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MARILYNN MAIR

[Read Marilynn Mair CGOW \[Reloaded\]](#) - November 30, 2003



Back when we first started tossing around ideas for guests to represent the mandolin community on this forum I suggested to Glenn that Marilynn Mair would be an outstanding choice, based on her consistent standard of excellence in performance and her untiring support of Our Favorite Instrument I'm delighted that her time in the CGOW spotlight is here, and encourage all who are interested in contemporary mandolin music in America to send in their questions.

Concert performer, recording artist, professor of music, mother of two musically talented kids, director of America's pre-eminent summer school for mandolin and guitar -- any one or two of these can be a full-time job, but Marilynn manages to do them all. Here, from her Web site (<http://www.marilynnmair.com>) are some excerpts from her biography:

"Ms. Mair began her mandolin studies with Hibbard Perry in Providence, Rhode Island, and continued them in Vienna with Professor Vincenz Hladky, of the Vienna Conservatory. She also studied in Germany with mandolinist, Takashi Ochi, and with Sigfried Behrend, guitarist and director of the German Mandolin Orchestra. As a performer, Ms Mair has continued to develop mandolin technique and repertoire, and has commissioned, recorded, and performed works by many important contemporary composers, including Ernst Krenek, Guido Santorsola, Evan Ziporyn, Daniel Pinkham, Ann Carr Boyd, Sigfried Behrend, David Jaffe, and others.

Best known for her performances and recordings of chamber music, Ms. Mair has also, in recent years, become increasingly involved in the field of Brazilian music, performing and recording "choro," an early-20th-century style of Brazilian jazz that features mandolin. She has researched choro extensively, and her articles on its history and music, published in Mandolin Quarterly and elsewhere, are some of the most complete available in English.

In addition to her solo career, Ms. Mair directs and performs in a number of chamber groups. She founded and directs "Enigmatica," a mandolin octet specializing in Baroque, Brazilian, and contemporary music. She also performs and records with the eclectic "World Caf  Quartet." Ms. Mair is the Artistic Director of the American Mandolin & Guitar Orchestra, a group whose membership spans North America. She performs in a number of duos with different musicians, including Brazilian pianist Luiz Simas, and guitarists Sasha Lisnichuk, Robert Paul Sullivan, and Andrew Mah.

Ms. Mair is actively involved in continuing and developing the American classical mandolin tradition. She directs the annual American Mandolin & Guitar Summer School, a national forum for mandolin and guitar instruction, now in its 18th year. She is also a regular columnist for "Mandolin Magazine," and "Mandolin Quarterly," writing on mandolin technique and history, and reviewing CDs.

Ms. Mair is a Professor of Music at Roger Williams University, in Bristol, Rhode Island."

-- Max McCullough

MARILYNN MAIR

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Q1

Q - Do I have it right that you are the only professor of classical mandolin in North America and that Roger Williams is the only university to offer a mandolin studies program? If not, who else is doing this?

Now that I have a fine mandolin for classical music (a Coombe Goldfinch) I'd like to learn as much of the orchestra repertoire as I can. So far the only piece I have is the Canzonetta from Don Giovanni. I'm aware that there are mandolin parts (a quartet?) in Lehar's The Merry Widow and in a Strauss waltz or two, and an atypically-attractive serenade by Arnold Schoenberg that includes mandolin. Has anyone made a book of this music? Is there a list somewhere I can work from? How can one obtain this music for study, short of moving to Rhode Island? ;<)

A - First, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm a professor of music history-- European and American-- and I don't teach mandolin @ Roger Williams University. My pal Eric Christensen, who plays in Enigmatica and teaches for guitar for me @ RWU does have a mandolin student there, but there's no major. I did manage to convince Rhode Island College to give me a Bachelors in music performance on mandolin, back in 1980, so there's a precedent there I guess, although I don't know of any others following in my footsteps. One could probably get a degree in mandolin @ New England conservatory, since Robert Paul (aka Bob) Sullivan who heads the guitar department there is a fine mandolinist. I'd assume that anyone, with sufficient chops and determined force of will, could convince most anyplace to grant them a performance degree in mandolin. (Note: I didn't study mandolin @ RIC, I studied theory and history. I studied mandolin in Europe & with Hibbard Perry in Providence).

For your second question, there's a Mel Bay book that has a number of mandolin pieces including the Don Giovanni aria. There's a mandolin quartet in Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet," but I don't know about Lehar. Most European cities have a mandolin soloist that plays the parts in opera, ballet, and symphony music. I've played some of them with groups around Providence. Most of the times the mandolin is there for folkloric color. Many of the orchestra-with-mandolin pieces make you wonder if the composer hated mandolin. For instance, the mandolin part in Mahler's "Das Lied von Der Erd" is in the 3rd of 5 mvts. (one sits on stage for the whole piece), and had the mandolin playing ppp, in unison with the entire 1st violin section playing mf. The mandolin/guitar duet in Verdi's "Othello" is fast arpeggios written in D flat accompanying a child choir. The mandolin part in Anthony Burgess' symphony is written in thirds and chords that are often literally impossible to play-- I brought a 2nd mandolinist to the gig. I'd love to play, or hear live, the mandolin parts in Schoenberg's "Serenade," the first 12-tone piece ever written, or Webern's pointillistic "5 Pieces for Orchestra," just because they're so weird and cool, but an opportunity has never presented itself. Since orchestras rent most of the parts, it's hard to purchase them outside of those mini-scores. Moving to RI won't help you much! 😊

Q2

Q - I understand you have instruments made by the excellent Canadian luthier Doug Woodley. Can you please tell us a bit about your experience with Woodley and describe what he built for you. I live in the SF Bay Area, do you ever get out this way.

A - I have one mandolin made by Woodley, and it's my main axe ever since I got it. He is an incredible maker! I first met him when he came to AMGuSS one summer as a student. Chatting with him at registration to make a newcomer feel welcome, I asked him how he got his name on the headstock of his mando. His answer-- "Because I made it."-- made me realize I was dealing with someone pretty special.

A couple of AMGuSSes later my L&H fell out of its case & broke its head off, and I ended up playing a Gibson F-4 (as the best concert-hall instrument I owned, despite having other L&H's) for 6 months while it was repaired. I decided I needed a back-up. When I asked Dougly if he'd build me one, he allowed as how he'd been thinking about designing a Marilyn Mair Signature Model. We decided mine would be the prototype. He took the measurements from my L&H and a year and a half later arrived at my house with a beautiful instrument. I decided I'd play it exclusively for 6 months, to break it in, and after that point

it sounded so good that there was no reason to stop playing it. It's a great instrument for me, because it's rich enough for the intensity that I need for chamber music (I like really passionate music), but open and bright enough for Brazilian music. I can simply change my touch and it responds with the colors I need. I did, for old times sake, play my gorgeous L&H for the concerts and recording sessions this spring for my new CD "Mandolin in the 18th Century". Its warm heavy sound really suits the material. But I was back to the Woodley by June for AMGuSS. You can see a picture of it online @ the 12th Fret site (there's a link on my website). I don't believe the signature series models are off the production line yet, although I know there is a list of people with orders in.

For your other question-- I haven't played on the West Coast for years, but I'd love it if anybody wanted to organize something! I've got a big and varied enough repertoire that I can play with most good guitarists or pianists. So no plans yet, but I'd love to make them!

Q3

Marilynn, what recording projects do you currently have in the works?

A - I just released my newest last month, "Mandolin in the 18th Century". It's original mandolin music that I recorded, some pieces with piano, some with string quartet. This is the most classical project I've ever done, and it really stretched me to play with these great musicians. The pianist and I are going to continue to perform together, which is a great joy to me. The CD includes Beethoven's 4 pieces for mandolin and piano, Hummel's outrageous sonata for mandolin and piano, Vivaldi's solo mandolin concerto (played w/ string quartet instead of an orchestra), Hasse's mandolin concerto, and a neat frothy quartet for mandolin and string trio by Giovanni Hoffman. It arrived just in time for its AMGuSS release concert, and still isn't on my webpage or shipped out for review, but it will be soon. I guess it's technically not still in the works, but I'm still dealing w/ the logistics of getting it out in the world, so it's still in my "project" category.

On my future project list is a CD w/ my octet, Enigmatica (who appear on my Brazilian CD "Nadando Em Luz," and just put some great tunes on North Star's soon-to-be-released "New England Christmastide III"). I also have a plan to do a CD with a bunch of different players (kind of like Nadando) of the cool, quirky contemporary American music that I love. And I would love to record with my new mandolin- guitar- cello trio "Vivaldi Tango," the guitarist Andrew Mah's arrangements of Piazzolla kick butt! And it is great to play with cello! Somewhere on the list is a recording of my own songs, mostly rock/blues numbers, which my producer Joe Auger would love to orchestrate, but that's going to wait for awhile.

Q4

Q - Marilynn, I'm interested in your instruments. Do you use one instrument exclusively or do you use different instruments in your different musical activities? What instruments do you currently own?

A - Well, I talked about my Woodley already, and mentioned my L&H. The L&H is a short-scale A model with a singing A-string to die for. The Woodley is built on the L&H's measurements, but the fingerboard is slightly wider and less radiused. Since the L&H is ~80 years old it has a mellow rich sound. The Woodley is about 3 years old and is brilliant and unbelievably well-balanced. As a chamber musician I need an instrument that can give me a consistent tone across the strings, and both these instruments do. When I play mandola I use a L&H that is beautiful, rich and easy to play. Doug Woodley took its measurements too and I believe has made some 'dolas with those dimensions. Like most players who have been in the field for a couple of decades, I have an embarrassingly large number of stellar instruments that I love and hardly ever play. Some of them are going to be for sale, as I still have another year of college tuition to pay for my son. I'll probably try to post them on one of the sale sites this summer, but I am really low-tech about that kind of stuff. I need a basic mcello for Enigmatica-- if anyone has one to sell or trade!

I really believe that a good player will pretty much sound the same on any good instrument, and for me versatility of sound on one instrument is important because I play so many different types of music, and go for so many different tone colors even in the course of one piece. It was interesting to me, when my L&H-- my first soul-mate instrument -- was beheaded and in the shop for repairs that I tried and dismissed all the instruments I had

bought of the same type, same sound, and same scale length, because they didn't have a big enough voice to cut it in a concert hall. I play unamplified if possible, and with chamber music it usually is. I played my F-4, completely different scale length, feel, and sound, because it responded to my touch with a big enough tonal range to allow me to play my way. A long-time fan came up to me after an F-4 gig and asked if it wasn't a different instrument from the one I usually played. He thought it looked very different (anyone who has seen a L&H A and a Gibson F-4 knows they look about as different as you get), but thought I sounded the same. It made me a bit more sanguine in the face of my least-favorite fan compliment, "Gee, I wish I had an instrument like that so I could sound as good as you." I have never yet said the response on the tip of my tongue, "yeah, you wish!" A good instrument is an important tool in the hands of a good player, and it should allow for the variety of sound you need to produce. But it will never substitute for lack of technique.

Q5

Q - Marilynn, I want to know if Max is really any good as a classical player? On a serious note, how did you hook up with Ginny Hollon at Mandolin Magazine?

A - Max is the bomb! He can rock the house with his Vivaldi! He actually has come to AMGuSS a couple of times, and was a key player in the orchestra and the soul of his chamber ensembles. Don't let his mild-mannered email persona fool you. 😊

Ginny called me about 20 minutes before I was expecting about 100 musicians and friends for a big summer party and asked me to write for her. She had read all my old Mandolin World News articles, so how could I say no! She's done a great job with the magazine, and it's great to have an opportunity to work with a woman in the mandolin field. No offense guys, I love you all, but as a woman I sure do feel like a minority in this country as a professional mandolinist. She was cool with my adamant refusal to put my classical examples into tab. (They're classical--right?) And puts out a very slick and information-packed journal that I am proud to be part of. I do hope to meet her one day. Gigs in her area, anyone?

Q6

Q - What are your thoughts on mandolin as an instrument for school kids? The scale of the neck is accessible for smaller hands, there is a repertory of simple tunes and exercises (e.g. elementary violin) that could be adapted, and it can be played in many forms - classical, pop, folk, country - you name it. Schools could probably recycle violin teachers if necessary, without too much trouble. And students could produce satisfying melodies and harmonies much quicker than they can with non-fretted instruments (I've sat through many painful elementary and middle school orchestra "concerts"). Have there been any attempts within the music education community to try mandolin ensembles in primary schools?

A - Mandolin is used as one of two elementary school instruments in Sweden (along with the recorder). Students aren't allowed any further choice until they get to their middle school years. This is both good and bad, according to the Swedes I was working with. Everybody knows what a mandolin is, but it's hard to convince anyone that it's an instrument capable of playing serious music.

I did a really fun workshop this past fall with some of the members of Enigmatica at Community Music Works in Providence, an inner-city group that runs a bowed string program for kids. We carted in 10 mandolins, all tuned up, and 6 shaky eggs, and, following a performance of 2-3 tunes ourselves, gave the kids the mandos in batches and got them to play "Twinkle Twinkle" from their Suzuki repertoire. Major Kodak moment!

Mandolins are easier to play for kids than guitar, especially if they're strung with single nylon strings. Ralph Costanza, my colleague who runs AMGuSS w/ me, has a very successful program going in Burlington VT.

Q7

Q - Do you play much jazz, either in performance or for fun? If so, what mandolin do you prefer?

Where can I find a 7 string guitar player in Tucson? Seriously, have you thought of any compatible instrument substitutions for the runs and bass elements that the 7 string supplies in choro? I am integrating some choro material with the jazz band I'm in, and it would be nice to get those sonorities. Our guitar player does play octave mando... .

A - I love jazz! I don't improvise at a level that keeps me in it w/ players otherwise at my level, but I do love the standards and love to collaborate or otherwise fool around w/ jazz players interested in searching out mutually-interesting intersections of style. My World Cafe Quartet CD has some jazz standards on it w/ a bit of improv, a modicum of chord comping... One of the most exciting collaborations I've had was in the group "Brazil Connection". It was started by a bebop jazz bassist who loves Brazilian music and was intrigued by choro.

The group was a septet, and included me & my guitarist at the time along w/ a jazz quartet (fretless electric bass, keyboards, a flute/sax/clarinet guy, & a drummer) and a Columbian percussionist. Incredible. The guys loved choro, and got me playing way out on a limb (Wayne Shorter's "Ana Maria"...). We had the utmost respect for each other & allowed each other great latitude, and weren't afraid to take chances. Audiences really dug it because each note was incredibly exciting and the whole sound was just fresh and new. The guys came in w/ pieces they were excited to hear on mandolin & one gave me a treasured compliment, that my "Funny Valentine" was his favorite piece in our repertoire. I've got to find time to get back with them...

Most recently I've been playing some w/ a jazz guitarist who also plays mandocello in Enigmatica. He writes out variations for me, writes us lines in harmony, and is teaching me a ton about chord voicings and improv licks. Nice to learn new stuff.

Re 7-string... The only player I know is Sasha, who lives in Atlanta, and who I play with whenever I can.

Clearly since you're asking me the question you've heard the amazing stuff he does on "Nadando." There are also some Brazilian bands where the 6 and 7 string guitars do runs in harmony-- amazing! The fretless electric bass in "Brazil Connection" was quite good at the fast clear bass runs. The Brazilians "Trio Quintessentia" (mandolin, guitar, cello) do some cool runs on any pair of instruments under the other one (I've heard them live; they don't have a CD out yet). Luiz Simas, the Brazilian pianist I play w/, is great at those runs too. Just let your band borrow your choro CDs and see what they come up with.

Q8

Q - Several years ago, I went to Louisville to a mandolin convention. You were at one of the vendor tables, as I recall. I remember asking you what a reading was, and you took the time to explain it to me and had me sit in with the mandolin orchestra as it was practicing. Since I couldn't sight read music, I mostly just listened and it was very exciting being in the middle of all that music. I don't think I ever got around to thanking you for your encouragement to sit in the session even though I couldn't read it.

A - You're welcome-- glad it worked out! And you were good to take the chance. Hey, nothing ventured..., well, you'll just live in whatever box you make for yourself. Lots of times I get folks who scarcely read coming to AMGUS, and they get in the middle of the 50-person orchestra rehearsal (usually full of impostor syndrome) and just kind of melt in nirvana. Being in the middle of a very cool musical experience is always worth putting yourself out on a limb. I'm not just saying it, I live it too.

P.S. Golly, I feel like Mickey in the "Sorcerers Apprentice"-- every time I send off an answer I go back to my inbox and there are even more new questions! It's great! And I will answer them all, never fear. Maybe just not tonight 😊

Q9

Q - You mentioned to me one time that you had played with our former CGOW, Barry Mitterhoff. What did you and Barry do? Also, have you ever had a chance to play with (or hear) Carlo Aonzo, an upcoming CGOW?

A - Yes, I've played with Barry few times, and heard him play a few more. He's been our special guest artist @ AMGuSS twice, and I think he's a terrific player & a genuinely great guy. The first time we played together was at a dual concert of the NY Mandolin Orchestra and the Providence Mandolin Orchestra, in NYC. Barry & I were jamming on some choro backstage and Lucky Checkley, the NYMO manager, said we should put it in the concert. It was a blast! As I remember-- it was a few years ago-- we had guitar, bass and pandeiro backing us. We'd take turns, without any real plan, playing melody or improvising harmony. One of those delicious on-the-edge performances.

Another time was quite a different repertoire! I was invited to play Mozart's concerto for violin & viola w/ the NYMO, and Barry, their concertmaster at the time, played the viola part. The piece is a stretch to do on pluckies instead of bowed strings, because there are so many ledger lines one could get altitude sickness-- it actually goes up beyond frets on an extended fingerboard. Barry learned to play & read mandola just to do the piece. What a guy! At the concert, as I was waiting a bit nervously for our entrance, Barry leaned over and said "You know, they should have given us a table up here, we'd probably have time to drink a couple of beers waiting for our entrance!" He's a treat to play with, and one of the most versatile players I've ever met. He's the first person I ever heard play choro, ages ago.

I've never had a chance to play w/ Carlo, or heard him live, although I did review his CD for MQ and enjoyed it greatly.

Q10

Q - There's been a lot of discussion on the list over the years about right-hand technique, as you could well imagine. But, in my recollection, anytime someone raises the question of classical right-hand technique it draws a response along the lines of "it's totally different ... too complicated to explain ... you don't want to go there" Can you say a few words about classical technique for the right-hand vs. "folk technique" (which the consensus seems to feel means lightly touching the bridge or the strings behind the bridge with the heel of your hand).

A - In string music-- violin or mandolin family-- the right hand is the soul of your interpretation. It's your personality; it's the composer's joy or anguish; it's what separates the artists from the players; it's what makes your audience hang on your every note, and cry or laugh as your music touches their hearts. It's what makes great music. So right hand technique is crucial. And there is a classical sound that clearly isn't there when a player from another style plays a classical piece. Of course it's true the other way around too, and I would not make a convincing bluegrass even if I transcribed Bill Monroe's solos note for note. Unless I studied his sound, and worked diligently to alter my right hand technique to create his sound too. It requires a really good ear and a subtle alteration of pick technique. I know this well, because I developed a new technique to play choro, so I wouldn't sound like a classical player doing "pops," and kill the beauty of the style. Classical technique is not "totally different" and it's not "too difficult to explain," and you really do want to go there. It is, however, hard to write about in one email. But I'll try... Classical music demands a broad range of sounds from the player-- it is the most demanding style in that respect. To accomplish this you need to eliminate nearly all tension from your right hand, particularly the back of your right hand, and your right wrist, forearm and elbow. You should hold your pick in a different way. Take your right hand and curl your fingers into a light fist, as if you were holding a hollow eggshell in the palm of your hand. Be sure the first digit of your index finger is curled around parallel to your thumb and just behind it. Slide your pick in, perpendicular to your thumb and the first digit of your index finger. Put your pick on your D string, keep your wrist loose and pick down (dropping your hand from the wrist, not the elbow) until the pick rests on the A string. That's the start. It's hard to keep yourself on track developing stamina and flexibility while minimizing tension, which is why folks just dismiss classical technique as complex. You'll have to work at the drop-lift swing-from-the-wrist even though it feels like you've lost crucial control of your pick at first. Hope that helps. Just come to AMGuSS, or to CMSA some year that they've hired me to teach if you've really got a yen for this stuff. Otherwise keep your right wrist loose, don't anchor your pinkie, don't worry and have fun!

Q11

Q - I faithfully read your piece in Mandolin Magazine, but can't play the music because I don't

read standard notation. Can--or will--you provide tabulature as well. I'm working on the notation reading, but it will be quite awhile before I'm comfortable with it.

A - Well, that's a sticky question, one that MM readers have posed to me and to Ginny frequently. My theory is that all you tab-readers will never change to reading notes if there isn't a reason to. And classical mandolin repertoire, orchestra repertoire, (and choro repertoire, and the bulk of Celtic fiddle tunes, etc.) will never be accessible to anyone who just reads tab. There is a case to be made, as you do here, for crossing the line to give tabbies (?) a helping hand. But I guess I'm in favor of tough love. Learn to read; to quote Nike, "Just do it!" You won't regret it. You have 3 months to learn each piece before I send out a new one 😊 And it does get easier. This might help-- find a reader, any instrument, and get them to record the piece. Then you can get your ear to help you learn to read. Nearly all of the exercises I use can be played in first position, and I put fingerings in if positions are used. Hope this helps.

Q12

Q - Marilyn, How do you choose music to record or perform? Bluegrass has a sort of "canon" that everyone learns a good bit of (or you know enough tunes that the forms become second nature if not the melodies), but classical music seems a bit broad for that. Are there pieces that every classical mandolinist should know? Are there pieces that you would like to record/perform but have trouble arranging for mandolin?

A - I arrange a lot of my music now, so it gives me a bit freer rein. When I first started performing I tried to include as much original mandolin material as possible, but after awhile that didn't fit with who I was becoming as an artist. So I began to listen widely, find a piece that grabbed my ears, and think about how to transfer it to mandolin. At this point in my career I have hundreds of pieces I've played. Usually for a concert these days, if we have enough lead time, I bring a bunch of different stuff I like to a rehearsal to see what sparks whoever I'm performing with. I listen to their ideas too. If everyone's committed to the material it'll be a great gig. For instance, for the "Vivaldi Tango" concert I gave in Ottawa last March, it took a couple of tries to find the right intersection w/ guitarist Andrew Mah. The "standard rep" didn't get his attention. But in emails we discovered we both love Lou Harrison, Bill Douglas, and Astor Piazzolla. Pens flew to paper, picks & fingernails flew to strings, we both wanted to play w/ cello & Andrew is stellar at arranging Piazzolla from a variety of CDs. Voila-- an eclectic program that two quite different players could get behind 100%.

Ideas for pieces come, generally, when I fall in love w/ a piece of music that I can "hear" on my instrument. Sometimes it's for solo piano, or a piece for flute or violin. But the music rocks my world. Sometimes it takes awhile to figure out how to make it work. Brahms' "Intermezzos" are a good example. They're written for piano. I listened to my favorite CD over and over and finally picked a couple of pieces that I could hear as mandolin and guitar. It took many tries, and there's still one that I can hear, but haven't been able to make work yet. There are some composers and some pieces, like Eric Satie's "Sports and Diversions," that I have arranged many times for different ensembles, just because I dig them, and their quirky cool is great for a concert mix.

A classical mandolin concert needs a diversity of material. A CD needs a more focused repertoire. I love the process of shaping each of these. For a concert you need a complementary mix of different styles, for a CD you need to keep all the pieces in the same room. The "Vivaldi Tango" concert included Vivaldi and Beethoven and Jacob do Bandolim, in addition to the composers I mentioned above. My last 2 CDs are so different from each other, and each is a really tight concept but with enough variety to keep them active. "Nadando Em Luz" is Brazilian choro (focus) for mandolin (me) in a variety of settings (diversity) from duo to octet, some predictable choices for accompanists (piano, guitar), some quirky (duo w/ clarinet, mandolin octet). "Mandolin in the 18th Century" is all original mandolin music (focus), one century (focus), European (focus) w/ piano or string quartet (diversity). Both of these projects were in genres where I felt I had something important to say as an artist. It's a great thing creating something quite original and beautiful that no one else would do quite the same way. No expectation, and no canon of expected music is one of the definite advantages of classical mandolin, to my way of thinking!

Q13

Q - Can you recommend some classical mandolin recordings that you like? Are they readily available? Also, who are your favorite mandolin players? In any genre...

A - Unfortunate alot of my faves are out-of-print LPs or obscure European CDs. That's one of the reasons behind my recent CD "Mandolin in the 18th Century,"-- the material needs to be out there now! Here are a few I like that you should be able to find (try Plucked Strings on Mandolin Cafe site):

"Sakura" NAVI Records NACD1087 - Trio Nuovo (Michiko Kataoka - mandolin)

"Mandoline Galante" Harmonia Mundi CAL9274 (Christian Schneider - mandolin)

"Konzerte fur Zupforchester" Thorofon CTH2025 - Deutches Zupforchester

"S'ei-Doh" ZD0246 (Klaus Wuckelt - mandolin)

"Visions" Domi MPO198 - Duo Munoz-Pavon (Juan Carlos Munoz & Mari Fe Pavon - mandolins)

"Kansas Tango" Uptown Mandolin Quartet UMQ0901

"American Music for Mandolin and Guitar" KOCH 3-1309-2

- Duetto Giocondo (Caterina Lichtenberg - mandolin)

"Oh that's Mandolin" Antes BM-CD 31.9019 (Detlef Tewes - mandolin)

"Calace - 10 Preludes" Thorofon CTH2211 (Gertrud Troster - mandolin)

"Pan American Journeys" Windham Hill 01934 - Modern Mandolin Quartet

"Kyo-En" - Duo Carillon (Shogo Miyatake - mandolin)

Favorite players, all styles: Jacob do Bandolim is #1. Also, fellow-Brazilians Joel Nascimento and Pedro Amorim. Patrick Vaillant is quirky brilliance personified. I always enjoy Barry Mitterhof, Mike Marshall & David Grisman. Gertrud, Catarina, (see above) & Alison Stephens. Simon Mayor, Evan Marshall.

Jazz mandolinist Jerry Miller, who lives out my way & has just got to record. Mike (Fishel) Bresler, a hometown klezmer hero. Pedro Chamorro on bandurria (it's close enough to mandolin). Anyone who cares, feels, takes chances.

Q14

Q - Being that you are located in one of the "hotbeds" of classical mandolin, i.e. Rhode Island, I wonder what contact you have had with Giuseppe Pettine or his decendants who I believe are still keeping the Pettine mandolin flame alive (bad choice of metaphors?) Do you play any of his duo-style pieces? Also, you mentioned Hibbard Perry. I have never heard of him and am interested in his background, age, mandolin background, etc.

A - Well, "hotbed" is in the eye of the beholder I guess. But I was lucky to be able to study w/ Hibbard Perry when I was starting out. Pettine died before I picked up the mandolin, but Hibbard had studied and played with him and also with William Place (who was the head of the famous Place Mandolin Quartet, in which Hibbard played, and was the mandolinist who quality-tested the original Loar F-5's for Gibson). Pettine's son, an artist, sells the famous picks (that I use and love) and method books now, but has never played. Hibbard died about 10 years ago, in his 80's. He was a teacher and performer on classical guitar and mandolin, and founded and directed the Providence Mandolin Orchestra in the 1930's. He was passionate about tone production, and incorporated elements of Pettine's technique and Place's technique (each documented in excellent multi-volume methods) with his own views. He was a thorough, methodical teacher, and although I pushed, impatient to move faster, I really appreciate his insistence on developing a smooth tremolo slowly, and on eliminating right-arm tension.

Q15

Q - You mentioned that you studied in Europe. Where and with whom did you study?

A - I studied with Vincenz Hladky in Vienna for two summers; with Takashi Ochi in Germany; with Sigfried Behrend, German guitarist and head of the Deutches Zupforchester; and briefly with Hugo d'Alton in England.

Q16

Q - In addition, I believe that Providence has a big Italian population. Have you come across any Italian mandolin players there? I also believe that there may be (or used to be) a Portuguese of Cape Verdean population (New Bedford, MA?) and would be interested in their music as well.

There are some older Italian players who come to my concerts, but none of them play anymore. There are excellent Portuguese guittara (sp?) players who generally accompany fado singers, and I've played on multi-performer bills with some of them. There were some music publishers in Providence at the beginning on the 20th century, including Paolilli Music, and I've found lots of nice Italian waltzes and opera arias for 2 mandolins and guitar, along with club theme songs and the like. Brown University has alot of them in its "Rhode Island Music Collection."

Q17

Q - There were a number of classical players who stayed with the older style bowlback instruments or who reverted to playing them. Have you played on any bowlbacks that you particularly like in terms of tone and/or playability? Do you own any such instruments?

A - For bowlbacks, I like the Italian Vinaccia, the American Vega, and the Italian Emberger models, the models with small fluted ribs. I have one of each of the 2 Italian models. I play the Vinaccia when I perform with orchestras, because its sharp clear tone cuts through the rich texture of the bowed strings. Otherwise I never play them. I like the warm, rich, sound of my carved-backs, and I think it's excellent for chamber music, which is what I usually play. Since I've been playing in Europe for decades-- since I was a student-- and I clearly play great instruments, nobody across the pond disses me for it. Some players feel the round-back is more historically correct, but unless I'm playing with Baroque violins or 18th-century fortepianos, I don't see why I shouldn't give myself the advantages of a modern instrument, as every other instrument does.

Q18

Q - Not being a classical mandolin player, I was floored the first time I heard a tremolo and a melody at the same time on solo mandolin. Is this Canto Campagnato? I just assumed it was double tracked until I read the liner notes on the record. Holy smoke! Can you explain how it works and what it is like to learn? When I played classical guitar years ago, I could play a tremolo with three fingers and a melody with my thumb, but how is this possible with a pick?

A - It's usually called "duo-style," since it's one player sounding like two. There are a couple of ways to do it. The most bravura way is to tremolo all 4 strings all the time, changing fingers in a slight almost-imperceptible break to change the chords or melody notes. I think the sort you are referring to, though, is a more intimate style, and my favorite. You tremolo a melody on the A or E string, and "sneak" your pick over, on an up-stroke, to play chords or double stops on the lower strings, accompanying yourself while maintaining the illusion that you aren't breaking your tremolo melody. Neat, huh? You can play the chord part as an arpeggiated figure too. Also you can tremolo a low string melody or bass note while "sneaking" your pick over on the down-stroke to catch chords on the upper strings. This is much harder! Most of the American method books from the 1930's or 40's have a section on how to do duo-style. The Pettine method has a whole volume on it! Try it on any melody you like and can figure out accompanying triads or diads for.

Q19

Q - What are some good materials for learning classical mandolin, preferably book/CD combos or maybe videos, both beginning and intermediate levels? I'm interested mostly in classical technique, but some repertoire would be nice too.

A - You know, I just don't know. I think Gertrud Troster has a video-- check w/ Plucked Strings-- but I haven't seen it. I don't teach lessons any more, except for the 1 week of AMGuSS every year. I mostly use historic methods & most aren't in print. I believe Mel Bay has a book of mandolin solos out. Plucked String probably lists some German methods. I teach quarterly in Mandolin Magazine.

Q20

Q - Marilyn wrote: "On your D string, keep your wrist loose and pick down (dropping your hand from the wrist, not the elbow) until the pick rests on the A string". I'd like to clarify something on this that I've wondered for a while. The movement of "dropping your hand from the wrist...", is this a strictly up-and-down motion or is it achieved by rotating the the hand at the wrist joint? There's a big difference between the two. I think most "untrained" players (myself included) rotate the hand. That seems more of a natural motion than an actual up-and-down motion.

A - Yes, that's it, exactly! It's a rotation at the wrist, and the forearm remains pretty stationary. When you rotate you can feel the motion is really easy and relaxed. It's the best way to keep the right arm relaxed. A "push-pull", where the wrist remains stationary and the hand moves, is much more tension-laden and hampers your nuance of tone (what you'll work on later, when you get to the nuance stage 😊). Just be sure that you're not lifting your hand up AFTER you hit the string. That adds tension and doesn't affect the sound one bit. Just allow the hand to fall.

Q21

Q - I've read some of your articles (including the one on tremolo) and wonder why you choose to play a flatback mandolin as opposed to a bowlback?

I am a beginner -- i started with the intention of focusing in bluegrass, but quickly discovered the diversity of the mandolin and am now getting classical training.

A - Nice to hear from the ladies! I far prefer the sound of a flat (carved) back instrument, for my purposes. I like the overtones and the warmth of the sound. It's a personal preference and one that works for my expressive style.

Q22

Q - How do you hold your right wrist? do you bend it, or keep it flat?

A - My right wrist is arched. It facilitates the light fast up-down picking needed for the tremolo. I have a very flexible wrist, so if you've ever seen me play, my wrist looks really bent. This is not advisable for everyone. To find out your optimum bend, hold your right arm out straight from the shoulder and let your hand fall from the wrist. Swing it around in front of your face and look at it. Flatten out slightly, so you don't feel the bend in the back of the wrist. For me, that's still quite bent, for some folks, that's nearly straight. Rotate your hand by swiveling the forearm, don't push-pull from either the elbow or the wrist.

Q23

Q - Do you hug the neck with your left hand or keep it away in the classical style?

A - My left wrist has a slight arch and is away from the neck. My left thumb is at the side of the neck at around the 2nd fret. You don't want to stress your left wrist by over-arching, or

by pushing the front of the wrist strongly forward. The mandolin is a high-tension instrument, compared to the violin or guitar, so even if you do everything right you'll still have left arm issues after a couple of decades. If you do it wrong you won't get more than a couple of years.

It's good to get classical training. It's very flexible, and a teacher will make sure you don't develop any bad habits that could block your progress. Good luck and have fun!

Q24

Q - Many years ago in Vienna I purchased both volumes of "La Scuola della Velocita per il Mandolino" by Giuseppe Branzoli, whom the title page styles "Professore." There is no publication or copyright date, although I've found out that Branzoli was active in either the late 19th or early 20th century (the printing seems far more recent, perhaps 1960s). With your background in the history of the instrument and its repertoire, can you shed any more light on the author and this set of etudes? If this is covered in a publication you know of, a citation to that would be wonderful.

A - Distilled from "The Guitar and Mandolin" by P. J. Bone: Branzoli was born in the 1800's near Bologna, and died in 1909. He was a violinist, a conductor, and the founder of a music school in Rome. He was a proponent of mandolin and guitar and founded the journal "Il Mandolini Romano" in 1907. His "Theoretical and practical method for mandolin" was published in 1875.

I also have the reprint, and have used one of the exercises in a Mandolin Magazine column. I can't put my hands on it at the moment, but I remember it as having some nice duets as well as exercises.

Q25

Q - I'd like any suggestions you can offer as to what pieces in the classical repertoire I should or could be working on. Is there a usual sequence at which one takes on progressively more difficult pieces (there seems to be for other instruments)? I'm an intermediate player who reads fairly well (though still only halfway through that Branzoli)! I've read through, passably but not to performance quality, the pieces by Beethoven and Mozart, and I can do the Vivaldi concerto top to bottom (but not yet to tempo and still with some fumbling and lots of fatigue by the end). My tremolo needs work (and I'm working on it).

A - Again, a lot of original repertoire is only available in manuscript, unfortunately. Doblinger (Vienna) and Zimmerman (Germany) both have music for mandolin series, and I recommend any of those pieces. The "Trio" by Prospero Cenciello is really nice, as are the trios by Cecere. Some violin repertoire, especially the sonatas by Vivaldi, the neat "Sonata in D" by Christian Gottlieb Scheidler, and the Gragnani sonatas are cool. I also like Paganini's Sonata Concertata for violin and guitar. The modern pieces by Will Ayton and Brian Israel (pub. by Plucked String) are good, but a bit more difficult, also Stephen Funk Pearson's "Mountain Moor" (Presser). There are some nice didactic books of duet exercises published in Germany as well, I think one is called "Musik zu Zweit" and Plucked Strings carries some of them. The Goichberg book of exercises for mandolin are nice, quite easy. There are simple sonatas by von Call. You can sometimes find old books in libraries, especially in Europe, but here too. You can find Plucked String online on the Mandolin Cafe website. Happy hunting!

Q26

Q - What skills and techniques would recommend that an intermediate classical mandolin player concentrate upon, who wishes to reach advanced playing levels?

Who are your favorite composers past or present?

A - Well there's your right hand, your left hand, coordination of the two, tremolo, and sight-reading. For your right hand, make sure your pick moves easily (see previous posts for more on technique). Work on cross-string picking, moving from a low string to a high string and visa versa. For the left hand, the importance of scales and arpeggios, in positions, can't be

overstated. For better coordination, which you need for speed, repeat passages, use a metronome and increase your speed, just a little bit at a time. Play passages of equal notes as unequal (both long-short, and the strangely-difficult short-long) to increase your precision. For tremolo, practice down-up strokes on open strings, doubling your hand speed (eg: metronome @ ~60; 2 measures of quarter notes, down-stroke; 2 measures of 1/8th notes, down stroke; 2 measures of 1/16th notes, down-up; 2 measure of 32nd notes, down-up; and then back to quarter notes to get rid of the tension & repeat endlessly). Stamina is important. Play page-long exercises, not 16-bar ones. Read through simple tunes (there are lots on the web) that you don't intend to work on, just to use them as "flash-cards" for sight-reading.

Favorite composers, wow. OK: Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms (except his symphonies), Satie, Albeniz, Granados, Locatelli, Stravinsky, Pixinguinha, Bandolim, Pearson, Ayton, Piazzolla, Zappa,...

Q27

Q - Your tremolo is really wonderful -- esp. for dynamics and time (or maybe I should say phrasing?) The time is accurate and right but not metronome-ish at all and the dynamics make it full of light and shadow, if that makes any sense. I'm thinking of "Serenade."

Any tips for the tremolo-impaired?

A -Thanks! My tremolo is a joy to me. But I was really a slow learner. You need to practice down-up strokes slowly for regularity, not speed, and many in a row, for stamina. I just gave an exercise in the last post. (hopefully they'll get on in the order I sent them in). Your goal is to be able to putter along on down-ups forever, without your wrist seizing up. This is kind of like learning to walk. Your motor memory will increase the speed for you when it's ready to, just as babies learn to run but start off at a toddle. Your only assignment is to be relaxed, and easy. Do it while you watch the Red Sox! Also read the posts on right hand position and the all-important drop-lift, not push-pull. It just takes time, but the good thing is that once you get it, you'll have it forever.

Q28

Q - In the early 80s, I was a member of the Berkeley Mandolin Ensemble. Among other things, we played some Bartok dances arranged for the ensemble. Did you write those arrangements? How would I get copies of that music? I remember your name coming up, so perhaps you had already visited the Bay Area at that time. If so, did you get a chance to play any of Rudy Cipolla's music?

A - Yes, it was me, and my former guitarist, who arranged them. They're not much different than the string orchestra versions, except for the guitar part, but they're in a pre-Finale scrawl. I can't publish them because there's a moratorium on Bartok arrangements, and for other reasons too complex for a friendly post. I haven't been out to Berkeley for ages. Maybe soon-- your fellow-Santa-Rosarian offered me a minor gig! (all tunes in minor keys?)

Q29

Q - What are some good materials for learning classical mandolin, preferably book/CD combos or maybe videos, both beginning and intermediate levels? I'm interested mostly in classical technique, but some repertoire would be nice too.

A - You know, I just don't know. I think Gertrud Troster has a video-- check w/ Plucked Strings-- but I haven't seen it.

For technique, I haven't seen anything other than Gertrud's video either.

For repertoire, the Suzuki violin books work well. They're graded, they have ones for violin, viola and cello and they have ensemble arrangements too. They also have play along CDs and accompaniment books so you can have someone play piano with you.

Q30

Q - Tell us more about Hugo D'Alton. I remember a Mandolin World News issue devoted to him, seemed the fanatic classical mando player/afficianado. When did you get to meet & study briefly with him? Any interesting stories?

A - I first met Hugo in London in the late 70's when I was a student. I was a fan of his LP of the 4 Beethoven pieces & got his number & called & he told me to meet him @ a recording studio, where he was laying down C&W tracks! It was the old days of recording, so there were a bunch of string players & Hugo w/ his mutton-chop side-burns and aristocratic bearing. He was ferocious to meet, talked about himself in the 3rd person, gave oblique critiques. spent alot of time giving pointers on how one makes a living as a mandolinist.

A few years later, mid-80's, I lived in London for a few months & visited him a few times & saw him play the serenade accompaniment in Mozart's opera, "Don Giovanni". He played it standing up, on stage in costume-- I think he's the only one to do that. I invited him to a recital I was giving, and afterward he defended me, quite gallantly, to a reviewer who was questioning if the instrument I was playing was actually even a mandolin, since it wasn't a round-back and if the music I was playing was classical, since it was new & American. After that, I guess he decided I was worth coaching seriously, because he invited me up to his house & as soon as I walked in he took all the strings off my mandolin & replaced them w/ his hand-made copper-beryllium alloy strings, while regaling me with stories and advice, and then had me play all the music in my notebook-- quite alot-- and he dissected my playing for all of it. The strings were excellent-- I wish I could still get them. The musical advice was unparalleled.

He's one of the teachers I dedicated my latest CD to -- one of a few who made a big difference in my career.

Q31

Q - I was wondering, other than desire, what is the most important element in learning music? With that as No. 1, what would be your top five list for the same question. I am hoping this will send comando into a tizzy. A - The 2nd most important requirement to playing music is...an instrument! 😊 But the 1st post asked about "learning" music. Learning to play music, or learning a piece of music? Is this a serious question? Where does the tizzy come in?

well, here goes:

1. desire
 2. an instrument
 3. imagination
 4. hard work
 5. regular practice
-

Q32

Q - I've been slowly working on one movement of the Bach Solo Partitas and Sonatas. What pieces would you suggest to start out in the world of classical mandolin? Books, studies, classical pieces, etc. I've been playing the mandolin for about 8 years now.

A - Some of the movements from Bach's unaccompanied violin music are great for mandolin. Not just for playing, but also for learning about form by hearing structure in music. Bach writes so much into a single line! I've mentioned the series on Zimmerman, "Musik fur Mandoline". It has some excellent pieces, and most can be played, if not at speed, by an intermediate player. Also Doblinger, out of Vienna, has a mandolin series. Both publish the 4 Beethoven pieces and these are always good. Frankly, it's just cool that he wrote for our instrument! The 2 Sonatinas, in C major and C minor, aren't too difficult. It'd be a good idea to listen to some classical mandolin CDs to see what you like! I use all sorts of stuff for students. Bartok's 44 violin duets are fun! There's nothing set, so it's best to listen a bit to see what grabs you and then find stuff like that to work on. Just don't get stuck on only one piece, it's too confining.

Q33

[Moderator's note: the bandolim being discussed was fitted with Brazilian bandolim strings]

Q - Marilyn wrote: "I know this well, because I developed a new technique to play choro, so I wouldn't sound like a classical player doing "pops," and kill the beauty of the style".

Interesting observation. How is it different? I just dig in (from a self-taught bluegrass direction), but use the picks that come with Brazilian strings, one in every pack.

I wonder how much the light picks used by many of the Brazilians, and the unique wound strings (like silk & bronze, with little tiny cores, .010") affect technique? On a lot of choro stuff I have heard, especially the older "roots" stuff, tremolo doesn't seem to be too prominent. More like 16th/32nd notes than trem.

Are common brands of classical strings more like the Brazilian style, or do they have heavier cores, like the American brands? I'm looking for a source, as the Brazilian strings (Rossignol) can be hard to get. US strings, even in extra lights, have thicker cores on the wound strings that just don't have the zing on the bando. Classical mando is "really" obscure in Tucson, as are supplies.

A - Well I use Argentine strings by Savarez. They're French, despite the name. But I substitute the Thomastik A strings. These are Austrian, and are wound A strings. I like this combo, because the strings are bright but feel quite flexible. A string that's too stiff (heavy) is going to cut down your range of nuance. I haven't played the Brazilian strings, unless they were on the bandolim you sold me, and I don't know the picks, but I've never used light picks. And I've found that I prefer to change my pick technique to get a particular sound, rather than change my instrument. I thought I'd play the bandolim, but found I missed the range of tone I was used to on the Woodley that I couldn't get from the bandolim. How did I change my technique? Generally I hold the pick lighter, attack with less force and sustain longer w/ the left hand. You'd have to see/ hear it to compare it to my classical sound. You can actually do that on my last 2 CDs. There are sound clips on my webpage, and the new 18th Century CD should be up there tomorrow.

Q34

Q - I also have a L&H. Mine is a 1920 Model A Professional with a wonderful tone. Can you tell me what strings you recommend. I use EXP 74s on my other mandos but they all have truss rods. Should I use something lighter on the L&H? And is there a string that you think brings out the best in its tonal characteristics?

A - The Thomastik strings from Austria are a good match for the Lyon & Healy. I used them for years. But eventually I switched to the Argentine strings by Savarez, but kept the Thomastik wound A. The Argentine are brighter and give more presence to the D and G, imo. I need a good bass for a lot of the pieces I play. You can buy these sets (Argentine w/ a pair of Thomastik A's) from Plucked String, online @ Mandolin Cafe. It's my special blend, but Norman has agreed to sell it. I have recommended Plucked String a lot in these posts, but that's just because Norman Levine, the proprietor does his homework and has most of what you'll need. I don't get a cut 😊

Q35

Q - I'm curious as to the non-standard techniques which some of the classical virtouosi may have experimented with in the past. It really would not come as a great surprise if it turned out that some 19th century player had written a piece using two-handed tapping technique, only a mere 100+ years before Eddie Van Halen and "Eruption". ("Sweep Picking" as the metal guitarists call it, is nothing radically "new" to anyone who's worked on pick-glide across-the-strings etudes, either written for mandolin or adapted from classical violin bowing etudes.)

In my way of thought, "technique" is a mechanical process, and not inextricably linked to any particular stylistic outcome. For example, the application of "sweep picking" by a classical

player and a rock player may produce entirely different sonic outcomes, but the mechanics of how the technique is physically done remains pretty much the same. But I think it is fascinating to hear/see how someone in a different tradition of music will apply those type of techniques to the style they perform.

Do you know of any examples utilizing:

- a) Two handed tapping ?
- b) Plectrum plus use of right hand fingers ?
- c) Microtonal bending for just-tuned intervals, scales?
- d) interlocking slurring? (see ex. below, > is hammer or pull-off)

```
e=====
a=====0=====0>>>>2=====
d=====0>>>>2>>>>0=====
g=====0>>>>4=====
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What about distortion as a controlled tonal sound/technique? If so, are there any ways of generating it without using a "prepared mandolin" (i.e.: bit of plastic interwoven between the strings near bridge, etc.) ? A - Cool question! I can just see the Back-to-the-future-mandomovie...

The non-traditional techniques I've seen written in include:

1. Tuning a unison pair of strings in thirds, so you always get 3rds when you play that pair.
2. scodatura (retuning an instrument so what you're reading isn't sounding because you're reading as if the A string was still an A, but actually it's a B)
3. Splitting a pair, so you're playing 2 different notes on one string pair, or 5 or 6 note chords.
4. Playing above the nut or below the bridge.
5. Hitting the instrument to get 3 different percussion tones and playing them; hitting the strings for a pizzicato effect.
6. Pizzicato a la Bartok (kind of like slap bass for the mandolin-- pulling the strings off the neck w/ the right hand to play them.)
7. Playing right next to the bridge for a japanese sound effect.

A non-notated technique that is used fairly often is picking a string w/ the LH while you're tremoloing another note.

It's hard to do double hammer-ons or pull-offs if you're playing unamplified in a hall, because w/ high action the volume isn't consistently there, although I do do it some, like in the Vivaldi solo concerto that I just recorded.

I've been playing a bunch of Piazzolla lately and I do some scratchy rhythm stuff there on muted strings, and also in some Brazilian tunes and songs. The violence of the Piazzolla calls for some picking that distorts the sound, making it more percussive with a harder attack a bit closer to the bridge. Also swishing the left hand up the neck after playing a chord or a note to get a "swoosh" ending.

I'll sometimes deliberately overplay in an emotionally intense part of a piece to distort and set up the dramatic effect of decrescendoing down to a dolce sweetness to resolve (or not).

I don't really think of any of the non-notated stuff as "special effects". They're just part of my vocabulary on the instrument. and all music isn't "pretty" or "relaxing" so some violence of sound is warranted to take the audience out of their expectations and into an exciting musical experience.

Q36

Q - I have a problem with my tremelo. Whenever I get it up to a reasonable speed, my hand starts the mandolin to shake, along with my tremelo. Do you have some advice about right hand position to prevent this problem?

A - A hah! The mando-detectives have deduced that if your mandolin is shaking you must have your right hand pinky anchored on the top of your instrument. This does steady you, but isn't a true tremolo, & has other disadvantages besides shaking. You can't get much variety of sound or volume that way. I use my pinky as a guide finger-- it lightly brushes the pick guard and I can use it to judge depth and distance between strings. Some folks don't touch the top at all, some touch it with the back of 2 or 3 fingers. Just don't anchor & the shaking should disappear. If I'm wrong in my guess, email back w/ more symptoms. I've written more about RH technique in other posts, so check them out as well.

Q37

Q - Could you please tell us more about AMGuSS? Your brochure is excellent but other questions include:

What "types" of musicians attend?

What level is the average participant?

Is the focus primarily classical music?

Is this a good "camp" for people who like classical music but don't have any formal classical mandolin training?

What types of jams "break out"?

A - Thanks for asking about my favorite mandolin event of the year! Comando-ers who have come to AMGuSS, feel free to jump in. By your questions, Lou, I think you have the makings of an excellent AMGuSSer!

> What "types" of musicians attend?

> What level is the average participant?

The camp is mostly adult amateurs. There's a wide range, from near-beginners to professionals. There are some players who are great at blues or bluegrass or swing or their own stuff who are challenged by the reading necessary to handle the orchestra parts. But they come for a new perspective, and they come back because AMGuSS is the most fun you can have with your mandolin. There are mandolin orchestra players who come for the chamber coaching & technique classes. There are guitarists who come for a chance to play in a 50-player orchestra. In fact, everybody comes for a chance to play in a 50-player orchestra, or at least sit there & look busy & inhale the experience! But most folks come for the breadth and intensity of the experience. This year the age range was ~25 to ~65.

> Is the focus primarily classical music?

There are technique classes, orchestra rehearsals, section rehearsals and chamber music coaching sessions. These require reading. They are broken up by level and instrument. Technique classes for beginners (self-identified) intermediate and advanced mandolins, mandolas, mando-cello, guitar. Orchestra parts are sent out ~3 weeks in advance so everyone can learn the notes ahead of time. The 2nd mandolin parts in the orchestra are generally in first position, and there are daily section rehearsals for each section to work out any technical or interpretive issues. Folks who think the music is "too hard" or "too easy" when they get it, soon realize that the purpose of the orchestra is to work together in a large group with a conductor to create a musical performance. Everybody contributes and learns at their own level. Same with chamber music. For first-timers, there is a mentored "newby" chamber group for anyone who hasn't played in a 1-to-a-part written-music group before. Returnees are placed by me in a group that will suit & benefit them. But it's not all classical. Chamber music includes tangos, choro, some folk arrangements.

There are also World music sessions, that this year included Argentine tango, Brazilian choro, jazz, Italian music, blues, and have included Celtic music, American folk styles, and French musettes.

> Is this a good "camp" for people who like classical > music but don't have any > formal classical mandolin training?

It's the best! Lots of opportunities, no pressure. I've worked hard to establish for AMGuSS the collegial, non-competitive environment that I enjoy working in. Everyone is appreciated at AMGuSS, and it's been a life-altering experience for many people. I was tickled to read in an article about a long-time AMGuSS attendee who had struggled with reading but is now a really strong orchestra member, that he identifies himself as a classical mandolinist. An excellent choice! Our teachers are very versatile and good at working with whatever the level of the group is. Students ask questions; no one is dissed for not knowing. One of my favorite quotes is from Ani DiFranco a fiercely independent folk-punk rocker: "I do it 'cause it brings me joy, and I'm a joyful girl. Because the world owes me nothing, and we owe each other the world." That's the spirit of AMGuSS. Faculty and guest artists live on campus, play in the orchestra & hang at all the jams.

> What types of jams "break out"?

Folk, Texas swing (one mandolinist brings a guitar & a stand-up bass along & channels Bob Wills); quartet sight-reading (one mandolinist sends ahead 4 giant notebooks of quartets for 1st, & 2nd mandolin; mandola, & mcello-- all are welcome to sit in); Brazilian choro; old-bad-rock sing-alongs (my fave); blues; Celtic; folky bluegrass stuff. There are 3 different jam areas in a building near the dorm rooms & outdoor deck. It never closes. No one sleeps much.

I've kept enrollment to ~40, but for next year I'm raising it to 50 and adding a new faculty member, so we'll have 5 instead of 4, plus the guest-artist- of-the-year. So 2004, our 19th year, already looks like an excellent year to attend. Hope to see some of you there!

Q38

Q - Could you please share with us your preference in strings and picks?

A - I use Argentine strings (made by the French string-maker, Savarez) but replace the A strings with the Thomastik wound A strings (from Austria). It sounds complicated, but isn't. You can buy a set like that from Plucked Strings for ~ \$10-\$12 (I forget), & you'll find PS on the Mandolin Cafe page. for your instrument, whatever it is, you need strings that are heavy enough to vibrate the body of your mandolin (unless you're relying on a mike for volume), but with enough flexibility to allow you to shape the tone.

I use the old Pettine heavy picks, alas, now sold out. To produce a good and varied tremolo tone you need a narrow heavy pick. A Gibson or Fender small heavy guitar pick will do. It's even better if you shave a little off the sides to make it narrower. The pick need to be stiff enough to move the strings, to vibrate your instrument... (yes, it is a little like the house t

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