Lett Mat Int (2014) 2:1–2
DOI 10.1007/s40329-014-0050-4

# Letter from the Editor

**Sandro Caparrini · Guillaume Jouve**

Published online: 3 May 2014


In 2013, the world over, there were dozens of initiatives to commemorate the bicentennial of the death of Lagrange. For the most part, such commemorations were academic conferences, but attempts were also made to make Lagrange more accessible to the public in general. The effort required to make a mathematician known beyond the restricted circle of experts is daunting enough to merit special notice and praise.

In Paris, at the École Polytechnique from 23 September to 15 December there was an exhibition, curated by Frédéric Brechenmacher, which displayed the mementos of Lagrange conserved in the archives of the École. In Turin, the Academy of Sciences organised, from 19 September to 23 November, another exhibition, which was noteworthy in its demonstration of the flavour, we might say, of Lagrange's epoch. The editors of the *Lettera Matematica* also wished to contribute to this laudable work of popularisation, and invited various experts in the mathematics of the 1,700 s to share some of the aspects of their research.

If you ask a mathematician what nationality Lagrange was, in ninety percent of the cases they would reply unhesitatingly that the great mathematician was French. In reality, Lagrange belonged to both Italy and to France (and a little to Germany as well). It was to take this fact into account that here are gathered authors from different countries; the international perspective that results seems to us to be particularly stimulating.

At the beginning, we gave ourselves the objective of covering all branches of mathematics to which Lagrange had contributed. We must confess that we have not been successful in that, but the fault is not ours. Rather, it is the fault of Lagrange, who dealt with *all* of the mathematics known in his day. If we had followed the criterion of completeness, this special issue would have grown into a volume of several hundred pages. Rather than go into every small detail, each author has limited his or her discussion to a glimpse of the riches that are hidden in the *Oeuvres* of Lagrange. The portrait of Lagrange that emerges from this mosaic is, in certain respects, new and surprising. We are used to considering Lagrange as little more than a label attached to some theorems that have been passed down through generations of students. In the past, some have even theorised that such a view is essentially correct, postulating that what we are dealing with is a typical case of the mathematician closed within himself. However, modern historians, digging deeper into documents, bringing to light previously unpublished correspondence and re-examining the sequence of theorems, have reconstructed a multi-dimensional figure. Lagrange had his likes and dislikes; he crossed Europe; he was a direct witness to the most important political events of his day; he conversed with ministers, philosophers and scientists. Like Franklin, Rousseau and Mozart, he is a valuable guide for orienting ourselves among the historic structures of the late 1,700 s.

Happy reading.

This article opens the issue of the *Lettera Matematica International Edition* dedicated to Joseph-Louis Lagrange.

S. Caparrini
Dipartimento di Matematica, Università di Torino, Via Carlo Alberto, 10, 10123 Turin, Italy
e-mail: sandro.caparrini@unito.it

G. Jouve (✉)
LML-Laboratoire de Mathématiques de Lens (EA 2462), Faculté des Sciences Jean Perrin, Université d'Artois, Rue Jean Souvraz SP, 18, 62307 Lens Cedex, France
e-mail: guillaume.jouve@espe-lnf.fr

**Acknowledgments** Every academic collaboration carries with it the pleasurable obligation to acknowledge those who contributed. First of all, we thank Angelo Guerraggio and all the collaborators of the Centro PRISTEM. Special thanks go to Luca Alberini, who dealt with problems of printing.

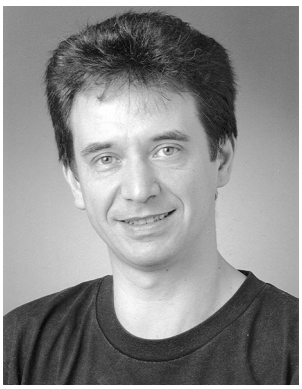
In the Department of Mathematics of the University of Turin, we thank the director, Prof. Caterina Dagnino, and Dr. Giuseppe Semeraro, vice-director of the Biblioteca of Mathematics "Giuseppe Peano", for having allowed Livia Giacardi and Franco Pastrone to reproduce the letter of Lagrange to his father. Giovanni Preziuso, technical assistant in the department, helped with problems of scanning.

We especially thank the president of the Turin Academy of Sciences, Prof. Alberto Conte, and the librarian of the Academy, Dr. Elena Borgi, provided advice regarding the choice of material.

Thanks are also due to Pierre Crépel, for much useful advice.

Finally, particular thanks go to the authors for having summarised their historic research. We hope that his special issue of the *Lettera Mathematica International Edition* clearly shows the variety and wealth of the set of disciplines that are gathered under the name of history of science.

(Translated from the Italian by Kim Williams)



**Sandro Caparrini** holds degrees in Physics and in Mathematics and a Ph.D. in Mathematics from the University of Turin. His research interests are mainly focused on the history of the interaction between mathematics and mechanics from 1750 onward. He has held postdoctoral positions at the Dibner Institute (Harvard and MIT), at the Cohn Institute (Tel Aviv), at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology (Toronto) and at the Dept. of Mathematics of the University of Lille (France). In 2004 he was awarded the Slade Prize from the British Society for the History of Science

.

**Guillaume Jouve** is a lecturer in the history of mathematics at the University of Artois (Laboratoire de mathématiques de Lens). His work concerns the history of the physical–mathematical sciences and more particularly the history of analysis and its partial differential equations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 2007 he defended a thesis on the problem of vibrating strings in the second part of the work of d'Alembert. His is also a member of the editorial board of the *Oeuvres Complètes de D'Alembert* and has directed several volumes of that edition

.