

The Embergher Mandolin



Ralf Leenen and Barry Pratt

FOREWORD

Over the past four hundred years, the simple word ‘mandolin’ has been used to describe an astonishingly wide variety of instruments. Some resemble a soprano lute or a miniature guitar, while others are more like a small cittern or even a plucked violin, and members of this supposedly homogeneous family can differ markedly from each other in almost every respect. What should be the shape of the body (round back or flat)? The number of strings (four courses, or five, or six)? The method of plucking (plectrum or fingertips)? The tuning (in fifths, or fourths)? Or even the type of strings (gut, steel, brass, or a mixture)? Yet each of these numerous forms has its place in the mandolin’s history, having been developed over the centuries to perform widely different styles of music, from dulcet baroque chamber pieces or delicate operatic serenades, to forceful bluegrass or zither-like choro music.

However, when we come to the classic repertoire that was created in the nineteenth and early twentieth century by a succession of virtuoso Italian performers and composers (such as Carlo Munier, Raffaele Calace, and Silvio Ranieri), there can be little doubt as to the preferred type of mandolin. It is the round-back, fifth-tuned, wire-strung, four-course instrument commonly referred to as the Neapolitan mandolin, initially developed in the 1740s by the Vinaccia family of Naples, and modernised in the mid-1830s by Pasquale Vinaccia. But although Naples is widely considered to be the home of the mandolin, the finest concert instruments were actually made further north, in Rome, and in the town of Arpino, some fifty miles south-east of the capital. For it was here that the Roman mandolin was perfected in the closing years of the nineteenth century, by the legendary luthier Luigi Embergher.

Until now, only a few sketchy biographical details of this great instrument maker and the apprentices who succeeded him have been published, and the history of his workshop has been shrouded in mystery. So I am delighted to introduce this book by Ralf Leenen and Barry Pratt (two of the world’s leading authorities on the subject of Embergher mandolins), which represents the first definitive study of these instruments and their maker. With the aid of surviving instruments and period catalogues, they have been able to note every modification and development that has taken place over the past century-and-a-quarter, as Embergher and his fellow luthiers strove to create an ever more beautiful and sonorous timbre. And their detailed analysis of precisely how these instruments produce their unique sound helps to explain why Embergher’s instruments are widely regarded throughout the world as the most perfect form of mandolin ever created.

Dr. Paul Sparks
Leven, Beverley, East Yorkshire
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Barry PRATT

Having started to play the mandolin at the age of fifteen, Barry studied with the world renowned English mandolinist Hugo d'Alton. He has performed with many of England's leading mandolinists and as well as giving concerts in Britain, he regularly performs with ensembles in other European countries and has recorded a CD of original works for mandolin with the Danish musicians Tove Flensburg and Per G Hansen. Together with Paul Sparks and the Japanese musicians Sanae Onji and Kego Fuji, he formed the Anglo-Japanese mandolin quartet which has given concerts in England and the U.S.A. Barry has also toured Japan with Tove Flensburg as mandolin duettists giving recitals in Osaka and Tokyo. He has researched into the history and construction of the Embergher mandolin for over thirty years and is an acknowledged authority on the instrument and string making.



Ralf LEENEN

Ralf is a multi-talented musician who regularly performs on both mandolin and violin with ensembles and orchestras in his native country of Belgium. He started to play the mandolin at the age of six under the guidance of Joe Van Dunnegem and joined the Royal Estudiantina 'La Napolitaine' when he was twelve, becoming their leader and principal soloist two years later; he continued his studies in classical Italian mandolin technique in the tradition of Silvio Ranieri under Henri Gamblin, La Napolitaine's conductor and director. Ralf studied violin at the Brussels Royal Conservatory with Clemens Quatacker, and Igor and Valery Oistrakh; as a second instrument he studied classical guitar with Albert Sunderman; graduating in 1997 with a Master's degree in Music. In 1999 he succeeded Henri Gamblin as the director of 'La Napolitaine' and has raised the orchestra's current profile by giving concerts in other European countries as well as Belgium. Ralf's preferred instrument is the mandolin and over the last seventeen years he has created a substantial archive on Embergher instruments.

