

## **Mandolin Mania in Buffalo's Italian Community, 1895 to 1918**

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The Estudiantina Figueroa, or so-called “Spanish Students” troupe landed in New York in 1880 with bandurrias, exotic costumes and thrilling music, to receive an enthusiastic welcome. The response was immediate and predictable – they were copied.

Their imitators, a group of Italian immigrants led by Carlo Curti, played mandolins instead of bandurrias, sparking a new musical enthusiasm in North America. They called themselves the “Original Spanish Students” and toured the country for several years, entertaining people in towns and cities far from New York City. Eventually, many of them settled down as music teachers and performers all around North America.

Carlo (or Carlos) Curti was a violinist who had come to New York in 1876 as a member of a French orchestra. He later claimed responsibility for organizing the fake “Spanish student” troupe and another, more openly Italian, organization called the “Roman Students” (*The Cadenza* 1909). He eventually settled in Mexico City, where he taught mandolin, wrote operettas and a comic opera, and directed the orchestra at the Orrin theater, before returning to New York in 1902 (*The Cadenza* 1902).

He also composed music for mandolin orchestras, often in a Spanish or Mexican style. One of his best known works was “Flor de Mexico” or “Flower of Mexico” (Fig. 1) (Curti 1903:46-47).

Mandolins had several advantages for a country like the US in the 19th and early 20th century, where people were often on the move. Mandolins were portable, relatively easy to learn to play at least on a beginner level, the sound carried well, and they could be used to play a wide range of musical styles. The mandolin carried an image of European culture and sophistication, and this was welcome especially in the many relatively isolated towns and cities in North America where people were hungry for culture and entertainment.

**INTERMEZZO.**  
**THE FLOWER OF MEXICO.**  
(La Flor de Mexico)

Solo Banjo. CARLOS CURTI.  
Arranged by Robt. R. Page.

*Modto.*



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Fig. 1: The Flower of Mexico (Curti 1903).

Besides Carlo Curti there were many other Italian immigrants who were very influential in spreading the mandolin-playing enthusiasm across the USA. The most prominent was Giuseppe Pettine, who arrived in Providence, Rhode Island, from Isernia, Italy, a virtuoso performer, composer, and nationally known teacher of mandolin technique. He is credited with promoting the “duo style” of mandolin playing, in which one player plays both the rhythmic chords and the lyric melodic line at once, combining single strokes and tremolo.

Other Italian virtuosos who made names for themselves playing mandolin in the USA (primarily on the East Coast) included Stellario Cambria and Vincenzo Carli, both of whom also settled in Providence.

Buffalo in the late 19th and early 20th century was a thriving industrial and trade city, and had already built a strong musical foundation and a progressive record in public education. Throughout the 19th century the city experienced waves of immigration, mostly English, Germans and Irish until the last two decades, when Italians and Poles came in large numbers.

By the time Italian immigrants began to arrive in large numbers, the city was run primarily by the “American” (English origin) Protestants and the Germans, who were mostly Catholics (although a few were Jews or Protestants), with Irish filling the lower middle-class positions in society. Italians and Poles had to enter at a lower social rung. Many young Italian immigrant men graduated from the local colleges and entered the ranks of attorneys, pharmacists and physicians, while educated young Italian women became teachers, pharmacists and nurses; other Italian men became successful in civil service or political positions. The majority worked in manual labor and skilled labor jobs, as railroad workers, street peddlars, stonemasons, carpenters, and farm laborers. Many founded small businesses, such as barbershops, groceries, shoe stores, etc., while a few became relatively wealthy and built manufacturing plants, usually producing food products for the Italian immigrant market.

While Buffalo attracted Italian immigrants from all over Italy, the Sicilians were the most numerous. Thanks to local Italian newspaper editor, amateur historian, and author Ferdinand Magnani, we have some interesting facts on this period. Magnani wrote a short book, published in 1908, on the many attractions of Buffalo, entitled *La città di Buffalo e dintorni e le colonie italiane*, intended to draw more Italians to the city.

### **Mandolin clubs and ensembles in Buffalo**

Musical activity was woven into Buffalo’s educational system. In the 1890s Buffalo’s high schools and colleges already had student clubs devoted to mandolin, guitar and banjo. The students paid music teachers to instruct and direct the clubs; along with the college glee clubs, the mandolin clubs performed for alumni and prospective students, acting as ambassadors for their schools. Since the average person only attended school up to the required age of 12 years,

high schools and colleges only took in professionally oriented youth during this period. Participation in these mandolin clubs was seen as a refinement suitable for young people of both genders.

Lafayette High School in particular had a thriving musical environment; the mandolin clubs included both girls and boys, from 1898 to 1910. The mandolin and guitar clubs played ragtime, marches, two-steps, and other popular music (Oracle 1912).

Besides the school- and college-based clubs, there were similar clubs in settlement houses and in the YMCA. These organizations aimed at assimilation and integration of the immigrants, offering free English-language classes, and sometimes music lessons. Instrumental music was seen by the elite as another means of uplifting the masses.

Musical ferment in the growing and highly concentrated Italian community of Buffalo, however, bubbled over into the entire city. Some immigrants to Buffalo were conservatory trained musicians (among them Nicola Donadio, Dante Barozzi, and Pietro Licari), while others were less formally trained yet very talented performers (for example, Isidoro Termini and Ignacio Millonzi).

In the Pan American Exposition of 1901, one of the most attractive Midway venues was called “Venice in America,” which featured temporary canals with gondolas and mandolinists and guitarists who serenaded the visitors. Some of the musicians were hired in Italy and brought



Fig. 2: Italian mandolinists at the Pan American Exposition, Buffalo, 1901 (Arnold 1901)

to Buffalo for the 1901 summer season, while others were hired in the Italian Colonia (settlement) of Buffalo (Fig. 2).

Although I have identified several of these musicians, for instance, Joseph Leone, Giuseppe and Salvatore Ortolani, Luigi Lomanto, Ciro Laduca, Giuseppe Sagone, Antonino Gugino, Giuseppe Vacanti, and Liborio Maggio, all of whom, except for Leone, were cited in the *Corriere Italiano*, I cannot connect the names to individuals in the contemporary photographs (Arnold 1901).

Judging from contemporary reporting on the Italian music scene in Buffalo in the *Corriere*, the Italian mandolinists and guitarists were apparently all male, while several young women



Fig. 3: Opera Singers: Carbone Sisters, 1905 (*Corriere Italiano* 1905)

made musical careers as vocalists. The most notable were Nina Morgana, Grazia Carbone, and her sister Carmela Carbone (Fig. 3).

The Italian marching bands were very visible from about 1890 to the 1930s, especially downtown, where they marched in religious festivals, serenading residents and parading the main streets. The same bands – especially the famous Scinta Band, founded by Serafino Scinta in the



late 1880s (Magnani 1908:35) -- played summer concerts at Buffalo's parks, competing with the Germania band and the two US Regimental bands stationed in Buffalo, the 74th and 65th Regimental bands, for paid performances. The Scinta band was extremely popular, and played at the Pan American Exposition in 1901 and later spent a couple summers playing at Coney Island.

The men who played clarinet, trombone, tuba, drums, saxophone, or another instrument in these concert bands and marching bands often played mandolin, violin, or guitar in smaller dance bands and chamber ensembles. These string ensembles played at church services, at hotels and restaurants, at benefits, and at private parties in the Italian "Colonia" to celebrate marriages, baptisms, anniversaries, and other family and social events.

Italians and Italian-Americans also performed in the mainstream (English-language) theatres, in pit orchestras and at movie theatres. In 1906, for example, the Savoy Trio played regularly at the luxurious Genesee Hotel, on the corner of Main and Genesee Streets. The members

2

### *The Cadenza—Advertising.*



### THE SAVOY TRIO

permanently located at the Genesee Hotel, Buffalo, N. Y., is one of the latest progressive organizations that has discarded the old construction instruments and adopted the product of *American Genius and Enterprise*.

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GIBSON MANDOLIN-GUITAR CO., Kalamazoo, Mich. Buffalo, N. Y., August 15, 1905.  
Gentlemen:—After having tested all the best mandolins and guitars of both American and Italian manufacture, we are satisfied that the "Gibsons" not only surpass them all by far, but stand in a class by themselves.  
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Fig. 4: Termini, Millonzi, and Francesco (*The Cadenza* 1906).

of the Trio were Isidoro Termini, Ignacio Millonzi and Tomaso Francesco, also known as Tom Francis (Fig. 4) (*The Cadenza* 1906).

Similarly, a young group, apparently still teenagers in the *Corriere* photo in 1910, the Pulvino Brothers, played mandolins and guitars at movie theatres and at Carnival Court, an amusement park then at the corner of Main and Jefferson Streets. In 1912 they reportedly played popular songs and accompanied dances in the Italian community (“Trattenimento” 1; “Trattenimento” 5; “Il Concerto” 1).

As the number and density of the Italian Colonia rose, the immigrants formed dozens of mutual aid organizations, mostly centered on their town of origin, but sometimes on their trade. Thus there were Società Montemaggiore Belsito and the Società Bagheria, but also associations of grocers and lawyers. These organizations provided a kind of group health insurance as well as a social outlet. On religious or patriotic holidays they participated in parades, and as soon as fall arrived, they arranged dances and banquets. Some also sponsored theatrical and musical performances.

New musical groups and combinations arose frequently in the Italian settlement. Young Italian Americans organized themselves in theatrical and musical clubs and performed for their peers, including the Club Aurora, the Filodrammatici, the Circolo Musicale Bellini, the Circolo Savoia and others.

### **The music they played**

The repertoire of mandolin orchestras and ensembles reflected the diverse musical tastes of the day. Almost all were instrumental works; few included vocals. Some of the pieces, like “A Day in the Cotton Field,” were originally written for the blackface minstrel groups such as the Christy Minstrels (founded by George Christy, a Buffalo Irish immigrant). Patriotic songs, college songs, and marches were popular, while other popular mandolin works originally written for violin and conventional string orchestra.

Composers of the time, including a few in Buffalo, also wrote music specifically for mandolin orchestras, as the ensembles were then called.

In the early 1900s, ragtime music, usually played on the piano, was popular with young people, and this was adapted to mandolin. Opera excerpts, especially overtures, were also very popular as mandolin orchestra selections. In the Italian community, of course, Verdi, Rossini, Donizetti, and other Italian composers were highly favored.

For example, the *Corriere* reported the following performance in the entr'actes of "I due Sergenti" ("The Two Sergeants"): "Un bravo di cuore va dato ai valenti mandolinisti e chitarristi che deliziarono gli astante con scelti pezzi musicali." (translation: Hearty applause was given to the talented mandolinists and guitarists who delighted those who attended with select musical pieces.) Then the article lists the first quartet; G. Puglisi and G. Mammano, on mandolin, and A. Mammano and G. Incao on guitar, played three pieces, including one from "Lucia di Lammermoor." The second quartet, Isidoro Termini and Ignacio Millonzi on mandolin, and Carmelo Peri and Cruciano Millonzi on guitar, played a medley of themes from "Il Trovatore" (*Il Corriere Italiano* 1904).



Fig. 5: Orignanal mandolin music published in the *Corriere Italiano* (*Il Corriere Italiano* 1904:6).



Some music, usually American popular songs, was published in the *Corriere Italiano* from 1909 to 1910. Both national mandolin magazines, the *Crescendo* and the *Cadenza*, published music in almost every issue (Fig. 5).

### **The instruments they played**

US manufacturers began to produce mandolins around 1890, when the demand for the instruments was evident, and importing them from Italy was impractical and too expensive for most would-be players.

Walter Boehm, Buffalo's Gibson dealer, was important in the integration of Italian musicians into the mainstream, as well as in his role as teacher, publisher, and composer (Fig. 6). American manufacturers, including Gibson, Martin, Stahl, Washburn, and many others, reengineered the Neapolitan mandolin and the Spanish guitar, and came up with hybrids, new inven-

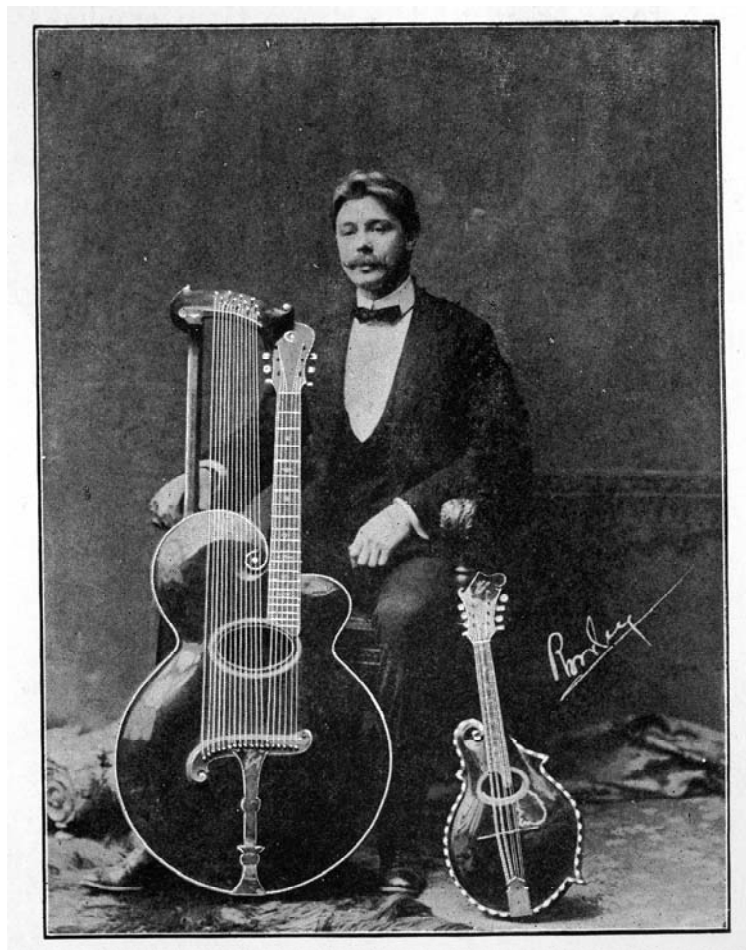


Fig. 6: Walter Boehm, musician, composer, Gibson dealer (Boehm 1905).

tions, and new versions of old instruments, including the harp guitar, the mando-cello, and the mando-bass. The mandolin underwent transformation, losing its fragile bowl-shaped back, while gaining volume and sharper tone.

### **What happened to these musicians?**

Most of the professional musicians who played mandolin, guitar, or banjo during this time (1895 to 1918) cobbled together a living by teaching music and directing clubs. While some of these musicians moved into jazz bands and orchestras, many had to take industrial or service jobs to support themselves and their families.

For example, Isidoro Termini (1878-1964) managed to make ends meet as a musician, playing mandolin, violin, tuba, or other instruments, without relying on non-musical jobs. He played in the 74th Regimental band, the Italian marching band and in informal ensembles for church and family events. In 1904 he had a studio at 136 Erie St., where he taught mandolin, violin, and guitar. He continued to play in orchestras of local theatres and then in the Philharmonic Orchestra in the 1930s and throughout the rest of his life (*Courier Express* 1964)

Tom Francis (Tomaso Francesco), a member of the Savoy Trio, bought a popular restaurant, the Roma Cafe, in 1911, and continued to play music part-time (*Corriere Italiano* 1911).

The Millonzi brothers traveled a path like Vitale's. Cruciano returned to Italy for good; Ignacio (1884-1978) went back to Italy for a few years and returned to Buffalo with his bride and two more brothers, Rosario and Phillip. Phillip's son, Robert, was a major benefactor for the Buffalo Philharmonic. Ignacio continued to play Italian music on the mandolin, while he pursued popular dance music (including occasional appearances with the Paul Whiteman Band) and "serious" music on cello. He augmented his income by working as a tailor and hosted a radio show playing Italian music, both live and recorded, for many years on WEBR (970 AM) (Russo 2005: Personal Communication). In their 80s, both Ignacio and Phillip were still very competent mandolinists.

Giacomo Vitale, a local guitarist, likewise used his diverse skills, playing woodwinds or brass in dance or jazz bands. Vitale joined a touring dance band in the 1920s but soon tired of

life on the road. In order to remain with his family in Buffalo, he took a series of jobs in industry, but always considered himself a musician, playing or practicing almost every evening, playing at Italian church festivals, weddings, and parties (Tucker 2005, personal communication).

### **What happened to this music?**

The mandolin craze did not endure in Buffalo, except in private parties and ethnically based concerts in the Italian community. Nationally, by 1918 it was apparently eclipsed by other musical trends, especially jazz and the big dance bands. Mandolin sales declined. In 1924, not coincidentally, Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Company became Gibson, Inc. (Gruhn and Carter 1993:85). No longer did the high schools and colleges train amateur and professional players in school clubs. Only a few remnants of the mandolin craze remained in Buffalo in the 1930s, 1940s and beyond: college and high school banjo-mandolin-guitar clubs disappeared.

The 1932 directory of American Federation of Musicians Local 43 lists 6 professional mandolin players among its members, including Phillip Millonzi and Isidore (Isidoro) Termini (Directory of Local 43, AF of M. n.a.). In 1941, the “Mandolin and Guitar Orchestra ‘Harmonie’,” linked to the German-American Harugari social club, is the only mandolin organization listed in a Buffalo directory of musicians and musical organizations; five teachers of mandolin are listed (*Stoeckel’s Music Directory* 1941:74-5, 122). In the 1947 edition no mandolin organization is listed, but there are still five mandolin teachers (*Stoeckel’s Official Directory of Music, Entertainment, Drama* 1947, 47).

### **Why does this matter?**

In the 19th century, many educated people divided music between highbrow and lowbrow. American culture, struggling over the painful legacy of slavery and the confusing results of mass immigration from Europe, was starting to assimilate both Italian and African-American music, as well as the German, Irish, and other European musical heritages. James Reese Europe,

the black New York musical pioneer, turned to mandolin and piano to make a living as a musician in New York in 1903, and later employed mandolins in African American musical theater and in dance bands until about 1913 (Badger 1995:30, 85), while Italian immigrants continued to dominate as leading virtuosos across the United States.

In Buffalo, the mandolin was a means of crossing over into the mainstream both financially and socially, for many Italian immigrants, although that crossing was usually only partial, because the music business was not well enough paid or steady enough to maintain a living wage.

### **Why did this music decline?**

Material and social changes that might explain the demise of the mandolin orchestras include the following:

1. Technological changes in the manufacture of fretted instruments made guitars larger, easier to tune, louder and more viable as lead instruments, and made tenor banjos so loud that they could compete with the brass and woodwind instruments, but single mandolins were not able to compete.
2. Recorded music and radio music became cheaper and could be used to entertain guests at parties and for dances; live music was no longer in such demand.
3. Some of the materials needed for manufacture of fretted instruments were diverted to wartime uses in the First World War, causing temporary shortages.
4. The horrors of the war and the demonization of the Germans encouraged Americans to look inward, and to reject the old image of European music as superior to homegrown musical creations.
5. Simple changes in fashion—perhaps the most important were the dance craze and the advent of jazz.

In Buffalo, these mandolin groups disappeared gradually, probably due in part to dispersion of the European ethnic concentrations as suburban sprawl grew, but more because of the factors that operated across the United States.

### **Why has this musical period faded from popular memory?**

Historians have treated the late 19th and early 20th Centuries as a transitional period, when American music had not yet developed a separate entity, and Americans were supposedly dependent on Europeans for music worth listening to. American society was still fractured by serious cultural and language divides; the music publishing industry was one of the few cultural institutions that attempted to extend its reach across the entire country. The relative hodgepodge of musical idioms presented in mandolin ensembles is now eclipsed by the spectacular rise of the new jazz and blues styles popularized in the following decades.

The few known recordings of mandolinists are not impressive; mandolins and guitars did not record well using acoustic recording technology (Linn 1994:93-94).

For example, Zarh Myron Bickford and Vahdah Olcott-Bickford were generally described in the press as virtuosos on mandolin and guitar (respectively), yet their acoustically recorded records sound stiff and mechanical. This seems to be due to several factors. First, the process was very restrictive and artificial, requiring the musicians to sit on platforms of various heights facing tin horns, with changes in instrumentation, for example, substituting tuba for stand-up bass, and restricting the numbers of musicians. This often produced in otherwise cool and collected musicians a kind of “gramo-fright” (Coleman 2003:18). Second, and probably more important, the range of tones and dynamics audible on such recordings was much narrower than the range heard by the human ear, and narrower than what we hear in more modern recordings (Martland 1997:81). Musicians were reportedly instructed to use as little dynamics as possible, or to move back and forth in front of the horn to record higher or lower pitches and volumes. Third, early recordings were limited to about two minutes, much shorter than most “serious” or even many popular songs in performance. Fourth, the recording industry was undergoing a shift in understanding of what their role was; many early recordings were meant as instruction, not entertainment. Many records created before the late 1920s were only an auditory version of the sheet music; that is, the song was more important than the singer. The exception was African American music, which was viewed as novelty entertainment (Brooks 2004:8). Caruso, an early



fan of the recorded disc, did document his vocal performances well, but most were unable to use the acoustic technology as effectively as he did.

Thus, for researchers today, the early recordings of mandolin music are less accessible; performances of this popular music simply were not documented even to the limited extent that Robert Johnson and other blues performers were just a few years later, in the late 1920s.

In summary, there does not seem to be a single reason why the mandolin craze came to an end, and why this type of music was virtually lost, but rather a cluster of factors that worked together. The failure of the early recording industry to record faithfully the soft sounds of solo mandolins and guitars, the technological changes that made guitars much more flexible, material and cultural issues related to the first World War, cultural changes that made public social dancing to jazz music much more acceptable to the mainstream, and simply changes in fashion, were all involved in the demise of this fascinating musical phenomenon.

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