

Report from the Field - Attending AMGuSS Again

By Nancy King & Nick Royal



The ensemble in front of Roger Williams Library before concert

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“Wasn’t that a great AMGuSS?!? I had the best time ever! It was wonderful to see you and the other returnees and to meet the new people.”

This email from Gayle Raposa, member of the ensemble, Enigmatica, and long-time attender of the American Mandolin & Guitar Summer School, speaks well to how many of us felt being at AMGuSS this past summer.

“Mandolins came into my life in early 2002,” Nancy King says, “and not long after that discovery, the American Mandolin and Guitar Summer School (AMGuSS), hosted by America’s own classical mandolin guru, Marilynn Mair, showed up on my radar screen. The years came and went, and just when the stars were aligning for me, AMGuSS went on a hiatus for several years. In 2017 it started back up and went back on my bucket list. 2020 was going to be my year! Well, we all know what happened in 2020. Two years later, the six-day music camp returned, and this time I jumped at the opportunity. Let’s just say, AMGuSS is no longer on my bucket list: it’s simply on my list. For next year, the year after, and the year after that. You get the idea.”

Marilynn Mair started AMGuSS in 1986 and has been running it for many years. Covid got in the

way, but AMGuSS held a mini version in 2021 and was back to six days this summer. One of the special things about AMGuSS is that it is one of the few mandolin camps focusing mainly on classical music. Students play both in the orchestra and in one of five small ensembles.



Music Professor at the University, Catherine Hawkes leading the orchestra

The music chosen for the orchestra this year was varied and challenging, while still being playable for all levels. Two of the pieces were written by faculty members: “Badi no Rio”, by Marilynn, was a fun choro offshoot of Bach’s “Badinerie”, and conductor Catherine Hawkes gave us her beautiful and lyrical “Tendrils on the Vine”. It was a special treat for the orchestra to play with Barry Mitterhoff as he performed the solo part for the baroque-era “Concerto in G Major” by Johann Hasse.

Nick comments that “one of the things I really like about the music is that Marilynn writes simplified versions for some of the pieces. So, as a so-so sight reader, I made use of the simplified version for “Carinhoso” and, as we practiced the piece, was able to move from that version to the regular score. For “The Jamie Suite” I just used the simplified version the whole time.

Concerts

Two concerts were open to the public during the week. The first presented Marilynn playing eight pieces with some of her duo partners: Robert Martel, Paul Dressel, and AMGuSS staff member, Ralph Constanza, all on guitars. Then Marilynn’s

Enigmatica group, performed eight pieces. Among them were two pieces by former AMGuSS staff member and Enigmatica member, Robert Martel, who played guitar on them. There was also a suite of pieces by Catherine Hawkes, a Fugue in B minor arranged by Enigmatica member, Fran Rifkin, and other pieces. The last one, “Blue House,” was by the late John Goodin, former AMGuSS member, to honor him for his contributions to the classical mandolin world.

The other concert was on Friday night and showcased the seven pieces we had worked on all week:

Badi no Rio – by Marilynn Mair

Carinhoso – Pixinguinha

The Allegro from Concerto II – Arcangelo Corelli
Concerto – Johann Adolf Hasse (3 movements)

Tendrils on the Vine – Catherine Hawkes

St. Francis & the Birds – John Goodin

The Jamie Suite – James Oswald



Marilynn Mair & Barry Mitterhoff

Small Ensembles

Besides the general orchestra, each of us participated in one of the five small ensembles, which were presented the last Saturday morning of the camp. Ralph Costanza’s group worked on a Turkish song. Catherine Hawkes, our conductor, and a music professor at Roger Williams University, chose a “Minuet” from early classical composer, Christoph Graupner. Charlie Moser’s group did “Pastorale Largo” from the classical period by Francois-Joseph Gossec. Marilynn’s group did a Choro from Brazil titled “Flor do Abacate” by Choro master, Jacob do Bandolim. Visiting artist, Barry Mitterhoff’s group worked on and presented, “Vicksburg Stomp. Though Barry handed out the music for this 1930s tune, Charlie McCoy & the Mississippi Mud Steppers would have learned it by ear.

Workshops

Additional workshops were held after breakfast and each afternoon. Charlie Moser held his Finger Yoga Workshop right after breakfast where we quietly went through some finger and scale exercises that Charlie had developed to put us into a focused and slowed down pace for a little while.

Catherine Hawkes dealt with performance anxiety. “Hawkes’s Helpful Hints for the Hapless” suggested that “as a performer, you are the vehicle for the music. The music (not you) always should be the focus.”

Marilynn presented two workshops. Lessons for the Classical Player, focused on a choro piece and how it can apply to classical technique. Her 2nd workshop used a Bach 2-part Invention to talk about structure in a piece and interpretation.

Barry presented two workshops. The first one was titled Bluegrass and Classical—What Can One Offer the Other? He raised issues about learning to play music by ear or by notation, and the strengths from each approach. His 2nd workshop was an Introduction to Chord Melody. He took the old song, “Smile,” by Charlie Chaplin, and went through ways to add chords to the melody.

Location and living details

Although AMGuSS would qualify as a terrific music camp no matter where it was held, the setting of Roger Williams University’s gorgeous campus in Bristol, RI, made for an extraordinary experience. The school sits on the shoreline of Mt. Hope Bay,

and our rehearsal space for the week was the Sailing Center, with expansive views of the bay that were constantly changing with the weather and time of day. Our accommodations were in student dorms, a short walk from the rehearsal space, and we had a private dining area for meals – another short walk. All those “short walks” add up, however, so if you plan on attending AMGuSS, comfortable walking shoes are a must!

The dining hall was an all-you-care-to-eat café with a focus on local and sustainable ingredients. With fresh soups and salad choices, a variety of hot entrées, a pizza and pasta bar, and grill selections, with vegan and gluten-free options at every station, it was impossible to go hungry. And don’t get me started on the dessert bar.

While the food, the views, fresh air, and music certainly contributed to the AMGuSS experience, what made it exceptional were the people. Every member of the faculty, led by the inimitable Marilyn Mair, was not only a talented musician, but also a terrific teacher, so each of the workshops, ensembles, and sectionals delivered material to

take home and incorporate into our musical lives. Fran Rivkin, Camp Coordinator extraordinaire, put her organizational skills to good use herding this group of “students”, and did double duty as a workshop leader. Every faculty member, including mandolin master and guest artist Barry Mitterhoff, was approachable and fully involved in the “total immersion” of this magical musical summer camp, from sharing meals to staying in the spartan-like dorm rooms. The experience was rounded out by the attendees, many of whom have been coming for years, some since its founding in 1986. The repeat campers made newcomers feel so welcome.

Nick says, “from time to time while at AMGuSS it felt like we were at a secular monastery. We spent six days just focusing on playing mandolin. During that period I didn’t think of the issues facing my community or world issues such as COVID or the war in Ukraine. It was a welcome break.”

We have to agree with Gayle: “Wasn’t that a great AMGuSS? It was the best time ever!” We urge you to think about coming to the June 2023 AMGuSS camp.



Barry Mitterhoff workshop