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Clara Ross, Mabel Downing and ladies' guitar and mandolin bands in late Victorian Britain

DURING the final decades of the 19th century, the playing of guitars and mandolins in large combinations became a popular form of music-making amongst amateur musicians in Britain. This fashion coincided with a period when educated middle- and upper-class women were quietly finding ways to circumvent the restrictive domestic and maternal roles that society had hitherto ascribed to them, and were seeking ways in which they could make their artistic mark on the wider world without ceasing to appear 'respectable'. One of the many ways in which they accomplished this was to form all-female guitar and mandolin bands, which enabled them to give public concerts at a time when respectable women had few other opportunities to perform instrumental music outside the home. This article chronicles the rise of these all-female bands, looks at the concerts they gave, the music they played and the instruments they used, and also draws attention to two women who feature prominently in their history: the composer Clara Ross and the band leader Mabel Downing.

The fashion for guitar and mandolin bands began in the early 1880s in Italy, where they were known as *circoli mandolinistici*. Following the unification of the country in 1870, many Italians sought symbols of collective national identity, and the mandolin—which had for decades been dismissed by educated Italian musicians as a humble Neapolitan street instrument—came to be seen as an authentically Italian voice, and was soon being studied seriously by the middle classes and the aristocracy, with even Queen Margherita becoming an expert player. The guitar had remained a favourite instrument of accompaniment amongst all levels of Italian society

throughout the 19th century, but now large groups of guitarists and mandolinists began coming together to make music, as Amerigo Parrini (who was growing up in Florence at this time) later recalled:

The guitar has always been cultivated among us with special fondness: many distinguished musicians devoted themselves to it ... I do not think I exaggerate by saying that [in about 1880] Florence seemed taken by acute mandolin mania, which spared very few people. Playing-by-ear people, musicians, men and women, stern old people and carefree youth, hairdressers and magistrates, milliners and noble ladies, scholars and illiterates, all were bitten by the plucking bug.¹

The first formally organized guitar and mandolin band in Italy was the 'Reale circolo mandolinistico Regina Margherita', founded in Florence in March 1881 under the patronage of Queen Margherita. An article in *The Musical Standard* in 1883 described it as 'one of the quaintest orchestras known to the musical world', with almost 100 members, and noted that it had been created

by a small number of Florentine gentlemen, fanatici per la musica, who had made up their minds that the mandoline² was the national instrument of Italy, and, as such, must be 'revived,' cultivated and popularised.³

During the 1880s, a *circolo* was also formed in Milan (where Verdi included it in the first performance of *Otello* in 1887), and in many other Italian cities, culminating in the first national competition for plucked-instrument orchestras and soloists, held in Genoa in 1892. As can be seen from the photograph of the Florentine *circolo* (illus.1) taken in that year, it was a mixed-gender band, consisting on that occasion of six guitars, about 20 mandolins and two



1 The 'Reale circolo mandolinistico Regina Margherita', 1892

harps, augmented for the competition by timpani, cello and piano.⁴

In addition to the enduring worldwide popularity of Italian opera, the 1880s witnessed a burgeoning fashion for Neapolitan songs (perhaps the most celebrated being Luigi Denza's *Funiculi, Funiculà* of 1880), and close links between the British and Italian royal families helped to cultivate further a taste in Britain for all things Italian. Mandolin virtuosos began to visit London on a regular basis⁵ and enjoyed considerable success in the major concert halls, above all the Neapolitan virtuoso Ferdinando de Cristofaro, whose 1886 appearances at St James's Hall attracted great attention:

This gentleman gets some really remarkable effects out of his tiny instrument. Few would imagine that the mandoline could be made so sweet and expressive. Signor Cristofaro contrives to give a sustained and expressive tone by his dexterity in manipulation ... on the mandoline, an

instrument for which both Mozart and Beethoven wrote, and which is, we understand, now once more becoming fashionable.⁶

In 1888, the Italian Exhibition at Earl's Court was London's unmissable social event, with fashionable female aristocrats becoming fascinated by a group of guitar and mandolin players from Naples (*illus. 2*), so much so that newspapers were soon reporting that

no fewer than five of these interesting persons have, during the past month, contracted matrimonial alliances in futuro with English ladies. In three of the cases the ladies are to be found in 'Debrett', and in all five the worldly position of the wives that are to be is far and away above that of the lords they have won.⁷

This was also a decade when the social expectations of educated middle-class and aristocratic British women were rapidly changing. For most of the 19th century, girls from respectable families had been



2 The Neapolitan Mandoline Concert at the 1888 Italian Exhibition, Earl's Court (*The Illustrated London News* (7 July 1888), p.18)

encouraged to acquire a competence in music (usually piano and singing), but this was primarily to improve their chances in the marriage market, and their skills were intended only for domestic display (or perhaps as one of the accomplishments necessary for a career as a governess), not for the public stage, which would entail the impropriety of subjecting themselves to the male gaze. They might entertain family and guests at home, or occasionally sing in an oratorio or in church, but appearing in a theatre or a concert hall (especially for money) would have compromised their respectable status, and was something best left to 'foreign' women. It is no coincidence that the female instrumental soloists who were best known to London audiences—such as the pianist Clara Schumann, the violinist Wilma Neruda and the guitarist Madame Sidney Pratten (*née* Catherina Pelzer)—invariably came from overseas.

Although women were by now being employed as orchestral musicians in many continental countries, and the all-professional 'Viennese Lady Orchestra' from Austria spent six months in London during 1885, performing to great acclaim in Battersea Park,⁸ no professional British orchestra would allow women into its ranks, a situation that would endure until 1913 when Henry Wood introduced female violinists to play alongside men in the Queen's Hall Orchestra. Indeed, the violin was one of many orchestral instruments, including the cello, the oboe and the entire brass family, that were widely considered unsuitable for a respectable woman to study because playing them required contortions of the face or body,

whereas a female pianist could retain a demure position during performance. Yet this was a period when large numbers of young British women were being trained to a professional standard of musicianship, thanks to the opening in 1876 of the National Training School for Music (which became the Royal College of Music in 1883), the Guildhall School of Music in 1880, and various educational establishments in the provinces. As a result, by the mid-1880s London and other major cities contained large numbers of musically talented young women who had few outlets for their skills, other than playing at home for friends and family, becoming governesses to other people's children, or taking up the poorly paid profession of a peripatetic music teacher.

Neither the mandolin nor the guitar was among the instruments taught in British music colleges during the 1880s,⁹ but they soon came to be regarded (in accordance with the prevailing social construction of femininity) as particularly suitable for women to play. Both were fairly small and attractively shaped, they could be played in a seated position (with no unseemly contortion of the body), they were associated (initially) with relatively modest musical ambitions, and they produced delicate sounds. The example of mandolin-playing Queen Margherita further strengthened the appeal of plucked-stringed instruments to fashion-conscious women, particularly when they were played in ensembles. Furthermore, while it was certainly the case that performing music for personal gain was not considered a respectable occupation for a well-bred British woman, raising money for good causes by giving benefit concerts for charity could be seen as a laudable and Christian enterprise, and one that did not compromise a musical woman's status as an 'amateur' (interpreted in the strict sense of someone who pursues a skill purely for the love of it, unsullied by financial considerations), at a time when the word 'professional' could carry negative social connotations. This was the background against which the fashion for ladies' guitar and mandolin bands arose.

The First 'Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Band'

On 25 and 26 March 1886, an ensemble called 'The Ladies' Guitar Band' (although it consisted from the outset of both guitars and mandolins) gave its first

public performances. The band presented 'a charming selection of music ... with Neapolitan songs' at a 'café chantant' held at 32 Cadogan Square in Kensington, in aid of an industrial home for young girls of Westminster.¹⁰ Formed by Lady Mary Hervey and Miss Augusta Hervey, the members were all from wealthy aristocratic families, with no need to perform music for personal gain, so their desire to appear in public could be presented as an altruistic wish to raise money for the poor. There are few pre-1888 newspaper reports of concerts by the band, whose members were presumably still mastering their newly fashionable instruments and studying with the celebrated guitarist Madame Pratten, who composed and arranged at least seven pieces for the Hervey band (most for guitars only) at around this time, including a Zapateado (illus.3).¹¹ However, from 1888 onwards, the band became markedly more serious in its endeavours, engaged experienced conductors to lead them and, as 'The Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Band', began performing regularly at charitable fund-raising concerts in the most fashionable parts of London.

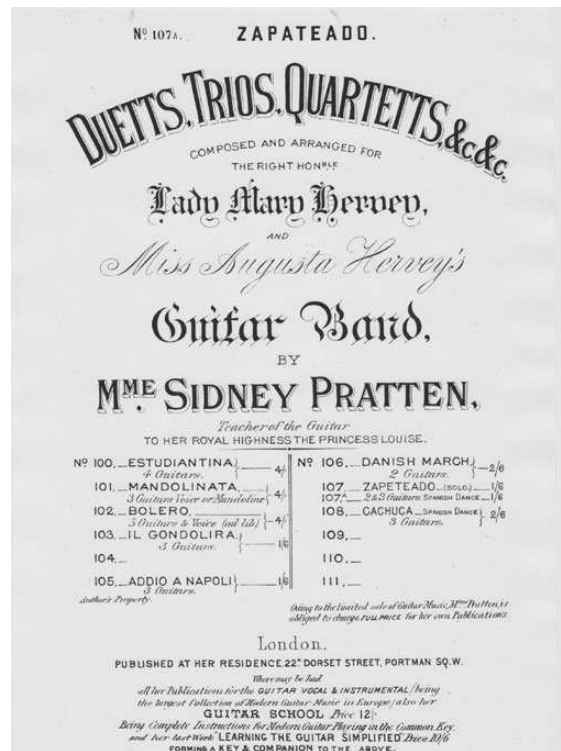
Their appearances in 1888 included a benefit concert at St George's Hall, Langham Place, on 28 February, where Federico Sacchi (who was music teacher to two of Queen Victoria's daughters) conducted the band. Several of their pieces were encored, and one (male) journalist was sufficiently distracted by the women's appearance to remark that

as a friendly warning to novices on the boards of the St. George's Hall, we may mention that this was the second occasion on which we saw a young lady, all unconscious of the effect she was creating, cross her lower limbs so as to expose to the audience some eighteen inches of well-filled black stocking.¹²

By 1889, Europe's leading mandolin virtuoso had taken over as conductor, and

Signor de Cristofaro's annual morning concert at Steinway Hall was one of the greatest successes of the season, the presence of the Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Band (Amateur) and the 'Ladies' Choir' from the London Academy of Music, proving a considerable attraction for both ears and eyes.¹³

The band's other charitable appearances that year included a concert at Brompton Hospital on 15 July,



3 Front cover of *Zapateado* by Mme Sidney Pratten (published c.1888) (reproduced courtesy of James Westbrook)

during which Princess Christian (Queen Victoria's third daughter) performed a piano solo, and shortly afterwards became the band's royal patron. Its membership on that day consisted of Lady Dorothy Stewart Murray, Lady Emily Cadogan, Lady Sophie Cadogan, Lady Edith Ward, the Hon. Isabel Mills, Lady Forbes of Newe, Miss Mabel Forbes and Miss Violet Mordaunt.¹⁴

By now, the band's repertoire was expanding far beyond the simple Neapolitan tunes with which it had made its debut in 1886, and the many positive concert reviews that appeared in the press suggest that its performances possessed considerable musical merit. Over the next few years, its programmes included such varied material as Schubert's *Moments musicaux* no.3, the serenade from *Pagliacci*, a selection from *Aida*, Mozart's 'Deh, vieni alla finestra' (the mandolin serenade from *Don Giovanni*), a serenade by Clementi, the overture to Gounod's *Mireille*, and the Introduction and Malaguena from Moszkowski's *Boabdil*.¹⁵ Additionally, Cristofaro

composed for them a ‘Serenade for solo voice and chorus, with accompaniment of mandolins and guitars,’ and planned to conduct the band in London during the summer of 1890; however, he developed peritonitis and died suddenly in Paris on 18 April.¹⁶ The press recorded numerous performances each year, including ‘an excellent concert’ in February 1892, when the band included ‘Ladies Lilian and Mildred Denison, Lady Forbes, Lady Edwards-Moss, [and] Lady Clayton’ in its ranks.¹⁷ By 1893, the band’s regular leader was a harpist called Mrs Perkins, the inclusion of her instrument being reminiscent of the custom in Italian *circoli* (indeed, the band was now frequently billed as the ‘Ladies’ Harp, Mandoline and Guitar Band’).

Before continuing the history of this pioneering band, let us now look at how the fashion for similar ensembles spread across the capital, and then across Britain, during the 1890s.

Miss Clara Ross’ Ladies’ Mandoline & Guitar Band

By the early 1890s, dozens of all-female ensembles could be found throughout London, at many levels of society, and with varying degrees of musical accomplishment. Some were founded by members of the aristocracy, others were based in newly formed ladies’ arts clubs, while music teachers often formed bands amongst their female pupils, and the causes they raised money for covered the spectrum of Victorian life. Besides such worthy recipients as the Hospital for Sick Children in Great Ormond Street, the Society of Women Journalists, the Girls’ Friendly Society and Mrs Dalison’s Guild of Impoverished Irish Gentlewomen, some bands performed to raise funds for the Primrose League (an organization dedicated to spreading Conservative principles throughout Britain), while others supported the temperance movement, or early socialist causes. And although performing for personal gain was still widely frowned upon, some bands did offer their services at garden parties, while the *Temperance Caterer* noted in 1892 that

London leads in Tea Rooms ... small orchestras, ladies’ mandolin bands and selections of vocal music are among the many attractions provided at these tea rooms, the majority of which are run by gentlewomen and most daintily furnished.¹⁸

The repertory of these bands consisted almost entirely of music by male composers, but we come now to one notable exception: the composer and band leader Clara Louisa Ross ([illus.4](#)). Born in Brighton on 1 July 1858 into a prosperous family of shopkeepers at 129 St James’s Street,¹⁹ she studied music as a child, and on 25 June 1877 (following an audition before Sir Arthur Sullivan) was awarded the Bristol scholarship to attend the newly founded National Training School for Music. She completed her studies in Easter 1882, leaving ‘with honour’ in singing and with ‘the highest honour’ in piano, and remained in Kensington throughout the 1880s, composing songs with piano accompaniment, several of which were published. On the 1891 census, she described her occupation as ‘composer of music.’²⁰



4 Clara Ross with mandolin, taken c.1888–90. This *carte de visite* was produced by the photographer John William Naudin, whose London studio operated from 13, The Terrace, Kensington, between 1884 and 1894 (reproduced courtesy of Andrew Ross)

When the mandolin started to become fashionable amongst the female aristocracy during the second half of the 1880s, Clara (who seems to have had no previous connection with the instrument) saw a new opportunity for herself, as performer, teacher and composer. She quickly mastered the mandolin and, with her lifelong friend Mrs Augustus Hart-Dyke (*née* Mercy Harris) began performing mandolin duets (sometimes accompanied by her brother Edmund on piano), before forming the all-female 'Kensington Mandolinists' at the start of the 1890s. She not only led this band but also composed most of its music, and trained the players to a high musical standard, as this review of a concert given at Queen's Gate Hall, Harrington Road, on 14 December 1892 attests:

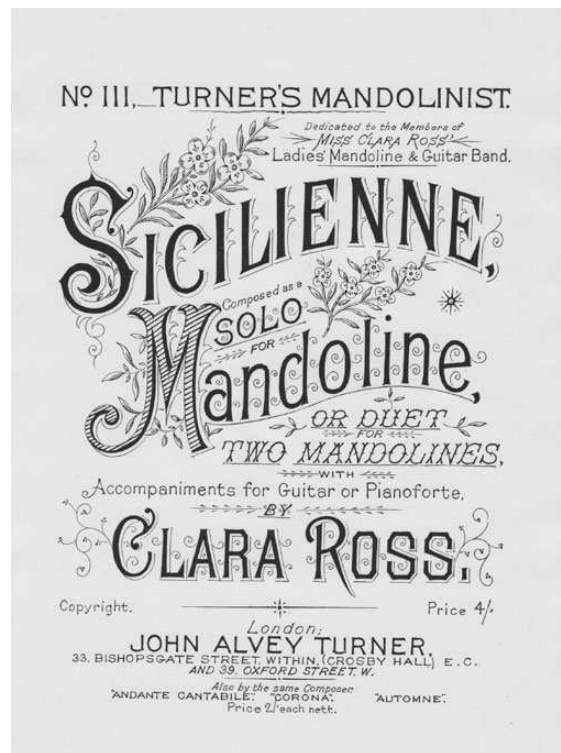
Miss Clara Ross has greatly distinguished herself in Kensington, and indeed elsewhere, as a very clever executant and teacher of the mandolin; and it reflects the greatest credit on her that she should have been able to get together an efficient band of some twenty young lady pupils, who divided their attentions between mandolins and guitars, the combination of the two producing a most effective result. Conducted by their able teacher, they played compositions, chiefly of her own, in which it was shown how well Miss Ross understands the effects that can be produced from these instruments ... Perhaps the most appreciated number of the programme was the mandolin duet played by Miss Ross and Mrs. Hart-Dyke.²¹

The Kensington Mandolinists were subsequently renamed 'Miss Clara Ross' Ladies' Mandolin and Guitar Band' and, over the next few years, rehearsed fortnightly in Kensington, and performed Clara's music at many of London's most fashionable events. From 1890 onwards her mandolin compositions began to be published, initially in versions for mandolin and piano issued by Phillips & Page and George White, before she entered (in 1894) into an exclusive agreement with John Alvey Turner (London's leading publisher of music for plucked instruments) for her mandolin compositions. Over the next decade, Turner published 41 of her works,²² the majority of which possess a musical sophistication that sets them apart from the vast quantity of mostly trivial mandolin music that was being published in Britain at this time. Her compositions were regularly singled out for praise in *The Musical Herald* and *The Musical Standard*, especially her attractively melodic *Sicilienne* (illus.5), dedicated to

'the members of Miss Clara Ross' Ladies' Mandoline & Guitar Band', who performed it regularly:

On Wednesday evening at Queen's Gate Hall, Mrs Hart-Dyke and Miss Clara Ross gave an evening concert at which their band of lady mandolinists, 'The Kensington Mandolinists', was the chief attraction. We have noticed the performance of these young ladies before, and on Wednesday they again gave evidence of the good training they have received. Among other pieces they performed some clever compositions of Miss Clara Ross, one of which, 'Sicilienne', is brilliant, melodious and excellently suited to the capability of the instruments.²³

The parts used by the band have not survived, but Turner customarily published mandolin music in two versions: the original, for mandolin and piano, and a simplified in-house arrangement for two mandolins and guitar. In Clara's case, the published guitar parts are greatly inferior to her piano originals (with the melodic and rhythmic complexities of the piano usually replaced by simple first-position chords, and



5 Front cover of *Sicilienne* by Clara Ross, published in 1893

florid passages omitted altogether), so anyone wishing to perform her music on mandolins and guitars would be well advised to begin with the piano part, and transcribe a new guitar part that stays faithful to the composer's intentions.

One of the band's most noteworthy performances was an appearance before royalty on 3 July 1893:

The Prince and Princess of Wales, who were accompanied by the Princesses Victoria and Maud, opened a bazaar at the Westminster Town Hall yesterday afternoon in aid of the funds of the Alexandra Hospital for Children with Hip Diseases ... Immediately below the platform, on which were gathered the ladies belonging to Miss Clara Ross's Amateur Mandoline and Guitar Band, were placed two chairs of state for the Prince and Princess ... On entering the hall the Royal party were received with loud cheers, and the lady orchestra played, while nurses from the institution sang, the National Anthem and 'God bless the Prince of Wales.'²⁴

Clara was by now in her late thirties and, despite the popularity that she was experiencing in London, she moved to the United States early in 1895 to marry a man she had first met as a student. He was Richard Atkins Griffin, an Irish operatic bass who had emigrated to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the mid-1880s, where he pursued a successful career as a singer and teacher under the name of Riccardo Ricci. The marriage took place in Yonkers, New York State, on 4 March 1895, and the Society page of the *Pittsburgh Bulletin* for March 1895 noted that:

Mr. and Mrs. Ricci were at one time fellow students at the Royal College of Music, London, where Mrs. Ricci (then Miss Ross) made piano music her principal study. For the past few years she has devoted a good deal of time to the mandolin, and is known on the other side as one of the leading composers of mandolin music. Her mandolin and guitar orchestra, consisting of twenty amateurs (all young ladies) was quite a feature in musical circles in South Kensington, and was favoured with Royal patronage and approval.

Clara settled with her husband in Wheeling, West Virginia, and as Clara Ross-Ricci she carved out a new (and more conventional) musical career. Back in London, her mandolin compositions continued appearing until the early 1900s, but in America she devoted herself exclusively to the voice, as a teacher of singing and as a composer of songs and trios for women's voices and piano (the best of which deserve

to be played, sung and heard anew). Following the death of her husband in 1905, Clara remained in the United States for several decades, returning to the UK prior to World War II to live in the Brighton area, where she died in 1954.²⁵

Mabel Downing and the Clifton Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Band

As we will see, innumerable ladies' guitar and mandolin bands flourished throughout Britain during the 1890s, most of them possessing only the most modest of artistic ambitions or technical ability, and existing as much for social as for musical reasons. But there were notable exceptions, particularly in the Bristol area, a part of Britain where the guitar had remained a popular instrument throughout the 19th century, long after the *guitaromanie* inspired by Fernando Sor and his contemporaries had faded in London. A search through West Country newspapers reveals the existence of several ladies' bands at this time, but one woman and one ensemble stand out for the quality of their performances and the ambitiousness of their programmes.

Mabel Downing was born in March 1870 in Weston-super-Mare, and in addition to learning the harp she studied guitar with Mme Pratten and mandolin with Leopoldo Francia (a young virtuoso from Milan). By 1895 she was advertising herself as 'Professor of the Harp, Guitar, Mandoline, Zither, and Philomele. Distances visited. 3, Melrose Place, Clifton', and had created

a new organisation in the 'Clifton Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Band', a party of eighteen amateurs, who devote their services to charitable objects. The band was organised, and is conducted, by Miss Downing.²⁶

Its early repertory consisted mostly of light Italian pieces (*Vita Gaia* by Bongini, *Flora* by G. B. Pirani), but within a few years it was also tackling such ambitious works as the *Symphonique no.1* by Berthold Tours and the *Waltz no.1* by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor,²⁷ and was performing regularly in the Bristol area, including annual concerts

before a large and fashionable audience ... The band, which does its conductress very great credit, rendered in the most perfect style selections from 'Crepuscule', a Cuban dance, Bongini's valse 'Vita Gaia', and Acton's 'Serenade Espagnole', the last two items being most praiseworthy.²⁸

In the 1901 census Mabel gave her occupation as 'Professor of Music'. She conducted several ladies' bands during these years, and the best players were combined in 1895 into

the West of England Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Society, which seems to have made itself exceedingly popular. The society is made up of the Clifton, Bath, and Weston-super-Mare Ladies' Bands, and some outside members who attend the general meetings held at the Imperial Hotel every six weeks. The three bands practice separately at the centres every week under the direction of Miss Mabel Downing. It is believed this is the largest society of its kind in England, and this season it will probably have fifty or more members. It is restricted to performers upon the mandoline, mandola, lute, guitar, and bow zither. The bands are quite private, and play only for charitable purposes, for which they are in great demand—especially the Clifton section. The members study chiefly the works of high class composers—one of the objects of the directress being to raise the status of the mandoline and kindred instruments which are now becoming so popular.²⁹

Mabel Downing continued to perform and conduct several ladies' bands in the Bristol area until about 1910, when she emigrated to Winnipeg, Manitoba, where she continued her career as teacher of, and performer on, plucked instruments.³⁰

Ladies' bands across Britain

One of the earliest bands to be formed outside London was organized in Derby by Miss Clara Gardiner, and gave a concert at the Temperance Hall on 11 February 1890, in aid of the Derbyshire Hospital for Sick Children. A few months later, at a concert in the Lecture Hall on 24 November

the chief attraction was Madame Clara Gardiner's proficient Ladies' Guitar Band ... in Parker's beautiful lullaby, 'In the dusk of the twilight', the executants showed remarkable skill and control over their instruments ... and were heard to great advantage in Trotere's famous serenade, 'In Old Madrid'.³¹

In Cheshire, the Tarvin branch of the Primrose League hosted a concert on 18 February 1890 which opened with 'a trio on mandolins and guitar by the Misses Cotton and Miss Rawstorne. The novelty of the mandolin was attractive ... the effect was striking and the applause enthusiastic'.³²

During the next decade, frequent reports of concerts given by ladies' bands can be found in the local press

of most British towns and cities. Space precludes a detailed examination, but the best of them—although amateur—were clearly serious enterprises. Edinburgh, for example, was home to the 25 young women who comprised Miss Yule's Vocal, Guitar and Mandoline Club, and also to Miss Jessie Murray's Mandoline and Guitar Orchestra which, on 26 March 1897

gave a concert in Queen Street Hall ... before an audience which crowded every part of the building. The orchestra, which numbers between thirty and forty, the larger majority of whom are young ladies, gave a very successful performance. A good rendering was given of the gavotte from 'Mignon'.³³

In Manchester, a ladies' band led by Mr A. J. Schofield gave annual concerts in the Free Trade Hall, while in Hove, 'an excellent little concert' was given in 1896 by a ladies' band (led by Mr W. H. Plumbridge).³⁴ Many smaller towns also had their own ensembles, such as the one from Rushden in Northamptonshire (illus.6), which was led by Rose Holmes and gave numerous local concerts during the Edwardian era.

As can be seen from the photograph, this 16-member Rushden band consisted mostly of mandolinists, with (apparently) just one guitarist and one mandola player. However, larger mandolin and guitar bands in Britain generally followed the Italian model and usually included the following: numerous first and second mandolins (corresponding to first and second violins in a standard orchestra); several tenor mandolas (tuned like a viola, with music written in the treble clef, but transposed a 5th above actual pitch) and/or octave mandolas (with music written as for mandolin, but sounding an octave lower); guitars (usually several, mostly playing block chords, but also florid, harp-like passages to accompany a mandolin melody, and occasional melodic passages, usually played on the bass strings); and often a conventional orchestral double bass.

Occasionally, they also included the Italian five-course *liuto*, a large mandolin tuned like a cello but with an extra high *e'* string. When played in the Italian style, instruments of the mandolin family required tremolo technique (rapid up-and-down strokes of the plectrum) to perform melodic passages and to sustain long notes, whereas the gut-strung guitar relied mostly on single plucked notes. One arranger noted that



6 The Ladies' Mandolin and Guitar Band, Rushden, Northamptonshire (photograph taken before World War I, reproduced courtesy of the Rushden Museum)

guitars are capable of arpeggio passages and detached chords ... but the difference between the upper and the lower three strings has to be noticed when melodic passages are given to the guitar.³⁵

Francia, Marucelli and Mezzacapo

By 1895, the original aristocratic Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Band (formed by the Herveys) had secured the services of the conductor Leopoldo Francia, one of Europe's leading mandolin virtuosos, who had previously conducted a prize-winning mandolin orchestra in his native Milan and demanded similar high standards from his English band. One of their first concerts together was 'Signor Francia's Evening Concert' at Prince's Hall on 21 May 1895, where

there were forty-five lady mandolinists, conducted by Signor Francia, who is a professor of the Milan Conservatoire. Lady Forbes, Lady Clayton, Miss Sassoon, Miss Grenfell, Lady Mary Hervey, the Hon. Mrs. A. Dyke, and other ladies well known in the world of fashion assisted at the mandolin or guitar, and two compositions by Signor Francia were received with great favour. One of them was encored.³⁶

Their repertory that night included the overture to *La traviata*, a Spanish dance by Moszkowski and several of Francia's own compositions, and was enthusiastically received by the press, who noted that there were

3 mandolas, 18 guitars and 1 bass guitar, played by Miss Augusta Hervey ... These ladies played remarkably well ... dressed uniformly in black, a fact which only tended

to show off the diamonds with which they were liberally provided.³⁷

Francia remained as the band's principal conductor until 1898, their concerts together including an 1898 recital at the (Small) Queen's Hall, Langham Place, where 'The Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Band played with delightful verve, steady time, and beautiful gradations of light and shade' in music by Gounod and Clementi, while a Fantasia by Francia 'was charmingly elicited from the mandolin of Lady Clayton and the mandola of Mrs. Slade, whilst the orchestra attacked the coda with a vivacity which was rewarded by long applause'.³⁸ Because of Francia's international commitments as soloist, many concerts were still directed by Mrs Perkins, including one at the Royal Albert Hall on 5 May 1897, where the band 'played well, and in their ranks were Lady Clayton, Lady Beatrice Kemp, and Mrs. Raphael'.³⁹

Mrs Perkins remained as conductor after 1898, but two new Italian conductors were subsequently appointed for the band's most prestigious concerts: the Florentine Enrico Marucelli, who had played in the mandolin orchestra in his native city before coming to London; and Edouardo Mezzacapo, an influential mandolinist and teacher, based in Paris. Their most important performance together took place on 8 June 1901 at the Royal Albert Hall, where The Ladies' Amateur Harp, Mandoline, and Guitar Band gave a Grand Concert in aid of the East London Hospital for Children, during which they performed two of Mezzacapo's compositions (*Reverie* and *Tolede*) under the composer's baton, while Marucelli conducted them in his own Serenade, all three pieces having been written expressly for the occasion.⁴⁰ After 1902, the frequency of the band's performances seems to have declined, although they still gave occasional performances for charity. The last concert by them for which I have details was scheduled for 19 January 1907 at the Chelsea Hospital for Women, when 'Lady Edwards-Moss brings the Ladies' Guitar and Mandoline Band'.⁴¹

Across Britain, hundreds of ladies' guitar and mandolin bands continued to meet and perform during the late 1890s and early 1900s, and although a greater liberalism within society meant that many mixed-gender bands were also being formed, most of those were predominantly female. One of the largest

of these mixed ensembles was the 'Polytechnic and People's Palace Mandoline and Guitar Band', which had connections to Regent Street Polytechnic and was, as can be seen from [illus.7](#), overwhelmingly female. Founded in 1891, this band was taught and conducted (until 1930) by Mr B. M. Jenkins, and it was noted in 1899 that:

There are 217 students in the classes, and no less than 2,000 students have been through the classes during the eight years of their existence. The Band has performed at the Queen's Hall, Langham Place, Crystal Palace, and the Queen's Hall, People's Palace, before audiences of over 3,000; at Shoreditch Town Hall, St. George's Hall, and many smaller halls in different parts of London. How ably and well Mr Jenkins wields the baton may be gathered

from the knowledge that the Band is the largest of the kind in existence, and at the present time there are many applicants waiting for a possible vacancy.⁴²

Mixed-gender mandolin and guitar bands continue to the present day, as do BMG orchestras (banjos, mandolins and guitars); however, fashionable society's fascination with ladies' mandolin and guitar bands had largely run its course in Britain before World War I. During the Edwardian era, as the political movement for female equality gained momentum, respectable women no longer felt the need to justify their desire to perform music in public, as had been the case 20 years earlier; and furthermore it had now become socially



7 The Polytechnic Mandoline and Guitar Band, pictured outside the Crystal Palace, Sydenham Hill, South London in 1899

acceptable for them to play a wide range of orchestral instruments, including the violin, not just such 'feminine' instruments as the mandolin and guitar. Moreover, as inexpensive mass-produced instruments flooded the market, and as plucked string bands flourished amongst the less wealthy classes, the mandolin and guitar inevitably lost the exclusive social cachet that they had enjoyed a

generation earlier. Yet during the 1890s, the original ladies' guitar and mandolin band had undeniably been at the heart of fashionable musical life, and had (along with its many imitators) accustomed polite Victorian society to the notion of all-female public performances of instrumental music by respectable British women, at a time when this was seldom encountered elsewhere.

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- 1 A. Parrini, 'Una pagina di storia mandolinistica fiorentina' (1926), reprinted in U. Orlandi, *Carlo Munier: the poet of the mandolin* (Brescia, 2011), pp.99–101.
- 2 The spellings 'mandoline' and 'mandolin' were both in common use in Britain during the 19th century.
- 3 *The Musical Standard* (1 December 1883), p.337.
- 4 For a fuller account of these bands, see P. Sparks, *The classical mandolin* (Oxford, 1995).
- 5 In earlier periods, Italian mandolinists such as Giovanni Battista Gervasio (1768) and Pietro Vimercati (1823–4) had performed in London with some success, but the instrument did not attain widespread popularity in Britain until the 1880s.
- 6 *Era* (London) (3 July 1886), p.9; *The Graphic* (17 July 1886), p.12.
- 7 *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald* (28 July 1888), p.3.
- 8 For further details, see 'An orchestra of women: an interview with Mdme.

Schipek', *Pall Mall Gazette* (London) (13 October 1885), p.11.

- 9 However, several London colleges did begin teaching these instruments during the 1890s. For details, see Sparks, *The classical mandolin*, pp.91–2.
- 10 *Morning Post* (London) (22 March 1886), p.1, and (26 March 1886), p.5. A 'café chantant' was an event that combined the performance of light music with the serving of refreshments.
- 11 I am indebted to James Westbrook and Sarah Clarke for drawing my attention to these.
- 12 *Era* (3 March 1888), p.9.
- 13 *Le Follet* (London) (1 August 1889), p.200.
- 14 *Morning Post* (16 July 1889), p.5.
- 15 *Banjo World* (London) (April 1898), p.58; *Era* (16 June 1894), p.11, (25 May 1895), p.7, and (16 May 1896), p.8.
- 16 *Daily News* (London) (1 July 1890), p.5.
- 17 *Hampshire Advertiser* (27 February 1892), p.7.
- 18 *Temperance Caterer* (15 December 1892), p.22.
- 19 Where lettering reading 'Ross & Sons, Hosiers, Outfitters' can still be

seen on the first-floor window. Clara's father was George Ross.

- 20 I would like to thank Andrew Ross of Perth, Australia, for providing me with many biographical details about his grandfather's aunt, and Maira Canzonieri (librarian of the Royal College of Music, where records of the NTSM are held) for providing details of Clara's student years.
- 21 *The Musical Standard* (24 December 1892), pp.507–8.
- 22 I would like to thank Barry Pratt of Deddington for providing me with copies of several of these pieces from his own collection to augment my own.
- 23 *The Musical Standard* (16 December 1893), p.489.
- 24 *The Times* (4 July 1893), p.12.
- 25 Many of her letters and documents are now in the possession of Andrew Ross, who is preparing them for publication.
- 26 *Western Daily Press* (26 July 1895), p.2, and (11 February 1895), p.7. The 'philomele' is a bowed instrument with a curved lower body and four wire strings.
- 27 *Bristol Mercury* (21 December 1894), p.6; *Western Daily Press* (22 May 1902), p.5.

- 28 *Western Daily Press* (4 December 1902), p.5; *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* (22 December 1898), p.2.
- 29 *Bristol Mercury* (23 September 1895), p.6. The 'lute' referred to is an Italian five-course *liuto*, described later in this article.
- 30 I would like to thank Janet Hiscocks and Elizabeth Newbery for providing me with details about Mabel Downing.
- 31 *Derby Mercury* (12 February 1890), p.8; *Derby Daily Telegraph* (25 November 1890), p.3.
- 32 *Cheshire Observer* (22 February 1890), p.7.
- 33 *Edinburgh Evening News* (27 March 1897), p.2.
- 34 *Manchester Evening News* (23 April 1895), p.1; *Hearth and Home* (9 March 1893), p.498.
- 35 'On Mandoline Bands', *Musical Opinion & Music Trade Review* (1 November 1895), p.105. For further details about the instrumentation of mandolin bands, see Sparks, *The classical mandolin*, pp.204–7.
- 36 *Era* (25 May 1895), p.7.
- 37 *Glasgow Herald* (22 May 1895), p.7.
- 38 *Banjo World* (April 1898), p.58.
- 39 *Hearth and Home* (27 May 1897), p.112.
- 40 *The Times* (5 June 1901), p.1; P. J. Bone, *The guitar and mandolin* (London, 1914, R/1972), pp.224 and 239. For a more detailed history of the original Ladies' Guitar and Mandolin Band, see P. Sparks, "A considerable attraction for both ears and eyes": ladies' guitar and mandolin bands in late Victorian London', *Soundboard*, xxxviii/4 (2012), pp.36–44.
- 41 *Charity Record* (17 January 1907), p.11.
- 42 *Polytechnic Magazine* (25 October 1899), p.209. I would like to thank Ian Steel and John Greig (the great-nephew of B. M. Jenkins) for providing me with this reference.

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Clara Ross, Mabel Downing and ladies' guitar and mandolin bands in late Victorian Britain

The first guitar and mandolin bands were founded in Italy in the early 1880s. The fashion soon spread to Britain, initially amongst the aristocracy. Victorian social morals did not permit 'respectable' British women to play conventional orchestral music in public, but approved of exclusively female guitar and mandolin bands performing for charitable purposes. In 1886, Lady Mary Hervey and Miss Augusta Hervey formed the first British ladies' band, which for more than two decades gave regular performances of serious classical music in London's major concert venues, and was conducted by Europe's leading mandolin virtuosos: Ferdinando de Cristofaro, Leopoldo Francia, Enrico Marucelli and Edouardo Mezzacapo.

During the 1890s, hundreds of similar ladies' bands were formed across Britain, mostly by

middle-class women. The quality of musicianship varied widely, but some were undoubtedly of a high musical standard. The Clifton ladies' band, led by Mabel Downing, maintained a considerable reputation in the Bristol area, while Clara Ross's band was highly regarded by fashionable London society. Clara composed most of her band's music, and became one of Britain's most popular composers for mandolin. She subsequently emigrated to the USA where, as Clara Ross-Ricci, she became a noted singing teacher and composer for women's voices. By the late 1890s, as British society was becoming more liberal, more mixed-gender ensembles appeared, although most bands were still overwhelmingly female. The largest was the Polytechnic Mandoline and Guitar Band, founded in London in 1891, which regularly gave concerts with as many as 200 performers and continued performing into the 1930s.

Keywords: Ladies' Guitar and Mandolin Band; Clara Ross (Ricci); Mabel Downing; Mary Hervey; *Circolo mandolinistico*; Polytechnic Mandoline and Guitar Band