

REQUISITES OF A MANDOLINIST

By Paul Cessna Gerhart

published in Godey's magazine. v. 135 (July - Dec. 1897). p. 255ff

WHEN the subject of stringed instruments, and more especially the mandolin, is introduced for conversation and discussion, it is likely that the tryo will give little heed to the ideas advanced by the enthusiast, and the subject will be dismissed with a few casual incorrect remarks concerning the same. Should a little examination or investigation be begun, however, it will be found that the later stringed instruments have an interest and charm and possess a certain fascination which cannot be denied or wholly explained. Of these instruments the mandolin undoubtedly ranks as the first and foremost, not only because it is the most difficult to learn to play well, but also because of the many natural advantages which it possesses over its sister instruments. From its very origin and nature the mandolin certainly stands pre-eminently as the instrument of its class. An analysis of this fact discloses certain circumstances which commend that instrument for general use. Among the points of advantage which can be claimed for the mandolin are its particular adaptability to all occasions whether in-door or out, its beautifid proportions and elegant shape, which, when combined with its pure, sweet, and mellow tone, and the general character of the music which it is capable of producing, unquestionably recommends it to general as well as particular use and interest. Then, too, being the evolution or product of principles which are so ancient, and grounded, as they are, in the history of the music-loving and developing races, the mandolin can be said to have attained its almost full perfection and grace, while the possession of one of these dainty instruments and mastery of same, certainly give unbounded satisfaction and pleasure.

In order to obtain the best results from the mandolin and feel sure that one has thoroughly understood and appreciated his instrument, it will be necessary to know several points which may not suggest themselves at once to the novice. A full acquaintance with the possibilities and special features and characteristics of the mandolin, and a knowledge of the methods and means best adapted to a thorough mastery of the instrument, are a paramount necessity. It is, therefore, the aim of this article to assist, if possible, the student of the mandolin to a better comprehension of the primary principles upon which the mandolin of today is founded; and also of some of the later additional features which so greatly enhance its utility.

To the aspirant the first point necessary is some unmistaken inclination or special adaptability, which, combined with proper training, will insure distinction in this particular line of study. Although many people with continued practice may learn to "tinkle" the mandolin, yet for the attainment of any higher results, special aptitude or talent is a fundamental requisite; for without doubt, we are thoroughly convinced that musicians are born, not made. It is, of course, impossible to gain any distinction in this line simply by means of the "capital" acquired from nature; talent can only be utilized and brought to its fullest development and beauty by a conscientious adherence to the fundamental principles or laws governing success in any vocation, viz. : application continued

and persistent, undivided time and attention, and love for one's work. I believe that this last law is the true secret of success in any line! When, therefore, it has been unquestionably evidenced that the applicant has some inclination and a true desire to understand the art of mandolin playing, with its attendant responsibilities and benefits, then I would suggest for his careful consideration and thoughtful mental digestion the following supplemental ideas or principles, which I feel confident will be of service:

First: A careful physical preparation; by this we mean the training of the hands and fingers (particularly the fingers of the left hand), the developing of all the muscles and tendons therein, so that a complete control is had of these "unruly members." As an illustration of the idea in this direction I offer the following as a test of the control of the fingers of the hands: Place the hands with palms facing in a horizontal position, with the respective fingers directly opposite each other and with the second fingers kept well together and turned down between the palms. Now try to separate the third fingers, which should touch each other at the tips. The second fingers should be kept firmly together from the second joint to the tips. Until after long practice and continued efforts, this little trial will prove utterly fruitless. It is, however, an excellent method of producing suppleness and digital dexterity, as it gives perfect and complete control over the fingers, which is so entirely necessary to insure success as a mandolinist. Another good way of "mastering" the fingers is to try to separate them ; now putting the first and second together, apart from the third and fourth; now the first alone and apart from the other three which should be held firmly together. This, of course, is to be done without touching the fingers with the other hand. It is not my intention to endeavor to establish a system of exercises in opposition to the famous Delsarte, but unless the fingers are often exercised, bent, wriggled, and turned, in fact put into every possible position, it will be difficult to become a good mandolinist, for this is the very foundation, technically, of the present system of mandolin playing.

Again, among the necessities to the aspirant for a mandolinist's honors are:

Second: Exactness and quick action: clearness and brilliancy in the rendition of intricate passages and high notes: an exact understanding of the use and benefit of the positions; a comprehensive knowledge and capability of sounding the various major, minor, diminished and augmented chords; a thorough understanding and full command of the triads, together with all the different intervals, viz.: prime or unison, augmented prime, minor second, major second, augmented second, minor third, major third, perfect fourth, augmented fourth, diminished fifth, perfect fifth, augmented fifth, minor sixth, major sixth, augmented sixth, minor seventh, major seventh, diminished octave, and octave, in the most important keys, to wit: C, G, D, A, F, Bb, Ab, Eb, ; interpretation with feeling and expression; besides, of course, a perfect knowledge of the scales, whether major, minor, or chromatic.

In addition to the above he must become accustomed to playing under every and all circumstances, whether alone in the privacy of his own home or in public as a soloist; whether playing in connection with one or two other instruments, or with a full club or mandolin orchestra; whether as a "second " player, "first," or leader and director. Under all the various conditions he must learn to sustain his part

perfectly, if he desires to become proficient in all departments of his art.

Above all he must learn to tune his instrument quickly and well, and be able to do this not only when alone or when all is quiet, but also when in company with a full club and when all is discord and confusion — no matter what the conditions, he must be capable of tuning his instrument without delay. These points can only be mastered by continued application and regular practicing. A control of the fingers will enable, quick action and produce clearness and brilliancy in the rendition of intricate passages and high notes. The use of the positions will also greatly facilitate the difficult passages and high notes, while a knowledge of their office is most essential.

The scales must be learned not only in the first position but also in all the other six positions; they must also be learned each on the different strings, since it is sometimes required to render a particular passage entirely upon one string. If, however, the performer does not know where the notes are, he cannot, of course, play the piece of music as intended by the author, which will invariably detract from the impression of the same. The feature of mandolin playing which adds most to the general effect is the correct and skilful introduction of the chords in all positions.

A mandolin player who has not entire command of the chords is hardly entitled to being called a mandolinist. Mandolin music divested of the chords is certainly thin and unattractive, but when the player thoroughly understands this part of his art, how different the effect!

Third: To acquire ease in playing, especially when on the stage or in public, which requires, besides a full compliance with all the above regulations, a certain amount of composure which can only be gained by continued appearances before the "foot-lights." Personalities are soon discovered and commented upon by the critical audiences. Therefore the mandolinist should strive to conduct himself with strict propriety when catering to the tastes of the public.

Learn to keep the eyes off the instrument; it may occasionally be allowed that attention be directed to the finger-board, but the necessity seldom arises ; the attention should be given the audience, but as a whole, not to individuals.

The player should endeavor to assume an easy bearing and appear perfectly at home upon the platform, but to assume an insolent or " I know it all " air is most unbecoming and ridiculous. The mandolinist should never forget, no matter where he plays, that there may be some one in his audience who is quite as capable of performing his part as he is himself, and actions of this kind will soon excite severe criticism, and endanger artistic success.

No rules to enable one to avoid "stage fright" can be given. It is, however, best to keep one's thoughts entirely away from himself and his work until the time for one's appearance arrives, when all attention should be centred upon his intended selection, whatever the same may be.

Fourth: As to the selection and rendition of music: Care should be taken to choose music suited to the requirements of the occasion. The musical tastes of

the public should be carefully studied, and, in order to insure success, indulged accordingly. Sometimes it may be necessary to interpret classic music entirely, in which event the mandolinist is afforded opportunity of exercising his highest artistic sensibilities and displaying all the feeling, depth, and grandeur in his make-up.

Again, the tastes of the audience may not be cultivated so highly yet music of a high class may be demanded and played to good advantage. At such times characteristic pieces, waltzes, marches, gavottes, etc., may be effectively introduced; the former rarely fail to meet with a cordial reception. Occasionally it will be the duty of the mandolinist to render mainly popular music ; if so, nothing but the very latest and most sprightly successes of the day should be played. I would suggest, however, that the programme be mixed, and a varied repertory given.

Under no circumstances are notes to be allowed on the stage. I make this assertion most emphatically. To my mind nothing detracts so much from the general appearance, especially of a club or orchestra, as the use of music in public. The selections should be thoroughly learned and then memorized until the performer or performers are perfectly familiar with the same.

Fifth: That the mandolin is primarily a solo instrument, and, I think, is heard to better advantage as such with guitar or piano accompaniment than under any other circumstances. When a greater volume is desired, as for outdoor playing, then, of course, the other stringed instruments of its class, together with the flute, may be effectively added.

Before ensemble playing is attempted in public, however, the various members of the club or orchestra should be thoroughly conversant with one another's little peculiarities and failings, for such always exist, in order to insure a perfect tempo.

Sixth: How to distinguish a good instrument. In this connection all the experience, judgment, and discretion of the mandolinist must be brought to bear upon the instrument proffered as a sample. I would remind my readers that many poor instruments are well finished, and for that reason one would be apt to imagine they possessed a good tone, whereas they may be worth nothing musically, while a high grade mandolin can only be detected at a glance after some experience.

A good mandolin, besides being well made and graceful, may be known by the following qualities:

1. A perfectly true fingerboard, which may be thoroughly tested by first putting the instrument in perfect tune and then sounding octaves, chords, prime intervals, etc., in all positions.
2. Low nut (the small cross-bar at base of head-piece) usually made of bone or other hard substance.
3. Comparatively low bridge (the string support across face or top) which is

generally of solid ebony, or ebony faced with ivory or bone. A low bridge insures an easy manipulation of the strings on the finger-board.

4. A perfect working machine-head, which in the very best instruments is of hardest steel and covered by a nickel, silver, or gold plate.

5. Small, well proportioned and accurately fitting automatic tail-piece, on which is provided a peg or post for each and every string. The many devices for adjustable tail-pieces, and "sleeve-protectors," whether of steel, tortoise-shell, or what-not, are not recommended.

6. Tortoise-celluloid guard-plate.

7. Ebony or pearl finger-board, provided with position dots, placed on the proper frets, which for advanced work are the first, third, fifth, seventh, tenth, twelfth, fifteenth, and seventeenth. For beginners the first, third, fifteenth, and seventeenth are not necessary.

8. (The final test.) An instrument which will hold "concert pitch " and possess a full, round, sweet, and mellow tone.

Many cheap instruments sound well enough when pitched very low, but when tuned to high or concert pitch they have, practically speaking, no tone at all; indeed, many of them, from their imperfect mode of construction, will not admit of being strung up to concert pitch. Such an instrument for anything like even moderately artistic requirements, would be utterly useless. Tune your instrument to concert pitch, and then, if it retains its pure, round tones, all things being equal, you may safely consider that your mandolin is all right.

Seventh: Of the care of the mandolin: Having purchased a good instrument, the next thought is in reference to its care. Like other stringed instruments, the mandolin is particularly susceptible to atmospheric and climatic influences; and to insure against damages of this kind, careful attention must be bestowed upon his treasure by the owner. Heat and cold, dampness and dryness, are all enemies of the mandolin, which must be guarded against always. They not only injure the appearance of the instrument, by causing it to crack and warp, but also affect the tone. It is absolutely necessary, therefore, to avert these threatening disasters if possible. To do this a good heavy case is a necessity, especially if any travelling is done. One made of sole-leather, hand stitched, with stout fastenings, is advised as best under all conditions, since it is most durable, and offers the best protection from knocks and rough handling. Cases of this kind may be secured from any music dealer, and are furnished in black and russet leather, so that individual taste as to color may be easily suited. Many manufacturers furnish at least their - highest grade instruments with a cloth bag, which will serve very well as a first covering, and help to exclude dampness.

After one has attained a thorough knowledge and mastery of the mandolin, he may profitably take up one or two of its derivatives or accessories, for like the violin, the mandolin has also such a cluster of sister instruments. Most of these are of rather recent origin; the selection of any one of them, however, will insure to the student a pleasant and profitable diversion. Each of these instruments has

its special characteristics which recommend it. Chief among these instruments are the mandola, the pandura, the manjeaurine, the bandora, the mandore, and the bandurria.

The mandola is a large or great mandolin, the open strings of which are tuned a fifth lower than those of the mandolin, i.e., to the notes C, G, D, and A ; otherwise it is the same as the mandolin. Its chief use is as a support or second to the mandolin.

The pandura, or Neapolitan greater mandolin (as the name indicates) is a still larger instrument than the mandola, and is used as a bass in mandolin clubs and orchestras. It is, however, very seldom-heard beyond the shores of sunny Italy. This instrument is played with a quill, the others all being played with a plectrum or pick made of tortoise-shell or bone.

The manjeaurine, or mandolin-banjo, is a combination instrument, lately invented and manufactured in the United States, and bids fair to become very popular at no distant date. It appears to the uninitiated as a banjeaurine minus the short E string, but it is fretted, strung, and played similar to the mandolin. As a solo instrument it is unrivalled for strength and purity of tone. It sounds well also in club work.

The mandore, or mandolin-guitar, is also a combination instrument which has lately appeared in this country. It is in appearance a small, short-necked guitar, fretted, strung, and played with a plectrum, similar to the mandolin. Its tone is much softer than that of the manjeaurine, though not so clear as that of the mandolin.

The bandurria, or Spanish mandolin, is of rather ancient origin, and most resembles a very short, stumpy guitar, with a short, wide neck, the finger-board of which contains but twelve frets, and over which run twelve strings, divided into six pairs, the two strings of each pair being tuned in unison a fourth apart. Half of the strings are gut, and half floss wound with metal. The bandurria is an ideal solo instrument, but sounds remarkably well, also, when used in concerted numbers.

The bandora, or Portuguese guitar, is most similar, both in proportions and characteristics, to the bandurria, in that it has six double strings; the strings, however, are of metal, and are tuned to fifths, and the finger-board contains seventeen frets, as on the mandolin. The bandora has a loud volume of tone, and as a specialty instrument, or on the leads in a mandolin club, it can be used rather effectively, though it is almost as difficult to learn to play well as the bandurria.

To anyone contemplating taking up the mandolin, whether for mere recreation, or with the idea of eventually accomplishing something further, either in the concert hall or elsewhere, I offer the above suggestions in the hope that they may serve some practical purpose.