



# Guitar

## The Classical Mandolin for The Classical Guitarist

by Chris Kachian

It has been a few months since I last wrote in these pages about different career opportunities for the classic guitarist. Learning a related discipline (theory, musicology, conducting, chamber music coaching) presents countless opportunities for someone seeking to expand their studio duties at a college or conservatory. I remain convinced that a well schooled (at least a master's degree) and open-minded guitarist can find gainful employment in the music field with this instrument. The only requirement is a flexible frame of mind.

Typically, guitarists in all genres receive calls from orchestras or recording studios asking us to perform on a variety of plucked string instruments. I've performed on the banjo (Shostakovich, Gershwin, Weill, Crumb and Adams), Hawaiian guitar (Shostakovich), and electric guitar (David Baker, Cary John Franklin, Randall Davidson and many other post-WW II composers). Composers score for these instruments for their color as well as their reminiscent "Americana" flavor. The professional players of these fine instruments, no matter how accomplished they are, often do not read music well, possess too little experience following conductors, and are unused to classical music repertoire, rendering them impossible hires for professional organizations. Facing the rigorous demands of an orchestral rehearsal and performance schedule, coupled with the sometimes technically demanding writing associated with these parts (these are nearly always exposed solos), contractors and conductors invariably call classically trained guitarists to "fake it" on rented instruments. This situation can be a real boon to guitarists in search of bookings.

Recently, I have been called to perform on the mandolin and have had to solve significant tactical problems. As a classic guitarist with 25 years performing experience and a DMA on the instrument, the technique, not to mention sight-reading on the mandolin, was a real shock. The plectrum, required to make any audible sound on a double-course, high-tension set of strings tuned wholly differently (G-D-A-E) than the guitar (E-A-D-G-B-E) made for rough going at first. Learning the part was part of mastering the entire instrument—the two processes occurred simultaneously. It was not an entirely foreign affair: it has frets and is shaped somewhat like a guitar though much smaller. But with the part arriving just a week before the beginning of rehearsals, I was faced either with a unique challenge or a form of quick and dirty career suicide.

I was extremely fortunate to have a professional violinist living in my home who could answer countless questions concerning fingering. With the narrowness of the neck and the comparatively tight fret spacing, mandolinists turn their left hand and wrist to enable them to negotiate large stretches and position changes much like violinists do; not the "finger-for-a-fret" approach familiar to guitarists. The frets are so close so as to make virtually impossible anything other than a standard violin fingering workable. (I.e., the notes F-G-A played with fingers 1-2-3 versus 1-3-4 or 1-2-4 on the guitar.) As regarded plectrum technique, I was on my own. Though most classic guitarists were, in another life, rock players, I had no experience playing with anything other than the fingernail and flesh combination of the right hand. With much trial and error, some wrist pain and no

small amount of self-doubt, I learned the natural up and down stroke for duple (either down-down-up or down-up-up for triple) necessary to get the double unison strings to ring musically.

My first call was from the Minnesota Orchestra for a short solo in Respighi's *Feste Romane*. With my rented mandolin and completely memorized part, I performed (...from the balcony of Orchestra Hall, no less—sonic projection being the goal...) well enough to get asked back to play another short, exposed solo in Argento's *Casa Guidi*. (This time at the very edge of the stage between conductor and principal cello!) At this point I was convinced that the mandolin was not only very rewarding to play but that I actually needed to purchase one and study it with focused discipline.

Since then, I have kept fairly busy performing with mandolin. Repertoire I have played includes Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Verdi's *Otello*, Adams' *Gnarly Buttons*, Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children*, Vivaldi's *Concerto in C* and Beethoven's *Sonatinas*. I have also begun touring as a soloist playing the accompanied violin sonatas of Bach with harpsichord. Most of these composers did not write for the guitar. The mandolin presents, along with a fairly considerable start-up challenge, many opportunities to play rich repertoire, perform with fine organizations and gain meaningful employment and exposure. A flexible (and perhaps, intrepid) guitarist coupled with his/her fine training reading music, tackling tough repertoire, and following conductors can realize a wonderful side component to their performing career.

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