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‘The practice of the twanged instruments’. Evaluating the amateur fretted instrument orchestra in British popular musical life, c.1890–c.1960

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Abstract

The British amateur fretted instrument orchestra was a product of the late Victorian and Edwardian banjo and mandolin ‘crazes’. Lacking deep community roots, early organisations were numerous but mainly short-lived. However, reconstituted as more broadly based clubs, they enjoyed a substantial revival from the later 1920s and played a major role in the preservation of fretted instrumental culture at a time when it was losing purchase in wider popular musical life. Clubs and orchestras provided a significant outlet for the musical talents of lower-middle and working-class amateur musicians and, although always ultimately male-dominated, gave greater opportunity to women than was the norm within amateur instrumental music-making. The charitable concerts that featured so strongly in their work provided an impressive record of public service. However, their instrumentation and middle-of-the-road repertoire rendered them increasingly unfashionable in the changed popular musical climate of the 1950s and entirely marginal by the end of the 1960s.

Amateur organisations have long been central to British musical life and although both their number and status were reduced over the 20th century, choral societies, brass bands, orchestras and all manner of specialist bodies continued to serve as guardians of their chosen genres within the national culture.[1] Scholarly attention to ‘amateur’, ‘voluntary’ or ‘associational’ music has undoubtedly grown, but it still represents only a modest and relatively underdeveloped strand within historical and musicological research and some forms remain barely considered, let alone studied (Finnegan 1989; Herbert 1991, 2000; Russell 1997; Lowerson 2005; Fawcett

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The quotation in the title is taken from the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 21 May 1903.

[1] The term ‘amateur’ is used here to denote organisations comprising, largely or totally, musicians who did not earn their living through music. They are in no sense seen as somehow artistically inferior to their ‘professional’ counterparts. The fact that many ‘amateurs’ were occasionally in receipt of fees demonstrates that even this particular use of the binary is often no more than a useful organisational device.

2012). Within the field of popular music, defined in terms of both demographic structure and repertoire, the fretted instrument orchestra is a particularly marked example. Although never rivalling the scale or influence of the more established forms of British amateur music-making, or indeed, that of fretted ensembles in the USA and parts of Europe (Sparks 1995, pp. 29–33, 47–8, 98–143), they nevertheless formed a constant feature of Britain's urban soundscape from the late-19th to the mid-20th century. As focal points for many ambitious amateur exponents of the banjo, mandolin and guitar they did much to develop expertise on, and maintain interest in, these instruments, while also serving a wider community through public performances. Moreover, a small number of professional combinations established a niche popularity, with Troise and his Banjoliers the most frequently featured act in BBC radio's 'Music While You Work' in the 1940s and 1950s (Taylor 2021, p. 289).[2] However, apart from the invaluable pioneering work of Paul Sparks on late Victorian and Edwardian mandolin bands and a small number of helpful local studies, fretted orchestras are effectively invisible within histories of British popular music (Sparks 1995, pp. 44–50, 87–98, 157–61, 2012, 2013; Charters 2008; Mansell 2020). Focusing mainly on the banjo, mandolin and guitar orchestras, bands or clubs (henceforward, BM&Gs) that dominated the fretted world, this study seeks to give this once flourishing sub-culture the consideration it merits.

The lack of interest is symptomatic of a wider neglect of fretted instruments within historical and musicological studies of the 19th and 20th centuries, only partially alleviated by an impressive raft of work on the early- and mid-19th-century guitar (Page 2020). While the banjo's late Victorian and Edwardian popularity and the guitar's eruption into 1950s popular music are commonplaces, knowledge of developments between these points is thin indeed. The fretted orchestra is undeniably a worthy topic in its own right, an exemplar of the rich musical sub-cultures that honeycombed musical life. However, although its members were always far outweighed by those playing for their own pleasure in domestic settings, the prominence of the institution over individuals in the historical record means that it also offers a particularly fertile route towards a much needed history of instrumentation, repertoire and cultural function and meaning. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that BM&Gs had a significance beyond the fretted world alone. Their history reveals yet another area of popular musical interest and expertise among the working- and lower-middle classes, sheds useful light on the gendering of 20th-century musical life and forces engagement with unfashionable but important musical genres. Given a repertoire combining specialist banjo and mandolin works with items drawn from light music, musical theatre and popular classics, fretted orchestras occupied precisely the kind of musical territory, variously labelled 'middle-of-the-road', 'mainstream' or 'middlebrow', that was such a hallmark of 20th-century musical life. Although now better represented within an academic discourse that tends to prioritise aesthetic or social and political challenges to the *status quo* above the continuities of quotidian musical life, further engagement with it is essential to a deeper understanding of popular taste (Brocken 2010; Michelson 2020).

In seeking to best serve current historiographical needs, this article offers an analytical overview that opens up a broad territory rather than a specific case study, thereby maximising the potential for future research and debate. It aims to map orchestras in relation to their growth patterns, social geography and class and gender structure, and to examine the process through which they moved from brief national craze in the late Victorian and Edwardian period to specialist organisation from the 1920s. Throughout, it places BM&Gs within the context of other amateur forms, especially brass bands, in order to identify the specific characteristics that defined and governed their activities and cultural reach.

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[2] A programme of continuous band music, it was originally broadcast twice-daily from June 1940 with the aim of helping maintain a steady rate of work on factory production lines. It became a popular feature of domestic listening on the post-war BBC Light Programme.

From 'craze' to sub-culture: origins, growth and survival

Orchestras were products of the late Victorian and Edwardian fascination with fretted instruments, a phenomenon well demonstrated by the scale of the trade press that emerged to serve the rapidly growing body of specialist instrument-makers and music publishers. *Banjo World* (1893) was the first, closely followed by *The Jo* (1894), *Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar News* (1897), *BMG* (1903), *Keynotes* (1907) and *Monthly Musical Advertiser* (1908).[3] That fretted instrumentalists were among the very first to enjoy dedicated journals is powerful testament to their number and influence (Scott 2009, p. 168). The banjo and, to a lesser extent, the mandolin, were at the heart of the new 'craze'. The former had first reached Britain in the 1840s through the minstrel show and remained anchored largely in the world of 'burnt cork and comedians' for the next 30 years (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle* 19 May 1899; Winnans and Kaufman 1994, pp. 2–9). From the late 19th century, however, it gained ever greater cachet as a 'parlour' instrument as manufacturers strove hard and successfully to elevate its social tone. Its new standing was vividly symbolised when the Prince of Wales began lessons (with the Black American, James Bohee) in the 1880s (Scott 1989, pp. 91–2). Although aristocratic and upper-class players were only ever a small part of its constituency, they gave the banjo a respectability that helped drive its growth both as a domestic instrument and a prominent feature of professional entertainment. It swiftly became Britain's dominant fretted instrument with all but three of the 43 teachers advertising in the trade magazine *BMG* in 1911 offering banjo tuition: indeed, it was to retain this position until finally displaced by the guitar over the course of the 1950s.[4]

The mandolin, decidedly marginal in British music for much of the 19th century, enjoyed a parallel if less dramatic upsurge in interest.[5] Following the instrument's revival in Italy, the concert tours of visiting Italian virtuosi from the 1880s helped it find favour in a country where enthusiasm for Italian culture had long been a potent middle-class sensibility (Pemble 1987; Sparks 1995, pp. 44–6, 87–98). Moreover, small, elegantly shaped, played while seated and marked by a somewhat delicate sound, the mandolin was increasingly viewed as a fitting vehicle for women's musical ambitions and the 'ladies' mandolin orchestra became a vibrant new component of (mainly) upper- and middle-class amateur music-making (Sparks 2012, 2013). Although the instrument was never as widespread as the banjo, about half the *BMG*'s advertising teachers offered mandolin tuition in 1911 and, it too was reasonably well represented on the popular concert and variety stages.

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[3] *BMG*, founded by Clifford Essex (1869–1946), teacher, publisher, instrument dealer, concert promoter and founder of the modern British Pierrot troupe, survived until 1976. By dint of its longevity as the country's only specialist fretted magazine to survive beyond the 1920s, it carries an unusually heavy burden as a primary source here.

[4] Teaching adverts in *BMG*, October 1911. By May 1959, only 48% advertising in *BMG* offered banjo classes and many of these teachers were older, long-established practitioners. By May 1969, that had fallen to 27%.

[5] At least until the 1920s, 'mandoline' was the standard spelling but, other than in direct quotation or reference to specific organisations, 'mandolin' is adopted here throughout.

It was inevitable that some of the two instruments' growing body of devotees should come together in ensembles and equally so that they should find common cause with guitarists. The guitar's status was by now much reduced from its 1830s apotheosis when 'La guitaromanie' swept Europe and made the instrument a highly fashionable accoutrement of middle- and upper-class social life. Nevertheless, a habit of playing had been established and the instrument's popularity as provider of vocal accompaniment translated easily into servicing the needs of the new musical fashions (Page 2020, 2022; Sparks 2013, p. 629). Certainly, differences in technique, tone, volume and repertoire meant that banjo and mandolin were not necessarily natural bedfellows and some players preferred to form separate organisations. Mandolinists were especially exercised, with one advocate firmly blaming royalty for the banjo's 'hold on the people' before commenting acidly that the marriage of mandolins, guitars and banjos was 'tolerable, *without the banjo*' (*Musical Opinion*, September 1895, pp. 772–3; Sparks 1995, p. 92).[6] Nevertheless, the BM&G, albeit in varying formations, gradually became the orchestral norm and not least because the larger instrument manufacturers and publishing houses enthusiastically encouraged an institution that maximised their commercial potential (Sparks 1995, p.92).

Amateur orchestras appeared from the mid-1880s.[7] The first may have been the banjo band established for a local blackface troupe by Nottingham bank manager, C.G. Askew, in 1885 (*BMG*, February 1957, pp. 131–2). Rapid growth took place from the mid-1890s until about 1905. Detailed enumeration is impossible but, while remaining alert to the journalistic hyperbole that led to claims such as 'banjo and mandoline orchestras have been formed everywhere', their emergence clearly represented a significant cultural moment (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 21 May 1903). Local newspapers recorded five separate organisations in each of Bradford, Huddersfield and Newcastle alone in the late 1890s and early 1900s and most large towns spawned at least one. Many, probably the majority, were undoubtedly short-lived but a significant number enjoyed several years' continuous existence and a few, including the London-based Ladbroke Banjo Orchestra (1893) and Aston Banjo Club (1898) and the Luton Mandolin Orchestra (1896), were to remain active and influential deep into the mid-20th century (*BMG*, February 1957, pp. 131–2; *Keynotes*, July 1912, pp. 31–2). While amateur minstrelsy may have provided a starting point for some groups, the vast majority were free-standing organisations founded by the swiftly emerging body of specialist teachers that had emerged to service a new musical clientele. Most Victorian and Edwardian orchestras were, indeed, named not after their locality, the norm with other associational genres, but their teacher. This level of involvement was a highly unusual and possibly unique feature within amateur music-making. Teachers had always been central to voluntary institutions as accompanists, trainers and conductors. However, they were normally the appointees of a pre-existing organisation which then kept some measure of control over their subsequent activity, even, as when Bradford Festival Choral Society sacked its conductor in 1887 for providing rehearsals 'not nearly so instructive and interesting as formerly', sometimes resorting to constitutionally granted power of dismissal (Russell 1997, pp. 261–2). Fretted teachers, however, were in the privileged position of being the only available source of expertise in this novel musical environment. Early fretted orchestras were effectively an institutionalised version of the long-established 'student concert': willing pupils gathered into formal bodies in the mutually beneficial cause of raising their standards and advertising their teacher's services. This dependence on individuals often resulted in a fragility of structure hardly conducive to long-term institutional survival. However, without it, the initial establishment of the fretted orchestra is difficult to imagine.

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[6] Original emphasis.

[7] The leading amateur banjoist, Bill Brewer (1890–1959), contributed an informative serialised history of BM&G organisations to *BMG* which, as 'Club History', ran from December 1956 to April 1960. For 1900–1914, *BMG*, April 1957, pp. 168–70 and May 1957, pp. 194–5.

New BM&Gs certainly continued to appear up to the First World War and beyond and were even joined by an entirely new, if fairly short-lived genre, in the form of the balalaika orchestra. Against the backdrop of improving Anglo-Russian relations Edwardian London became a favoured destination of Russian cultural institutions. While the Ballets Russes was to be the most important arrival, the Coliseum's engagement of W.W. Andreef's Russian Balalaika Court Orchestra in late 1909 proved highly successful and led to what contemporaries enthusiastically termed 'the balalaika boom'. By spring 1910, a number of professional fretted players found themselves hastily recruited into balalaika ensembles and amateur orchestras, supported by a 'Balalaika Notes' page in *BMG*, were founded in several provincial settings (*The Stage*, 23 September 1909; *London Evening News*, 8 January 1910; *BMG*, February 1911, p. 75). Overall, however, the pace of growth had slowed considerably and the period from about 1914 to the late 1920s was to be marked by stagnation and, eventually, probable numerical decline.

Already disrupted by First World War, most amateur musical organisations found the inter-war period extremely problematic as emerging technology, particularly wireless, combined with jazz and contemporary popular dance music to change habits of musical consumption and create new taste publics (Russell 2000, pp. 96–110). Alongside these wider contextual problems which saw some bands and choirs lose members and even cease to function, fretted orchestras faced the additional burden of diminishing general interest in their instruments. Most importantly, the banjo, once a symbol and source of modernity, steadily lost ground as trumpets, trombones and saxophones became the vanguard of a new contemporary soundscape. Initially, its decline had been somewhat disguised by the arrival in the post-war period of the four-string tenor banjo, eventually adopted by some for solo purposes, but developed mainly as a dance band rhythm instrument. However, as this role was increasingly usurped by the plectrum guitar from the mid-1920s, the banjo found itself outside the mainstream of popular music for the first time in 30 years. Yet, despite these problems, or rather, precisely because of them, BM&Gs resisted contemporary trends and enjoyed what *BMG* termed an 'extraordinary revival' (*BMG*, April 1928, p. 114). Although there was little attempt to account for this renewed interest, it is perhaps best seen as a protective reflex designed to maintain long-established repertoires and playing styles in a most challenging age.

Once again, exact measurement of activity is impossible, although, in a later and far from exhaustive survey, Bill Brewer noted the foundation of some 180 new organisations between 1925 and 1939, mostly dating from the earlier part of that period.[8] While the total number of active bodies lay probably only in the hundreds, there was much energy and initiative. *BMG* much increased the space it devoted to fretted organisations and 1929 saw the foundation of the British Federation of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists (BFBMG) (*BMG*, October 1929, pp. 17–18). Although divided into northern and southern sections which largely failed to operate in concert, the Federation gave a focus to the more ambitious organisations and established annual 'rallies' that housed the fretted orchestra's first and most prestigious set of competitions. Absolutely key to the process of recovery was the increasing establishment of 'clubs' in preference to the earlier 'orchestras' or 'bands'. Whereas Victorian and Edwardian ensembles had focused ultimately on public performance, clubs sought a balance between attracting and developing the most talented players, providing an outlet for the more dilettante or less confident and generating a social environment into which non-musicians could feel welcome. *BMG* described a 'typical' club meeting as comprising a session of solo-playing; some ensemble performance of easier works, usually termed 'community' pieces; a refreshment period sometimes expanded into a full social event and occasional lectures or discussions (*BMG*, January 1928, p. 53). Crucially, their advocates were anxious to stress that, unlike earlier orchestras, clubs were 'the possession of all its members' and not the 'possession of the teacher' (*BMG*, June 1929, p. 167).

The division between old and new was not rigid. Bath Banjo Club, the model for much club activity, was founded in 1924 by Richard Tarrant Bailey senior, a highly influential teacher and professional performer and many other teachers gave their services to the club movement (*BMG*, January 1928, p. 53). Moreover, teacher-led organisations continued to exist – the Leeds P.P.P. Banjo Club was formed of 'Past and Present Pupils' of local teacher, William Whittington – and there is some evidence that the teacher-led organisation began to reassert itself in the 1950s (*BMG*, April 1929, p. 143; December 1958, p. 83). Again, many clubs established concert/contest orchestras drawing on their best players. Nevertheless, a new mode of organisation had been established that both suited contemporary needs and allowed community-based institutions, very much in the manner of choirs and brass bands, to become more prominent: the Orrell Mandoliers (1932) and the Goonhavern Banjo Band (*c.* 1936) were based, respectively, in a working-class district of Merseyside and a small north Cornish village and its surrounding seaside settlements. Works-based institutions also emerged, including the Bourneville BM&G Club (*c.* 1926), founded by Cadburys Chocolate Company's education department, the Diamond Banjo Band (1928), comprising train, tram and bus staff from London's Walham Green, and the Rhondda Tramways BM&G Club (1933) (*BMG*, October 1928, p. 17; April 1928, p. 113).

Clubs remained viable well into the 1950s with several new organisations, notably but not exclusively in London, growing out of the local-authority adult education programmes that gradually were becoming an important part of amateur musical provision (*BMG*, January 1954, p. 94; November 1954, p. 30; July 1956, p. 251; September 1959, pp. 291–2; March 1960, p. 163). However, even early in the decade, BFBMG officials voiced concern over a relative lack of younger players and the consequent reduction in competition entries. To some extent, this reflected problems in the Federation itself. *BMG* grew highly critical of the body, claiming that it had become narrow, divided and representative of only of its few hundred remaining members based in a handful of clubs (*BMG*, October 1953, p. 19; November 1955, pp. 25–6). More fundamental problems, however, were clearly at work. Both the Federation's struggles and the decline in the bands' number and status that became ever more apparent from the late 1950s, were ultimately the result of irresistible shifts in patterns of musical taste and consumption brought about by the emergence of rock 'n' roll and guitar-driven pop. By the mid-1960s, the BM&G orchestra was little more than a footnote in the trade magazine that had once worked so hard to promote it and barely even that in the wider musical culture.

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[8] See Brewer's 'club history' entries in *BMG*, June 1959 to June 1960.

Geography, class and gender

Fretted orchestras and clubs were always mainly products of urban and suburban life, requiring a critical mass of performers and a level of infrastructural support which rarely existed outside of these environments. Within these parameters, organisations were formed throughout Britain, although some areas proved especially fertile ground. London and its immediate environs was a heartland from the beginning and generated almost a quarter of the inter-war formations listed by Brewer. He also identified lively growth in the north-west, and Lancashire in particular, with the region matching London for new organisations at this time (*BMG*, January 1958, p. 101). London especially, but also Manchester and Liverpool, were always major centres for music teaching and relevant service industries and were well resourced with concert halls, variety theatres and other venues where inspiration could be found. The prominence of these two regions reflects the relative ease with which local players' needs were met.

Socially, orchestras formed part of the powerful current of formal lower-middle and working-class amateur music-making so noticeable from the mid-19th century (Russell 1997). Not as markedly proletarian as the brass band, their social complexion was defined by a broad balance between manual and white-collar workers leavened by a small number of minor professionals and small businessmen. Individuals from higher in the social scale were certainly present, especially before 1914. The Cambridge University Banjo and Mandolin Orchestra (1894) and the Brighton and Hove Amateur Society of Guitarists and Mandolinists (*c.* 1895) – *The Jo* claimed that 'a great number of members were connected with the nobility and aristocracy' – were just two of the early orchestras rooted in social elites (*The Sketch*, 2 January 1895, p. 474; *The Jo*, March 1896, p. 47). In particular, many ladies' mandolin bands, some of which had an aristocratic presence, consciously acted as respectable recreational outlets for middle- and upper middle-class women 'quietly finding ways to circumvent the restrictive domestic and maternal roles that society had hitherto ascribed to them' (Sparks 2013, p. 621).[9] However, the dominant social tone was underlined by *BMG*'s change of editorship in 1911 from Sir Home Gordon, Old Etonian, 12th Baronet of Embo, journalist, publisher and highly accomplished amateur player, to Emile Grimshaw, professional musician and son of a Lancashire cotton weaver (*BMG*, February 1911, p. 68).[10]

A lack of membership records coupled with limited local press coverage means that detailed data on social composition is thin. Nevertheless, a review of the scattered contemporary evidence combined with biographical data gathered by later enthusiasts has allowed the compilation of a collective biography of some 56 individuals, largely banjoists, active in the fretted instrument field from the late 19th century until the 1960s.[11] It includes professionals as well as amateurs on the basis that, as professionals were once amateurs, their backgrounds are relevant. Although not all studied were directly associated with amateur orchestras, the majority were. This sample is small and contains only four women, a reflection of the difficulty in tracing female bigraphies, but its findings are highly suggestive.

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[9] *The Stage*, 12 March 1891, referred to Senor Zerega's Ladies Mandoline and Guitar Band as comprising '30 fashionable dames, some with handles to their names'.

[10] *BMG*, February 1911, p. 68.

As defined by paternal occupation, players were drawn overwhelmingly from the lower-middle and (mainly) skilled working class. Of the 31 whose father's occupation can be traced, 13 were the sons of clerks, small tradesmen and shopkeepers with the remaining 18 born into working-class homes. The occupations then followed in adulthood, traceable for almost of the sample, present a slightly more complex picture.[12] Fourteen became professional musicians, music teachers or were otherwise engaged in the music industry. Another four pursued middle-class careers in the minor professions or in business. Once again, however, the role of the lower-middle and, particularly, working class is striking, with 12 performers in lower middle-class employment and 24 pursuing working-class trades. Amongst those especially prominent in bands and orchestras, Frank Lawes (1894–1970), a key member of both the Acton and Ealing BM&G clubs in the inter-war period, was a municipal clerk; William Ball (1915–2000) a founder of the Bristol BM&G Club in 1927, member of the prestigious Bath Banjo Club and a much decorated soloist at BFBMG events, was at different times a coach painter and a warehouseman; Frederick Musselbrook (1876–1960), leader of the Beckenham BMG Orchestra immediately before the First World War and later a member of the prestigious London Banjo Club, was a compositor and printer's reader (*BMG*, September 1955, p. 298; williamjball.co.uk; Player Biographies – Classic-Banjo (ning.com)). Although women are largely absent from this analysis, the occupational biography of Leeds mandolinist and teacher, Ada Taylor, at least is helpful in suggesting that her instrument was never the sole preserve of the upper- and middle-class. Born in 1884 to a machine-maker and, before teaching, a paper bag maker and clothing-factory machinist, she is evidence that, from an early period, the mandolin could garner a popular following.

Access to the fretted world for working- and lower-middle-class players was eased for those on regular and reasonable wages, by its relative affordability. Membership subscriptions in the 1930s ranged from 1/6 to 10/- but, paid monthly, even higher rates were not onerous. Instruments could be costly, with a Hawaiian steel guitar retailing at 25gns and a Clifford Essex tenor banjo, at £30, in the same decade, but most manufacturers produced a range of products to suit a broad customer base (*BMG*, March 1932, p. 131). In the Edwardian period, although a Clifford Essex 'de luxe' mandolin sold at 10 gns, the company offered another version for just 3 gns, while the John Alvey Turner workshop advertised banjos at prices between 3 and 12 gns (*BMG*, October 1911, p. ii and p. iv; *Keynotes*, July 1909, p. 37). From the outset, manufacturers facilitated payment by instalment and a flourishing second-hand market developed. Moreover, Orrell Mandoliers were unlikely to have been the only organisation to have loaned instruments to some new players (Charters 2008, p. 20).

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[11] This draws most heavily on Bill Brewer's 'History of the Banjo in Britain', *BMG*, May 1953 to November 1956 and the invaluable Player Biographies - Classic-Banjo (ning.com). Details on occupation are drawn from census returns (1871–1911) and other official data at Ancestry.com. 1921 census returns have been accessed via findmypast.co.uk/.

[12] For professionals, their main career before entry into the music industry has been recorded.

The fretted orchestra was always predominantly male: men's higher earnings, expectation of the 'breadwinner's reward' and lower levels of domestic obligation, benefitted them here as in public leisure more generally. The gender balance was at its most equal before 1914, not least because of the popularity of ladies' mandolin orchestras. Even within the wider BM&G framework, however, photographic evidence supported by occasional detailed reporting of orchestral personnel, suggests that women comprised between 30 and 40% of most orchestras and could sometimes exceed this: in 1904, they made up almost 60% of the Derby BM&G orchestra (*Banjo World*, March 1904, p. 76). From the 1920s, however, ladies' mandolin bands declined dramatically in number and the proportion of women in BM&G orchestras fell to between about a fifth and a quarter over the inter-war period. Women's reduced presence stemmed partly from an increase in newly respectable leisure activities such as dancing, cinema, tennis, golf and even team sport that drew them beyond the safe space that music had frequently provided. However, it also reflected the banjo's greater prominence within BM&Gs at this time, an issue discussed in greater detail below. Although there had always been women banjo players, including some professionals, as *Banjo World* commented in 1904, it was usually 'regarded more as man's instrument than a woman's' (*Banjo World*, March 1904, pp. 66–7). The journal saw 'no apparent' cause for this but the instrument's long association with blackface and comedy and a tendency to flamboyant, extrovert playing style, were probably reason enough. As the banjo's role increased within clubs and orchestras it inevitably had an unbalancing affect upon gender structure. Significantly, those organisations specifically devoted to the instrument were effectively male-only. In the late 1920s, both the Stoke-on-Trent and Birmingham Banjo Clubs, 19 and 33 strong, respectively, were entirely male and several similar clubs had only fractional female representation (*BMG*, September 1928, p. 229; September 1929, p. 241).

Despite their weakening position, however, within the wider context of amateur instrumental music-making, BM&Gs still gave women unusually high levels of opportunity. The brass band, a particularly potent male republic, saw the first trickle of female players emerge only in the 1930s and active hostility to their recruitment continued among elite bands into the 1960s (Russell 2000, pp. 80–2). Concertina bands and handbell teams were equally impenetrable and, beyond the string section, amateur orchestras gave women only modest options. In comparison, talented women musicians were always a visible minority in the BM&G and their achievements happily celebrated. Even the banjo gradually attracted a growing number of highly regarded exponents. In 1955, *BMG* praised the 'flawless' display of Goonhavern Band's Rose Jacka when winning the BFBMG's Southern Section championship. Four years later, it described Lancashire teenager Brenda Auden of the Orrell Mandoliers as 'the leading banjoist in the British Isles today' following her sixth victory in the Northern's solo contest (*BMG*, May 1955, p. 193; December 1959, p. 65).[13] Again, although women only ever represented some 10–15% of the teachers advertising in *BMG*, an extremely modest figure given women's overall dominance within the music teaching profession, some became highly influential and respected figures (Russell 2016, pp. 150–1). At a time when women's ability to undertake leadership roles in music was decidedly restricted, a small number, including Alice Gardiner, with both the BM&G and Balalaika Orchestras of Edwardian Cheltenham, and Elsie Dawson and Mrs A. Black, of, respectively, Derby BM&G Orchestra and Manchester Bluebird Club in the inter-war period, were even able to act as conductors and musical directors. (*Cheltenham Chronicle*, 17 February 1912; *BMG*, July 1928, p. 190; May 1930, p. 162). Ironically, while such chances may have existed only because of the BM&G's marginal status within British musical culture, they were, nevertheless, highly appreciated by those individuals granted them.

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[13] *BMG*, December 1959, p. 68.

Making music

Fretted orchestras were never standardised. Music publishers would have preferred otherwise, suggesting various set formulae over time, but inescapable practicalities always intervened.[14] The supply of Instrumentalists was never so plentiful as to allow for the demands placed by a strictly defined combination, while contesting, a key agent of standardisation in the brass band movement, was never developed enough to exert great influence. Where it did exist, organisers largely accepted what they were offered. The BFBMG Southern Section's inaugural orchestral contest in 1930 saw the Ilford BM&G Club, only 10 strong and featuring seven banjos, push the 30 piece Luton Mandolin Band, comprising mandolins and guitars, into second place (*BMG*, August 1930, pp. 205–6, 210).

Orchestras were at their most varied during their infancy in the 1890s and early 1900s. The Luton Mandolin Band originally featured harp, flute, piccolo, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, cello, double bass and cymbals alongside the mandolin family and guitars. The strict requirements of several European competitions that it entered (extremely successfully) in the Edwardian period led to all but the harp, a not infrequent presence in early fretted orchestras, being removed (*BMG*, December 1959, pp. 73–4). Unorthodox line-ups could still be found into the 1920s, with the Aberdeen BM&G Club featuring Hawaiian guitars, saxophones and a xylophone in an eclectic mix that unsurprisingly mirrored the instruments taught by its conductor, John Stordy (*BMG*, June 1957, pp. 227–8; *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 9 October 1928; *Aberdeen Evening News*, 24 August 1939). As already noted, however, banjo, mandolin and guitar were always the core instruments, often backed, at least in concerts, by pianos and/or accordions, double bass and drums. The banjo family was the most heavily represented and the guitar decidedly the least. Detailed reports of formations in the trade press show the banjo typically comprising 60–70% of Victorian and Edwardian BM&Gs, rising to almost 80% by the late 1920s and early 1930s. By then the mandolin's share had fallen to about 15% and the guitar's 5%. Evidence from descriptions in *BMG* between 1958 and 1960 suggests that interesting shifts were taking place in the 1950s, the banjo's share now only at 45% while the mandolin and guitar's stood at 35 and 20% respectively. The increased role of the guitar at this time is unsurprising but the mandolin's renewed popularity is harder to explain, perhaps simply reflecting the influence exercised by individual members: that mandolinists made up 50% of Leeds BM&G in the late 1950s, for example, may well result from Ada Taylor's prominent role in the orchestra's development (*BMG*, May 1959, pp. 190–1).

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[14] See Clifford Essex's suggestions, *BMG*, January 1904, p. 61.

Within this general context, there were important changes in specific instrumentation. Mandolinists were largely unaffected, with the round-back model associated with classical music adopted throughout: mandolas and, occasionally, mandocellos, were added where available. Guitarists, however, saw the gut-stringed 'Spanish' or 'fingerstyle' instrument supplanted increasingly by steel-strung plectrum models over the inter-war years, while banjo players experienced various shifts in fashion and technique across the whole period (Sharpe *c.* 1965). Until 1914, the most frequently used instruments were the two five-string fingerstyle versions, the orthodox open-back gut-stringed version and the zither-banjo. The latter, built with a closed back and strung with a combination of gut and wire, was especially well suited to slower, sustained melodies. The American banjeurine, a soprano banjo termed banjorine in Britain, also enjoyed a brief vogue into the Edwardian period. While fingerstyle instruments always remained popular, from the second decade of the 20th century they were joined ever more by wire-strung plectrum banjos, as well as the banjolin, a banjo-mandolin cross popular not least for its volume. These changes undoubtedly affected the BM&G's sound. In 1911, *BMG* referred affectionately to orchestra members as 'twangers of gut and pickers of wire' but as the latter began to populate the BM&G more widely, it developed a brighter, louder but possibly harsher sound (*BMG*, February 1911, p. 66).

BM&G members were never entirely bound by the standard orchestral instrumentation. Individuals and small groups were able to explore other avenues in concerts, competitions and, most commonly, club sessions. The Hawaiian guitar was one instrument that was embraced enthusiastically. Consequent on the extraordinary popularity that followed its exposure at San Francisco's 1915 Panama Pacific International Exhibition, indigenous performers and teachers sought new avenues in Europe and the instrument became a considerable popular musical force in Britain from the 1920s to the 1950s (Troutman 2016, pp. 76–8, 108–10). Inevitably, it was often combined at BM&G gatherings with the ukulele, another major facet of the enthusiasm for things Hawaiian. In other indicative examples of the musical range and experimentation that took place, club sessions in the early 1930s saw three women from Derby BM&G Club play trios featuring mandolins and lute, the Watford Club was given an exhibition of cowboy yodelling to zither banjo accompaniment and a member of the Birmingham Banjo Club stepped outside the fretted world to perform three saxophone solos (*BMG*, January 1933, p. 88; July 1933, p. 225; August 1930, p. 221).[15] Clearly, there were many other routes allowing new or rare instruments to reach the public but BMGs undeniably played their part in broadening horizons. This environment also encouraged many players to become multi-instrumentalists: H.J. Sherring of the Bournemouth BM&G Orchestra won eight prizes at a Federation contest in 1955 performing solos on, *inter alia*, plectrum and Hawaiian guitars and zither-banjo (*BMG*, May 1955, p. 212).

The banjo, mandolin and guitar repertoire combined specialist custom-composed pieces with light music, including selections from opera and popular classical music, and a modest menu of contemporary popular song. The focus here is upon orchestral playing, although, especially in the case of specialist works, orchestral items were often simply arrangements of the numerous solos and duets that were such a key feature of the fretted world. Choice of material was always subject to constraint. Published orchestral works were available from the 1890s but the market was never strong enough to support large-scale investment: most houses opted to provide parts only for the best-known specialist items and favourite light and light classical works. More adventurous programming was usually the prerogative of organisations blessed with individuals capable of producing bespoke arrangements. A band's specific instrumentation also inevitably impacted upon repertoire. For the 'own choice' class in the 1930 BFBMG contest, for example, while Ilford BM&G Club chose Emile Grimshaw's banjo piece, 'Nigger Minstrels', Luton Mandolin Band opted for an overture by the mandolin composer, Konrad Wölki (*BMG*, August 1930, pp. 205–6).

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[15] I am grateful to Paul Sparks for suggesting that the 'lute' was probably a liuto modern, a 10-string member of the mandolin family.

Although Wölki's inclusion illustrates the presence of dedicated mandolin (and, occasionally, guitar) works, the banjo's numerical dominance guaranteed a similarly dominant role in the BM&G's specialist repertoire: all 10 pieces in a list of the most-played 'community' items in the 1930s were originally written or arranged for the instrument (*BMG*, June 1958, pp. 219–20). It has been estimated that in the 1890s America provided some 50% of all banjo music played in Britain: some of its composers, including (Morton) Parke Hunter (1876–1912) and Alfred Cammeyer (1862–1949), admittedly an adopted Englishman from the late 1880s, continued to be popular well into the 20th century (Winnans and Kaufman 1994, pp. 18–19, 22). However, a growing body of player-composers developed an indigenous, if still heavily American-influenced, repertoire from the Edwardian period, with Emile Grimshaw (1880–1943), Frank Lawes (1894–1970), Joe Morley (1867–1937), Olly Oakley (1877–1943) and Papworth Sanders (1877–1955) among the most prolific and regularly performed (Peabody 2018). A canonical body of work gradually emerged. Oakley's early 20th century march, 'Rugby Parade' remained popular at least into the 1930s, while Sanders's 'Man the Guns' (1930) effectively became the BMG orchestra's theme tune. Grimshaw, who composed seven of the 10 community items referred to above, was especially successful with a series of compositions from the early 1900s into the 1930s including 'Tattoo', 'Nigger Minstrels', 'Kilties', 'The Dusky Dandy', 'Swanee Singsong' and 'Moonlight and You' that became almost obligatory pieces (*BMG*, April 1955, pp. 177–8; June 1958, pp. 219–20; http://grimshaworigin.org/miscellaneous-grimshaw-individuals/the-complete-banjo-works-of/, accessed 2 December 2022).

Alongside their specialist fare, BM&Gs played exactly the same body of light and light classical music as that found on the programme of almost any brass or military band, cinema orchestra or seaside concert party of its day. In 1895, for example, Field's Mandoline Band entertained its Huddersfield audience with Joachim Raff's 'Cavatina', as did, in the same year, Frank Duke with his concertina at a military smoking concert in Hastings, a church organist in a Bury St Edmunds charity concert and scores of solo violinists in concerts across the country (*Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 27 November 1895; *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 31 August 1895; *Bury and Norwich Post*, 15 October 1895). In 1933, the test-piece for the BFBMG's Northern Section orchestral class was Albert W. Ketèlby's *In a Persian Market* (1921), the 'Intermezzo' from which has been described by one authority as 'probably more frequently played, at home and abroad, than any other work in the history of English music, with the possible exception of the national anthem' (*BMG*, June 1933, p. 190; Ehrlich 1989, p. 37). Similarly safe overtures and operatic selections included *The Bohemian Girl*, *Maritana*, *Poet and Peasant*, *Faust* and *Il Trovatore*, the latter so well known to brass bands that one leading Edwardian authority claimed of the aria, 'Il Balen', that 'every bandsman can whistle it from memory'

(Russell 1997, p. 230). Ladbrooke BM&G Club's performances of 'Three Mozart Folk Dances' and 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik' in the 1950s were testament to the value of having an in-house arranger but, for the most part, BM&Gs operated absolutely in the musical mainstream (*BMG*, November 1958, pp. 30–31).[16]

The relationship with popular song and dance music was slightly more complex. From the late 1890s until the First World War orchestras played a substantial amount of contemporary material and, for the only time in their history, stood somewhere near the leading edge of musical style. Medleys of British music-hall song occasionally featured but it was ragtime and the syncopated rhythms of American popular song that found generous space in BM&G programmes. The banjo, the first example of 'a genuinely American phenomenon influencing the English musical scene', had always been an important element in the Americanisation of popular culture and it was inevitable that ragtime should appeal to exponents long attuned to the music and traditions of minstrelsy (Winnans and Kaufman 1994, p. 1). Although ragtime is most often associated with the piano, the banjo was a major conduit for its spread and recordings of the American virtuoso, (Sylvester) Vess Ossman (1868–1923), in combination with his extremely successful tours of 1900 and 1903, were crucial in stimulating British interest (Winnans and Kaufman 1994, pp. 20–21). The majority of published items were solos, sometimes performed in BM&G concerts, but a number of these were arranged for orchestra. Amongst the most popular were Arthur Pryor's 'Coon Band Contest' (1899) and the Kerry Mills compositions, 'Rastus on Parade' (1895), 'Smoky Mokes (1897) and 'Whistling Rufus' (1899) (Blesh and Jans 1971, pp. 74–5; *Holloway Press*, 10 April 1903; *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 12 March 1904; *Bexhill-on-Sea Observer*, 9 December 1905). When the opening of *Hullo Rag-Time!* at the London Hippodrome launched a national ragtime craze in December 1912, *BMG* could proudly state that while 'the "man in the street" seems to have only just heard of it and gone mad on it … banjoists have had ragtime music for many years past' (*BMG*, January 1913, p. 60).

Although ragtime proved the highpoint of the BM&G's engagement with popular song, their soloists, at least, continued to be able to draw on published arrangements of current material. Emile Grimshaw introduced regular transcriptions of 'the principal "hits" of the London dance orchestras' to *BMG* from 1921 and such songs as 'Ain't Misbehavin' (1929), 'Happy Days are Here Again', 'Happy Feet' and 'Ro-Ro-Rollin' Along' (all 1930) appeared in the magazine within weeks of establishing their popularity (*BMG*, January 1922, p. 27; November 1922, p. 16; December 1929, p. 54; April 1930, p. 129; September 1930, p. 233). From the early 1930s, however, there were undoubtedly signs that some players had no enthusiasm for such music. In a lively letter-page debate, while some readers expressed approval of 'hit' tunes, with one prominent teacher/conductor noting their popularity with his BM&G concert audiences, others perceived them as ephemeral and unworthy of attention. One correspondent described arrangements of modern songs as much inferior to the '*real* solos for any of our fretted instruments', a telling illustration of the desire to celebrate and protect established styles and repertory (*BMG*, June 1933, p. 202).[17] *BMG* eventually resolved the issue by alternating popular hits with specialist works in a more standard mould, a move marking a definite shift toward, if not a heritage culture, then one that prized a particular understanding of 'authenticity' (*BMG*, July 1933, pp. 205–6). The only items from the popular musical world that found a genuine foothold were selections from musicals such as *Rose-Marie* (1924), *Desert Song* (1926) and *Show Boat* (1927) and, later, film themes including 'The Dam Buster's March' (1955). Easily assimilated within existing languages and tastes, many eventually became standards – *Show Boat* in particular was an absolute core work – and comfortable familiarity swiftly trumped any hint of novelty. For much of the post-1945 period and especially from the late 1950s, as rock 'n' roll and guitar-driven pop severed any remaining link between contemporary popular music and the fretted orchestra, the middle-of-the-road could prove a beneficial route to follow. BM&Gs could cater for older audiences happy to consume familiar items from long-established repertoires that they still saw as living and relevant. However, it could never be a long-term strategy. From the 1960s, the past had become a much harder territory to inhabit.

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[16] The former was probably in fact Mozart's 'Three German Dances'.

[17] Original emphasis.

Public engagement and sub-cultural pleasure

The BM&G's public role was always hindered to some degree by the reputation and image of fretted instruments more generally. The banjo, especially in the 1890s and 1900s, was a butt of much, albeit often gentle, humour. One provincial writer equating its protagonists with the 'young gentleman amateur whose wont it was in the previous generation to tootle mournfully on the flute', captured what many thought a rather suspect fashionability. Again, his enthusiastic but also somewhat surprised acceptance that 'in skilful hands, the banjo is really a musical instrument', cleverly hinted that an opposite view was possible (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 19 May 1899). Although the phrase 'twangy instruments' seems to have been accepted by those playing them, it still carried comic connotations and came uncomfortably close to the not uncommon idea of fretted instruments as novelties and 'toys' (Sparks 1995, p. 97). This notion resurfaced in 1928 in a stinging attack in *Radio Times* by the choral trainer-conductor, Sir Henry Coward. A notoriously bitter enemy of jazz and popular dance music, he contrived to link his standard targets with what he termed 'another lowering' of musical standards.

> To the constitution and use of the 'jazz' combinations we can unmistakably trace the revival of toy or semi-toy instruments and combinations – which, pre-war, we had outgrown – as being, from a symphonic aspect, beneath serious consideration – except for special characteristic purposes – and that only semi-occasionally. These are the banjo and other twangy instruments, the elementary free reed accordion and concertina; mandolin and balalaika bands, with their metallic clangy shimmerings and ditherings; the sickly contemptible ukulele and the battery of percussion noise makers. (*Radio Times*, 7 September 1928, pp. 415, 424)

Fretted instruments, along, with other outliers of British musical life, were simply placed beyond the pale. Such attitudes were never to disappear entirely. Although the classical guitar enthusiast and writer, Wilfrid Appleby, was notoriously snobbish about all instruments other than his own, his studiedly icy observation during a review of a book by *BMG* editor, A. P. Sharpe, that 'the author is the editor of a fretted-instrument magazine', captured a long history of disdain (*Guitar News*, August–September 1954, p. 14).

Unsurprisingly, then, BM&Gs garnered very little social and cultural capital. It was unthinkable that the banjo could ever be a conservatoire instrument and the guitar and even the mandolin barely registered an institutional presence. Quite simply, the instruments and the music orchestras played had little significance in the eyes of the musical establishment and considerable sections of the musical public. This was admittedly the norm for many popular genres and institutions but the problem was compounded by the difficulties BM&Gs often experienced in developing the compensatory virtues of a long-matured local rootedness and community engagement that typified much other amateur music-making. These characteristics were at their most advanced in the elite brass bands of the industrial villages and smaller towns that, particularly through the medium of contesting, became such powerful agents of local patriotism (Bevan 1991, pp. 102–19). Although few other forms of musical organisation were quite so embedded in their communities, longevity, accrued reputation for excellence and recognition of their role as local representatives could generate powerful bonds. As a result, choirs and orchestras as well as bands became a staple of local newspaper discourse – the relative paucity of BM&G press coverage noted earlier stands in stark contrast – their activities reported and achievements celebrated enthusiastically. Indeed, after sporting institutions, musical societies were arguably the nation's most potent carriers of civic expectation and ambition. The fretted orchestra's less favoured position was partly a matter of timing, their emergence from the 1880s and 1890s forcing them to fight for space in an already crowded musical field, but it was also a function of their organisational and geographical origins. In certain settings, the brass band's experience could be replicated. The Orrell Mandoliers and the Goonhavern Banjo Band, for example, were both very much organic growths from within small communities and became favoured and high-profile local entertainers from the 1930s to the 1960s (Charters 2008, pp. 20–22; Mansell 2020). More frequently, though, especially before the 1920s, groups were teacher-led or teacher controlled and/or drew from suburbs or large urban areas and therefore lacked the benefits of the close-knit occupational and residential structures that underpinned the deepest relationship between amateur musicians and the local population.

This is not to deny sometimes substantial levels of community involvement. Leading clubs and orchestras could, indeed, reach beyond their immediate confines through broadcasts on BBC local and regional radio programmes. The Leeds BM&G Club performed for the North Region on at least seven occasions in the 1930s and *BMG* proudly reported on appearances by the London Banjo Club and the Gloucester and Watford BM&G Orchestras two decades later (*Leeds Mercury*, 24 June 1932; *BMG*, January 1954). More usually, most organisations were capable of at least an annual concert and many were far more ambitious, acting as dance bands, providing entertainment during cinema intermissions and performing in public parks under various municipal musical schemes (*BMG*, September 1933, p. 274; November 1933, p. 25). In what was probably a conscious extension of an established tradition among amateur guitar and mandolin players from earlier in 19th century, orchestras were particularly active in the provision of charitable concerts (Sparks 2013, pp. 623–4; Page 2022, p. 14). All manner of causes benefited, from the unemployed workers assisted by the combined Bradford and Leeds orchestras in 1933 to the Darby and Joan and over-60s clubs regularly visited by Croydon BM&G Orchestra in the late 1950s (*BMG*, November 1933, p. 44; February 1959, pp. 120–21). Such activity, however, once again underlines organisations' somewhat underdeveloped relationship with their local populace. Although charity concerts were often public events, many, and perhaps a majority by the 1950s, were effectively private or closed, with visits to hospitals, prisons and other institutions a stock-in-trade (*BMG*, July 1959, p. 242; August 1959, pp. 265–6).[18] The overall level of charitable commitment was highly impressive and stands perhaps as the orchestras' greatest social contribution. Nevertheless, that much of it took place, literally or metaphorically, in front of captive audiences does suggest a certain isolation, their presence seeming on occasions to be imposed as much as sought. Fretted organisations were undoubtedly active in the community but never entirely of it.

For many players, their marginal position in both national and local culture mattered very little and may even have proved attractive. Sparks has argued persuasively that since the mandolin 'did not carry the substantial cultural weight and expectations of the traditional orchestral instruments, adults could begin studying it without feeling intimidated or inept', and his observation undoubtedly extends to other fretted instruments (Sparks 1995, pp. 44–5). Again, public utterances from within the BM&G world suggest a generally well-satisfied self-containment. AS *BMG* editor, Emile Grimshaw was understandably moved to respond to Coward's attack but did so with a tone of only the mildest exasperation.

> Sir Henry's extremes are not convincing; he expresses himself too much in superlatives, and forgets the well-known axiom that 'one man's meat is another man's poison'. To exalt the banjo to one of the peaks of Olympus would be as childish as to consign it to the depths of Hades. The banjo and other fretted instruments have their own places in public opinion where they may well be left in peace. (*BMG*, October 1928, p. 1)

Members were happy to devote themselves to their chosen music and their own specialist composers and arrangers, seeking enjoyment, expertise and status within a like-minded community. Banjoists gained much satisfaction from the strongly held view that their instrument generated a sense of 'good fellowship … that does not exist among players of any other … [it is] my impression that the possession of a banjo constitutes an admission to a "Friendly Society"' (*BMG*, June 1929, p. 180). Although poorly informed criticism was not appreciated, fretted ensembles rarely displayed the irritated sense of being patronised and unappreciated that often marked the brass band movement. The differing cultural geographies of the two genres once again mattered here, with brass bands, often (although not exclusively) the representatives of the industrial English north and midlands, agents in a struggle between provincial margin and metropolitan core. This powerful sense of their own worth was vital in generating the concept of banding as a 'movement', a force for cultural and social good that demanded to be taken seriously by the musical establishment. These aspirations were most marked in the commissioning of test-pieces for the annual Crystal Palace National Band Championship from art music composers including Bantock, Bliss, Elgar, Holst, Howells and Ireland in the late 1920s and 1930s (Newsome 1998).

Fewer in number, far more recently formed than brass bands and with many leading organisations located in southern towns and suburbs, fretted orchestras neither sought nor were able to define themselves as a cultural movement in quite this way. Moreover, in a further constraint upon musical adventurousness, their instrumentation rendered impossible any engagement with high-status contemporary composers. While brass bands posed problems enough, their instruments were broadly familiar to those working in the standard orchestral tradition; fretted instruments simply were not. These are arguments for difference rather than inferiority, for BM&Gs sought high standards. One key mechanism was the compulsory solo common in club meetings in the late 1920s whereby individuals were asked to play without previous notice and often on pain of fines for non-compliance. In fact, the procedure proved so stressful that players were increasingly given generous advanced warning, although this desire to reduce nerves was similarly defended as a route to improvement (*BMG*, April 1929, p. 125; May 1929, pp. 147, 161–4; July 1929, pp. 186, 189–90; February 1930, p. 101). Again, some members studied for the specialist *BMG* diplomas first introduced by the magazine in 1908. Eventually embracing more or less the complete family of fretted instruments, the examinations offered basic, intermediate and advanced levels, with even the first category testing sight-reading ability (*BMG*, October 1928, p. 4).

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[18] Charters 2008, p. 21, notes 17 consecutive Christmas Day hospital concerts by the Orrell Mandoliers in the 1940s and 1950s.

Although the making of music was the major objective, many other layers of social and cultural pleasures were on offer. There was plentiful opportunity for dressing up and contemplating identities not necessarily available in the normal course of members' lives. For concert purposes, most musicians were formally attired, with men in suits, blazers or dinner jackets and women usually in white blouses with long, dark dresses (*BMG*, May 1930, p.161; March 1959, pp. 144–5). There were also other, rather more exotic guises. Unsurprisingly, balalaika orchestras showed a penchant for Cossack uniform while a number of organisations spawned female mandolin bands performing in Romany costume (*BMG*, October 1911, p. 4; July 1930, p. 202). The relationship between BM&Gs and Black identities is undoubtedly the most problematic of these engagements. Although there appears to have been little direct link between blackface minstrelsy and fretted orchestras after the late 19th century, it is difficult to ignore the heavily racialised language that saturated the fretted repertoire, especially that of the banjo, but equally difficult to draw overarching conclusions about its significance. At the very least, song titles could keep alive and legitimise language now utterly unacceptable, but until comparatively recently, unquestioned and commonplace. However, individual responses to the tunes and their titles will have varied enormously, some fitting them into an overtly racist worldview, others simply unconcerned, yet others happily reminded of the contribution of African-Americans to the expansion and invigoration of popular music (Pickering 2016; Scott 2009, pp. 144–70; Taylor 2021, pp. 197–214). A far easier conclusion to reach is that BM&Gs provided numerous opportunities for the social evenings, picnics, excursions and other events that punctuated the annual cycle of any voluntary associations. Moreover, the friendships (and, sometimes, romances and marriages) gained with like-minded people was a fundamental reward for membership.

For the best amateur musicians, a hobby could become a stepping stone to a full-time career. Choirs and amateur operatic companies were the starting point of numerous posts in musical theatre, opera and concert hall and brass bands provided a major source of supply to orchestras for much of the 20th century. Permanent opportunities for fretted instrumentalists were always limited in comparison and largely confined to specialist work as a soloist or within a dance band, concert party or dedicated fretted ensemble. Here, perhaps, lay the one serious disadvantage of the BM&G's marginal position, the fretted world looking uncomfortably close to a musical ghetto limiting choice and ambition. Semi-professional work, at least, was much more feasible, adding often modest but invaluable sums to family budgets. Bands themselves often received performance fees but these were usually used to cover overheads and paid engagements were thus usually independent of the parent body (Charters 2008, p. 20). Amongst the most common bookings were specialist concerts at which the best exponents performed as soloists or in small combinations. However, some performers also reached wider audiences in theatres, cinemas and clubs. In 1953, a 16-year-old Brenda Auden appeared in a concert in Llandudno, headlined by soprano Gwen Catley and the pianist and composer Billy Mayerl, both eminent performers of the day. About this time, two fellow Orrell Mandoliers, banjoist William Sullivan and guitarist George Hughes, began club work in north Wales and the north-west as 'The Granadas', even securing an appearance on BBC's prestigious *Workers' Playtime* (*North Wales Weekly News*, 11 June 1953; *BMG*, August 1955, p. 281). Teaching represented another avenue. For some this was at a relatively modest level, like Sally Adams adding to her wage as a Leicester filing clerk in the late 1930s by working as a banjo and Hawaiian guitar instructor at the studio of local teacher and instrument maker, Joseph Chamberlain (*BMG*, September 1954, p. 290). Judging from their regular adverts in *BMG* in the same decade, William Lund, a self-employed mechanical engineer from Nelson, Lancashire, Sydney Rich, a printing operative from Birmingham and Irving Pollard, a draughtsman's clerk from Coventry, were among those able to build substantial teaching connections.

From the late 1950s, the BM&G was moving rapidly toward the obscurity in which it has long dwelt. It had served its cause well, particularly in the post-1914 period when clubs nurtured instruments that faced serious and perhaps even terminal decline. They were obviously not the only vehicle through which the three core instruments survived: a small but talented body of professional musicians ensured them some degree of public exposure and thousands of individual enthusiasts continued to play for their own pleasure. However, it was an important one and, indeed, for the mandolin, never afforded the protection of incorporation into jazz and popular dance bands, the most important. With the sustaining of the instruments came the maintenance of their specialist repertoires and techniques, most notably that of the 'classic' banjo. Two leading banjo historians have deemed what they term 'British banjo clubs' as fundamental in explaining why British fingerstyle playing remained much healthier than its American equivalent (Winnans and Kaufman 1994, p. 22). The BM&G's legacy was probably much thinner. Ironically, the very cultural and musical forces undermining it from the 1950s were also allowing fretted instruments to take on a vastly enhanced function in other popular musical arenas. The guitar's revolutionary role requires no comment here but 'trad' jazz gave the banjo a brief, if not always critically acclaimed boost, and folk and country music, especially bluegrass, did the same for both the banjo and, crucially, the mandolin (increasingly the flat-back variety). It is certainly unlikely that in this moment of deep situational change British banjo, mandolin and guitar culture had much to offer to these often heavily American-influenced genres. Perhaps the most that can be suggested is that the tutor books, sheet music and the reservoirs of expertise, all of which fretted orchestras had helped generate and sustain, were there for the exponents of emergent popular music to use as they pleased; whether they did is a question for future research. If the fretted orchestra's bequest was modest, however, it should not detract from the life that preceded it.

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