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SWEET HARMONIES FROM LITTLE

*Mandolin Playing in
Minneapolis and St. Paul*



WOODEN BOXES

AT THE CLOSE OF THE NINETEENTH century, a new and distinctive sound caught the ears of Minnesotans ranging from poor Italian immigrants to affluent young men. The captivating sound came from a small, eight-stringed wooden instrument called the mandolin. While modern listeners associate it with bluegrass and folk music, a hundred years ago mandolins were welcomed in the realms of classical and popular music.

Between 1890 and 1920, the golden age of the mandolin, traveling concert



The Albert Bellson Mandolin Quartet, late 1930s:
(clockwise from lower left) Bellson and Wallace Ziebarth with mandolins, Clifton Peterson with mandocello, and Vergel Vanzora with mandola



artists, vaudeville performers, and local teachers inspired thousands of amateur musicians around the country to take up the instrument. Forming mandolin clubs, the musicians made warm, mellow sounds together for appreciative and enthusiastic listeners. As the decades passed, orchestral ensembles, including guitars and other fretted instruments, entertained listeners at large concerts and on the radio. By the 1940s, however, musical tastes had changed, and amateur music making had taken a back seat to other, more passive entertainments. The era of the mandolin drew to a close.¹

While mandolin clubs thrived for a time in Minnesota cities including Brainerd, Stillwater, Mankato, Elk River, Spring Valley, and St. Cloud, Minneapolis and St. Paul were the vital hub of mandolin playing in the Upper Midwest. They boasted professional mandolinists, a few of them of national reputation, and hosts of amateur players. Schools offered instruction, and many local businesses catered to players by selling instruments, strings, and music. Minneapolis was even home to a handful of mandolin makers.²

From the late 1880s to the 1940s, more than 50 mandolin ensembles flourished in the Twin Cities, including women's, men's, children's, and mixed groups. Their repertoire included opera arrangements, marches, overtures, waltzes, two-steps, galops, mazurkas, polkas, quadrilles, character pieces, and programmatic works. Ensembles performed in homes, churches, parks, opera houses, lakeside hotels, and amusement parks, to name a few venues. They played for events including receptions, weddings, and socials. The Aeolian Mandolin Orchestra even played over the telephone, giving a concert in 1900 to friends in Minneapolis, Anoka, Buffalo, and Wahpeton, North Dakota.³

THE MANDOLIN ORIGINATED IN ITALY in the eighteenth century. Although there were several regional variants, the design codified by the Vinaccia family of Naples became most common.⁴ This Neapolitan mandolin has eight strings grouped in four pairs and tuned in fifths to the same pitches as the violin (g-d'-a'-e").

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A round-back Italian mandolin, advertised for \$25 in a P. Benson Musical Merchandise catalog, 1912



Unlike violins, however, mandolin fingerboards have metal frets, and players activate strings with a pick or plectrum rather than a bow. Because the resulting sound decays rapidly, players sustain tones by a rapid up-and-down plectrum motion, a technique called *tremolo*.

Until about 1910, most Italian mandolins had rounded backs made from thin strips of wood, called ribs. High-quality instruments might have more than 40 ribs as well as lavish decoration in ebony and mother of pearl. Mandolin tops were flat with an angle just below the bridge.

During the 1890s several American companies began crafting mandolins. The largest, Lyon & Healy Company of Chicago, manufactured the popular Washburn line, by 1894 producing more than 7,000 mandolins a year. In the same year Orville Gibson, an instrument maker in Kalamazoo, Michigan, began radically redesigning the instrument by applying principles from violin construction. Instead of bending strips of wood to create a bowl or pear-shaped back, he carved the back and top out of single, thin pieces of wood. These new mandolins had a bigger, louder sound. Some models had asymmetrical, Art Nouveau-inspired shapes and decorative curlicues. By the 1910s the Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Company aggressively marketed a whole family of mandolins in different sizes—mandolins, mandolas, mandocellos, and even mandobasses. While many other styles existed, most Minnesota mandolinists played either traditional round-back or Gibson-style instruments.⁵

The mandolin's popularity stemmed in part from the ease with which it could be learned. Beginners could acquire basic techniques fairly rapidly. In addition, mandolins could be purchased from local dealers for less than \$10 in the 1890s, and lessons were inexpensive. Mandolins were portable and easily taken on outings and vacations. Some people reportedly carried mandolin cases simply to appear stylish. Because man-

dolins could be played in ensembles, they offered social advantages as well. One 1930s advertisement, for example, promised players “good times, popularity, companionship, travel and education.”⁶

The event that set off the national mandolin craze in the United States was a visit in 1880 by the Figaro Spanish Students, a troupe of about 20 young men from Madrid who played bandurrias and guitars. Although the bandurria and the mandolin are not very similar—the guitar-like bandurria has 14 gut strings tuned in fourths instead of fifths—most Americans, who had never seen a mandolin, assumed the bandurrias were mandolins. The highly entertaining Spanish Students, who wore exotic costumes and played from

Portability and ease of learning helped make the mandolin popular (photo ca. 1910).



memory with impeccable technique, toured both North and South America, creating a sensation wherever they went. Noticing their success, an enterprising New Yorker named Carlo Curti recruited some fellow Italian violinists to form their own Spanish Student group. These Italians, however, played mandolins because the instruments were much easier to obtain and the tuning was familiar. Furthermore, American audiences failed to notice the difference. Other counterfeit groups soon followed, and in this way America acquired its first generation of professional mandolinists.⁷

Minneapolis was visited by at least one Spanish Student company in October 1891, when a group advertised as “the World Renowned Spanish Students From the Royal Conservatoire, Madrid” and a Spanish dancer named Carmencita played at the Grand Opera House. According to the *Minneapolis Tribune*, “This feature proved entertaining by reason of its novelty and the excellence of the playing. . . . The students played Carmencita’s music, too, which was played with the expression peculiar to Spaniards, and which, of course, added much to the effect.”⁸

THREE RESIDENT ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS contributed to the growing popularity of the mandolin in the Twin Cities. The earliest was Anacleto Montanelli, a mandolin teacher who arrived in Minneapolis in about 1887. He opened a mandolin and guitar studio on Nicollet Avenue, where he also sold and repaired the instruments. The following year, Montanelli founded the Minneapolis Mandolin and Guitar Club, the area’s first. It debuted on March 31, 1888, at an Apollo Glee Club concert at the Grand Opera House. Before a packed house members played three pieces on seven mandolins and two guitars.⁹

Two months later, Montanelli’s club put on its own concert at Harmonia Hall in Minneapolis, playing a Suppé overture, two marches, and a Spanish waltz. A newspaper reviewer described his impressions: “It was an entirely novel and unusual entertainment. . . . The mandolin is an instrument little known in this country, but in the hands of an expert produces a very fine, fascinating kind of music, simple and having strict limitations but possessing a peculiar charm.” The next year, Montanelli’s club admitted six women members and gave a concert described as “one of the most successful home talent concerts of the season.” It also gave a performance at the Lake Harriet band shell, billed as a



Gino Perera popularized the mandolin as a teacher and director of several clubs, including the University of Minnesota's 1899 Mandolin and Guitar Club.

"Grand Sacred Concert, Vocal and Instrumental, by Signor Vegara, Assisted by Signor Montanelli's Celebrated Venetian Mandolin Orchestra." In July Montanelli played at a less sublime venue: Minneapolis's Dime Museum, where people viewed curiosities such as eight-footed horses and fighting kangaroos. Perhaps Montanelli went on to a career on the vaudeville circuit, since he seems to have left the area by 1890.¹⁰

Another Italian who popularized the mandolin in the Twin Cities was Gino L. Perera, who may also have been the Italian consul in Minneapolis. In the 1890s he taught mandolin and guitar at a studio on Nicollet Avenue and at St. Joseph's Academy, a school operated by the Sisters of St. Joseph on Marshall Avenue in St. Paul. Perera directed several mandolin groups, including one that was part of Minneapolis's Filharmonix Club, an ambitious amateur musical society that hosted a glee club, string orchestra, and banjo group. He also directed other ensembles, including a

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Advertisement for Carmencita and a group of Spanish Student mandolinists (Minneapolis Tribune, Oct. 18, 1891)

women's group, according to one news item: "Century Hall was well filled last evening in compliment to Gino L. Perera and his mandolin clubs . . . and it was a pleasing success. The Ladies' Club . . . is composed of a dozen or more well known ladies, and in a concerted number with the Florentine Club they acquitted themselves with credit as mandolin players."¹¹

During the Minneapolis Summer Carnival of 1893, one of Perera's clubs appeared in two concerts with the John Philip Sousa Band, playing a Spanish folksong as part of the grand finale, which was a Sousa composition called *Salute of the Nations to the Columbian Exposition*. According to the *Minneapolis Tribune*, "The Salute opened with the blast of trumpets and rattle of drums to proclaim the anniversary of the discovery of America, rapidly followed by different national airs, in which the band, [a goo-voice] chorus, and incidentally a fife and drum corps, Perera's group of mandolin players, and two bag pipers played a part." (One wonders how the mandolins could be heard above the din.) Although Perera moved to Brussels, Belgium, in about 1900, by 1904 he had returned to Minneapolis where he directed the Central High School Mandolin Club and the Perera Mandolin Club. After 1905, like Montanelli, he disappeared from the Minneapolis scene.¹²

In 1883 a third Italian mandolinist, Tomaso (Thomas) Di Giorgio, arrived in Minneapolis to stay, becoming a theater musician, composer, arranger, and teacher of mandolin and guitar. During the late 1890s he directed the 21-member Flour City Mandolin Club, which, according to the *Minneapolis Journal*, had "an extensive repertoire of high-grade music" and was "one of the most popular and capable musical organizations of the city." A 1902 concert of Di Giorgio's Dilettanti Mandolin Orchestra was noted this way in *The Cadenza*, one of



The long-lived Twin City Mandolin Club, including a 12-stringed mandolin, guitar, and violin, about 1900

the nation's foremost fretted-instrument periodicals: "The listener is charmed by the evident musicianly evenness of its members and impressed by the influence of its director. Their work throughout was colored by a warm southern expression . . . a graceful, emotional understanding of each selection that was thoroughly human." Di Giorgio directed a mandolin orchestra as late as the 1920s, and his wife Laurentina and daughter Fortunata were also players and members of the local musicians' union.¹³

Sharing credit for popularizing the mandolin in Minneapolis was Charles Shibley from Oswego, New York. He taught a wider variety of instruments than the Italians, also being skilled on the banjo, guitar, and zither. This versatility enabled him to direct many fretted-instrument clubs during the 1890s, including the Hollow Cove Banjo Club, Concert Banjo Club, Crescent Banjo Club, Alpine Zither Club, Florentine Mandolin Club, and Florentine Mandolin Sextet.

Eventually, Shibley joined the faculty of the MacPhail School of Music, and by 1914 he had married one of his students, Catherine Salter, with whom he taught until his death in 1931. Catherine continued at MacPhail until about 1947 and taught fretted instruments in her home until 1968. The couple's careers in Minneapolis thus spanned nearly 80 years.¹⁴

ALTHOUGH MANDOLIN CLUBS caught on slowly in St. Paul, its first group, the Twin City Mandolin and Guitar Club, was one of the state's longest-lived. The group's earliest surviving program is from an 1891 concert at the English Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, where the club performed the "Skater's Waltz" and a selection from Verdi's *Il Trovatore* on a bill with the Ideal Banjo Orchestra, a zither soloist, and other musicians.¹⁵

The club's most prominent members were co-founders Frederick Swanson and Anthony L. Snyder. Swanson, a native of Red Wing, taught mandolin and

guitar in St. Paul, directed the Twin City Mandolin Club until 1906, and composed and published sheet music, including the very popular “Minnesota Street Rag March” (1903). Snyder played the banjo in vaudeville before moving to St. Paul in 1879, where he taught mandolin, banjo, and guitar and directed the Elk’s Banjo Club. When Swanson gave up directing the Twin City club, Snyder took it over until it disbanded in 1924.¹⁶

A much shorter-lived St. Paul club was the College of St. Thomas Mandolin and Guitar Orchestra. Its director was John Ryder, a teacher of fretted instruments and the director of Ryder’s Mandolin Orchestra. Playing first mandolin was a man of the cloth—the Rev. John Lowry, a prefect at the college. At its largest in 1896 with 10 mandolins, four guitars, a violin, flute, banjo, and piano, the orchestra disappeared by 1900.¹⁷

A collegiate group demonstrating more staying power was the University of Minnesota Mandolin Club, one of the longest-lived and best-known mandolin groups in Minnesota. Formed in 1892 after traveling university glee and banjo clubs from Yale, Wisconsin, and Michigan played in Minneapolis, the Mandolin Club favored catchy popular tunes, with a sprinkling of light classics. Succeeding Perera as its first paid director in 1897 were Bert Rose, director of the university band, and Thomas Di Giorgio, among others. The club also elected student officers: in 1900 Charles Pillsbury was president and his twin John Pillsbury its student leader.¹⁸

Membership in the club grew from 10 to more than two-dozen players, and by 1897 it had gained a flute and a harp guitar, a large guitar with an extension for additional bass strings. Later the club acquired a Symphony harp guitar, marketed nationwide by the W. J. Dyer Company of St. Paul and played in many mandolin orchestras across the country. In 1902 the club gained a violin and percussion, until it peaked in size with seven first mandolins, eight second mandolins, a mandola, six guitars, a flute, three violins, and a violoncello.¹⁹

As the century turned, university mandolin and glee-club concerts were major social events often held off-campus in large halls. Governor Samuel R. Van Sant and prominent families patronized the concerts, and the Pillsburys, Lowrys, and Northrops reserved boxes. The *Minneapolis Journal* described one concert this way: “There was a good audience to greet the young men . . . and the reception given to both clubs was most





The University of Minnesota Mandolin club, 1897; among the members (back row, center) are John Pillsbury (with mandolin) and Charles Pillsbury (with guitar). A harp guitar is at upper left.

hearty and encouraging. . . . The boxes were draped in university colors and were occupied by numerous gay parties. . . . The mandolin club made a distinct hit.” The university’s clubs also played annual concerts in St. Paul and Stillwater, provided music for university events, and toured the state during Christmas and Easter vacations in a chartered railroad car. Over the years, they visited at least 46 towns in Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, and Canada. Wherever they went, the clubs did wonders for university public relations. A 1903 concert inspired the following observations by a reviewer in Granite Falls, Minnesota: “The boys play with a precision and snap which can only be the result of careful training and long practice. One would not believe that such sweet harmonies could be brought out of these little wooden boxes.”²⁰

University of Minnesota President Cyrus Northrop thought highly of the clubs. When the University of Chicago’s president disbanded musical clubs in 1900 on the grounds that they caused students to neglect their studies, Northrop was appalled, according to one newspaper account: “I have no such designs upon the musical element of our university. We have healthy glee and mandolin clubs, and I say, may they live long and prosper. I believe that college musical organizations are just as healthy, ennobling, elevating and necessary adjuncts to college life as football clubs.” Unfortunately, this endorsement did not translate into any financial or administrative support from the university, and the clubs struggled financially. Some of the tours resulted in a deficit, and after the clubs returned home, they gave extra concerts to pay off debts.²¹

From time to time, the clubs hired professional business managers, but more often than not they were elected from the clubs’ ranks. Organizing a tour was arduous, because the manager had to travel the route first to make arrangements and draw up contracts. If fortunate, he obtained a money guarantee; if not, clubs earned only a percentage of the receipts.

In 1901 Francis H. Robertson, the former director of the disbanded University of Chicago club, was elected director at Minnesota. The next concert opened with a march of Robertson’s own composition and featured him in two mandolin solos. Robertson, who had studied with two virtuosi of the mandolin, Salvatore Tomaso of Chicago and Giuseppe Branzoli of Rome, also taught mandolin and guitar at the nearby Northwestern Conservatory of Music. In December

1901 he began a series of five recitals assisted by the University Mandolin Club. Seeking to bring out “all the possibilities of the instrument,” he performed works by Valentine Abt, Beethoven, Mascagni, Gounod, Verdi, and others.²²

By 1903, however, Robertson had left Minnesota, and the club chose more music from popular genres. By 1909 membership had started to drop, and despite some attempts to revive it, lack of leadership and financial support soon brought about its demise at least a decade before that of larger university mandolin clubs such as Yale’s.²³



While the university's mandolin club was an all-male organization, the campus boasted a number of women mandolinists. In October 1908 the Girls Mandolin Club formed, but despite ads recruiting more players in the *Minnesota Daily* and an editorial suggesting that it consolidate with the men's club, the group topped out at 15 members and disappeared after 1911.²⁴

DURING THE FIRST DECADES of the century, when women's public lives were limited in scope, at least seven Twin Cities women mandolinists are known to have influenced the music scene by directing ensem-



bles and teaching scores of students. According to music historian Walter Carter, "The mandolin era had the widest participation by women of any popular music movement in history."²⁵ String instruments seem to have been more socially acceptable for women than wind instruments. Certainly, the mandolin craze created a demand for teachers at a time when an increasing number of women were finding careers in music education.

Mattie Bartholomew, one of the region's earliest female mandolinists, taught mandolin, guitar, banjo, and piano in Minneapolis beginning in 1895 and directed the Wauping Mandolin, Banjo and Guitar Club. She also taught at the Northwestern Conservatory of Music with Charles Shibley, and the two of them performed with the Elk River Mandolin Club in 1902. Her career was cut short that year when she died of typhoid fever.²⁶

Across the river in St. Paul, Nellie Hope, an established violin teacher and church musician, also taught mandolin and directed mandolin orchestras. On the faculty of Macalester College and several Catholic schools, she gave mandolin lessons until about 1910 at St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music and Art, one of the largest conservatories in the Upper Midwest. Hope's Ladies String Orchestra, the first women's orchestra in the region, included three mandolins, four violins, a violoncello, and a guitar, and Hope was highly respected for her organizational and business abilities.²⁷

Sr. Wilfrida Hogan of the Sisters of St. Joseph taught mandolin, guitar, and other musical subjects for more than 50 years at several Catholic schools around the Twin Cities. Traveling to different schools, she was, according to a history of the order, "considered a gad-about, but with such dignified reserve that her trips caused no comment." Around 1900, while superior of St. Joseph's Convent in Marshall, Minnesota, Sr. Wilfrida directed a mandolin orchestra for men and women in the evenings. Returning to St. Paul to join the faculty of the College of St. Catherine, she wrote that the school's mandolin and guitar instruction were "as thorough and detailed as that for other instruments. . . . Original classic selections are given which

Nellie Hope directed the St. Paul Ladies String Orchestra, about 1895

not only make the study more serious but afford infinitely greater entertainment to both the player and her listener.”²⁸

Teachers of mandolin frequently were skilled on a variety of instruments, and Emma Greene, who began giving lessons in 1905 in St. Paul, was no exception. Over the next three decades, she taught mandolin, guitar, banjo, steel guitar, ukulele, tenor banjo, and tiple (a small guitar). Highly trained, she studied piano at the New England Conservatory in Boston, as well as fretted instruments with Andres Segovia and two prominent East Coast teachers, Giuseppe Pettine and A. J. Weidt. As a faculty member of the Macalester College Conservatory and the MacPhail School of Music, she directed ensembles of her students.²⁹

Blondina C. Smith taught an equally wide variety of instruments—mandolin, guitar, banjo, steel guitar, ukulele, Irish harp, piano, and violin. Born in England, she had studied mandolin, guitar, and banjo at the Brighton Conservatory. Her teacher, Richard Harrison, was a student of a famous Neapolitan mandolin virtuoso, Fernando De Cristofaro. Smith worked in New York City and Roanoke, Virginia, before opening a studio in St. Paul about 1913. Later she was on the faculty of MacPhail and other music schools, and she directed the Northwest Mandolin Orchestra from about 1915 to 1930.³⁰

MacPhail faculty member Grace Wentzel, a Shibley student, also taught mandolin, banjo, and piano during the 1920s. A biographical sketch from the time noted that she directed MacPhail’s Banjo Quartette, its Banjo and Mandolin Orchestra, which “has often been heard over the radio,” and the Schiller School Teachers’ Mandolin Club. For five years she was organist and choir director at the Norwegian Baptist Church, but “owing to numerous engagements of the banjo and mandolin orchestra, she was obliged to discontinue church work.”³¹

IN A STATE FULL OF IMMIGRANTS and children of immigrants, it is not surprising that many turn-of-the-century mandolin players had strong ethnic ties. In 1895, L. J. Lundgren of St. Paul, for example, published *Amatören*, a Swedish-language newsletter for mandolin and guitar players. A single extant issue includes music, instructive articles, and a catalog of instruments available from Lundgren. Another Scandinavian business, Benson Music House, an important supplier of fretted

instruments in Minneapolis, also claimed to be a manufacturer of mandolins and guitars. Four other small Scandinavian firms in the city apparently made mandolins and guitars during the 1890s: the Larson Mandolin Manufacturing Co., Levander & Ericson, Northwestern Guitar & Mandolin Mfg. Co., and the Dahlman Manufacturing Company. Quite likely, however, these small firms must have experienced difficulty competing with large national firms; Dahlman, for example, abandoned mandolin making and began selling veneers.³²

William Howard may have been the area’s only African American teacher of mandolin and guitar when he opened a studio in Minneapolis in 1901, but he must have had compatriots, judging from Howard’s 1902 city-directory advertisement, which read: “Colored Brass Band, Mandolin and Quartette Clubs furnished at short notice.” Howard also directed the Rosebud Mandolin Club, a group of about 21 young white musicians. As late as 1925, he was also still directing Howard’s Military Band.³³

Several Filipino groups in Minnesota played the mandolin in combination with instruments from their own culture. The Filipino Serenaders, a mid-1920s quartet with two mandolins, a bandurria, and a guitar, blended two Filipino musical traditions: the *rondalla*, an ensemble of plucked string instruments including the bandurria, and the *estudiantina*, a group which typically included mandolins, violins, guitars, flutes, cellos, basses, and percussion. One Serenader, Perfecto Biason, played an American-style mandolin similar to a Gibson.³⁴

In the 1920s a small stream of Filipino student musicians who arrived at the University of Minnesota formed the Philippinesotans, a group that sponsored social events such as concerts, plays, and holiday celebrations. Among the string groups featured at these functions was a quintet (including Biason) that played around town and toured several states before returning home to register for the fall quarter. In April 1922 the *Minnesota Alumni Weekly* reported that the quintet “supplied the orchestration between the acts at the Shubert Theater, Minneapolis, two weeks ago. . . . Their program

The Filipino Serenaders, about 1925: (standing, from left) Fidel Ramirez and Perfecto Biason with mandolins and Francisco Taberner with small guitar; (seated) Rudolph Runez with bandurria





The Red Star Orchestra, directed by Ivan Kozek, shared the bill with Bellson's Mandolin Quartet and a Ukrainian amateur theater troupe at a Dayton's Bluff Commercial Club performance in 1936

is usually a selection of haunting Philippine airs and Spanish love songs." If these musicians supported themselves by playing, they were unusually fortunate, since many students left school because of economic hardship. Nevertheless, in 1921 the civic-minded Philipinesotans were the first group to offer funds to help build Cyrus Northrop Memorial Auditorium, completed in 1928 and still a venue for major musical events.³⁵

Russian Minnesotans also combined the mandolin with instruments from their own culture. For example, St. Paul's youthful Red Star or Balalaika Orchestra, active during the 1930s, played Gibson-style mandolins, guitars, and balalaikas. Director and teacher Ivan Kozek, a garment cutter, led the group in playing music and traditional tunes by Russian composers, accompanied by a group of young Russian dancers.³⁶

The Ukrainian community of northeast Minneapolis also produced many mandolin players. While Ukrainian communities in cities such as Detroit favored the bandura, the lutelike national instrument, Minneapolitans played the more easily obtained mandolins. Most of the city's Ukrainian churches sponsored man-

dolin orchestras for young people; consequently, many children grew up playing traditional Ukrainian music on round-back mandolins at church events. Mandolinist Peter Ostroushko remembers that players from St. Michael's Ukrainian Orthodox Church rarely mixed with players at St. Constantine's Ukrainian Catholic Church across the street. In contrast, Winnipeg's Ukrainian mandolin orchestras, which were affiliated with ethnic labor organizations, drew players from around the city.³⁷

BY THE 1920S MANDOLIN GROUPS in the Twin Cities were suffering a reversal of fortune. Many orchestras had disbanded because loud Dixieland jazz and dance orchestras overpowered the instrument's delicate sound. Another fretted instrument, the tenor banjo, projected sound much better, and soon many amateur and professional mandolinists moved over to the banjo. By 1930, for example, the 64 banjo players far outnumbered the 7 mandolinists in the Twin Cities' musicians' unions.³⁸ Musicians played together in groups like the MacPhail Banjo and Mandolin Orchestra, and some

mandolinists made the easy transition to the tenor banjo, which was tuned the same as the mandola.

By 1930 the mandolin was also meeting competition from “Hawaiian” instruments, including ukuleles and Hawaiian guitars. Hawaiian studios such as the Mauna Loa Guitar School, the Kealoha Studio, the Honolulu Conservatory of Music, and the Paradise Islanders South Sea Island Studio sprang up around the Twin Cities. Mandolinist Blondina Smith led one of at least three full-fledged Hawaiian orchestras in the area.³⁹

Forestalling the decline of the mandolin in the Twin Cities, however, were two exceptional and very different individuals, Italian-born Albert Bellson and Minneapolis-born Chester Gould. Over several decades, these nationally recognized leaders contributed significantly to the cities’ musical life and extended the longevity of the instrument whose popularity rapidly diminished elsewhere around the country.

Albert Bellson, St. Paul’s last, and probably finest, Italian mandolinist, was born Alfonso Balassone in

1897 near Salerno, where he sometimes played the instrument by the light of an olive-oil lamp. The Balassone family immigrated to the United States in 1906, changed their name to Bellson, and settled in Rock Falls, Illinois. Albert began teaching mandolin at age 11, and within two years he taught several dozen students and served as an agent for the Gibson Company. At age 15 he became a professional member of the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists, and Guitarists, an association of professional and amateur players, publishers, and manufacturers that promoted fretted instruments.⁴⁰

At 18, Bellson left Rock Falls to study for three years with Giuseppe Pettine, a famous mandolin virtuoso living in Providence, Rhode Island. What the Juilliard school was to the violin, Pettine’s school was to the mandolin. When Bellson graduated, Pettine awarded him the rarely bestowed diploma of mandolin soloist, calling him “my most talented pupil.”⁴¹

In 1920 Bellson settled in St. Paul, where he opened the Bellson School of Music in the Schiffmann Building

Mandolinists responded to the Hawaiian music craze in the 1930s with mixed groups such as this one.



at St. Peter and Sixth Streets. Here he sold instruments and music and gave lessons on the mandolin, guitar, Hawaiian guitar, tenor banjo, ukulele, violin, and accordion. Over the years his very successful business moved to the Pittsburgh Building, the Bremer Arcade on St. Peter Street, and, finally, the American National Bank Building.⁴²

Bellson quickly debuted as a concert mandolin soloist, playing the most demanding classical Italian mandolin works. During the summer of 1921, he toured nationally with the Original Gibsonians, a sex-

tet comprising two mandolins, a mandola, mandocello, guitar, and piano, serving as musical director and featured soloist. An admiring reviewer in Salt Lake City wrote, “His rendition of ‘Capriccio Spagnuolo’ by Munier and the ‘First Prelude’ by Calace confirm him as one of America’s premier artists.” Bellson also was a featured soloist at Guild conventions in Los Angeles, Toledo, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. At a rare solo performance in St. Paul in 1928 he performed works by Munier, Fantauzzi, Pettine, Marucelli, Mezzacapo, and Calace.⁴³

The talented player was also a busy director, leading a mandolin orchestra from at least 1924 through the early 1940s. In addition, during the 1930s and 1940s he directed two fine mandolin quartets. The Bellson Mandolin Quartet included Bellson and Wallace Ziebarth on mandolins, Bellson’s wife Vergel Vanzora on mandola, and Clifton Peterson on mandocello. Nationally known, they were featured artists at the 1936 Guild convention in Minneapolis, where they played Italian works for mandolin quartet, as well as standard string-quartet literature. Bellson’s prize-winning Romantic Quartet included Bellson, Vanzora, and guitarist Vernon Eide.⁴⁴

During the 1930s, Bellson also coached Taylor’s Musical Strings, based in St. Paul’s Rondo neighborhood. This group of African American girls played mandolin, mandola, mandocello, guitar, and bass guitar. Their repertoire included J. S. Bach, Stephen Foster songs, Sousa marches, gospel tunes, and, when their elders were not listening, the blues. Bellson walked to Rondo to give private lessons once a week and sometimes conducted. Youthful mandocellist Evelyn Fairbanks described Bellson’s style of conducting in her book, *The Days of Rondo*:

He raised both hands chest-high with his elbows sticking out. He looked at each of us, one at a time, to make sure he had our attention. Then he made the slightest movement with his baton and we started to play. . . . With his hands, his head, his winged arms, his facial expressions, and sometimes his entire body, he made us play the song the way he felt it should be played. When he led us in one of Sousa’s marches, he created an entire parade for us to play for. And when we played the lullaby “Mighty Like a Rose,” it seemed he almost fell asleep before we tiptoed to the final measure.”⁴⁵

Mandolinist and fretted-instrument teacher

Albert Bellson, about 1930





Vergel and Albert Bellson in their St. Peter Street store, St. Paul, about 1950

Mandolins were also part of Bellson's fretted-instrument "plectrophonic" ensembles such as the Bellson Hawaiian Serenaders, which included banjos, mandolin-banjos, guitars, Hawaiian guitars, ukuleles, and accordions.⁴⁶ But a major change in popular culture was brewing, and the mandolin's days of popularity were numbered. Bellson's large mandolin and plectrophonic groups disbanded sometime between 1942 and 1950. Mandolins and banjos had difficulty competing with recorded music, motion pictures, and other entertainments that decreased the appeal of amateur music making across the United States.

Minnesota's second major fretted-instrument promoter was Chester William Gould. Whereas Bellson was

known for artistry and impeccable technique, Gould was a showman. Born in 1900 in Minneapolis, he was educated at the College of St. Thomas and MacPhail School of Music, where he probably studied with Charles Shibley. After serving in the armed forces during World War I, he opened the Gould Banjo-Mandolin-Guitar Institute in 1923 on Eleventh Street. Later, he operated a larger studio and music store at 1607 Nicollet Avenue.⁴⁷

Gould did everything in a big way. His concerts were crowd pleasers that featured costumed musicians, student soloists, vocalists, dancers, baton twirlers, and drum majors. He took his mandolin orchestra and banjo band on many road trips to Guild conventions,



Minneapolis musician and showman **Chester W. Gould**, about 1948

the World's Fair, and the Chicagoland Music Festivals. After serving again in the armed forces during World War II, Gould renamed his expanded studio the Gould School of Music. Perhaps the largest school of fretted instruments in the Midwest, it soon offered instruction in piano, accordion, violin, woodwinds, brass instruments, ballet, tap, and baton twirling. In 1947 *Fretted Instrument News* called Gould "one of the leaders in modern studio operation" and remarked that his enrollment had exceeded 1,000.⁴⁸

President of the Guild from 1938 to 1942, Gould managed and hosted several conventions in Minneapolis. Some 1,500 people attended the 1936 affair, which began with a parade down Nicollet Avenue. Among those marching were the Gould Banjo Band, the Red Star Orchestra with its mandolins and balalaikas, and even one of Bellson's groups. *Time* magazine noted that the "convention manager and official host was Chester William Gould, 36, a big, loud-voiced banjoist, organizer of the 50-piece Gould Mandolin Orchestra, which this week was to perform a Mexican Fantasia in costume, and of the champion 60-piece Gould Banjo Band, which was to render a new arrangement of Ravel's famed Bolero." After the even larger 1948 convention, *Fretted Instrument News* reported, "Gould may well be proud of the work done. . . . By tying this convention with the Minneapolis Aquatennial celebration, the fretted instruments received nationwide publicity [through radio broadcasts and newsreels] and certainly made Minneapolis fret-conscious." Gould's bands marched in the parade and hosted a concert at Lake Harriet.⁴⁹

A street parade, Gould believed, was the best way to advertise and promote fretted instruments to the largest number of people in the shortest time. An expert on organizing and training these bands, Gould apparently had them execute all sorts of maneuvers, which they practiced on Sundays at the Minneapolis Farmers' Market. Although marching groups contained a few mandolins, Gould favored banjos for their "cutting and carrying tone quality. . . . Mandolin players should play mandolin banjos. Mandola players should play tenor banjos and guitar players should play guitar banjos," he opined. By the late 1940s, the mandolin was clearly being left behind in Minnesota.⁵⁰

In the summer of 1955 Gould, a survivor of two world wars, fell from the roof of his studio while trying to dismantle a sign and died. His band and school died

with him. Albert Bellson's teaching career lasted another 20 years before his death in 1977. One of his last mandolin students in the early 1960s was Richard Walz, who recalled, "I thought he and I were the last mandolinists on the face of the earth." Lacking the opportunity to play mandolin in an orchestral setting, Walz gave up the instrument and switched to the violin.⁵¹

HAPPILY, THERE IS A postscript. Although mandolin orchestras virtually disappeared after 1940, they are enjoying a revival. Milwaukee's 100-year-old mandolin orchestra is



going strong. Since 1991 Minneapolis has been home to the Minnesota Mandolin Orchestra, and some two-dozen others around the country are rediscovering the turn-of-the-century repertoire and performing new compositions, as well. Bellson would have been pleased

to know that Walz is now a leading exponent of Bellson's Italian school of mandolin playing and that in 2000 the Twin Cities hosted the annual meeting of the Classical Mandolin Society, attended by many admirers of "sweet harmonies from little wooden boxes."⁵² □

NOTES

1. For a full account of the mandolin's heyday, see Scott Hamby, "Mandolins in the United States Since 1880: An Industrial and Sociocultural History of Form" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1977), and Paul Rupp, "The Mandolin in America after 1880 and the History of Mandolin Orchestras in Milwaukee, Wisconsin" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1988).

2. Outstate mandolin clubs included Brainerd's Bartsch Mandolin Club, Stillwater's Bluff City Mandolin Club, Mankato's Brastad Mandolin Orchestra, the Elk River Mandolin Club, the Spring Valley Mandolin Club, and the St. Cloud Concert Mandolin Club.

3. *Minneapolis Journal*, Jan. 23, 1900, p. 5, July 5, 1900, p. 8, and July 28, 1900, pt. 2, p. 7.

4. Paul Sparks, *The Classical Mandolin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 15–16.

5. Hamby, "Mandolins," 12. Mandolas are equivalent to violas, mandocellos to violoncellos. Mandobasses are tuned in fourths like string basses.

6. *Bellson's Famous School for the Romantic Instruments* (St. Paul: Bellson Music Company, ca. 1935), Jeffrey Van collection, St. Paul.

7. See Hamby, "Mandolins"; Rupp, "Mandolin Orchestras." H. P. Sutorius, a German-born mandolinist who toured with a Spanish Student group directed by Carlos Montague,

operated a studio on West Seventeenth Street in Minneapolis in 1901; *The Dual City Blue Book*, 1901–02 (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1901), 304; *The Cadenza*, Sept.–Oct. 1899, p. 2.

8. *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 18, 1891, p. 5, and Oct. 19, 1891, p. 4.

9. *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1888–89, p. 128, 963; program, Apollo Glee Club, Grand Opera House, Minneapolis, Mar. 31, 1888 (vol. 7, no. 225–31, for Mar. 26–31, 1888), p. 8, Minnesota Historical Society Library, St. Paul; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 1, 1888, p. 7.

10. Program, Grand Concert by Minneapolis Mandolin and Guitar Club, Harmonia Hall, Thursday Evening, May 24, 1888, copy in Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis; *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 25, 1888, p. 4, Jan. 20, 1889, p. 4, May 23, 1889, p. 5, June 23, 1889, p. 5, June 24, 1889, p. 5, and July 21, 1889, p. 5.

11. *Minnesota Magazine* 8 (Apr. 1902): 239; Sr. Ann Thomasine Sampson, CSJ, *Sister Wilfrida Hogan, CSJ, 1860–1944: Music Teacher, Writer, Superior* (St. Paul: the Author, 1994), 45, College of St. Catherine Archives, St. Paul; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 28, 1893, p. 4; Dec. 21, 1893, p. 5.

12. *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 18, 1893, p. 4; *Minneapolis Journal*, May 8, 1902, p. 8, Apr. 23, 1904, p. 14, May 20, 1905, p. 12. See also, program for 1893 Summer Carnival, Minneapolis Public Library.

13. *Minneapolis Journal*, Jan. 10, 1933, p. 10, Mar. 1, 1899, p. 7, and Feb. 4, 1899, p. 5; *The Cadenza* 9 (Nov. 1902): 36; *Northwest Musical Herald Year Book, 1930–31* (Minneapolis: Musical Herald Publishing Co., 1930), 24; Wallace Ziebarth, mandolinist, interviews by author, St. Paul, Aug. 14, 1998, and Jan. 4, 1999. DiGiorgio died in 1933 at age 72.
14. *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 14, 1931, p. 2; MacPhail College of Music, *Catalog* (Minneapolis: the College, [1947]), 17.
15. Emma A. Hess Detzer, scrapbook of recital programs and reviews, 1888–89, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; *St. Paul City Directories, 1890–1924*; *Dual City Blue Book, 1895–99*.
16. James T. Dunn, “A Century of Song: Popular Music in Minnesota,” *Minnesota History* 44 (Winter 1974): 134; *Northwest Musical Herald* 2 (Aug. 1928): 24; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 27, 1931, p. 1; *Northwest Musical Herald Year Book, 1930–31*, p. 29–31. Snyder is better known as the long-time director of the still-extant Minnesota State Band. Under Snyder, the group played extensively throughout the Upper Midwest, including summertime concerts at St. Paul’s Phalen Park from 1911 until his death in 1931.
17. See the college’s *Annual Catalog* for 1895–1899.
18. *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 28, 1890, p. 4; *The Gopher* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1901), 150; *Minnesota Daily* (Minneapolis), May 21, 1902, p. 4.
19. Robert C. Hartman, *Guitars and Mandolins in America: Featuring the Larsons’ Creations* (Hoffman Estates, IL: Maurer & Co., 1988), 23–24. The percussionist also played snare drum, bass drum, tom tom, triangle, tambourine, sand blocks, bells, and cymbals; see *Minnesota Magazine* 8 (Apr. 1902): 240.
20. *Minneapolis Journal*, Mar. 6, 1902, p. 5, Mar. 4, 1899, p. 2, and May 9, 1903, p. 11 (quoting *Granite Falls Journal*).
21. *Minneapolis Journal*, Mar. 21, 1900, p. 7; *Minnesota Daily*, Mar. 23, 1904, p. 4.
22. *Minneapolis Journal*, Mar. 8, 1902, p. 14; *Minnesota Daily*, Dec. 7, 1901, p. 1.
23. *Minnesota Daily*, Oct. 21, 1911, p. 1, Nov. 3, 1911, p. 2.
24. *Minnesota Daily*, Oct. 21, 1908, p. 1, Nov. 18, 1908, p. 2; *The Gopher* (1912), n. p.
25. Walter Carter, booklet accompanying Nashville Mandolin Ensemble recording, *All the Rage: Mandolin Ensemble Music from 1897–1924* (New World Records, 80544-2, 1998), 8.
26. *The Northwestern Conservatory of Music Seventeenth Annual Calendar, Season 1901–1902* (Minneapolis: the Conservatory, [1901]), 7; *Minneapolis Journal*, May 26, 1902, p. 3, and Sept. 19, 1902, p. 6.
27. Minnesota Ladies String Orchestra, 1895, photo, Minnesota Historical Society Library; Mary Dillon Foster, *Who’s Who Among Minnesota Women* (Minnesota[?]: the Author, 1924), 139; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Oct. 11, 1918, p. 16.
28. Sr. Helen Angela Hurley, *On Good Ground: The Story of the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Paul* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1951), 174; Sr. Ann Thomasine Sampson, “The History of St. Agatha’s Conservatory of Music and Arts, 1884–1962,” 35, Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph, St. Paul Province; Sr. Wilfrida Hogan, manuscript notebook, College of St. Catherine Archives, St. Paul.
29. MacPhail School of Music, *Annual Catalog, 1936–1937* (Minneapolis: the School, 1936), 11.
30. Arthur E. Wascher and Thomas C. Ingham, *Who’s Who in Music and Dramatic Art in the Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul* (Minneapolis: Associated Publicity Bureau, 1925), 192; Philip J. Bone, *The Guitar and Mandolin: Biographies of Celebrated Players and Composers* (London: Schott and Co., 1972), 162–63; *The MacPhail School of Music and Dramatic Art* (Minneapolis: the School, 1921[?]), 3, 29, 31, 45; Ziebarth interviews; Linda F. Parker, “Women in Music in St. Paul from 1898 to 1957 with Emphasis on the St. Paul Public Schools” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1982), 66.
31. Wascher and Ingham, *Who’s Who*, 210.
32. Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 307; *Amatören* (St. Paul: L. J. Lundgren, 1895), copy in Minnesota Historical Society Library; *Illustrated Catalog P. Benson Musical Merchandise, Books, Etc.* (Minneapolis: the Firm, 1912); *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1906, p. 506. A Benson mandolin in the America’s Shrine to Music Museum, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, bears this label: “Benson/ Manufacturer & Importer/ Maker of Musical Instruments/ Minneapolis, Minn. U.S.A.” This instrument is described in Joseph R. Johnson, “Mandolin Clubs and Orchestras in the United States (1880–1925): Their Origin, History, and Instruments” (master’s thesis, University of South Dakota, 1987), 144–45. Benson claimed to be “the largest musical instrument factory in the west”; see *Minnesota Magazine* 8 (Nov. 1901): 74.
33. *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1902, p. 1757, and 1925, p. 69; Rosebud Mandolin Club, ca. 1905, photograph, Minnesota Historical Society Library.
34. William R. Pfeiffer, *Filipino Music: Indigenous [sic], Folk, Modern* (Dumaguete City, Philippines: Silliman Music Foundation, 1976), 148–49. Like mandolin orchestras, *rondallas* peaked in popularity around 1910, declined after 1920, and are enjoying a revival in the Philippines and in U.S. cities including Boston, Los Angeles, and Clark, New Jersey.
35. *The Quarterly Philippinesotan* 1 (Dec. 1922): 3, University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis; Rudolph F. Runez, interview by Sarah Mason, St. Paul, Jan. 17, 1979, Minnesota Ethnic History Project Papers, MHS Library; *Minnesota Alumni Weekly* 21 (Apr. 13, 1922): 404, and 20 (May 26, 1921): 4.
36. Program, Red Star Orchestra, Concert and Ball Given by the Russian Section I.W.O.—P.H.O.B., Branch 3103, at the Dayton’s Bluff Commercial Club, St. Paul, May 10, 1936, Jeffrey Van collection; program, First Annual Minnesota Tamburitza Festival, Croatian Hall, South St. Paul, July 12, 1936, Jeffrey Van collection; *St. Paul City Directory*, 1937, p. 687. Other mandolin groups for young people included the Columbine Mandolin Orchestra, Rosebud Mandolin Club, Huse Junior Mandolin and Guitar Club, and Central High School Mandolin Orchestra.
37. Peter Ostroushko, telephone interview by author, Minneapolis, Sept. 7, 1999; Myron Shutulsky, 1921–1996, *Winnipeg Mandolin Orchestra: 75 Years Performing for Canadian Audiences* (Winnipeg: Canadian Society for Ukrainian Labour

Research, 1996). Mandolin playing still flourished at house parties in Minneapolis's Ukrainian homes during the 1950s. Today, a group called Cherivnecky ("enchanters" or "wizards") plays for weddings and other occasions.

38. *Fifth Annual Northwest Musicians Directory* (Minneapolis: Northwest Musicians Directory, 1930), 17, 24, 30–31.

39. *Northwest Musical Herald* 4 (Jan. 1930): 21.

40. Mike Van Buren, "Guitar Town: Kalamazoo, Julius Bellson and the Gibson Heritage," *Michigan History Magazine* 74 (Sept.-Oct. 1990): 28; Kate McGown, telephone interview by author, St. Paul, Oct. 30, 1999; *The Cadenza* 10 (Apr. 1904): 13–15.

41. Inscription in Pettine's hand on a 1930s photograph of Pettine, Jeffrey Van collection.

42. *St. Paul City Directories*, 1920–77.

43. Julius Bellson, *The Gibson Story* (Kalamazoo, MI: the Author, 1973), chap. 15; *The 1921 Gibson Catalog* (1921; reprint, Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1973), 10, 28 (quoting *Salt Lake City Telegram*, June 19, 1921); American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists, *Twentieth Annual Convention: Souvenir Programme* (Los Angeles, June 22–25, 1921), 2, 10, Jeffrey Van collection; *Northwest Musical Herald* 2 (Jan. 1928): 23.

44. Ziebarth interviews; Bellson Romantic Quartet photograph, *Fretted*

Instrument News 7 (Nov.-Dec. 1938): 8; photograph caption, program, Bellson Musical Concert, St. Paul, May 26, 1942, Jeffrey Van collection.

45. Evelyn Fairbanks, *The Days of Rondo* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990), 127–28.

46. Hawaiian Serenaders photo, Jeffrey Van collection.

47. *Northwest Musical Herald Year Book, 1929–30* (Minneapolis: Musical Herald Publishing Co., 1929), 87; *Minneapolis City Directories*, 1923, 1939.

48. Karen Oyen, musician, telephone interview by author, Minneapolis, Sept. 14, 1999; *Fretted Instrument News* 15 (Sept.-Oct. 1946): 4, and 16 (Jan.-Feb. 1947): 4.

49. *Fretted Instrument News* 16 (May-June 1947): 19, and 17 (Sept.-Oct. 1948): 3; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 23, 1936, p. 8; *Time*, June 29, 1936, p. 60.

50. Oyen interview; C. W. Gould, "Marching Bands," *Fretted Instrument News* 17 (Mar.-Apr. 1948): 6.

51. Richard Walz, email message to coMANDO list, Nov. 1, 1995.

52. Other mandolin orchestras are currently active in Europe, Japan, and Australia. Sparks, *Classical Mandolin*, chronicles the history, classical repertoire, and cosmopolitan popularity of this instrument from 1815 to the present.



The photos on p. 219, 230–34, and 237, including Gould's portrait (from the 1948 convention program of the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists, and Guitarists), are courtesy Jeffrey Van, St. Paul; on p. 222 (left, from the 1899 Gopher) and 224–25, courtesy the University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis. The other graphics are from the Minnesota Historical Society Library, St. Paul.



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