

# Marilynn Mair

## First Lady of the American Mandolin

*"Marilynn Mair is a mandolinist who, through her technical mastery and artistic interpretation, has established the classical mandolin in chamber music circles worldwide."*

As an attention getter, one could easily speculate that this opening sentence from Marilynn Mair's biography pretty much says it all. Yet there is much more to the musical life of this complex and gifted musician. She is one of the very few professional classical mandolinists in the world. Her high profile performances in venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the White House, Tivoli Concert Hall, and many others - coupled with her varied tastes in music and the manner of performance during the past two decades have earned her the title, "First Lady of the American Mandolin." Praise indeed. However, it must be noted that mandolin was not her first instrument.

A prodigious youngster, Marilynn played the piano and violin, performing classical music in orchestras from the age of eight. "However," Mair recalls, "I decided to stop playing classical music when I went to college and left my violin behind. I played guitar and wrote songs in college—rock and folk—and played in a couple of rock bands. After college I picked up the violin again, and then, happily, discovered the mandolin. There was something about the sound of the mandolin that absolutely enchanted me. And, learning to play it was easy for me because of my background on violin (left hand) and guitar (right hand). I started out playing fiddle tunes with my friends, but soon I wanted to know more, and signed up to take lessons with the late great Hibbard Perry."

Longtime FIGA members will remember Hibbard Perry as a tireless musician, teacher and promoter of the mandolin. His influence of decades ago is still felt as the classical mandolin in the New England region continues to enjoy a strong and quality presence. Marilynn comments, "I can't begin to tell you what a huge influence Hibbard had on me. It would be a book. By the time I met him



he'd been teaching for well over half a century. He was a stickler for technique, and absolutely focused on production of great tone. His own range of mandolin tone color was fabulous, and he was a scientist in the area of tonal variety. He experimented with techniques and instruments to get the biggest range of sound possible from the mandolin. He instilled in me an ear for musical color that has helped me to establish the potential of the mandolin in chamber music throughout my career."

Completely devoted to the pursuit of excellence in mandolin musicianship instilled in her by Hibbard Perry, Mair's mandolin studies continued in Vienna, Germany and England. "I did formal studies with Professor Vincenz Hladky of the Vienna Conservatory, German mandolinist, Takashi Ochi, and Sigfried Behrend, guitarist and director of the German Mandolin Orchestra, and was coached by English mandolinist Hugo d'Alton." These advanced mandolin studies abroad did much to articulate the perceived differences in approach to the instrument in countries outside of the U.S. Mair comments, "There is simply a longer tradition of classical mandolin playing in Europe than in the U.S. Although I've studied in Europe, I have always walked my own path with regard to

repertoire, and that has helped me establish a singular profile as an American classical mandolinist. I play an American-style mandolin, and am a strong proponent of the American school of mandolin technique, begun at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the great American teacher/performers, Bickford, Pettine, Place, Odell, and others. I have always been accepted abroad as a serious classical mandolinist, and never felt pressured to switch to a round-back instrument or a more European repertoire. I'm actually just completing a 200+ page mandolin method that will be published by Mel Bay quite soon, so America is starting to pay attention to my thoughts on mandolin technique. I consider being an American musician a great advantage, as it makes me more flexible and open to new music and ideas."



Andrew Mah (guitar), Marilyn Mair, and Rob Bethel (cello)  
*Vivaldi Tango.*

*While her most recent CD **Mandolin in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – Vivaldi to Beethoven** presents an artist passionately absorbed in fascinating history of classical music written for, or to include, the mandolin, Marilyn Mair refuses to confine herself only to the classical literature written for the instrument...*

"On the new CD, I've included several of my favorite classical pieces. The four Beethoven pieces for mandolin and keyboard are gems: the great master writing youthful works to establish his reputation with Viennese aristocracy, who were mad for mandolin. The fabulous "Sonata for Mandolin and Piano," written by Mozart's student Hummel is very exciting and quite unusual in the mandolin repertoire. The piano part is massive and

virtuosic, but Hummel has left spaces for the mandolin to appear and play beautiful lines. Vivaldi's concertos for solo mandolin and for two mandolins are both delightful works and his "Noah's Arc" concerto for two theorbos, two flutes, two mandolins, and other pairs of instruments is very cool too, and lots of fun to play. Johann Hasse, the Baroque opera composer, wrote a great concerto for mandolin, and there are lots of other "anonymous" composers, like Hoffman, Zaneboni, and Guiliano, who wrote beautiful little-heard works."



Marilynn and Ralph Costanza, AMGuSS Directors, perform  
in the faculty recital.

"However, in order to keep the mandolin an important instrument actively involved in the present-day musical world, contemporary composers must be enticed to write for it. I have commissioned important 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers to write for the mandolin, including the internationally-renown Ernst Krenek and Guido Santorsola. I also play everything that is written for me, and regularly premiere new works for mandolin by composers who may, in future, be considered the Beethovens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My thinking is that if there are good pieces written for the mandolin, pieces that will withstand the test of time, there will always be a need for mandolinists good enough to play them. In the past year I have premiered works by Seattle composer, David Hahn, who has written several pieces for mandolin, including a duo for mandolin and guitar that won the Classical Mandolin Society of America's 2004 composition competition; Boston composer, Pamela Marshal, who wrote a great piece for my mandolin septet in 2004; Massachusetts composer, Robert N. Martel, who wrote a piece for the American Mandolin & Guitar Orchestra to perform at the 20<sup>th</sup> session of

*Enigmatica* - Marilyn's mandolin septet.



my summer school in June 2005; my colleague at Roger Williams University, Will Ayton, who has written many pieces, including several duet and a quartet I premiered in Rio de Janeiro in March 2005. If there isn't new music for mandolin, then it is a "dead" instrument, and it's my intention to avoid that absolutely."



Teaching at the Cape Cod Mandolin Camp.

Another area of keen musical interest to Mair is the recognition of the significant role the mandolin plays in early 20th century style of Brazilian jazz known as *choro*. "I've played South American music throughout my concert career, and I've been especially drawn to the music of Brazil. As a rock-and-roll kid I liked its focus on rhythm, and it has always seemed to me that Brazilians don't differentiate between "classical" and "popular" music as we "gringos" do—it's all just music. *Choro* pre-dates samba and bossa nova as a national music style. It is a seductive music developed in the 19th century by Brazilian performers who interpreted European dance music with African-influenced rhythms. Being so, it seems more approachable for someone not born in Rio. It's an

instrumental music, a virtuoso music, and a style that has always prominently featured the "bandolim," the Brazilian mandolin. *Choro* today is a written music that involves a degree of rhythmic improvisation, variation and ornamentation in performance. It's usually notated in lead-sheet form—melody with chord symbols—and like many forms of jazz, knowing its performance practice is crucial to playing it well. The first time I heard *choro*, I fell in love with it, and have been playing it ever since."



Performing with the Rio Trio at the Palacio de Cristal in Petropolis, Brazil.

*In addition to her performances as a solo artist, to facilitate the performance of such a varied body of work, Marilyn Mair is either a designing force or critical component in several distinctive mandolin ensembles...*

"I play a lot of different styles of music in a number of duos, and some larger ensembles as well. I've directed the mandolin septet, *Enigmatica*, for the past five years. The members come from the Boston and Providence area, and we play Baroque, Brazilian, and contemporary music. It's kind of a cross between a quartet and an orchestra, with four

mandolins, two mandolas, and a mando-cello. We arrange and play music with four to seven parts, and the repertoire ranges from J. S. Bach's fugues and concertos, to Brazilian *choro* and music by Villa-Lobos, to music written for us by contemporary composers, to fun pieces like *Linus and Lucy*. I've just started playing in the *New England Mandolin Ensemble*, a group of Boston jazz musicians who have all fallen in love with the instruments of the mandolin family. They let me play John Coltrane on mandola—how cool is that? I play in a duo with Boston jazz-guitarist and mando-cellist Adam Larrabee; and also play with classical guitarists Bob Sullivan and Bob Martel. And I've performed and recorded with classical pianist Nancy Nicholson, and with the NYC-based Brazilian composer/pianist Luiz Simas."



American Mandolin and Guitar Summer School.

this is in addition to her position of Professor of Music at Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island.

*When questioned about the future of the mandolin, Marilynn exudes a comfortable - almost natural - positive and progressive demeanor, completely devoid of negativity or pessimism. This demeanor becomes downright passion as she identifies certain misperceptions surrounding the mandolin - along with the means to correct them...*

"The mandolin's greatest strength is its approachability. Nobody's intimidated to go to a mandolin concert, so classical mandolinists have the opportunity to introduce lots of teen-agers, rockers, folkies, and world music fans to a complex and historically-interesting instrumental style. Many teen-agers seem to be attracted to the mandolin today. Some come to it through celtic or old-time music, some through its inclusion in rock bands. Some come to it as I did, just because they like the sound. Some switch over from guitar. Mandolinist Chris Thile and his folk/rock trio Nickle Creek are turning scores of teens on to the coolness of mandolin, and Jamie Masefield, of the Jazz Mandolin Project, plays concerts in rock venues that whip the crowd into a frenzy. The young-adult interest in world music, that has grown enormously in the past decade, opens the ears of its listeners to new sounds and makes them more receptive to instruments outside of 'usual' including the mandolin. It's an encouraging trend."

"While I don't believe the mandolin faces a full-blown identity crisis, we do need to get people to recognize it as a versatile contemporary instrument,



Playing choro with Brazilian bandolimit, Joel Nascimento.

In her quest to keep the mandolin alive and current, Mair's skills and efforts extend far beyond the performance hall. Her ongoing activities as an educator and promoter include her annual American Mandolin & Guitar Summer School. Now in its twentieth year, the AMGUS affords an opportunity to all mandolinists and guitarists to spend a week studying technique with a staff of experienced teachers, playing in a 60-person orchestra, playing classical, jazz, or Brazilian music in small ensembles, and becoming part of a national community of musicians. She was also recently appointed Chair of the Education Committee of the Classical Mandolin Society of America, and continues to develop a national network of mandolinists teaching in their communities and offering help through online forums. As a journalist, Mair's work is a regularly seen in both *Mandolin Quarterly* and *Mandolin Magazine*. All



Performing with seven-string guitarist, Sasha Lisnichuk.

one that can be at home in a number of different contexts. In America, expectations for mandolin pretty much begin and end with bluegrass, and it's hard for many people to envision it elsewhere. Mandolinists in nearly every other area of music often feel like ground-breakers, interlopers, or nuts! But we keep doing it. Every player, every recording, every school group, every teacher helps. Visibility and quality are important."

"Hearing is believing. That's why recordings being made today are vitally important for the mandolin. Mandolinists in the future will, hopefully, have a much easier time being accepted in a variety of musical circles because of the pioneer work that is being done by many of us today."

As a performer, educator or promoter, Marilyn Mair has simultaneously established both a contemporary benchmark of excellence as well as a strong foundation for the future of the classical mandolin.

*For more information regarding the multi-faceted*

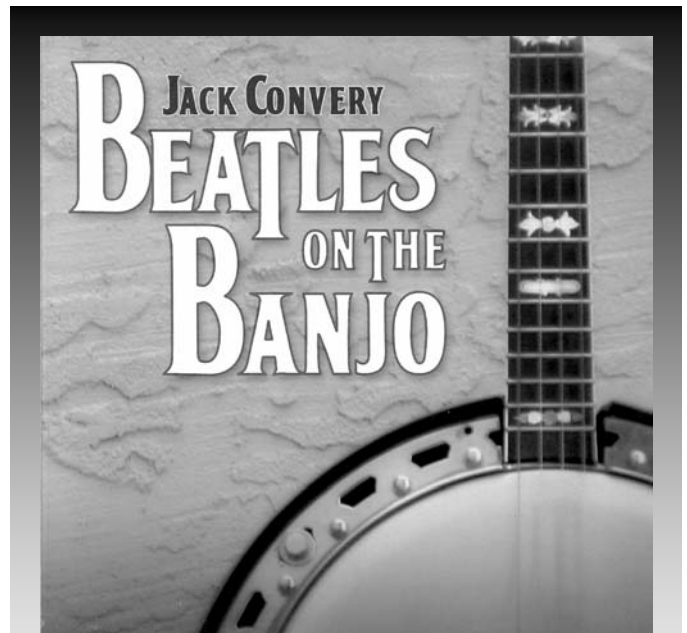
*musical world of Marilyn Mair visit:*

*www.marilynmair.com*

***The 21st American Mandolin &***

***Guitar Summer School***

***will be held from June 26 - July 2, 2006***



Get your copy of

## BEATLES ON THE BANJO

from Amazon, iTunes, banjojazz.com  
or mail \$17 to:

Jack Convery, PO Box 508  
Benicia, CA 94510

*The Kettering  
Banjo Society  
Proudly offers*



*2 CDs for your enjoyment*

### The Banjo Picker's Ball

Roll on Mississippi	My Mammy
Who's Sorry Now	Beer Barrel Polka
Maggie Blues	Goofus
Jambalaya...plus 9 additional favorites.	

### Too Old to Rock, Too Young To Die

Strike Up The Band	Edelweiss
Apple Blossom Time	Hindustan
Are You From Dixie	Show Boat
Louisiana Fairy Tale	Pennsylvania Polka
Patriotic Medley...plus many more.	

\$15.00 per CD + \$2.00 shipping & handling  
(Overseas s&h \$5.00)

Mail orders to:  
Kettering Banjo Society  
PO Box 292605, Kettering, OH 45429