



The Miraculous Mandolin

Orchestras made up of these unique stringed instruments have been under the radar for more than a century. Now, the secret's out.

BY MEREDITH LAING

■ Music is subject to trends, with musical styles and fads coming and going with the breeze. The mandolin has had an especially volatile history, enduring extreme ups and downs in popularity, endless comparison with the more common stringed instruments, changes in its physical construction, and a confused musical identity. Yet, throughout its history, the mandolin has always been staunchly upheld by loyal enthusiasts committed to ensuring that the mandolin tradition lives on—even when its popularity wanes. The instrument now thrives in ever-growing mandolin orchestras that exist across the US, and even around the world, hinting at a new golden age of the mandolin that may be on the horizon.

FINDING A VOICE

Baroque composer Antonio Vivaldi wrote more than 250 concertos for the violin; compare that with one lone mandolin concerto, and it becomes painfully clear which one was the favored soprano-range stringed instrument. During the Baroque era, mandolins were typecast as an accompanying instrument in orchestral works, always playing “second fiddle” to violins, which were seen as more elite.

The underappreciated mandolin found more luck as a folk instrument during the 1800s, with its plucked notes heard throughout the streets of Italy. However, it fell off of the orchestral music map entirely, unable to sustain the lyrical melodies that were en vogue during the Romantic era of classical music, beginning about 1815.

Thanks to several mandolin virtuosos who emerged in Europe in the later part of the 19th century, the mandolin finally managed to gain recognition

as a legitimate concert instrument. These virtuosos wrote and performed a huge amount of mandolin music that demonstrated the instrument's true capabilities. They also developed the mandolin tremolo technique (rapid strumming back and forth between a pair of strings playing the same note), which allows the instrument to sustain pitches.

Around that same time, Italian immigration to the US was on the rise, bringing mandolins and the mandolin's lesser-known relatives—the mandola, mandocello, and mandobass—across the seas, as well. Many Americans took an interest in these “new” instruments, among them Orville Gibson.

SPREADING THE WORD

Gibson, the luthier who founded Gibson Guitar Corporation in 1902, took the Italian mandolin (known as the “bowl-back” because of its converse, rounded underside) and redesigned it with a flat back, similar in shape to the violin. This is the most common type of mandolin in the US today. The flat-back design accomplished two things that made the mandolin even more suitable as a concert instrument: the volume was bumped up and the strings didn't fall out of tune as easily.

To get the word out about his new invention, Gibson hired music teachers across the country to work as door-to-door salespeople, pitching the instrument, teaching people how to play, and organizing numerous amateur mandolin orchestras in the early 1900s.

At first, music written specifically for mandolin orchestras was hard to come by, so instead, the ensembles played pieces from the classical string repertoire. After all, the mandolin, mandola, mandocello, and mandobass are counterparts of the violin, viola, cello, and bass—same tuning and all. But with the mandolin's phenomenal growth in popularity, came a multitude of original compositions for mandolin orchestra (many of them, inexplicably, were march tunes).

The mandolin's period of glory, however, was somewhat short-lived. With increased interest in jazz music and guitar, mandolin sales dropped significantly by the mid-1930s and many of the orchestras disbanded ... but a few remained.

PASS IT ON

While some community mandolin orchestras continued to play under the radar, it was the bluegrass, folk, and rock music of the '60s and '70s that brought the instrument back into the spotlight. Bluegrass king Bill Monroe championed the mandolin, and bands like Led Zeppelin and The Grateful Dead, as well as singer Rod Stewart, used it on many popular songs. With that publicity boost, some of the mandolin orchestras that had collapsed in the '30s reformed, and new ones emerged, as well; today, these orchestras can be found in dozens of US cities.

One of the few groups that have been around since the beginning and never faltered is the New York Mandolin Orchestra,

which was first established in New York City in 1924. This group of 30 to 40 amateur players meets for weekly rehearsals and performs several concerts each year, including performances at nursing homes and for other charitable causes.

The New York Mandolin Orchestra's repertoire is as unpredictable as the mandolin's history has been. They perform music by Bach, Scott Joplin, The Beatles, The Temptations, and everything in between, showing how the mandolin's versatility has allowed it to either be a part of, or recreate, almost every musical trend. “The whole idea is that we're continuing this long tradition of the mandolin,” says Ira Chavis, 51, a six-year member of the ensemble.

Chavis, who works as an IT specialist for IBM, originally played guitar, but became interested in the mandolin after seeing a North Carolina bluegrass band that used one. Now, he's happy to have switched over, for starters, because the mandolin community is small and accessible.

“With an instrument like the guitar, you might look up to someone like Eric Clapton, but you couldn't get Eric Clapton's phone number for jack! But I have access to the great, world-famous mandolin players,” explains Chavis, who has studied with his mandolin “heros,” like Steve Bernstein, Barry Mitterhoff, and Carlo Aonzo. “The community is cool about helping others out, and the masters are available. It's a beautiful thing.”

But, if that small community feel is something that attracts you, consider acting fast: the number of mandolin players out there is growing. “In the past couple of years, we've grown the membership of the New York Mandolin Orchestra so much that we just barely fit in our rehearsal space!” says Chavis. Still, he believes that the beauty of the mandolin and mandolin orchestras is a musical secret worth sharing. Pass it on.

MEREDITH LAING IS CURIOUS TO FIND OUT HOW HER VIOLIN REPERTOIRE WOULD SOUND ON THE IDENTICALLY-TUNED MANDOLIN.



The New York Mandolin Orchestra (originally the Freiheit Mandolin Orchestra) celebrates its fourth anniversary in 1928.



Ira Chavis, 51, plucks out a tune.



Members of the New York Mandolin Orchestra pose for a photo after a 2007 concert.