

Feature Review: Marilyn Mair

Silver Lining of a Quiet Year, and The Complete Mandolinist: Volume 3

By Mark Linkins

The global COVID pandemic presented all of us with unprecedented obstacles and challenges. Despite the challenges of forced seclusion, some individuals found opportunities to thrive and expand their creative horizons. Mandolinist/educator/composer Marilyn Mair clearly falls into this category. Mair used the opportunity presented by the pandemic to shift her focus from performance to composition. Mair herself was grateful for the opportunity to focus on composition. As a mandolinist, I am grateful for the amazing body of repertoire that Mair generated. I believe that many others within the classical mandolin community will soon come to appreciate this diverse treasure trove of new repertoire.

Marilynn Mair, *Silver Lining of a Quiet Year*, CD Recording (physical copy and download), available from <https://www.marilynmair.com/cds/2022/silver-lining-of-a-quiet-year/>



Mair's 2022 CD release *Silver Lining of a Quiet Year* contains recordings of 29 works composed and recorded during the pandemic. Ten works are written for solo mandolin (*Etudes en couleurs*); ten pieces are composed for two mandolins (*Fantasia in Dialogue*); and ten compositions are written for mandolin and guitar (*Nocturnes for Vincent*). A separate track – *Saudades do Rio*, a Brazilian waltz – is also included on the CD.

The first collection on the CD is *Fantasia in Dialogue*. Popular during the Renaissance, fantasias were usually based on existing themes and provided an opportunity for musical experimentation and exploration. Mair's fantasias are written for two mandolins. She performs both parts on this recording.

Mair's fantasias are based upon a wide variety of themes, from composers as diverse as Frank Zappa, Stephen Foster, and Erik Satie. She also draws upon

themes from folk and popular music, as well as several of her own original themes.

Planting Gardens is Mair's take on the English folk song *Country Gardens*. While the familiar tune is clearly identifiable, the melody takes some interesting detours, twists, and turns. Mair's whimsical deconstruction of the tune seems to pay homage to Percy Grainger's arrangement of the same melody. Grainger uses the simple tune as a blank canvas for seemingly endless musical invention and experimentation. The musical garden tour conjured here by Mair traverses a diverse sonic landscape, from the mundane to the magical, and from the idyllic and the idiosyncratic.

Trouble in Mind is a delightful collage of bits and pieces of musical Americana. Musical phrases, melodies, and harmonic cadences from another era – the turn of the 19th Century – collide and compete with one another to be heard. Halfway through the piece, the chorus of "You Are My Sunshine" emerges from the musical mix. The melody remains intact, but the background elements combine to create a surprising reharmonization. The references to the musical styles of the early 20th Century are particularly relevant for mandolinists, as so much of the repertoire for mandolin is rooted in this era. *Trouble in Mind* is a nostalgic nod to the era when cakewalks, rags, and mandolins were all the rage.

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Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies 1* is one of the most immediately recognizable solo piano compositions, even if a majority of people do not know, or cannot pronounce, the piece's title. Satie provided the performer with the following performance note: "Lent et douloureux," which translates as "slow, with pain/grief." The common practice is to perform this piece very slowly and with rubato (i.e. slowing down/speeding up to complement the musical phrasing). In *By the Sea*, Marilyn Mair interprets Satie's theme in a very different musical setting: (1) with a significantly faster tempo (andante rather than lento) and (2) with a precise, almost music box-like pulse, without fluctuation. Mair uses the familiar theme not as a destination, but as a point of departure. Satie's piece famously makes use of negative space. The melody is sparse. Mair fills in the silences with hypnotic counterpoint, a musical dialogue between both mandolin parts. Satie's melodies are embedded within – not separate from – this on-going dialogue. The counterpoint is beautifully written, and the performance exquisitely simulates the sound of a music box.

The seven *Nocturnes for Vincent* take their titles from the sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay, known to her friends as "Vincent." Marilyn Mair explains that her aim in writing the nocturnes was to "reflect the poems' moods as well as [her] own." The nocturnes are written for mandolin and guitar duo.

Taken as a whole, I believe that this collection of mandolin and guitar duos rank among the very finest collections within the genre. The fluid interplay between mandolin and guitar constitutes a dialogue between equals, rather than a relationship between soloist and accompanist. The sonic properties of Mair's mandolin and Robert Martel's guitar blend beautifully. Mair's tone has the perfect balance of brightness and depth (reminiscent of the late Peter Ostroushko). The compositions reference diverse musical styles: lyrical ballads (Nocturnes 1 and 3), waltzes (Nocturnes 5 and 7), rags (Nocturnes 6 and 8), blues (Nocturne 4), and atonal compositions (Nocturne 2). Despite the range of musical influences, the pieces together form a cohesive whole. All of the works – like the sonnets that inspired them – reflect a depth of emotional insight and sophistication. Millay's success as a poet lay in her ability to thoroughly embrace traditional poetic conventions to illuminate and examine new themes and emotional landscapes. Like Millay, Mair has a deep understanding of traditional forms – in this case, ballads, waltzes, rags, etc. – which provides a springboard for exploring new musical territory.

Every facet of this recording of *Nocturnes for Vincent* is superb: the compositions, the performance, and the recording quality.

The CD's third collection of original works – *Etudes en couleurs* (Studies in Color) includes ten pieces for solo mandolin. Earlier composers, such as Scriabin and Messiaen, explored the phenomena of *synesthesia*, which involves one sensory stimulus (e.g. auditory) triggering a different sensory response (e.g. visual). For example, one who experience synesthesia may see certain colors when listening to a certain piece of music. In the *Etudes*, Mair explores this synesthetic connection. Each etude is a short piece inspired by a specific color.

As with the *Nocturnes for Vincent*, the *Etudes en couleurs* reflect a wide range of moods and musical forms. Achieving harmonic richness/complexity can be a challenge when composing for solo mandolin. With respect to vertical harmony, choices are limited to double stops and three-note (and occasional four-note) chords. This is one of the many areas where Mair's compositional skills shine through. Several of the *Etudes* – *Amber*, *White*, and *Blue* – employ particularly rich harmonic palettes that inspire introspection and reverie.

In *Violette*, Mair effectively combines horizontal harmony (arpeggios) with melody to create a beautifully seamless sound tapestry. Although the piece is written in common time, the eighth note arpeggios are grouped in clusters of 3, 3, and 2. This gentle syncopation suggests the ebb and flow of water.

Twilight is a charmingly simple lullaby. The only strictly diatonic composition among the collection of etudes, it combines a dreamy melody – performed mostly on the E string – with double-stop and triple-

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stop accompaniment on the lower three strings.

In a collection that favors contemplative moods, *Orange* stands out as the most energetic of the *Etudes*. With its modal melodies and mixed meters, *Orange* evokes the musical traditions of the sunny Aegean.

Saudades do Rio, a waltz for mandolin and guitar, is the final cut on the CD. It is the only piece on the CD which is not part of a collection of works. Guitarist Paul Dressel joins Mair on this selection. *Saudade* is a Portuguese word that has no precise English equivalent. It is an intense, melancholic longing, particularly for something that no longer exists, or is no longer able to be experienced as it once was.

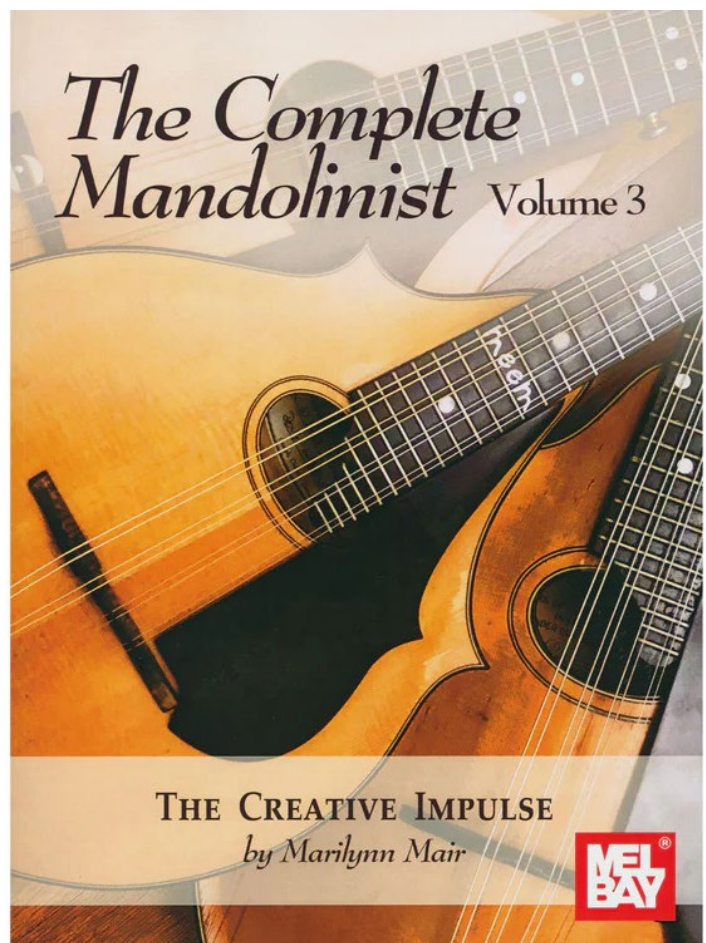
Many readers of this review know of Mair's deep connection with Brazil. As one of North America's leading proponents of *choro*, Mair has been intimately involved with Brazilian music and culture for more than two decades. In *Saudades do Rio*, Mair expresses her longing for Rio de Janeiro. This stunningly beautiful lament reveals Mair's sophisticated use of melody and harmony (the hallmark of the greatest *choro* composers, from Jacob do Bandolim to Pixinguinha).

Marilynn Mair, The Complete Mandolinist: Volume 3 – The Creative Impulse. Available from <https://www.melbay.com/Products/30782/the-complete-mandolinist-volume-2.aspx> (also E-book)

The Complete Mandolinist: Volume 3 – The Creative Impulse is actually Marilyn Mair's fifth book for Mel Bay. I imagine that many readers of this review have at least one, if not more, of her method books in their personal collections. A pre-eminent figure in the development of modern American mandolin pedagogy, Marilyn Mair has followed in footsteps of early 20th Century mandolin pedagogues Myron Bickford and William Place, Jr. Mair's approach, however, reflects a truly 21st Century sensibility, informed by global musical influences and technical advances.

In her forward to *Volume 3 – The Creative Impulse*, Mair explains that with each of her previous Mel Bay publications, her purpose was pedagogical. Her goal was to help her audience "improve their mandolin musicianship" (p. 3).

Volume 3, however, marks a turning point. Her purpose here is to share music from her vast library of original compositions. This collection includes approximately 70 original compositions, including works for solo mandolin, mandolin duo, mandolin and guitar duo, mandolin quartet, and mandolin quintet. Mair describes *Volume 3* as her effort "to add [her] own personality to mandolin repertoire, staking out an



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additional spot in mandolin history through composing” (p.3).

Mair released *Volume 3* in conjunction with *Silver Lining of a Quiet Year*, a CD containing 29 recordings of pieces included in *Volume 3*. I provide a review of the CD in the article above. In the CD review, I focus on a discussion of Mair’s compositions. Here I will offer my review of *Volume 3* as a resource for mandolinists.

Volume 3 begins with a collection of ten solo works for mandolin, *Etudes en couleurs*. All of the etudes incorporate both melodic and harmonic content. One of the performance challenges with solo repertoire of this sort is to delineate the melody from the harmony in a way that makes musical sense. While listening to the CD certainly sheds light on the composer’s intention, I recommend playing through the etudes first and using your own ear to shape the music. You can then use the CD to compare your own interpretation to that of the composer.

As a whole, the *Etudes* provide ample opportunities to practice playing independent lines. Usually, the melody line is higher in pitch, and the accompaniment line is lower in pitch. (In one of the etudes – *Shadow* – this pattern is reversed.) One of the greatest challenges with performing works with independent lines is to ensure that notes (especially in the lower line) don’t get clipped short. This requires (1) careful left-hand finger placement and (2) careful right hand plectrum placement to ensure that strings aren’t inadvertently being deadened.

Fantasia in Dialogue is a collection of eight imaginative mandolin duets based on a wide range of themes from classical, folk, and popular music. In terms of playability, most of the fantasias are accessible to intermediate-level players. These pieces are both fun to listen to and fun to perform.

Nocturnes for Vincent is a collection of ten works for mandolin and guitar inspired by the poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay. I think that these duets rank among the finest works for mandolin and guitar. The collection covers a broad terrain, both musically and emotionally. What unites the collection, as a whole, is Mair’s strength as a composer generally, and more specifically, her keen understanding of the range of expressive possibilities for mandolin and guitar. For the most part, the *Nocturnes* are written at an intermediate or advanced intermediate level.

The *Etudes en couleurs*, *Fantasia in Dialogue*, and *Nocturnes for Vincent* are all included on the CD *Silver Lining of a Quiet Year*. More than one-half of the content included in *Volume 3* is not included on *Silver Lining*. Most notably, *Volume 3* includes a vast selection of choro pieces composed by Mair over the course of fifteen years.

The choro compositions are written as lead sheets (melody line with chord symbols). Mair’s choro’s reflect all the traditional choro conventions:

1. Standard choro form: AABBA(Coda)
2. Frequent use of chromaticism
3. Rich/complex harmonic/chordal palette
4. Quick tempos (mostly)

While Mair employs the traditional conventions, she also clearly introduces her own creative voice, especially when it comes to combining disparate elements to create something new. Mair refers to these works as “hybrid choro.” For example, Mair’s *Sonatinha* is based upon Beethoven’s Sonatina for Mandolin. Everything about the Sonatina make it a perfect candidate to be rendered as a choro: it has three sections (A, B, C), a quick tempo, and an intricate melody.

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Another hybrid choro – *Madrugada* – combines Mair’s passion for choro and the nuevo tango of Astor Piazzolla. Beautifully composed, *Madrugada* captures the melodic and harmonic idiosyncrasies of a Piazzolla composition. *Outro Verao* is a choro that draws on George Gershwin’s *Summertime* for inspiration. In *Um Quinto do Ludwig*, Mair embeds themes from Beethoven’s 5th Symphony.

Mair’s collection of choro includes many pieces dedicated to – or written in the style of – musicians who influenced Mair over the course of her musical odyssey in Brazil. *Baluciano* is inspired by Pixinguinha’s *Cochichando*, one of most famous of all choro compositions. Mair takes the first measure of each section, as written note-for-note by Pixinguinha; from the second measure on-ward she rewrites the melody using her own ideas.

Interestingly, Mair has written a series of three “retirement choro.” Together, they serve to chronicle her journey from uncertainty about whether to retire from her position as a Professor of Music at Roger Williams University, to feeling confident about her decision to retire and move forward.

As a group, the 20 choro included in *Volume 3* reflect a truly rich repertoire for mandolinists and choro musicians in general. Mair’s choro melodies are infectious, for listener and performer alike. While *Volume 3* certainly isn’t intended as a method book, this collection of choro provides a treasure trove of skill-building exercises. Due to the extensive use of chromaticism, selected excerpts can be used as advanced fingering exercises. Intermediate, advanced, and professional players can use these choro – at very different tempos – to develop their sight-reading skills and overall fluency. Despite the technical difficulty of Mair’s choro (and many choro for that matter), the beauty of the pieces provides incentive to practice. (Spending time working on “real music” is almost always more gratifying than working on purely technical exercises.)

The penultimate section of Mair’s *Volume 3* includes seven works for mandolin quartet/quintet (or larger ensemble). Each ensemble piece includes a score and a single copy of each of the parts. The mandolin quartet compositions can be used with *Romantico* or *Classico* configurations, as both guitar and mandocello parts are provided. The mandolin quintet compositions include *separate* mandola and octave mandolin parts.

Mair composed most of the ensemble repertoire to be performed by Enigmatica, her New England-based mandolin ensemble. *Badi no Rio* is Mair’s rendering of Bach’s *Badinere* as a choro. *Enrolado* and *Nadando em Luz* are Mair’s ensemble arrangements of two of her original choro. *Goodin Gigue* is Mair’s tribute to the late mandolinist and composer John Goodin. *Ayton’s Farewell* is Mair’s fantasia based upon a theme that Will Ayton “plucked from a dream” (p. 96). Ayton, a composer and performer on viola da gamba, was a former colleague of Mair at Roger Williams’ University. Mair composed this piece for the occasion of Ayton’s retirement. The composition/arrangement evokes images of ancient landscapes and mythic tales (somewhere in the British Isles). It is easy to imagine this arrangement being used as part of a film score.

Volume 3 concludes with *Selected Early Works*. These include assorted works for solo mandolin; two mandolins; and guitar and mandolin.

Marilynn Mair is truly a master of “silver linings.” We – the classical mandolin community – are the beneficiaries of Mair’s significant creative output during the pandemic. I believe that it is only a matter of time until Mair’s collections – *Nocturnes for Vincent*, *Etudes en couleurs*, and *Fantasia in dialogue* – become part of the plucked string canon.