

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

MAD ABOUT THE MANDOLIN

Returning to making music later in life.

By Tim Parks

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On October 30, 2023, shortly before my sixty-ninth birthday, I stepped into a music store a few minutes from my house, in the southern suburbs of Milan, to buy a mandolin. At first, I thought that I would come away empty-handed. It's a big store, with long rows of guitars and orchestral instruments on every wall, the floor space taken up by pianos and keyboards. But eventually I spotted them, high in a cobwebby corner: two mandolins—one a folksy flat-back and the other a classical bowl-back. After getting them down with the aid of a ladder, the store assistant had to wipe off the dust. Though Italy was the birthplace of the mandolin, both had been made in China.

I hesitated. I hadn't touched a mandolin since adolescence, and, even then, I'd only fooled around. My wife was beside me. "Do it," she said.

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At home, I pulled the flat-back from its case. The sound box had a teardrop shape, just a couple of inches deep, with a golden-brown polyurethane finish that darkened to black at the edges. The whole thing was only two feet long and very light. Its eight strings were arranged in pairs and tuned in fifths, like a violin: G, D, A, E. When I plucked them with the plastic pick provided, the sound emerged, bright and metallic, from F-shaped holes on either side of an adjustable bridge.

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The first weeks were a roller coaster of pleasure and perplexity. Touching the strings, my fingers started to remember things that I had long forgotten. Here was the Irish jig “Father O’Flynn,” here the English lament “Water of Tyne,” and here, even, the opening bars from Vivaldi’s concerto for two mandolins. Simply holding the mandolin had transported me back fifty years.

But although I played for two or three hours a day, I struggled to make progress. My fingers were stiff. I had no technique. And these memories soon lost their shine. How many times do you want to hear “Father O’Flynn”? Or an English lament? And, if I were to tackle the Vivaldi, I’d have to learn to read the music reliably as I played. Was that really going to happen at my age? Asked by friends to play something, I’d become impossibly nervous. Why? Does music have value, I wondered, if you play only for yourself? What had seemed like a good way of chilling out was actually plunging me into a kind of crisis.

If this attempt to reclaim the instrument of my youth had been a mistake, I wasn’t alone in making it. Asking around, I became aware of other older people who were returning to music or even taking it up for the first time. My brother,

in upstate New York, was one of them. We live oceans apart and rarely speak, but in an exchange of e-mails I discovered that he'd gone back to the piano and joined a Facebook group called Adult Piano Returners, which has forty-six thousand members. It was uncanny, we agreed, that we'd both felt this compulsion to make music on the threshold of old age.

Was it a kind of collective dotage? A little research suggested that the trend was global. In Germany, in 2023, the national association of music schools reported that the number of seniors in music education had grown six-fold since 2000. Perhaps as a result, various European countries had introduced academic programs in the new field of music geragogy—the study of music-learning in old age. In Genoa, a school started to offer a course in drumming for people over sixty. Academic papers abounded: “The Meaning of Learning Piano Keyboard in the Lives of Older Chinese People,” “Exploring Motivation for Older Adults in South Korea to Engage in Musical-Instrument Learning After Retirement.” Inevitably, there were commercial repercussions: in May, 2025, the *Financial Times* reported that Yamaha would now target older people when promoting its saxophones in China.

Far from being a sign of dotage, scientists concurred, music practice in old age confers all kinds of cognitive benefits. After four years of following a group who'd taken up piano in their seventies, neuroscientists at Kyoto University found that the putamen and cerebellum areas of their brains—crucial for motor control, learning, cognition, and memory—were surprisingly free of the atrophy that usually accompanies aging.

All this was reassuring but not entirely helpful. One doesn't labor over scales and arpeggios just to stimulate one's neural pathways. And why was I the only older person to have chosen the mandolin? As a teen-ager listening to folk music in London pubs, I'd been attracted to the instrument's nimble, tinkling cheerfulness, its being on the margins, not too demanding, perhaps. Now, exploring mandolin courses online, I found that they were teaching mainly

bluegrass, which I've never been interested in. There seemed to be an unwarranted frenzy in the speed at which everything was played, as if music were as much a sport as an artistic pursuit.

Speed in general was a problem. A note played on the mandolin doesn't resonate for long before decaying. Perhaps a second or two. This is owing to the high pitch of the notes, the tension of the strings, and the small body of the instrument. A note played on the guitar lasts about three times longer. As a result, music arranged for the mandolin tends to multiply the notes or the number of times each note is picked in order to fill the space, a process that culminates in the famous Neapolitan tremolo—in which the same note is repeatedly picked at upward of ten strokes a second, a speed I found hard even to imagine.

"You need a teacher," my wife told me. But my only music teachers—Miss Mellor, who taught me the piano when I was seven, and Mr. Padmore, when I was in the church choir, before my voice broke—had both terrified me, to the point that I came to associate musical performance with exposure to humiliation. How much worse would it be now that I was older and supposedly competent? Unsurprisingly, experts identify the "threat to the ego" as a major obstacle for older learners. However, right when my resolve was wavering, I upped the stakes by buying another mandolin. In London for work, I passed a store with twenty or so beautiful instruments. What harm could there be in taking a look? An hour later, I walked out with a handmade Celtic flat-back with a marvellously rich, warm tone. So rich and warm, I felt ready to face a teacher.

"Life in tune with mandolin soul," Paolo Monesi's website proposed. He had founded the Southern Comfort Band, an Italian bluegrass group, decades before. His photos had a nineteen-eighties feel: long hair, drooping mustache. But the man I eventually sat down with exuded a clean-cut, salt-and-pepper sobriety, and on his lap was not the F-style flat-back featured on his website but a pretty Neapolitan bowl-back with mother-of-pearl inlay.

"Play something," he said.

It was the moment of truth. “Father O’Flynn” was my choice: simple, plonky, and utterly familiar. My hands had different ideas. All at once, I became not an integrated self but an amalgam of twitching body parts. I switched to Vivaldi, with much the same result. Returning home in a foul mood, I decided to call time on this mandolin madness.

And yet.

“If you want to go on,” Paolo had suggested, “why not take a look at the sonatas of Francesco Lecce?” He himself, he explained, had given up folk music to concentrate on the classical repertoire and was studying under the world-renowned maestro Ugo Orlandi, at the Milan Conservatory, where his special interest was the Baroque. Since I’d played a snatch of Vivaldi, perhaps that might attract me.

The only Wikipedia entry for Francesco Lecce was in German. A Neapolitan, it said, whose name turned up in the second half of the eighteenth century as a musician at the Royal Chapel of the Treasure of San Gennaro in the Naples Duomo. There were no dates of birth or death, but a manuscript of sixty-seven short pieces for solo mandolin or violin had been unearthed from archives in recent years.

On YouTube, a young man in a gray hoodie played Sonatina No. 1, exactly seventy charming seconds of it. To the right of the frame, there was a facsimile of a handwritten score—“Sonate e Partite del Sigr. D: Francesco Lecce.” The notation was curiously quaint, dots and curly tails swimming along like so many tadpoles. Tackling it myself, I felt that the music was different from anything I’d played before, as if I were being invited to a decorous dance, at once intimate and impersonal.



Photograph courtesy International Music Score Library Project

“You’ve got your pick directions wrong,” Paolo told me. The dotted notes required two downstrokes, followed by a snatched upstroke, the closing appoggiatura a powerful downstroke followed by an upstroke picked so softly it was barely heard. Surely I’d noticed the appoggiatura? In general, I’d have to completely relearn my right-wrist movement.

He played the piece himself: the sprightly snatched notes like brisk turns of the heel; the dying fall of the appoggiatura a gracious curtsy. The bowl-back was exquisitely mellow. “A nineteen-seventies Calace,” he told me. “They get better with age.”

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Calace, I discovered, was a Neapolitan workshop that had been making mandolins since 1825, and Raffaele Calace, the grandson of the founder, had been the greatest composer for mandolin in the late nineteenth century. But his music was quite different from the pieces that Paolo introduced me to over the next year, all of which were written in the mid-eighteenth century. With each composer we studied—Emanuele Barbella, Gabriele Leone, Giovanni Battista Gervasio—I dived a little deeper into the history of the instrument, and slowly, unexpectedly, my own attraction to it began to make sense.

Invented in seventeenth-century Italy, during a period of intense experimentation with plucked-string instruments, the mandolin came in various

versions and sizes, with four, five, or six strings, single or double. Everything was fluid. There were gut strings, then metallic strings. You could pick with a quill—ostrich feather or raven—or, later, with a tortoiseshell plectrum. By the mid-eighteenth century, the mandolin had become hugely popular in Naples, Rome, and, above all, Paris.

Why? Why was it so successful then but not now? This was the only question I dared ask, sitting in on a seminar at the Milan Conservatory. The teacher was Orlandi himself, both an authority on the history of the instrument and a virtuoso performer. Because the mandolin, unlike the violin, he said, quoting from Leone's method book, published in 1768, "can tolerate mediocrity." Music was overwhelmingly domestic at that time. There were no concert halls, and, if people wanted music, they had to make it themselves, in houses where perhaps only one room was heated. A poorly bowed violin screeched. Since it had no frets, learners were frequently off pitch. Even played badly, the fretted mandolin was pleasant and relatively quiet.

Given these circumstances, most of the music written for mandolin (eighty-five volumes were published in Paris between 1761 and 1783) was intended for amateurs, often women. The playing position was thought more decorous than the position for the violin, and the mandolin itself was visually attractive, appearing as a fashion accessory in any number of paintings. An instrument made "pour les Dames," Gervasio noted on the title page of his method book. The dominant composition was the intimate duet; often, mandolins were made and sold as twins, to be played together. Noble families, Orlandi tells his students, sometimes hired musicians to accompany their amateur efforts.

In the seventeen-seventies, Gervasio composed six duets dedicated to his student the Princess of Prussia. I remember the rush of excitement the first time I managed to get through one of these with Paolo. The mandolins weave intricate patterns together, in counterpoint or unison. Everything is light, zippy, and gently ironic. In the fun of it all, I simply forgot to be nervous.

"You need to work on your expression," Paolo observed with a sigh.

The fact that the mandolin is easy on the ear doesn't mean that it is easy to play. Leone taught and codified dozens of complicated pick-stroke combinations, to give depth and expression. "This artist's skill was astonishing and he was a genuine success," a review of Leone's performance at a concert in Paris in 1766 enthused but added ominously, "which was all the more flattering for him because his chosen instrument is not loud compared to the size of the venue." The era of the concert hall was at hand, and the same qualities that had made the mandolin attractive at home now put it at a disadvantage. The violin and other stringed instruments were redesigned to improve projection and volume. Attempts were made to do the same for the mandolin, but they were never enough. The fact that the instrument was popular with amateurs, particularly in Naples, and often purchased as a souvenir by tourists led to its being disparaged by the state-sponsored academies. So, in a general process of professionalization that changed the way that music was experienced, raising standards while widening the gap between expert and amateur, the mandolin fell out of fashion. Beethoven's lovely duets for mandolin and harpsichord, written in the seventeen-nineties "pour la belle Josephine," the wife of a Bohemian nobleman, were not published or publicly performed in his lifetime. By the mid-nineteenth century, the instrument and the music written for it had been largely forgotten—to the point, Berlioz complained, that it was hard to find a mandolinist to perform the serenade in Mozart's "Don Giovanni."

Is domestic music a second-class thing? Discovering this history, I felt strongly what a different phenomenon music is when you make it yourself. You're inside it, living it, experiencing a pleasure so intense that pleasure is perhaps no longer the word. This surely helps explain why older people are turning to it. After countless hours of practice, I was able to play one of Beethoven's duets with my wife on piano. But she found it hard to make her instrument quiet enough for mine to be audible, and I struggled to play loudly enough for her. Volume is a real issue for the mandolin. The harpsichord was also a victim of the orchestral era.

Then, in the late nineteenth century, the mandolin experienced a second flowering, albeit in a different guise. In the newly unified Italy, it became the national instrument par excellence. Margherita of Savoy, the country's first and much loved queen, played and promoted it. The composers Raffaele Calace and Carlo Munier set out to write music of a quality the academies could not ignore. The mandolin quartet was developed, mixing treble and bass versions of the instrument, and the technique of the tremolo was taken to new heights of sophistication. Calace's "Fantasia Poetica" is a madly ambitious romantic keening up and down the fretboard, singing and wailing in a helter-skelter of shrill, sustained tremolo. Not a piece for the amateur.

Equally important was Queen Margherita's association with what would become the Reale Circolo Mandolinisti, in Florence, which established a full mandolin orchestra using mandolins, the larger mandolas, and mandocellos. In just a few years, such ensembles became all the rage, spreading through Europe to the U.S. and even Japan and Korea. As early as 1888, Kansas City was reported to have a hundred mandolin clubs, and, by the turn of the century, all the major East Coast cities had mandolin orchestras. Again, women played a leading role. In eighteen-nineties London, where it was generally frowned upon for "respectable" women to play professionally, there were dozens of all-female mandolin orchestras, some involving forty to fifty women. So the instrument became part of a process of emancipation and socialization.

To meet increased demand, factory-built mandolins appeared. In Chicago in 1894, Lyon & Healy turned out seven thousand of them. When, in the early nineteen-hundreds, Gibson developed the F-style flat-back, inspired by the Stradivarius violin, the idea was to produce a louder instrument that could be used for classical as well as folk music, while being assembly-line-friendly. Instead, the success of the flat-back led to a further separation between popular and classical music, with the punchy F-style becoming the trademark instrument of the celebrated Bill Monroe and his newly invented bluegrass style. The bowl-back, thanks to its shape, produces a greater number of high partial harmonics that give it a distinctive, delicate tone preferred by most players of classical

music. However, neither design took well to electrical amplification, and, by the nineteen-forties, production lines had been given over to the guitar.

“Know the history of your instrument,” Orlandi exhorts his students. “Its range, its possibilities.” He describes how Vivaldi’s music was rediscovered in the nineteen-thirties, after two centuries of neglect. How scholars became aware of the Gimo archive, which includes nineteen works for mandolin, collected in Italy by the son of a Swedish iron manufacturer in 1762. But to one class he also brings along a jazz mandolinist from Puglia, who learned to play as an apprentice at a barbershop in the nineteen-seventies. Barbers, tailors, grocers, and bakers would often keep a musical instrument handy to pass the time when there were no customers.

It was this sense of a variegated community, stretching across time and space, always struggling for recognition, that so attracted me. “The mandolin is a ghetto,” Orlandi laments. But a cheerful one, I’d say. After a year of lessons with Paolo, who, I discovered, plays in a mandolin orchestra in Milan, I travelled down to Naples to buy a Calace bowl-back. Not an impulse purchase this time but a sort of yearning for initiation.

Now in his seventies, Raffaele Calace, Jr., is the great-great-grandson of the workshop’s founder. He operates, with his daughter, Annamaria, and a handful of craftsmen, from the first floor of an old palazzo in the narrow Vico San Domenico Maggiore. There’s a small, cluttered reception area where an espresso pot is coming to a boil as I arrive. From the big room beyond, where men are working with chisels and planes, wafts a powerful smell of wood glue. The bowl of the mandolin is created with twenty-five or more hand-cut strips of maple or rosewood, each heated, bent, then glued around an inner shell.

It’s summer, and there’s no air-conditioning. A big fan turns slowly on the ceiling. The benches are blackened with age, strewn with tools. On shelves from floor to ceiling are mandolins in every phase of construction. “We mostly sell for

export,” Annamaria tells me, “to Japan and Korea, among other countries.” She regrets the decline in amateur musicianship, and the mental space that is now occupied by TV and social media, and hopes that more people can find pleasure in the instrument they’re so proud to produce. On the other hand, she adds, “Few can make a living playing the mandolin.”

Raffaele tunes an instrument for me with enviable speed, striking a tuning fork on his desk. This mandolin is quite different from my flat-back, the strings closer together, the arm shorter, the frets more tightly spaced. The bowl is so big and deep that when I hold it against my chest I can’t see where my fingers are. But everything is silky and precise to the touch, and the sound astonishingly full and sweet in the small room, with the strain of an accordion coming in through the open window.

“I never asked you,” Paolo remarks a month later, at the end of another duet, “if you were interested in playing with the mandolin orchestra.”

“If I’m ever good enough.”

He pulls a wry face that might mean anything, and I realize that he’s given me something to work toward. I doubt I’ll actually get there, but, as a solution to the existential question of what to do with your time in old age, how to avoid the toxic pull of the newsfeed or the temptation to work on forever as if you were immortal, the prospect is alluring. ♦

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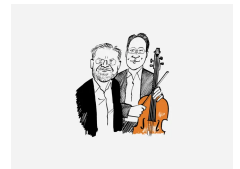


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