

## The Mandolin Orchestra, an Introduction

Mandolas, mandoras, and mandolinos were part of the mix of fretted instruments that proceeded from the oud and other instruments around the Mediterranean through the medieval, renaissance, and baroque eras.



Left: Alex Timmerman's chart shows the variety of ways that Italians created versions of the instrument, starting around 1650.

The Roman and Milanese forms were popular, but in Naples the Vinaccia family eventually put together a version of the mandolin that would become the standard for nearly a century and a half. Through the latter 1700s, and into the early 1800s, Gaetano Vinaccia produced instruments thusly: "ten frets on a fingerboard lying flush with the table to which some additional frets were glued, three pairs of brass strings and one pair of gut, all tuned with wooden pegs and plucked with a quill" (Sparks, 15). During this period, luthiers developed the form of the violin and guitar, as well as the mandolin; more robust metal strings and the resulting string

tension provided more projection, raising the playable range of the instruments through lengthened finger/fretboards and--at least for the guitar and mandolin--metal tuning machines. Around 1835, Pasquale Vinaccia used these advances, along with a deeper bowl (and the practice of using a tortoise-shell pick) to create the format of the "bowl-back" mandolin that is still in wide usage today (Sparks, 16).

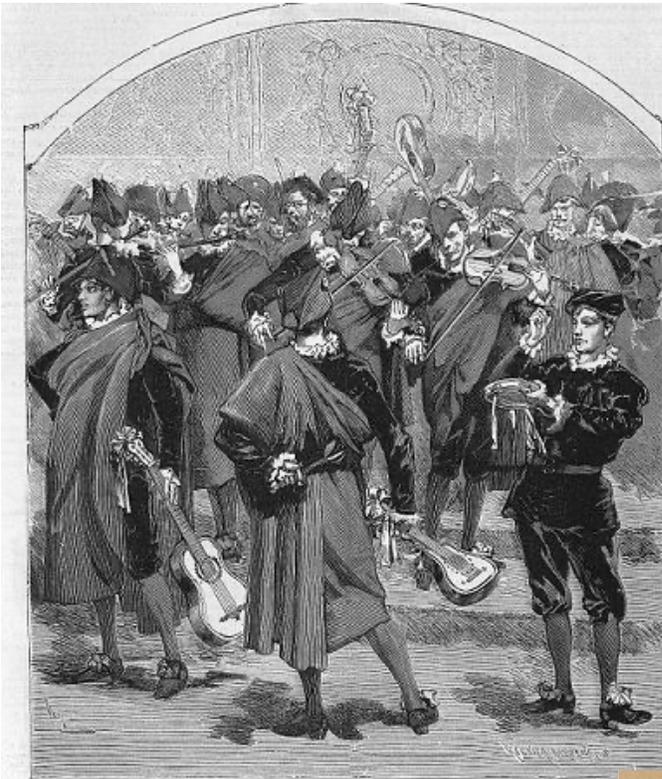
A type of group called the *Circolo mandolinistico* formed as Italian mandolinists gathered to make use of the new and versatile form of the mandolin, which could accompany dancing and song. Virtuoso Carlo Munier (b. 1859) was at the center of some famous groups, including the *Royal Circolo Mandolinisti Regina Margherita* (The Mandolinist Circle of Queen Margherita). Munier, who seems quite an entrepreneur, published in 1891 a *Scuola del Mandolino* that sought expand knowledge and practice of mandolin technique

Left: Many of us who have in more recent years used a "how to play" book for any instrument would recognize the illustration from Munier's 1891 volume that shows how to hold the mandolin and pick.



Munier, as a player/teacher/publisher/organizer helped form many of the practices of mandolin--and fretted-instrument--ensemble playing we still use today. Significantly, Munier also innovated a quartet of mandolin-family instruments made up of two mandolins, a mandola and the 5-course liuto, and pushed for the mandolin's use in more refined musical situations.

Elsewhere the allure of fretted instruments was often tied up with exoticism, as was the case in 1878 when groups of Spanish students, in their academic garments, delighted thousands at performances at the "Carnaval de Paris." These *estudiantina* ensembles were a traditional part of student life in Spain and Portugal, featuring boisterous college songs on the guitarra and bandurria, Iberian instruments that were similar to the mandolin.

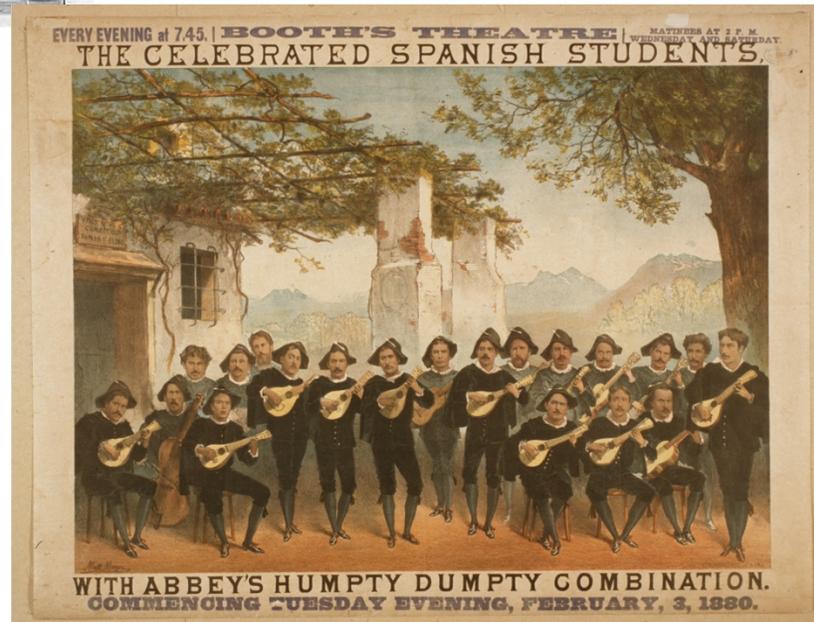


Left: "L'Estudiantina Espagnola qui triompha au Carnaval de Paris en 1878." *Le Monde Illustré*, March 16, 1878.

The fad for the mandolin, and the image of the *estudiantina*, spread to the US. Carlos Curti, born in Italy, was a large part of this process. About five years after he arrived in the United States (c.1875), Curti saw the opportunity to imitate one of the great acts of his day, the *Estudiantina Figaro* / *Estudiantina Figueroa*, a costumed, dancing, bandurria-playing group from Spain that was touring in the United States (as well as the United Kingdom and parts of South America) in the early 1880s. Curti's Spanish Students imitated the Figaro group, but using mandolins instead of the Iberian bandurria.

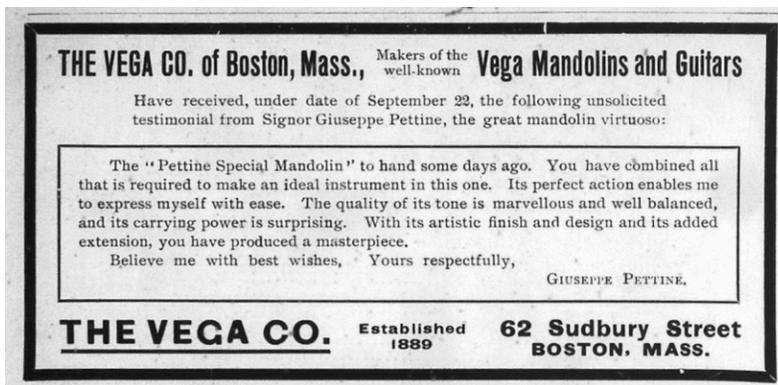
Right: Illustration by Matthew Morgan (1839-1890) advertised *The Celebrated Spanish Students* in 1880.

Meanwhile, another Italian named Giuseppe Pettine had settled in Providence, Rhode Island, continuing Munier's effort to elevate and refine the mandolin. He published original pieces and a method book that coached avid students of the mandolin in technical maneuvers like the "duo style," and was recognized as a leading figure in the mandolin world.



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*Left: This Vega advertisement, published in the Cadenza in November, 1904, includes a testimony from Pettine*

In the decades around 1900 the growing middle class had more resources, but also found more stresses in factory work and factory pollution, in increased

mechanization, traffic, and urban noise. Many of these harried workers found relaxation and refinement in the mandolin, especially in groups, clubs, and orchestras. One way that we can grasp the extent of the mandolin movement ca. 1900 is to look at publications related to the instrument. In 1894 Clarence L. Partee founded *The Cadenza* in Kansas City, (eventually sold to NYC publisher Walter Jacobs) and in 1908 Philadelphia teacher and publisher Herbert Forrest Odell started *The Crescendo* as the official organ of the Guild of Mandolinists, Banjoists and Guitarists. Both magazines included musical selections, columns by leading musicians, as well as news and advertisements for sheet music, instruments, and other supplies. The mandolin and fretted-instrument orchestra movement was so widespread that Odell wrote *The Mandolin Orchestra*, subtitled 'A book for directors, managers, teachers and players'. The 90-page manual, published in 1913, covered everything from instrumentation and conducting style to effective programming and proper stage behavior."

While periodicals and published music (and soon, recordings) were important parts of the mandolin world in the United States, fretted instruments of various kinds were a key part of the business and community activity that developed in distinctly American ways. The dance orchestras organized by James Reese Europe in the New York area were one of the last cases of African-American presentation of the banjo in mainstream popular culture. Europe's groups played different sizes and configurations of the banjo, a reflection of the boom in instrument innovation ca. 1900 in the United States (Linn, 5-39). The "Banjo-mandolin-guitar" or "BMG" term was used to describe the movement in this period, indicating the connections that joined these instruments. Mandolins, along with banjos, became the object of new kinds of popular attention--and various kinds of "uplift" and popularization—as other fretted instruments.

While instruments from Larsen, Vega, and other makes were on the market, Orville H. Gibson was a key figure in creating what might be called the American mandolin. Born in New York in 1856, he moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan as a young man and began designing and building instruments in the 1880s. In 1898, he was granted a patent for a new design in arch-top instruments. His early instruments were highly experimental and ornate, using principles similar to those of violin construction to radically alter the mandolin's form.

Right: Drawing. O. H. GIBSON. MANDOLIN.  
No. 598,245. Patented Feb. 1, 1898.

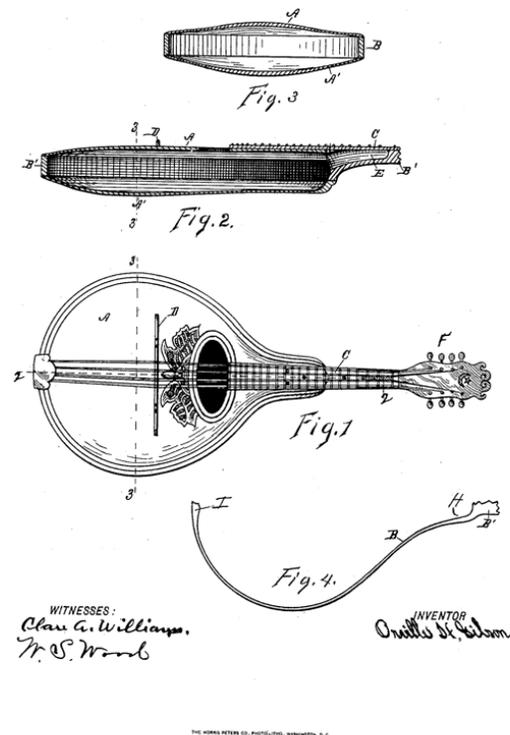
The Gibson company propagated BMG instruments and the groups that would use them. As the history site of the Pittsburgh mandolin society puts it, "... companies such as Gibson ... employed salesmen who traveled across the United States, selling instruments of the mandolin family. The salesmen quickly found that they could generate more sales by establishing mandolin orchestras in the towns they visited. Playing in the local mandolin orchestra became 'all the rage' for the men and women of polite society. Mandolin orchestras soon became plentiful across the nation, with membership sometimes being contingent upon ethnicity, social status or political beliefs" (<http://www.pittsburghmandolinsociety.org/our-history>). Gibson convinced many players to become "Gibsonites," participants in the BMG vogue and contributors to the growing fretted music business. The company's success in recruiting teachers and orchestra leaders to serve as Gibson dealers helped establish the company nationwide.

The firm grew around Gibson's revolutionary designs but the business didn't retain him—a new visionary was hired by Gibson in 1922: acoustic engineer Lloyd Allayre Loar. Loar led Gibson in updating their BMG instruments. The new mandolins eventually sported a number of features that improved playability and sound: an adjustable truss-rod in the neck, adjustable two-piece ebony bridge, and a new tapering peghead contour called the 'snake-head'. Loar sought to re-establish the mandolin as a high-class concert instrument but soon fell afoul of the Gibson company's management himself; they didn't share his zeal for the mandolin which had faded as a fad and thus as a source of revenue.

For amateur groups in the U.S. after the 1920s, as for some of the Italian Circoli and Spanish Estudiantinas, the emphasis was on participation; after the fading of the mandolin fad from a business point of view the mandolin itself stuck around in fewer professional and presentational contexts.

The instrument did appear in new contexts during this time in a few key situations. A parallel fretted-instrument phenomenon in South America saw the instrument emerge in the context of *choro*, a dance music based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Players like Jacob do Bandolim used a version of the mandolin with a flat top and round sound hole to dazzling effect in performing repertoire that shows the influence of jazz as well as local Afro-Latin sounds.

(No Model.)  
O. H. GIBSON.  
MANDOLIN.  
No. 598,245. Patented Feb. 1, 1898.



Bill Monroe was another virtuoso who used the mandolin in popular music and within a string band context, featuring it in early recordings of his duo with brother Charlie and later with the Blue Grass Boys. Monroe used tremolo techniques extensively, as well as syncopation and rhythmic emphasis that reflect the considerable African American influences on his playing. His approach to the instrument added a new voice to the acoustic string band format that formed the roots of country music in the 1940s. Monroe's "Kentucky Waltz" was a pop hit for Eddy Arnold, but Monroe's 1951 version of this song—with organ wafting up around the mandolin—flopped. The mandolin remained well outside of the mainstream, but use of the instrument in bluegrass and the folk revival has kept it in the toolbox of pop music and on music store shelves ever since.

Well below the radar of popular music, mandolin orchestras and similar ensembles have maintained musical and social settings for the instrument and the people who play it. The Takoma Mandoleers (in the DC area) have been playing and meeting since 1923; the Providence Mandolin Orchestra emerged from the longstanding interest in the mandolin in Rhode Island; the New York Mandolin Orchestra founded in 1924 was originally associated with *Freiheit*, a Jewish communist newspaper; founded in 1900, the Milwaukee Mandolin Orchestra (originally the Bonne Amie Musical Circle) is the longest-running group (according to their website) in the world (<https://www.milwaukee mandolin orchestra.org/info>).

A revival has added new groups to these legacy ensembles. The Classical Mandolin Society of America supports the movement with grants, publications, distribution of materials, and with its annual convention (<https://classicalmandolinsociety.org/>). As of 2009 Pittsburgh has one of the largest mandolin orchestras in the country (~40 members) and celebrates diversity of styles in their performances (<http://www.pittsburghmandolinsociety.org/our-history>). The fretted instrument ensemble that was part of the community of the Polish town of Gora Kalwaria is remembered and re-enacted by the Ger Mandolin Orchestra that "...stands now not merely as a 'living memorial' to one particular family or community, but to an entire musical and cultural tradition that has disappeared from Jewish life" (<http://germandolin.com/about>).

### **The ETSU Mandolin Orchestra**

The ETSU Mandolin Orchestra, founded Spring 2014, is a course offered through the program in Bluegrass, Old-Time and Roots Music Studies (BLUE) housed in the Department of Appalachian Studies at East Tennessee State University. Director Lee Bidgood coaches mandolinists from a variety of backgrounds to play using a range of source materials and styles. The group covers a lot of ground: learning by ear, reading notation, learning about the history of mandolin orchestras, and exploring contemporary ways to continue this tradition into the future.

The group recorded for this project in 2017 consists of community members, undergraduate majors in the BLUE program, graduate students in Appalachian Studies, as well as

students of Exercise Science and Geosciences. Some of the players have been doing this kind of for decades—one member started playing the mandolin just a year before the recordings were made.

The group continues to draw from the traditions of the mandolin, adapt older repertoire, and make new connections. All the while, we balance our musical and technical goals with the legacy of the mandolin orchestra as a social institution. Everyone is welcome in this group, and all have something to offer.

### **A note about instruments.**

The members of the ETSU Mandolin Orchestra play a variety of instruments, mostly with a Gibson-type carved top and back. One exceptional member of the lineup, though, is a mandola that was donated to ETSU, and which was used for the first time in this ensemble. Generously gifted to the program by Lonette Seaton ca. 2000, it was stored with other instruments in a closet, assumed to be a 1920s Gibson oval-hole mandolin (it was fitted with mandolin strings) and thus not suited for the bluegrass style. The only other information about the instrument came from Lonette, who recalls that the instrument was bought by the family of her husband Lester Seton in the 1930s, likely at a pawn shop near Knoxville, Tennessee.

Through the help of members of the online site Mandolin Café and instrument expert George Gruhn, it soon became clear that there are no other known “snakehead” (slanted peghead) mandolas made by the Gibson company, and that this instrument might be unique. Now part of the cataloged equipment at ETSU, this mandola is a lovely piece of lutherie and a phenomenal musical instrument. It is a pleasure to present its sound along with the other resonances and stories that make up our group.

As you might imagine, there is no departmental budget to purchase mandolas and mandocellos, the rarer members of the orchestra, so we are always looking for more instruments—especially mandolas and mandocellos—and folks who want to play them. If you are interested in learning more about the group and what we are doing, contact Lee Bidgood at [bidgood@etsu.edu](mailto:bidgood@etsu.edu) or 423-439-7072

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## ETSU Mandolin Orchestra

[1] The Home Town Band, - A. J. Weidt, (1920, Walter Jacobs).

On the parts (which are written for mandolin orchestra) this piece is subtitled “An Imitation.” We have used this march as a fanfare to open concerts and announce our presence in the way that a brass band would do. This number is one of the simpler ones in terms of the sheet music involved, and thus one of the first ones that players tackle if this is their introduction to using music notation.

[2] Bullfrog Blues - Tom Brown and Gus Shrigley, Arr. Louis Tocaben (1917, Carl Fischer).

One of the reasons I founded this group was to find ways to connect the formal musical world of an “orchestra” that I became familiar with through studying music and the more informal “band” model that I know from vernacular music worlds. This piece comes from an era when bands called orchestras were part of popular/vernacular music making; taking part in a mandolin orchestra was something ordinary people might do for fun. Over the years this piece, with all of its orchestration, continues to make students in the group smile.

[3] *Sobre las Olas (Over the Waves)* - Juventino Rosas, Arr. O. Schick (Hofmeister, 1898)  
Rosas (1868-1894), born a part of the Otomí indigenous group in Santa Cruz de Galeana in Mexico, rose from work as a street musician to leading a band at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This piece continues to be one of the most recognized waltzes in the world. The version we use was published in Germany, indicating the international history of the mandolin orchestra and its continuing possibilities for intercultural interaction.

[4] *Noites Cariocas* - Jacob do Bandolim, Arranged by Ralph Wesley Carr. Solo mandolinist, Isaac Shockley.

The instrumental genre of choro, an early Brazilian popular music genre, originated in 19th century Rio de Janeiro. Mandolinists outside of Brazil have been attracted to this form of music, having heard players such as Jacob do Bandolim (Jacob Pick Bittencourt, 1918-1969) virtuosically perform the style's mixture of African and European influences. Wes Carr transcribed the piece from a recording and Isaac Shockley here translates that notation back into sound.

[5] *Cold Morning Shout* - from the playing of the South Street Trio (1927, Victor). Arranged by Jim Miller

This piece, recorded by the South Street Trio (African-American duo Bobby Leecan & Robert Cooksey, dates unknown), highlights the rag form, with a variety of strains, variations, and rhythms that was the rage in the early 1900s. This arrangement by mandocellist Jim Miller, who has long taught students to play variety of instruments in the Bluegrass, Old Time and Roots Music Studies program, imagines how this piece might have sounded if a period group back then had gotten their hands on it.

[6] *Mandolin Rag / Take Those Lips Away* - from the playing of Doc Roberts, 1928, Gennett). Another ETSU colleague, mandolinist and fiddler Adam Tanner, introduced us to these pieces which Roberts (born Dock Philipine Roberts, 1897-1978) recorded on the mandolin. We spin these melodies into an ensemble arrangement, again imagining a link between “raggy” repertory and style and the mandolin orchestra ensemble.

[7] *Black Cohosh* - Adam Tanner

This original piece—named for a wildflower native to the Appalachian region—also appears on Adam's 2018 project entitled “State of Grace,” in which Lee Bidgood joins Adam in playing this and other Tanner compositions on a mandolin family instruments.

[8] *Duo des fleurs / Sous le dôme épais*, from the opera *Lakmé* by Léo Delibes, (1881) Arr. Paul Binkley

This arrangement of this graceful piece by French composer Léo Delibes (1836-1891) was made by Paul Binkley, long a part of the Modern Mandolin Quartet until his death in 2002. Diggs DeRusha joins in on guitar, a gesture towards the wider BMG movement, and the presence of the instrument in many mandolin groups ca. 1900.

[9] *Mandolin Concerto in C major, RV 425, first movement* - Antonio Vivaldi, ca.1720 Solo mandolin: Digger DeRusha

This showpiece of the baroque mandolin by Venetian composer Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) repertory seemed impossible for a group that included many first-time score-readers, and few folks who had ever played this kind of material. The students rose to the challenge, and soloist Diggs DeRusha inspired us not only with his playing, but with his social energy—reminding us that mandolin orchestras are about music, but also about working and playing together.

[10] Svatbarska Ruchenitsa - traditional.

Lee first heard this tune on Bruce Molsky's "Soon Be Time" record (Compass, 2006) as "Brass Band Ruchenitsa." Hearing Molsky perform it with guitarist Beppe Gambetta led us to work up the piece. This project posed some obstacles for our group, mostly since the piece is in 7/8 time, a typical dance rhythm in the Balkan region, but a radically different groove from the ones we are used to. Over the years, players in the orchestra have taken on the challenges that this piece poses, and have embraced it as an up-tempo way to conclude concerts. This is what our ensemble is all about - finding new ways to explore our technical and expressive abilities, and to create new connections between players, audiences, ideas, and places.

Engineered by Ben Bateson and Dan Boner

Mixed and Mastered by Ben Bateson

Photography by Dan Boner

Produced by / Notes by Lee Bidgood

Many thanks to First Baptist Church in Elizabethton for allowing us to use their building to make these recordings on April 22, 2017.

**The ETSU Mandolin Orchestra, Lee Bidgood, director**

*Mandolin: Digger DeRusha, Brandon Ladd, Delaney Dunlap, Isaac Shockley*

*Mandola: Clinton Ross, Lee Bidgood*

*Mandocello: Jim Miller*

*Guitar: Digger DeRusha, Jim Miller*