mandritta at the head of his scholar, at which time the scholar must remove with his right foot, following with his left, and let him turn his Rapier hand as I have said, and that the scholar observe the same time in going back as the teacher shall, to the end that his point may be towards the belly of his master, and let him lift up his other hand with his ward on high, that he be not stricken in the face with the mandritta, or in the belly with the thrust or stoccata. Wherefore at the selfesame time that the scholar shall deliver the [aforesaid]¹ stoccata to the teacher, the teacher shall yield and shrink with his body, and beat the stoccata outward on the left side, and shall bring his right foot a little aside in circle wise upon the right side, & shall give an imbroccata to the face of his scholar, at which time the said scholar shall go back with his right foot a little aside, with the same measure, and shall beat aside the imbroccata of his master with his left hand outward from the left side, and withall shall deliver the like imbroccata of counter-time to the teacher, but only to the face, and then the master shall go back with his right foot toward the left side of his scholar, in breaking with his left hand the said imbroccata outward from the left side, and shall strike a down right blow to his head, because that by beating aside his foyne with his hand, he shall find him naked and without guard.

L. And what then, cannot the Scholar defend himself?

V. Yes very easily with a ready dexterity of nimbleness, for at the same time that the master shall give

¹ The text here is "fore saide", which clearly is aforesaid in this context.

the saide mandritta, the scholler shall doo nothing else but turne the pointe of his foote toward the bodye of his maister, and let the middest of his left foote directly respect the heele of the right, and let him turn his body vpon the right side, but let it rest and staye vpon the lefte, and in the same time let him turne the Rapier hand outward in the stoccata or thrust, as I haue giuen you to vnderstand before, that the point be toward the bellye of his maister, and let him litte vp his hand and take good heede that hee come not forward in deliue- ring the saide stoccata, which is halfe an incartata, for how little soeuer hee should come forward, he would put himselfe in danger of his life: and beleue me, eue- ry man which shall not vnderstand these measures and principles, incurre the danger of his life: and who so despiseth these grounds which are necessarye as well for the schoole as the combat, it may bee to his confu- sion & dishonour, and losse of his life: wherefore eue- ry one which makes profession of this art, should seek to learn them and vnderstand them.

L. For this matter I am fullye satisfied, wherefore I praye you proceed to teach me that which remaineth to be taught for this ward.

V. When the maister will make his scholler readye, hee shall practise him to be the first in going backe, by remouing his right foote a little aside in circle wise, as before his maister did to him, and let him with great readines thrust his Rapier vnder his teachers, and giue him a thrust or stoccata in the belly.

L. What then shall the teacher doo?

V. He shall shift his body a little, and shall beate the stoccata or thrust outward from the right side, and shal

E remouc

the said mandritta, the scholar shall do nothing else but turn the point of his foot toward the body of his master, and let the middest of his left foot directly respect the heel of the right, and let him turn his body upon the right side, but let it rest and stay upon the left, and in the same time let him turn the Rapier hand outward in the stoccata or thrust, as I have given you to understand before, that the point be toward the belly of his master, and let him lift up his hand and take good heed that he come not forward in delive- ring the said stoccata, which is half an incartata, for how little soever he should come forward, he would put himself in danger of his life: and believe me, eve- ry man which shall not understand these measures and principles, incurs the danger of his life: and who so despiseth these grounds which are [...]

Interpretation

General advice

Each excerpt below represents a unit of fencing time. At the conclusion of each unit of fencing time either the master or the student would be stricken by his opponent unless he responded in some manner. It can be a useful training technique to allow a blow/thrust to land occasionally at various points in the routine. If you are going to use these moves in a real fighting situation there are two things that this routine should give you.

1. Fluidity, you can build up a fighting flow, using both cuts and thrusts, and gain an intuition about how to defend in certain types of situations.
2. A collection of shorter attack sequences and potential responses if your opponent responds as predicted. However, typically your opponent will rapidly deviate from what you can predict in his responses, so you need to be able to break off your sequences as soon as you hit, or you are unable to “read” your opponent.

By allowing a blow to land a semi-random point in the sequence you will avoid programming yourself to blindly run through the whole sequence irrespective of the responses of your opponent.

Adopting a guard position:

“[...] the teacher shall deliver the Rapier into his hand, and shall cause him to stand with his right foot foremost, with his knee somewhat bowing, but that his body rest more upon the left leg, not steadfast and firm as some stand, which seem to be nailed to the place, but with a readiness and nimbleness, as though he were to perform some feat of activity,

[...] the ward of his hand be directly against his right

knee: and let the teacher also put himself in the same ward, and hold his Rapier against the middle of his scholar's Rapier, so that the point be directly against the face of his Scholar, and likewise his scholar's against his, and let their feet be right one against another”



Saviolo's advice about stance and placement of the feet is fairly clear, my interpretation has been to place about 70% of my weight on the rear leg. The motivation for this is that it keeps your face further from the tip of your opponent's rapier.

The basic ward position is with the hilt of the weapon low, in line with right knee and with the point directed at the opponent's face. This starting “guard” position seems to be what is depicted in the figure on the verso of folio 9, a detail of which is reproduced here. If the

illustrator can be assumed to have been reasonably accurate, we might conclude that Saviolo's English translator uses "against" to mean "in line with", in contrast to "in close proximity to", which is how a modern reader might be likely to interpret it.

Time 1:

"[...]then shall the master begin to teach him, moving

his right foot somewhat on the right side in circle wise putting the point of his Rapier under his scholar's Rapier, and so giving him a thrust to the belly.

L. And what then must the scholar do?

V. At the selfsame time the scholar must remove with like measure or counter-time with his right foot a little aside, and let the left foot follow the right, turning a little his body on the right side, thrusting with the point of his Rapier at the belly of his teacher, turning

readily his hand [so] that the fingers be inward toward the body, and with the joint of the wrist be outward. In this sort the said scholar shall learn to strike and not be stricken, [...]"

The master commences with a low line attack to the belly of the scholar. In doing so he moves out of the line of the scholar's blade (to avoid a naively delivered direct thrust) by taking a circular step to the right. Note the similarity to the opening attack described by di Grassi. The scholar counters this attack by moving out of line by making a side/circular step with his front (right) foot, followed by the left foot moving the point of the weapon from pointing at the face to point at the belly, thus closing the line. To strengthen this defence he rotates his hand so that the fingers face upwards and towards his body. This places the strength of the arm behind the blade preventing the master's attack

from breaking through the guard. A moderate extension will then suffice to impale the master, since he is already closing the distance as a result of his attack. My interpretation is that the scholar's thrust is made in opposition to the master's blade closing the line, while at the same time moving to the side to avoid being stricken if the timing is not quite right. It seems that Saviolo also has this in mind when we read his justification in the last sentence of the quotation.

Time 2:

" [...] At the same time that the scholar removeth his foot, the teacher shall play a little with stirring of his body, and with his left hand shall beat away his scholar's Rapier from his right side, and shall remove his right foot behind his left striking a cross blow at the head.

L. And the scholar what shall he do?

V. When I remove with my foot and lift up my hand, let the scholar pass with his left foot where his right was, and withall let him turn his hand and not lose the opportunity of this blow, which must be a foyne in manner of a thrust under his Rapier, and let him lift up his hand with his ward that he be guarded and lie not open, meeting with his left hand the rapier of his teacher, and let him not beat aside the the blow with his Rapier for he endangereth the point and brings his life into hazzard, because he loseth the point [...]"

The master defends himself by swaying back and to the side away from the point of the scholar's rapier to gain time. However, in my interpretation he does not retire, instead seeing the opportunity to gain time and distance he moves abruptly sideways to the left, pivoting on his left foot and moving his right foot behind the left one (tracing a circle about the left foot, which is the point of rotation), beating away the point of the scholar's rapier to the outside of his body on the right hand

side. This results in a void reminiscent of Capo Ferro closing the distance in a manner that effectively prevents the scholar from making either a thrust or cut and placing the master at about ninety degrees to the student's line of attack. To borrow a phrase from William Wilson, "the master is now standing in the ideal position from which to pee on his opponent's leg". At the same time as he starts to move the right foot he removes the blade of his weapon by dropping it away from that of the scholar in a circular motion around behind his head and down in a crosswise cut to the back of the head of the scholar. This cut should arrive at the same time as the right foot is placed on the ground at the completion of the pivoting movement. At the conclusion of this action the master's feet are reversed, that is, the left foot is forward.

The scholar defends himself against the crosswise cut to the head by also pivoting around and blocking the incoming cut by intercepting the guard of the master's rapier with his hand. Simultaneously he drops the point of his rapier down and thrusts under his parrying hand into the master's body. Note that Saviolo stresses that the scholar should not "beat aside" the incoming cut, because then he would lose control of the blade and point and thus be in great danger, it is vital in this move that one tries to grip the guard of the opponent's rapier momentarily in order to prevent him from striking you in an unexpected manner.

This section of the routine depends on quite precise footwork and distance for the timing to work. This I believe to be one of the key aspects of Saviolo's style, to make and break distance in half time in order to create an opportunity to strike the opponent.

Time 3:

“At the selfsame time that the scholar goes back, the master shall play a little, and shifting his body shall break the same imbrogata or foyne outward from the left side, removing with his left foot,

which must be carried behind the right, and withall shall give a mandritta at the head of his scholar, at which time the scholar must remove with his right foot, following with his left, and let him turn his Rapier hand as I have said, and that the scholar observe the same time in going back as the teacher shall, to the end that his point may be towards the belly of his master, and let him lift up his other hand with his ward on high, that he be not stricken in the face with the mandritta, or in the belly with the thrust or stoccata.”

Now the master needs to gain distance and time to avoid the scholar's thrust. To do this he retires one pace removing his left foot behind his right, as he does this he beats away the scholar's rapier point from his body line using the left hand, outward from the left side of his body. Having avoided the thrust he makes another cut to the scholar's head, this time with the front edge of the blade withdrawing his rapier guard out of the hand of the scholar again in a semicircular motion above and behind the head in order to gain momentum for the mandritta. The resulting cut can be placed anywhere on the right hand side of the scholar's head (as seen by the master, e.g. From the scholar's point of view the cut might be aimed at the left temple).

To counter this action the scholar also retires a little, and closes the open line using his rapier in the same manner as in the previous sequence, though raising the hand now to take the cut on the guard of the weapon. One can also argue that the scholar should parry with the hand again, as in the sequence for time 2. This fits the description slightly better, but to do so with the distance between the fencers that one gets by following the footwork would involve parrying the mandritta directly with the hand. The alternative is to take the cut on the weapon as I have described. As insurance and to protect against an unexpected cut or thrust the scholar raises his left hand to "ward" the face. The blade pointing at the belly protects against the thrust by

closing the low line at the same time making a thrusting attack against the master.

Time 4:

“Wherefore at the selfsame time that the scholar shall deliver the [aforesaid]² stoccata to the teacher, the teacher shall yield and shrink with his body, and beat the stoccata outward on the left side, and shall bring his right foot a little aside in circle wise upon the right side, & shall give an imbroccata to the face of his scholar, at which time the said scholar shall go back with his right foot a little aside, with the same measure, and shall beat aside the imbroccata of his master with his left hand outward from the left side, and withall shall deliver the like imbroccata of counter-time to the teacher, but only to the face, ...”

To avoid the thrust the master shifts more of his weight and body backwards, placing most of his weight on the back foot in order to gain time and distance from the point and then beats out the point on the left side of his body taking a short compass step to the right angling the point of the rapier around the raised hand that the scholar is protecting his face with and delivering a direct thrust to the face. The scholar beats away this thrust and moving also to the right with the right foot in a circular manner delivers the same direct thrust to the master's face.

Time 5:

“and then the master shall go back with his right foot toward the left side of his scholar, in breaking with his left hand

² The text here is "fore saide", which clearly is aforesaid in this context.

the said imbroccata outward from the left side, and shall strike a down right blow to his head, because that by beating aside his foyne with his hand, he shall find him naked and without guard.

L. And what then, cannot the Scholar defend himself?

V. Yes very easily with a ready dexterity of nimbleness, for at the same time that the master shall give the said mandritta, the scholar shall do nothing else but turn the point of his foot toward the body of his master, and let the middest of his left foot directly respect the heel of the right, and let him turn his body upon the right side, but let it rest and stay upon the left, and in the same time let him turn the Rapier hand outward in the stoccata or thrust, as I have given you to understand before, that the point be toward the belly of his master, and let him lift up his hand and take good heed that he come not forward in delivering the said stoccata, which is half an incartata, for how little soever he should come forward, he would put himself in danger of his life.”

The master also beats aside the face thrust, and using the momentum that the student has given his blade by beating it out to the left from the face he allows the blade to drop away and out to his right in a swing that results in a down right blow directly onto the crown of the scholar's head. To avoid this blow the scholar consolidates his stance by drawing up his left foot pivoting a little to his right on the ball of the right foot. The left foot ends up with the instep resting against the heel of the right foot. The scholar simultaneously raises his right hand to protect his face in case of accident and reorientating the point of his rapier on the side of the belly of the master delivers a killing thrust. It is vital in doing this that the student not close the distance, otherwise he exposes himself to extreme danger since the master could then reposition the cut,

grapple his weapon, or engage in other hand to hand wrestling actions.

Discussion

The pivoting action in Time 2 is my interpretation, alternative interpretations exist, in particular that of Stephen Hand[1]. His interpretation assumes that the footwork is incorrectly described, this affects the development of the next couple of actions following this one as well since the fencers are further apart at this point in his reconstruction.

The other area of difficulty is in Time 3, where I have discussed the alternatives that I see as possible. Here also Stephen Hand offers another approach. The difficulty that I see with the reconstructions of Mr Hand are that they add fencing times and foot motions to the sequences and in some cases discount what is actually written.

References

[1] Stephen Hand, "The Practical Saviolo - Part 1", Journal of Western Martial Art, March 2003,
http://ejmas.com/jwma/articles/2003/jwmaart_hand_0303.htm

[2] Saviolo, Vincentio. His Practise. In Two Bookes, London, 1595,
Translation to English by IG Gentleman