

# The Mandolin: Its Structure and Performance (Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries)

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Tyler, James and Sparks, Paul (1996) "The Mandolin: Its Structure and Performance (Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries)," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 5. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199609.02.05

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## Performing Historical Instruments

### The Mandolin: Its Structure and Performance (Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries)

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James Tyler and Paul Sparks

From at least the middle of the 15th century a small pear-shaped, round-backed instrument (which would develop into the mandolin in the 16th century) was called *chitarra* and *chitarino* (Italy), *guitara* (Spain), *quitarre*, *quinterne*, and *guisterne* (France), *gyterne* (England), and *Quintern* (Germany). By the 16th century most of these terms were applied to the small, four-course guitar, and it became customary to refer to the early mandolin type as the *mandola* (Italy) or *mandore* (France).

The term *mandolino* was used in Italy from the mid-17th century, as was *mandola*, the latter by some writers (but by no means all), to indicate a slightly larger and lower pitched instrument of the same family. In Italy, *mandolino* continues to be used to the present day to refer to both the six-course "Milanese" mandolin (the modern descendant of the 17-18th century, gut-strung instrument), and the four-course, metal-strung "Neapolitan" mandolin (developed in the mid-18th century). The term *mandore* continued to be used by the French until just after the middle of the 17th century, when the French style of instrument (with its variant tuning) became obsolete.

## Sixteenth Century

From the 16th century onwards, the construction of the mandolin defines it as a small, treble member of the lute family. Like the lute, its back was rounded, its soundboard completely flat. Its neck had movable, tied-on, gut frets. An intricately patterned rosette is either carved into or separately constructed and glued into the soundboard. At first it had four courses of strings, but fifth and sixth courses were added in the 17th century. Gut strings were the norm, although occasional references to metal strings appear in the late 18th century.

## Seventeenth Century

In Italy tuning indications first occurred in the mid-17th century, when *e'e'-a'a'-d"d"-g"g"* became standard, with *bb* and *gg* sometimes added for a fifth and sixth course. The six-course tuning continues to the present day as that of the "Milanese" mandolin. The typical tuning of the French counterpart (*mandore*) was *c'c' - g'g' - c" - g" - g" - g"* (sometimes with *e"e"* or *f"f"* instead of *g"g"*). Single courses were common for the French type, and there were other tunings, as well as models with lower pitches.<sup>1</sup>

## Eighteenth Century

The technique for the early gut-strung mandolin was similar to that of the lute. The strings were plucked with the fingers of the right hand. Tablatures and other sources show that this was still the standard technique in the era of Vivaldi and his contemporaries. In the mid-18th century with the arrival of the new metal-strung "Neapolitan" type of mandolin, which was especially designed for plectrum-playing, players of the older type instrument began to employ a similar plectrum technique.<sup>2</sup>

The finger-style mandolin of the baroque era not only has a considerable repertory of solo music with continuo accompaniment, but was used frequently in chamber music ensembles and in opera and oratorio orchestras. Many elaborate mandolin obbligato parts survive in

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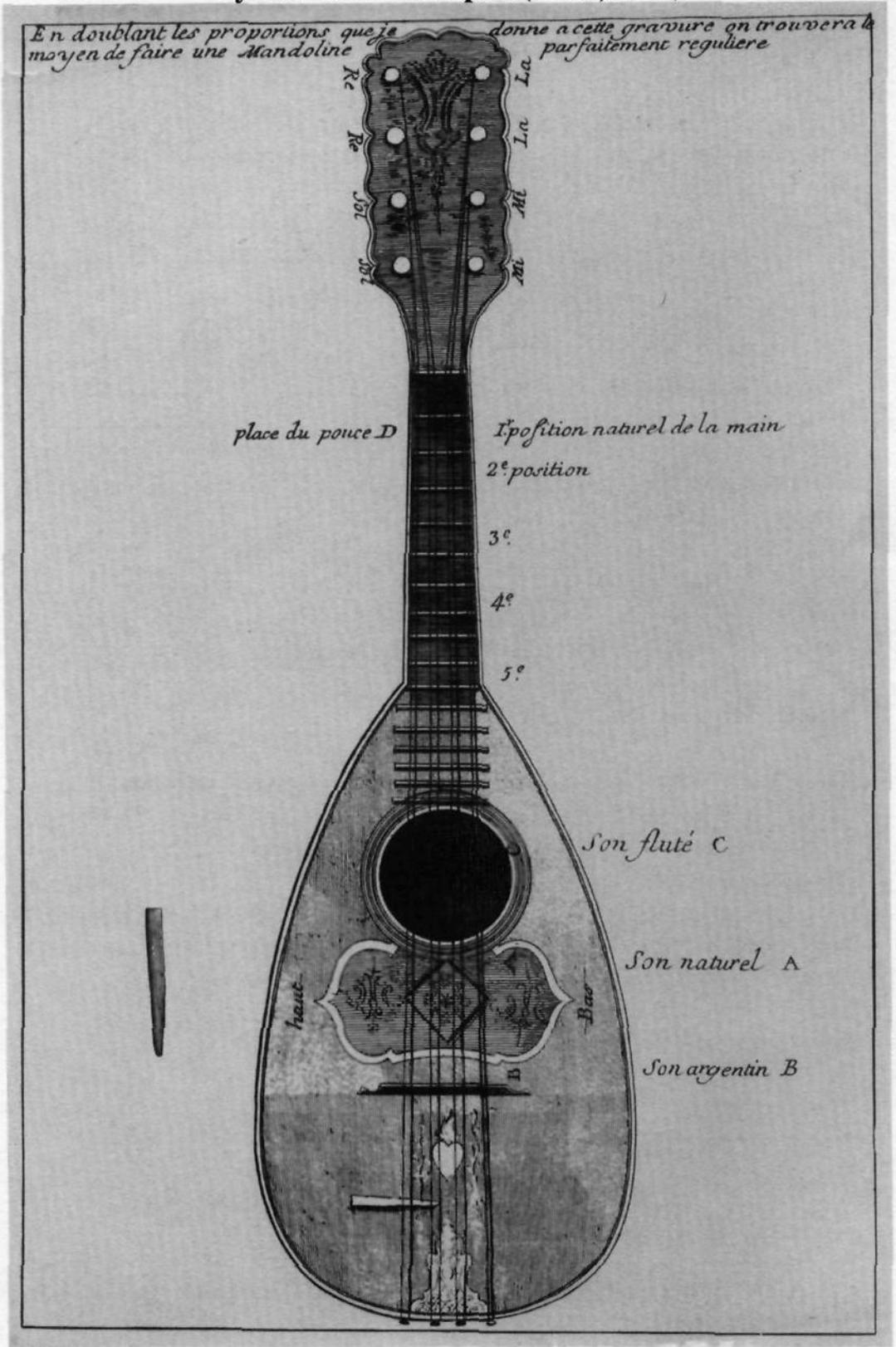
<sup>1</sup> For further details see James Tyler, "The *Mandore* in the 16th and 17th Centuries," *Early Music* 9 (1981), 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> James Tyler and Paul Sparks, *The Early Mandolin* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 38-39.

**Figure 1.** *Mandolino* by Antonio Stradivari  
Cremona, 1680 (Great Britain,  
Collection of Christopher Challen)



**Figure 2. An Eighteenth-Century Neapolitan mandolin, reproduced from the *Méthode . . . de mandoline* by Sr. Leoné de Naples (Paris, 1768)**



such works as Carlo Cesarini's oratorio *Ismaele* (1695), A. Scarlatti's cantata *A battaglia pensieri* (1699), Francesco Conti's opera *Ga-latea* (1719), Vivaldi's oratorio *Juditha triumphans* (1716), Fux's opera *Diana* (1717), and Handel's oratorio *Alexander Balus* (1748), to name but a few.<sup>3</sup>

The instrument is frequently suggested as an alternative to the violin, flute, or oboe in publications of solo sonatas. Gaetano Boni's *Diver-timenti . . . Op. 2* (c1725) and Roberto Valentini's *Sonate . . . Op. 12* (1730) are two examples. Its most familiar role today is as a solo instrument in the popular and appealing concertos of Vivaldi and Hasse.<sup>4</sup>

Since baroque composers employed the gut-strung, finger-style mandolin with surprising frequency, and in a wide variety of uses, it is important to understand the nature of this instrument, and not confuse it with the later, metal-strung, plectrum-style instrument, which, despite its very different character and timbre, is frequently used as a substitute for the original instrument in today's performances of this repertory. The Neapolitan instrument acquired a large repertory of its own during the later 18th century, including four pieces by Beethoven, a concerto by Hummel, and works by Barbella, Prota, de Majo, Piccinni, and Sacchini.<sup>5</sup>

### **Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries**

After 1815 both types of mandolin fell into disuse, except in Italy where they survived as street instruments. In Naples c1835 the indigenous four-course mandolin was extensively redesigned by Pasquale Vinaccia (with deeper bowl, larger resonating chamber, raised fingerboard, extension to 17 frets, machine heads, high-tension steel strings, and tortoise-shell plectrum). The instrument acquired a louder and much brighter tone than any previous mandolin. This new Neapolitan mandolin became the dominant type in Italy from the 1860s and achieved worldwide popularity by the

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<sup>3</sup> Tyler and Sparks, *Early Mandolin*, 27-28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-33.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Sparks, *The Classical Mandolin* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), and Tyler and Sparks, *Early Mandolin*.

**Figure 3.** Edouard Mezzacapo (d. 1942) and his quartet, photographed during the 1890s (reproduced from *Mandolin Memories* by Samuel Adelstein, San Francisco, 1905).

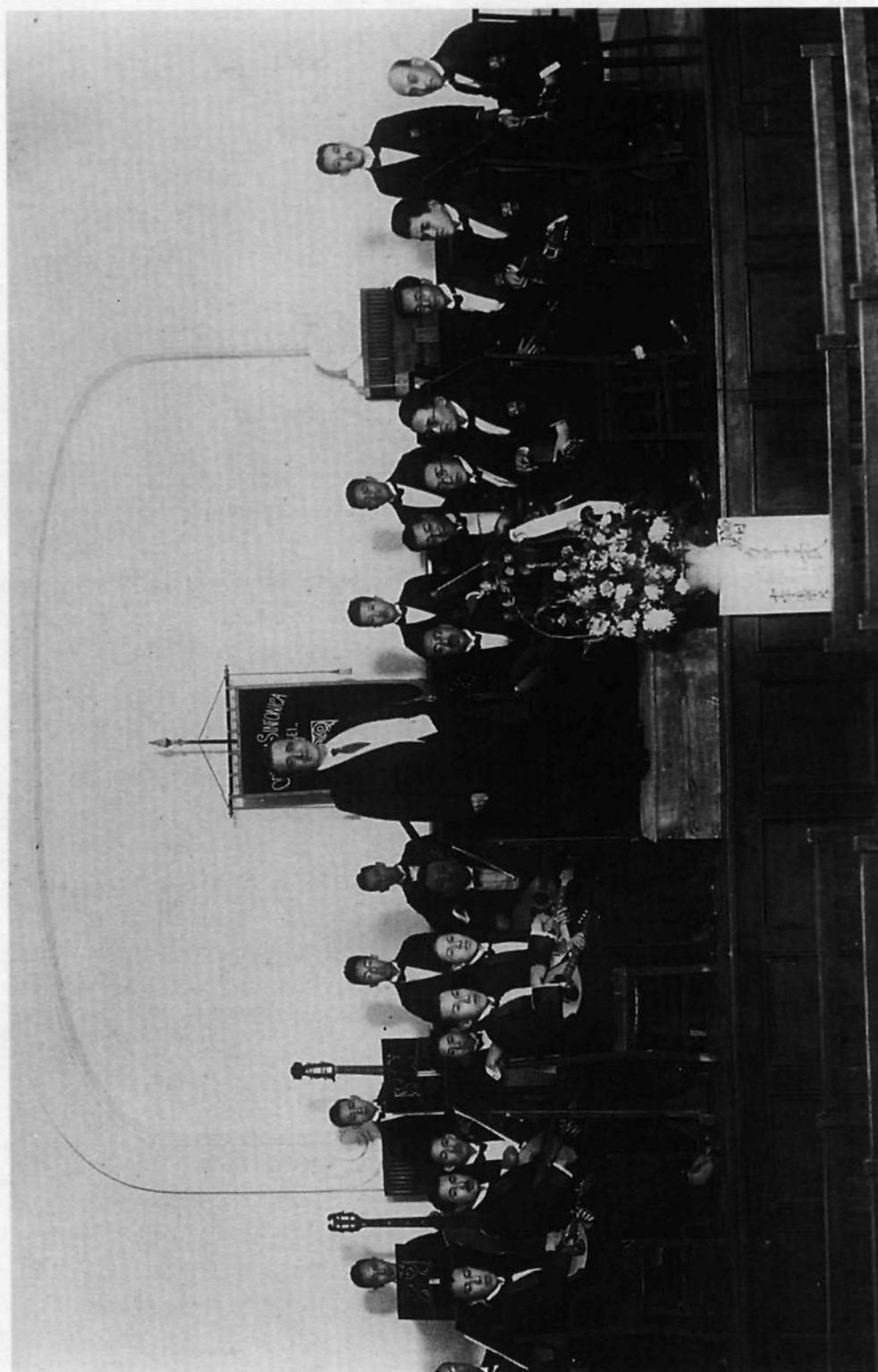


**Figure 4. Silvio Ranieri (1882-1956) playing an Embergher mandolin (photograph courtesy of Henri Gamblin).**





**Figure 5. Raffaele Calace (1863-1934) and members of the Orchestra sinfonica Takei in Tokyo, January 1925 (photograph courtesy of the Japan Mandolin Union)**



## Example 2.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff, labeled 'written', is in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. It contains a simple melody of quarter and eighth notes. The bottom staff, labeled 'played', is also in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. It shows the same melody as the top staff, but with a tremolo effect on the upper strings, represented by multiple stems for each note, indicating rapid repetition of the notes.

“Trio” and “Quartet Style” required tremolo simultaneously on three or four courses, creating sustained homophonic textures similar to the *vox humana* stop on an organ. Scordatura was also used by many concert performers (a popular tuning being  $g\ b^b\ d'\ f'\ a'\ a'\ e''$ ), enriching the mandolin’s harmonic language with six-note chords on four courses. Because of the increased string tension, ornaments are difficult to articulate on a modern mandolin if attempted entirely with the left hand, as on the guitar; notes of very short duration can be hammered, pulled, or produced with a glissando, but most players give a plectrum stroke to each note of an ornament, in the interest of clarity.

Plucked string orchestras (often called *Zupforchesters* or *Estudiantinas*), which use all the members of the mandolin family, are popular throughout the world, especially in Japan and Germany. They consist of first and second mandolins, *mandolas* (either octave *mandolas*, tuned an octave below the mandolin, or tenor *mandolas*, tuned like the viola), and *mandocellos* (tuned like the cello), as well as guitars. These are also used in the two standard quartet forms: the “Classical Quartet” (two mandolins, tenor *mandola*, and *mandocello*, the plucked equivalent of the string quartet) and the “Romantic Quartet” (two mandolins, octave *mandola*, and guitar). The latter is more commonly adopted (e.g. three quartets by Munier). The *liuto moderno*—a large Neapolitan mandolin similar to the *mandocello*, with an added fifth course tuned to  $e'$ —often appears in works by Calace, indisputably the greatest virtuoso ever on this instrument.

The mandolin frequently appears in an orchestral context, notably in works by Boulez (*Pli selon pli*, *Éclat*), Stravinsky (*Le Rossignol*, *Agon*), and some twenty compositions by Henze. It produces a small

but penetrating sound which can be clearly heard in a symphonic context, provided that it is played with a stiff plectrum and advantageously situated on the platform, and that the orchestral scoring is sensitive. For general orchestral work, an instrument with 19 frets is sufficient, players rarely encountering anything above the *b'''* in Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* and Gerhard's *Concert for 8*, although many pieces from the solo repertoire require up to 29 frets (to *a''''*).

The mandolin has also proven successful in non-classical music, especially since 1939, when it was introduced into American bluegrass by Bill Monroe.<sup>6</sup>

Flat-back mandolins, above all the carved back and top models manufactured by the Gibson Company, have a crisp and punchy attack with few high harmonics (more amenable to electronic amplification than round back mandolins), and are especially suitable for this type of music.

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Tottle, *Bluegrass Mandolin* (New York, 1975).

**Figure 6. A Gibson F-5 mandolin, made in 1924  
(photograph by Trip Savory, courtesy  
of Mandolin Central, Siler City, NC**

