

The Big Mandolin Reference Sheet

presented by

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and originally compiled

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Some Common Mandolin Types and Terms

The etymology of “mandolin” isn’t entirely clear: often cited to have been derived from Italian for “little almond” and often cited to have been derived by more convoluted means from more remote Greek terms for an ancient stringed instrument group (*pandra*, *pandura*, or *pandoura*). Words obviously and directly related to “mandolin” began appearing in Italian sources at the end of the 16th and early 17th c., around the dawn of the early-baroque aesthetic. Several “mandolino” and “mandola” patterns have survived from Stradivari’s shop, and there are at least two extant mandolins from the late 17th c. known to be in his hand. Mandolin nomenclature and organology is a downright mess, with luthiers and players frequently reinventing instrument types and assigning them new names (or inventing new things and borrowing old names from altogether different things) in ignorance of historic precedents. Those instruments of primarily folk- and popular-music applications (e.g., modern cittern, Irish bouzouki, Greek laouto, etc.) are not addressed here unless they are similar to mandolin types commonly designated in academically composed music.

Amandorlino or *Armandolino*: Earlier synonyms for mandolin.

Barockmandoline: Of course, the term can refer to actual baroque-era instruments (of the fourth-tuned, gut-strung mandolino type) in German. However, the term is also applied to an idealized, anachronistic modern six-course instrument strung in courses of paired gut strings, having a large soundbox/bowl, and emulating baroque tuning—g, b, e¹, a¹, d², g²—and a generally baroque-like aesthetic, but not quite built to the dimensions of any instrument known from the Baroque. The modern barockmandoline is almost always played with a plectrum, usually of quill.

Cant: The crease in the soundboard of most flat-top mandolins, almost universally just behind the bridge (the US manufacturer Vega may be the only one to have produced mandolin-family instruments designed for the bridge to rest behind the cant) and sloping down to the tailpiece, the intent to increase the angle of deflection of strings over bridge and thus increase the downward component of force on the soundboard.

Cremonese or *Brescian mandolin* / *mandolino cremonese* or *bresciano*: Soprano instrument with four fifth-tuned gut strings tied directly to a lute-like fixed bridge and tuned g, d¹, a¹, e². Mostly

with bowlbacks, but some romantic-era pieces had flat backs and pin bridges. Origins as early as mid-18th c. Soundboxes of earlier instruments are extremely small and delicate. Some authors distinguish between Cremonese and Brescian, the former being generally earlier in time.

Duo style: A suite of techniques developed in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, most notably by golden-era American mandolinists, whereby a solo mandolin gives the impression of multiple, simultaneous parts. This most commonly manifests analogously to classical guitar tremolo in which a sustained melody is played in tremolo above a single-stroke accompaniment with a single plectrum.

Genoese mandolin / mandolino genovese: Similar in construction to early Neapolitan mandolins with a canted soundboard, bowlback, floating bridge, hitch pins, and wire strings, but more often incorporating a decorative rose set into the soundhole and with six courses of paired strings tuned one octave above guitar: e, a, d¹, g¹, b¹, e². Extant instruments are relatively common beginning in the late 18th c. This mandolin type was Paganini's first musical instrument.

German mandolin / mandoline: A modern derivation from Neapolitan mandolin developed and refined by luthiers like Reinhold Seiffert and later Klaus Knorr. German mandolins tend to have much larger soundboxes and broader soundboards than the Neapolitan type. Players often use flat-wound strings and hard-rubber plectra for a mellower, almost guitar-like, tone.

"Golden era": A period of tremendous popularity for mandolins and a proliferation of mandolin music, professional soloists, and amateur orchestras beginning around 1880. The era ended in the early 1920s in the US. The era can be considered to have persisted well into the Great Depression in parts of Europe.

Liuto cantabile / liuto moderno: A five-course bass instrument of the modern mandolin family, combining functionality of mandolincello and tenor-voiced mandola/octave mandolin to be flexible in accompaniment or solo work, and tuned C, G, d, a, e¹. Raffaele Calace claimed to have invented the instrument in the late 19th c., but that claim seems unlikely as there were many others also making such instruments at that time.

Milanese or Lombard mandolin / mandolino milanese or lombardo: Soprano instrument with six fourth-tuned gut strings tied to a lute-like fixed bridge and tuned g, b, e¹, a¹, d², g². Mostly bowlbacked, but some romantic-era pieces had flat backs and pin bridges. Some authors distinguish between Milanese and Lombard, the former being earlier in time and with a slighter soundbox. Milanese types possibly originated as early as the late 18th c. Modern Lombard mandolins (i.e., beginning in the late 19th c.) have relatively large soundboxes and very often feature scalloped fingerboards. Both terms are also often applied to baroque-era instruments with courses of paired strings, but those regional terms are not used in any sources from the Baroque era.

Mando-bass: An unwieldy and unpopular fretted instrument to flesh out the bass end of mandolin orchestras. Ordinarily, they are strung in four single strings tuned E₁, A₁, D, G (large) or G₁, D, A, e (small). Single-strung mando-basses are usually played with the fingers. Mandolin orchestras also often use standard orchestral basses pizzicato because of the rarity and cumbersome anti-dexterousness associated with mando-basses.

Mando-cello / mandoloncello: A bass instrument of the modern mandolin family, tuned analogously to cello/violoncello: C, G, d, a. In this form, the instrument first appeared in the 1890s by manufacturers like Embergher (Rome), Waldo and Howe-Orme (US), etc. (in spite of their promotional hype, the Gibson Co.'s came a little later) in an effort to emulate the bowed string quartet.

Mandola: Modern application of this term is a chaotic mess. See the semi-messy effort at disambiguation to follow. Technically, “mandolino” is the diminutive form of “mandola.”

Mandola (Baroque): As relates to early fourth-tuned, gut-strung mandolins, there is some evidence to suggest “mandola” simply implied a mandolino with six courses—g, b, e¹, a¹, d², g²—to distinguish it from five-course “mandolino” that lacked the lowest g course (e.g., as implied by some works with each designation in the Dalla Casa [1759] archlute book).

Mandola, alto (or *tenor* in the UK) / *mandoliola*: In Italy (likely first by the Embergher shop near Rome), the alto member of the family—tuned analogously to viola: c, g, d¹, a¹—was first referred to as “mandoliola” to distinguish it from the earlier tenor-voiced instrument. The instrument first appeared in the 1890s in an effort to emulate the bowed string quartet. Around the same time, US builders (like Waldo, Howe-Orme, and—a bit later—Gibson), aware of viola (but not necessarily of earlier forms of mandola), applied the unmodified term of “mandola” to alto-voiced mandolin relatives in parallel semantic construct to the violin family. This alto-voiced type is probably the most common application of the unmodified term “mandola” among English speakers. Confusing the issue even further, many UK builders and players refer to the alto-voiced instrument as “tenor mandola.”

Mandola, tenor / mandola / octave mandolin / mandola a sol: In modern usage (by the latter half of the 19th c.), the term “mandola” was initially applied to a tenor instrument tuned one octave below standard mandolin: G, b, a, e¹. Most Italian repertoire from that time and into the early–mid 20th c. designating “mandola” (including that for quartetto romantico) is for this tuning. This tuning later came to be called “octave mandolin” by many English speakers. Confusing the issue even further, “tenor mandola” is often applied to the alto instrument of the family by many in the UK.

Mandolin: English for the general modern type and “family” name. The modern family members usually feature four courses of paired wire strings, usually passing over a floating bridge to fix to a tailpiece mounted to the tailblock of the soundbox. Courses are usually tuned in unison with the interval of a fifth between each. Most types are played with a plectrum. The standard soprano instrument is tuned analogously to violin: g, d¹, a¹, e². *Mandolino*: Italian. *Mandoline*: French, German, etc.

Mandolin orchestra: Sure enough, they’re resurging (to some degree), and can be argued to make more sense than very large guitar ensembles in engaging a family of different-sized instruments for a wider natural range and having a more violin-like sustaining function and a more diffuse attack and decay via tremolo. (In spite, some orchestras currently active in Germany eschew tremolo in ensemble performance. This was not the case with “golden era” German orchestras and is not the case among such ensembles in other countries.) Guitars often play substantial roles in mandolin orchestras, especially in recent incarnations.

Mandolino: Simply modern Italian for “mandolin.” However, outside conversational Italian, the term is now often applied to fourth-tuned, gut-strung mandolins of the Baroque through early Classical era and their reproductions. The first uses of terms related to “mandolino” coincided with the early Baroque era and applied to instruments strung in courses of paired gut strings (and structurally similar to earlier soprano lutes and relatives, like mandore). Surviving period instruments of the type almost universally feature a sickle-shaped (rather than straight, lute-like) pegbox (as do the patterns surviving from Stradivari’s shop) and a lute-like bowl that is proportionally shallower than that of Neapolitan types and derivatives. Very early instruments of the type (and relatively briefly) were in four courses of paired strings, but five-course and later six-course instruments became much more common. Tuning of the courses was wholly or mostly in unison fourths: (g), b, e¹, a¹, d², g². Iconography implies punteado play was the norm in the Baroque, but the use of plectra is implied through chord voicings in written music for the instrument by the time of the Classical era (e.g., that by Hoffmann).

Neapolitan mandolin / mandolino napoletano: The direct ancestor of all modern, wire-strung mandolins. The name generally implies a standard soprano instrument of the family with a flat (or only slightly radiused) fingerboard and lute-like but relatively deep bowlback. The earliest forms appeared in the early to mid-18th c. with four courses of paired strings, mostly of wire, passing over a floating bridge on a canted soundboard to fix to hitch pins set into the tail block. Coincidentally, some families responsible for building some of the earliest known Neapolitan mandolins were also responsible for building some of the very earliest known six-string guitars (Vinaccia, Fabricatore, etc.). The first designated “mandolino” repertoire known to be for the Neapolitan type appeared around 1760. Before steel strings were available, 18th c. method books prescribed the following stringing and tuning: g¹-g (octave tuning on the lowest course in brass wire [g¹] and silver-wound silk [g]), d¹ (twisted-brass harpsichord strings), a¹ (plain-brass harpsichord strings), and e² (gut). The modern soprano instrument of the family is ordinarily strung in all wire with each course in unison: again, g, d¹, a¹, e². All the myriad modern archtops (a la the Gibson A and F styles); early-20th-c. American flat-backed mandolins with canted tops; weird guitar-like mandolins (a la Ovation); Portuguese/Brazilian bandolim; modern Roman, German, and Greek mandolins; etc. are derived from the Neapolitan mandolin’s tuning and functionality.

Quartetto classico: The later standard form of mandolin quartet, appearing at the end of the 19th c. and developed to emulate bowed string quartets: two mandolins, alto mandola/mandoliola, and mando-cello/mandoloncello.

Quartetto romantico: The initial form of mandolin quartet, standardized perhaps in the early 1890s: two mandolins, octave mandolin/tenor-voiced mandola, and guitar.

Roman mandolin / mandolino romano: Refined by luthiers operating in and near Rome (like Giovanni de Santis and especially Luigi Embergher) beginning in the 1880s. The Roman mandolin is functionally very similar to the modern Neapolitan mandolin only with a narrower and more violin-like fingerboard—pronouncedly cambered on a narrow, compound radius—and with the soundbox in the mature form usually narrowing at the neck-body joint resulting in a complex, compound curve to ribs of the bowl.

Tuscan mandolin / mandolino toscano: Fifth-tuned mandolin with construction features derived from the modern Lombard mandolin (a relatively large soundbox and gut strings tied directly to a fixed bridge). Some authors refer to the type by the earlier term “Brescian.” Function and tuning intervals do refer both back to the earlier and smaller Cremonese/Brescian and to the contemporary Neapolitan mandolin: g, d¹, a¹ e².

Composers of Music for Mandolin

Some “major” composers and some better-known guitar composers:

Arrigoni, Carlo (1697–1744): sonatas with basso continuo and one concerto (all for fourth-tuned, gut strung mandolino). Alright, so maybe not so “major” today—primarily known as a vocal-music composer, singer, and lutenist in his own day—but his mandolin sonatas are some of the best of the Baroque. Check’em, my homies a pizzico!

Beethoven, Ludwig van (1770–1827): Sonatina, WoO 43a; Adagio, WoO 43b; Sonatina, WoO 44a; and Andante (with variations), WoO 44b, all with keyboard accompaniment (the intended mandolin and even keyboard type hotly debated among geeks). A fifth piece, a rondo, has been lost, only some sketched sections remaining. Certainly some and possibly all were composed for Josephine de Clary (later becoming the Countess Clam-Gallas: 1777–1828) while Beethoven was in Prague in the 1790s. Beethoven is said to have learned the rudiments of mandolin from Wenzel Krumpholz (1750–1817).

Barbella, Emanuelle (1718–1777): primarily known as a violinist in his day, but now almost exclusively remembered for his mandolin music.

Bizet, Georges (1838–1875): opera *Don Procopio*.

Bogdanović, Dušan (b. 1955): several miniatures with guitar.

Boulez, Pierre (1925–2016): *Improvisation sur Mallarmé III* for soprano and instrumental ensemble and *Éclat* for instrumental ensemble.

Call, Leonard von (1767–1815): variations for mandolin and guitar, opp.8 and 25.

Carter, Elliot (1908–2012): *Luimen* for chamber ensemble.

Corrette, Michel (1707–1795): substantial method and a handful of chamber pieces.

Cowell, Henry (1897–1965): suite *Persian Set* for chamber ensemble including mandolin.

Crumb, George (b. 1929): song cycle *Ancient Voices of Children*.

Dyens, Roland (b. 1955–2016): *Deux Celebres Melodies Populaires* for mandolin and guitar.

Foden, William (1860–1947): a handful of arrangements, most notably for his touring ensemble, the “Big Trio” consisting of mandolin (Giuseppe Pettine), banjo (Frederick Bacon), and guitar (Foden himself).

Gál, Hans (1890–1987): mostly remembered for his mandolin music, especially the *Capriccio* for mandolin orchestra and a handful of chamber pieces.

Gilardino, Angelo (b. 1941): concerto *Fiori di Novembre* for mandolin, guitar, and chamber orchestra; *Sonatina-Lied no.4* for mandolin and guitar; and quartet *I Castelli d'Acqua* for two mandolins, mandola, and guitar.

Gragnani, Filippo (1768–1820): three nocturnes for mandolin (or violin) and guitar from a manuscript discovered in a collection in Prague (but the same music is also attributed to Carulli, published in Paris as “Duets” with violin op.5 and without reference to mandolin...but there were several publications designated as Carulli’s op.5, so these are usually referred to as op.5c when attributed to Carulli).

Handel, George Frideric (1685–1759): oratorio *Alexander Balus*, HWV 65 (used fourth-tuned, gut-strung mandolino).

Hasse, Johann Adolf (1699–1783): concerto (originally for fourth-tuned, gut-strung mandolino, but sometimes played on the modern instrument).

Henze, Hans Werner (1926–2012): several works, most popularly *Carillon*, *Récitatif*, and *Masque* for mandolin, guitar, and harp.

Hummel, Johann Nepomuk (1778–1837): concerto, S 28 (dedicated to mandolino cremonese/bresciano virtuoso Bartolomeo Bortolazzi) and sonata, op.37a (dedicated to “Signore Franc. Mora de Malfatti,” Italian expatriate and Beethoven’s one-time physician, the intended mandolin type for the sonata debated by geeks).

Kaufmann, Armin (1902–1980): a relatively prolific composer with diverse output, but now mostly remembered for his compositions involving mandolin, especially *Burletta*, op.62 and *Mitoka Dragomirna*, op.63 for mandolin and piano.

Krenek, Ernst (1900–1991): opera *Karl V*; *Kleine Symphony*, op.58; and suite for mandolin and guitar, op.242.

Lehár, Franz (1870–1948): operetta *Die Lustige Witwe*.

Leoncavallo, Ruggero (1857–1919): multi-movement tone poem *La Nuit de Mai* for tenor and orchestra (including mandolin and lute [!]).

Mahler, Gustav (1860–1911): symphonies no.7 and 8 and symphony for tenor, alto, and orchestra *Das Lied von der Erde*.

Massenet, Jules (1842–1912): opera *Don Quichotte*.

Monti, Vittorio (1868–1925): mandolin method and several chamber pieces (including the very famous Czardas repeatedly misappropriated by wicked violinists).

Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus (1756–1791): two songs for voice and mandolin, K 349 & 351 and the opera *Don Giovanni*, K 527 (again, intended mandolin type hotly debated by geeks).

Mussorgsky, Modest (1839–1881): unfinished opera *Sorochinskaya Yarmarka*.

Paganini, Niccolò (1782–1840): *Sonata per Rovene*, MS 14 and *Serenata*, MS 16 (both for mandolino genovese and guitar) and a three-movement sonata (usually named *Minuetto* for its first movement, MS 106 (unaccompanied mandolino genovese).

Paisiello, Giovanni (1740–1816): three speculatively attributed concertos.

Prokofiev, Sergei (1891–1953): ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, op.64.

Respighi, Ottorino (1879–1936): tone poem *Feste Romane*.

Sammartini, Giovanni Battista (1701–1775): a very fine sonata with basso continuo (for fourth-tuned, gut strung mandolino).

Santórsola, Guido (1904–1994): *Sonata no.6* for mandolin and guitar.

Scarlatti, Domenico (1685–1757): multi-movement sonata for soprano instrument with “basso numerato,” K 89, the first movement named *Sonatina: per mandolino, e cimbalo*. by one manuscript source in a Paris collection; as a result, all similar multi-movement sonatas with figured bass—K 81, 88, 89, 90, and 91—are popularly interpreted on mandolin relatives with basso continuo (and more rarely K 73, 77, and 78 simply by virtue of having multiple movements).

Schönberg, Arnold (1874–1951): several arrangements of songs for chamber ensembles; *Serenade*, op.24; and the unfinished opera *Moses und Aron*.

Sprongl, Norbert (1892–1983): a relatively prolific composer with diverse output, but now mostly remembered for his compositions involving mandolin, especially the duo for mandolin and guitar, op.85/2.

Stravinsky, Igor (1882–1971): ballet *Agon*. The English mandolinist Hugo D’Alton performed *Agon* with Stravinsky conducting in London during the 1950s. Stravinsky was so impressed that he offered to write a mandolin concerto for D’Alton...if D’Alton could conjure up a £20,000 commission fee. Needless to say, being a professional mandolinist, D’Alton couldn’t, and the concerto never came to be (Neil Gladd, personal communication). Ah well...

Verdi, Giuseppe (1813–1901): opera *Otello* (likely intended for six-string Lombard mandolins, but rarely if ever performed using them).

Vivaldi, Antonio (1678–1741): concertos, RV 425, 532, and 558 and the oratorio *Juditha triumphans devicta Holofernis barbarie*, RV 644 (all originally used fourth-tuned, gut-strung mandolino, but now very popular on modern instruments as well).

Webern, Anton (1883–1945): *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, op.10.

A small sampling of the primary (and primarily) mandolin specialist composers:

Abt, Valentine (1873–1942): well regarded in his day and an early proponent of duo style.

Bickford, Zarh Myron (1876–1961): husband and duo partner to famous US guitarist Vadah Olcott-Bickford (at least famous in the pre-Segovia era).

Bortolazzi, Bartolomeo (1773–1841): championed gut-strung mandolino cremonese and published a substantial method for that instrument. Dedicatee of Hummel’s concerto.

Calace, Raffaele (1863–1934): perhaps the most prominent figure from the mandolin’s last “golden era” in sustaining interest in the instrument to persist into the present day—prolific composer of technically demanding music of quality, touring virtuoso, early recording artist, and luthier.

Craton, John (b. 1953): prolific composer of diverse works with numerous mandolin pieces of good quality.

Denis, Pietro (ca. 1735–after 1805): prolific composer, works including a substantial early method, many solos and chamber pieces, and several volumes of song accompaniment.

Gervasio, Giovanni Battista (ca. 1725–ca. 1785): several sonatas with basso continuo and the earliest known mandolin method.

Giovale/Gioviale, Giovanni (1885–1949): also a prolific recording artist while staying in New York during the late 1920s.

Giuliani, Giovanni Francesco (ca. 1760–after 1818): one of the many “other” Giuliani-es, several having written for mandolin.

Gladd, Neil (b. 1955): one of the primary living composers for the instrument, employing a modern and mostly atonal musical language but with great respect for structure and thematic development.

Hoffmann, Giovanni/Johann (ca. 1770–ca. 1814): wrote for fourth-tuned, gut-strung mandolino, including many chamber works and one concerto, all of good quality.

Kioulaphides, Victor (b. 1961): also an award winning “chamber opera” composer and virtuoso bassist with several fine works for guitar solo and in ensemble to his credit as well.

Kobayashi Yoshinao (b. 1961): one of the primary living composers for the instrument, his music in a decidedly modern idiom, of excellent quality and structural integrity, and requiring a strong command of technique to perform convincingly. His works are recently popular as set pieces in competitions.

Kuwahara Yasuo (1946–2003): several demanding solos and appealing mandolin orchestra pieces.

Leone, Gabriele (ca. 1735–after 1768): wrote what is perhaps the most sophisticated of the first generation of methods, already developing many advanced and idiomatic techniques to a very high level. Named only “Sig. Leone” in publication, and his mandolin works are sometimes misattributed to his harpsichordist brother, Pietro.

Munier, Carlo (1859–1911): extremely prolific composer, arranger, and pedagogue. His work helped to initiate the mandolin’s last “golden era.”

Nakano Jirō (1902–2000): mostly known for his attractive solos with a decidedly romantic feel.

Pace, Bernardo de (1886–1966): the house mandolinist at New York’s Metropolitan Opera (back when the world was sophisticated enough to support house mandolinists at major opera companies).

Pettine, Giuseppe (1874–1966): the leading proponent of mandolin in the US during the mandolin’s last “golden era.” Dedicatee of one of Calace’s concertos.

Ranieri, Silvio (1882–1956): the leading proponent of early Roman-type instruments and technique.

Siegel, Samuel (1875–1948): very popular virtuoso performer in his day, sometimes credited with inventing duo-style techniques. His vaudevillian compositions sound dated by today’s standards.

Stauffer, Aubrey (1876–1952): also wrote popular songs and some early film music. He may be most famous for exceptionally awkward duo-style arrangements of grand orchestral works.

Weeks, Seth (ca. 1865–after 1924): African-American and the first US composer of a mandolin concerto.

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