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# The REVIEW- Television and Entertainment

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## Mandolin Society Concert took listeners back a century

John G. Whitacre-Alliance Review

The Montana Mandolin Society took listeners back a century to the mandolin orchestras that were the rage in the early 1900's. Based in Bozeman, Montana, the string ensemble played at Alliance High School in the opening concert of the Alliance Area Concert Association's 04-05 season. MMS plays a variety of popular and traditional music on mandolin family instruments and other string instruments and is a resurrection of the Bozeman Mandolin and Guitar Club in 1902.

Group leader Dennis White said the mandolin orchestra era ran from 1894 to 1924 and ended when Louis Armstrong's loud, driving jazz superseded mandolins and the gentler classical and traditional music styles. Mandolin groups were as ubiquitous then as rock groups are now and were found in just about every city. They were inspired by 'The Spanish Students' that toured the country playing bandoras, a large European instrument similar to a mandolin or a guitar.

Those mandolin groups played a quartet of instruments patterned after the string instruments of the orchestra. The mandolin is tuned like the violin; the alto mandola matches the viola, the mandocello; the cello, and the mandobass; the double bass. The groups were supplemented sometimes with guitars and banjos and members of the violin family.

The Montana Mandolin Society adds octave mandolin, an instrument developed in the 1960's by Celtic musicians and patterned after the Greek bouzouki, its tuning lying in the tenor clef between the mandola and mandocello.

Also included in the group are guitars, banjo, double bass in place of mandobass, hammer dulcimer, violins, cello and percussion, with many members switching instruments or trading with each other.

MMS also recreates the 1902 sound with its repertoire, which includes tunes by the Baroque-era Irish harper Turlough O'Carolan, early 1900's jazz tunes, southern Appalachian fiddle tunes, and modern tunes in traditional styles.

Violinist and mandolinist Nancy Padilla played her composition, “The Promise” on violin, a Scottish-style tune with double stops on the violin complemented by a surrounding wall of harmonies from mandolin, steel-stringed guitar, octave mandolin and cello. As Padilla ended, the cello played a low-register tag that gave a fittingly rich reprise to the gentle tune.

Similar in style was Peter Ostroushko’s “Heart of the Heartland.”. The MMS arrangement started out similar to Ostroushko’s arrangement as heard in Ken Burns "Lewis and Clark" documentary. Megan Waldum played the melody on mandolin, with the cello joining her on the repeat of the first part.

These are traditional tunes, and those written in the style have two parts of equal length, stemming from their use as dances, with each part repeated, and the entire tune played again as many times as the dance required or the musicians wished.

The concert gave a mix of slow, medium-tempo and fast tunes. “The Flying Wedge”, a tune named for a dangerous football play that eventually was outlawed, was a galop, a dance that White said involved couples scooting down the hall and back. The tune’s 120-beat tempo confirmed White’s statement that those dances were short, because they were exhausting.

White played an uptempo banjo solo in the clawhammer style, the southern style where the right hand is hooked under and the thumb and two fingers play melody and rhythm. He said these tunes were played by slaves in their quarters after an evening playing white folks’ music.

Another southern fiddle tune, played after intermission, featured fiddle and mandolin doubling on the melody while bass, guitar and hammer dulcimer played rhythm and harmony. The dulcimer and mandolin doubled on the second round while the fiddle played offbeat chords.

Early 20th-century pop tunes were also represented: “Sweet Georgia Brown”, with descending chord progressions and brush percussion; a jazz arrangement with solo mandola of the ’70s pop tune “Misty”, and “The Saratoga Blues”, a slow, stately blues with the entire group creating full rich sounds, were reminiscent of the repertoire of the old mandolin groups.

Folk and swing blended in the driving, hypnotic “Duck Waddle” written by White, percussion giving a heavy accent on the third beat. The low instruments, the octave mandolin, mandocello and cello started the tune, with the violin and mandolin joining them on the low strings.

One of the most moving tunes was White's arrangement of "Oh Susannah". He said he always thought people played the song too fast. He feels it is a song about a slave who has been separated from his true love and is pining away for her, and, in the only vocal of the evening, White gave new life to this old warhorse, offering solid evidence that he is right about the tempo.

MMS finished its program with an unusual arrangement of "Soldier's Joy", possibly the most popular fiddle tune from the British Isles. The banjo joined by mandola, started the tune, normally in quick 4/4 but with jazz-influenced ascending bass notes, and the full sound of the entire group led the audience to call for an encore, a latin-flavored tune with conga.

The Montana Mandolin Society sells CD's and can be contacted at 406-587-71989 [www.montanamando.com](http://www.montanamando.com).