

Mandolin enjoyed ‘golden age’ in late 19th century

“The members of the Lotus Club last evening entertained their lady friends at their rooms on North Center Street,” noted The Pantagraph of April 21, 1894. “They tripped merrily through the evening to the melodious strains of Orpheus Mandolin Orchestra.”

Two musicians with local connections—Fred T. Ashton and Lloyd Allayre Loar—speak to the popularity of the mandolin in the final decades of the 19th century and into the first decades of the 20th century.

The Classical Mandolin Society of America is holding its convention at the Marriott Hotel in Uptown Normal Oct. 9-13. This convention will feature mandolin players from across the U.S. and Canada, Europe and Japan. Also performing will be the Twin Cities based Orpheus Mandolin Orchestra. Although this 12-member group dates to 2003, its name comes from Fred Ashton’s late-19th century orchestra.

Mandolin enthusiasts today speak of a “golden age” that dated to the Paris Exposition of 1879. It was there that the mandolin became all the rage in Europe after performances by Estudiantes Espanoles (Spanish Students) at the Paris Exposition of 1878. The instrument’s popularity spread to the U.S. “Thousands were taking up the instrument as a pastime, and it became an instrument of society, taken up by young men and women,” it’s been noted. “Mandolin orchestras were formed worldwide, incorporating not only the mandolin family of instruments, but also guitars, double basses zithers.”

As early as 1882, an eleven-year-old Ashton’s performance on violin drew notice in the local press.

The Orpheus Mandolin Orchestra organized in the early 1890s, with Ashton as its director.

“The Orpheus Mandolin Club has been out serenading several nights lately,” reported the Sept. 23, 1891 Pantagraph. “All are experts on this sweet instrument and the music is charming and greatly delights all who hear it.” In addition to Ashton, the club’s director, the performers at this time included Will Homuth, watchmaker; Eugene McColm, a bookbinder with Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co.; William E. McLernon, a printer who was also at Pantagraph Printing and Stationery; Carol Sprague, a jeweler (who worked with Homuth); and Fred Thomas, Pantagraph Printing and Stationery printer.

One month later, the group delivered matinee and evening Thanksgiving performances at the Grand Opera House on the 100 block of East Market Street. This theater building burned down in 1907, replaced by the Chatterton (later renamed the Illini) which still stands adjacent to Lucca Grill. The orchestra, “assisted by the best vocal and instrumental talent in the city, under the direction of Fred T. Ashton, will give the people of Bloomington one of the best concerts ever heard in this city,” was the promise. Tickets ranged from 25 to 50 cents.

“Instructor of violin, mandolin and guitar, banjo and all orchestral and band instruments,” Ashton advertised in 1893. “Manager and director of the Orpheus Mandolin Orchestra.” At the time, his studio was located in the Grand Opera House.

Later, Ashton and his wife Alberta Rickey established a music studio on North Main Street where they taught mostly piano and violin. Ashton then became the director of the Bloomington Band, formed from a merger of two local organizations—the DeMolay Band, sponsored by the Knight Templar, and the Dillon Band, directed by Ora Dillon.

“Open to all high class engagements, tea parties, receptions private dancing parties and clubs,” read a promotional item for the 1895-96 season. “Special inducements to all out of town engagements, commencements, dinner parties, weddings, etc.” In addition to Ashton, the orchestra then included Frank Miller, Henry Muhl and Fred Thomas on mandolin; William Hull, cello; Fred Schroeder, flute; and William Thompson, harp.

Ashton also composed and published his own works, including “Gay Tally Ho” and “The Caddy.”

Ashton left Bloomington around 1920, eventually establishing a second career in Oklahoma as a director of music for Oklahoma City schools. Despite Ashton’s departure, the Bloomington Band, under the direction of George W. Marton, continued to be a major player in the local music and cultural scene.

Ashton passed away in 1940. “There was a time,” eulogized *The Pantagraph*, “when a great social affair in this city could not be considered complete without Mr. Ashton and his orchestra.”

The current Orpheus Mandolin Orchestra performs a range of popular music from the 1890s into the 1920s, including everything from marches to ragtime.

“Loar, the ‘Wizard of the Mandolin,’ is a revelation to those who believe that instrument to occupy a secondary position in musical excellence,” noted a newspaper from Rushville, Ind.

As a soprano, Shipp was said to have “a voice of great beauty, with a range of three octaves.”

“This is a company of originality and variety,” noted a circular on the Fisher Shipp-led group of touring musicians. “The program will include violin, mandolin, viola, soprano and contralto solos, duets, instrumental trios, mixed trios ... readings and song cycles in costume, character and musical studies and sketches.”

The Bloomington Chautauqua of 1914 included performances by the Fisher-Shipp Concert Company. The Aug. 28 afternoon performances included two solos by contralto Pauline Harrison, “Happy Days” and “Irish Love Song;” an instrumental arrangement by Loar from William Tell; a solo by violinist Carolyn Pomroy; a “burlesque on grand opera” by Harrison and Shipp; and an closing ensemble number from “Il Trovatore.”

In early July 1922, Loar and Shipp performed in Bloomington as the Gibsonian Orchestra. A Jul. 7 afternoon program included Loar on the saw and violin, and Shipp giving an impersonation and singing “The Daffodils” and “Annie Laurie.”

The “Gibsonian plectral ensemble” performed at the Gibson City Chautauqua. One week later, on Aug 25, the Gibsonian Orchestra with Loar as director and Shipp and soprano and reader, performed in Mattoon, Ill. “Mr. Loar was generous with his saw numbers and also gave several viola selections, playing ‘The Rosary’ in the afternoon and again by request in the evening,” noted the local press. Shipp, assisted by Walter Kaye Bauer. “have two excellent comedy sketches, one, a takeoff on the movies, a humorous skit in pantomime, furnishing fun for afternoon and the other, in the evening, giving an equally ludicrous imitation of grand opera.”

Loar was also a pioneer in the amplification of instruments, giving built an electric double bass in the mid-1920s.

The Classical Mandolin Society of America convention in Normal the second weekend in October will include a number of concerts, including on Saturday night at the Center for Performing Arts on the Illinois State University campus. Admission to all concerts is free, though there attendees are encouraged to make a ten-dollar donation.

Although its popularity has never reached the heights of more than a century ago, the mandolin has been incorporated into a wide range of musical, including bluegrass, Celtic, classical and even rock-n-roll.