

MY BOX OF STEAM Science FORCES IN ACTION

Laura Bassi, scientist,
physicist, the first woman
to obtain a university
professorship.
Bologna, October 29, 1711
/February 20, 1778



Co-funded by
the European Union

MY BOX OF STEAM (project nr. 2022-2-E-E01-KA220-SCH-000099273) is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



Science "FORCES IN ACTION"
All content is licensed under
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

THE POWER OF DETERMINATION

Little Laura listened to the rustling of book pages. It sounded to her like a whisper, as if the book was telling her, "...Come closer, come and discover the secret I keep." A curious and capable child, Laura had learned languages other than her own. The family doctor, Gaetano Tacconi, being not only amused by her brilliant intelligence, had offered to be her private teacher, so year after year, the child had been able to study, expanding her knowledge. Although her family was not exactly well off, her father and mother desired a good education for her so that her gift of wit and insight would not be wasted.

Laura especially liked philosophy and read uninterruptedly.

Bologna, the city where she was born and lived, was home to one of the oldest universities, and Laura, as much as she knew her dream was difficult, aspired to enter it. Therefore, having turned 20, before an audience of professors, scholars and men of letters, with a proud and determined look on her face, she argued in 1732 on philosophy, answering very difficult questions. Her arguments aroused not only astonishment but great admiration, so much so that only a short time later, she was allowed, the first woman, to teach at that same university. However, the eighteenth century, despite being an "enlightened" century where the place was given to science and reason, was by no means an easy or even kind century for women. Laura actually represented an exception. Her entry into the university aroused chatter and discontent, so to make life easier for herself, she decided to marry. She was lucky, the man she chose, physician Giuseppe Veratti, not only fell in love with her, her intelligence and beauty but always encouraged her studies and work. Laura, like the modern woman she was, managed to reconcile her work with her family of eight children. Their marriage was not one of mere convenience but of mutual love and esteem. Together they opened a scientific laboratory where not only students could study but also do important experiments. In their laboratory, there were many scientific instruments, including an electric machine.



Laura continued to study and perform experiments, fascinated by the work of other contemporary scientists. Her value was recognised outside the city as well, so much so that in the course of her life, she had a dense correspondence with numerous men of culture and science: Voltaire, Alessandro Volta... She became so famous that not only did the city derive lustre from it, but it was considered a true wonder, on a par with the Roman ruins the pictorial works of illustrious artists, so much so that travellers on the Grand Tour stopped in the city also and above all so that they could meet her and listen to her lectures. In her increasingly avant-garde laboratory, she also taught courses in Newtonian physics, contributing to the dissemination in Italy, so much so that she earned the nickname "the Newtonian." Her lectures influenced the best intelligence of the time, including Spallanzani, who, for her, abandoned his legal studies to devote himself to those of natural philosophy (biology). In 1776, she finally became a professor at the Chair of Physics Experimental at the Institute of Sciences at the University of Bologna, the first woman in Europe, with her husband serving as her assistant. She died two years later.

A crater on Venus, an asteroid and even an icebreaker ship are dedicated to her today, perhaps because she was able with strength and determination to overcome obstacles by "breaking" the schemes. Laura Bassi, forgotten for so long, is today regarded as a true example: emancipating herself through study in the Age of Enlightenment, she represented a true light, very high, capable of illuminating the path of so many people still today.