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# MANDOLIN

M · a · g · a · z · i · n · e

*A quarterly magazine for mandolin players & enthusiasts.*

*Carlo  
Aonzo*



Photo Luigi Cerati

**Inside:** *Builder Bill Bussman*

# Carlo Aonzo

## *Mandolin Master*

*by David McCarty*

Gaining global recognition for playing mandolin in this modern world poses some significant challenges, to say the least. One pro I once knew in Chicago had grown so weary of the repeated questions about the instrument he'd devoted his life to that he printed business cards with an outline of an F5 and the words, "It's a mandolin," imprinted along with his name and contact information.

Carlo Aonzo needs no such business cards. His impact and influence among mandolin aficionados worldwide has brought him acclaim and honors both in his native Italy and even at the de facto national mandolin championships at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. There, amidst a field crowded with bluegrass virtuosos, his delicate, ringing, sonorous round-backed classical mandolin sound set him apart as having the greatest mastery of the instrument of anyone in the competition.



His recording career includes discs with fellow Italian Beppe Gambetta, whose flatpicking guitar style started with the likes of Clarence White and Doc Watson but soon spread to include nineteenth Century Italian folk and semi-classical pieces and a host of other influences.

Aonzo joined forces with mandolin impresario David Grisman and Gambetta to recreate the music Italian immigrants brought with them to America. An accomplished classical soloist who's studied with Ugo Orlandi, dean of the mandolin program at Cesare Pollini Conservatory in Padua, Italy, Aonzo has recorded the works of Vivaldi and issued a manual on classical mandolin playing for the U.S. publisher Mel Bay.

A renowned touring artist, he's performed with numerous classical groups and ensembles throughout Europe and repeatedly appeared at the Classical Mandolin Society of America (CMSA) convention, leading workshops, conducting master classes and participating in various ensembles.

The director of the Ligurian Plectrum Orchestra, he has performed before Pope John Paul II. Since 1998, he's directed the international mandolin festival in Varazze, Italy, an event drawing many of the world's leading performers. When not performing, recording, touring, arranging, conducting and promoting, he immerses himself in historic research on the mandolin, digging deep to uncover long-neglected repertoire and musicians and helping bring their contributions to the mandolin into the twenty-first century.

Outside of the classical realm, he's toured with Gambetta, performing as a duo and covering a wide range of musical styles. His concerts range from classic Italian pieces to music from Appalachia, Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and the British Isles. American listeners have been captivated by his sound on national radio programs including NPR's *All Things Considered* and *E-Town*.

And in June, he frequently teaches mandolin at Steve Kaufman's popular Mandolin Kamp in Marysville, Tennessee, joining American mandolin masters such as Don Stiernberg to help involve students in the mandolin in new ways and at new levels. On top of that, he earns his daily living working full-time as a fireman.

So it's probably no surprise that when *Mandolin Magazine* caught up with the peripatetic plectrologist last November, Carlo Aonzo was tired. He had just completed an exhausting three-day series of mandolin workshops in New York City and was preparing for the CMSA convention in Philadelphia. He was kind enough to grant us an extensive interview, graciously spelling names and repeating himself often when I was unable to decipher his charmingly accented English.

### ***You were born in Savona. Where is that in Italy and what kind of city is it? Modern, industrial, historic?***

Savona is in the Liguria region. The head city is Genova, which was home to Christopher Columbus and (Beppe) Gambetta, and Paganini. Savona is a little town about 60,000, right on the seaside on the Mediterranean. It's a seaport town, but mostly it now has cruise boats there. It's mostly now a tourist place. It was industrial, but it's not anymore.

### ***Do you still live there?***

I still live there. My background about music is with my father. He was a member of the old mandolin ensemble, Ciarcolo Mandolinistico, dedicated to Verdi, a musical association. He was an honored member of the Milano Mandolin Orchestra.

### ***So your first teacher was your father? Tell me about him, what was his name?***

Giuseppe. I got my first training of music from my father, directly on the mandolin. So we started with him, at first. He was so good a teacher I am sending my own daughter to him. I trust him. I've played hundreds of concerts for my father in the mandolin orchestra; then I became conductor; then I built up my own orchestra, the Ligurian Plectrum Orchestra.



*Twelve-year old Carlo already in action.*

### ***Do you have the memory of your first time picking up a mandolin or remember hearing it?***

No, because it was always in the house. My father was always playing for us kids. His lullaby, I teach to my students. It's the nicest example of special technique on mandolin. It is interesting to tell how we started to study, to learn music, me and my sister, because my father was playing but never forcing us to learn. We had a meeting to learn music, and we forced him to teach our class.

He operated a music school at my house. On Saturday afternoon, it was impossible to get into my house, so many people were learning music. After a year, we started to teach ourselves; we brought our friends from school. This was 1978. So we started to have this school of music for mandolin and guitar, so I had classical training on mandolin and guitar. Then I had the possibility to go to conservatorium in Padua with Ugo Orlandi, in 1993, where I got my degree.

### ***So you studied with Ugo Orlandi: How were you chosen for this, did you have to audition for it?***

Before you get in, you have to do an exam, an access exam. Then you have one year of try-out, then take another exam. At the time, it was the only (conservatory) with a mandolin course, now we have four.

### ***How many students were in your class? Did you get a degree or an award?***

Twelve were in my class. I got the very good evaluation, the maximum honors. That was one of best conservatories in Italy, so that was very good. Maybe the biggest thing to happen to me in my musical life, I won the audition at La Scala Theater in Milano.

I had the big honor to play in that theater several times, providing mandolin in that orchestra. Also I won first prize in the Vivaldi church, where Vivaldi conducted his musical concepts. I won first prize for a performance of his mandolin concertos, and also the special prize for the performance.

### ***And yet you don't actually earn your living as a musician?***



Photo Elk Boening

**Officially charged by the Italian government to play in Germany at Muenchen Firebrigades 125th anniversary.**

mandolin music. So we met around 1985, but never did anything together until we found some old recordings of guitar and mandolin of our past region by Plasquale and Nicolo.

Those old records had such magic; we were understanding that we were the only witness of the golden era of Italian music. So we decided to do a revival of that music on *Serenata*. And after a while, we found out that people very interested, both in Italy and outside.

Our first tour was in Germany, and it was interesting that what we found was the people that like acoustic music also liked classic and Italian music. Of course, in Italy, everyone has a relative with a mandolin, or has a memory of hearing guitar and mandolin together. These kinds of old things from the past, we brought back to our days something that was already in our soul.

### **How did that CD with Beppe lead to working with David Grisman?**

So after *Serenata*, it happened like a guy like David Grisman heard that CD. When we were touring East Coast, we went to visit a David Grisman concert. He had great words for us and invited us to do a recording for his company. We went to visit him. We were able to involve him in the project, *Traversata*.

### **Did you write out his parts for that record?**

Time by time, we started at first to play together, and we went through any kind of stuff that went through our minds, then decided on the material to use. Sometimes something came out from playing directly in the studio. Some times I wrote out a part for David. *Costuma*, the first track, I wrote it out for David. But anything we did came out

Yes, I am a fire fighter. My job allows me to stay at home with family, so it's my daily job. But we have a good schedule that permits me to organize my musical life very well. It permits me to be a musician.

### **How did you meet Beppe and what was his influence on your playing?**

He has a folk background, and I am classical. Beppe performed with Redwine (the Italian bluegrass band he started with) in the old center of town, and my father bought his book, and I heard a strange way to play the mandolin.

The bluegrass mandolin was very new to me, and I started to get interested in bluegrass. It opened to me a new world in

very naturally. It was easy to involve him musically in that project because the culture is inside of us.

### **In addition to bringing the mandolin tradition of your home to America, you've also been influenced by America's mandolin styles and even won the mandolin contest at Winfield.**

I had played in other contests, more classical contests, so it was very unusual for me that situation. Surprised? Yes, it was very incredible time. I knew nothing of the American world. I had never had a connection with America; it was like a dream. I was surprised also because I won with my culture; I was not playing any bluegrass music. So I was very glad that Americans were appreciating my own culture and music.

### **Had you ever absorbed any American influences before then?**

Actually, I absorbed a lot from Italy when I was a teenager. I got the Mel Bay books from Jethro Burns and I learn a lot from him. In fact, my compositions are very influenced by Jethro and American culture. And I like that, I like the melting pot of culture. But also I always remember that I am basically a classical musician. But sometimes I like to shock my audiences with something from other fields.

I like to jam; it is not my main language, but it is just for fun. Actually, I'm just a classical musician that likes very much to sometime take a drink with some bluegrass music with friends and jazz with jazz friends. It is very good to have many different inputs for the art. It always let you grow up, always. It is never bad. It is your soul that grows with the beauty, always it has to be the beauty of the work. It only can help your soul to improve your art.

### **So even with your classical background you have the skills to improvise?**

I can take fun playing jazz and bluegrass, but my language is classical music. That's the point of why I love so much the other culture. I have a love for the American influence on my mandolin playing. Most classical musicians are tied to the paper, to the written music.

In the American way to play the mandolin, I found



Photo Roberto Cullinaro

**Beppe Gambetta, harpguitar; David Grisman, Carlo at Traversata CD photo shoot.**

another way to express music that helped me a lot in my style of classical music. You can find your own soul and style of interpretation in classical music. You discover the dark side of music that otherwise you can not discover. I think it is important for musicians to try other sides of music.

### ***Is that why you enjoy doing so many workshops?***

When I come here, the process is reversed. People are used to playing with not reading music. I help them understand it is so important to read music. You can get an enormous range of different music, from classic and any other kind. You can learn a lot more from written music than learning by ear. To read music is basic.

Coming here, I had to build up a new didactic for teaching the mandolin so I can teach to both people who can not read and those who are trained to classical music and want to improve the classical knowledge.

### ***What projects are you working on now?***

I am inaugurating the Paganini House in Genova, a musical hall that caters to Paganini. I will record mandolin duets, original music for mandolin duets. It is a little bit of secret what it will be. These will be Italian mandolinists.

Also we are preparing with the mandolin orchestra new modern material of my region. In my region, in Genova, they started the story of the mandolin orchestra. They did the first competition for mandolin orchestra in 1492. My region is very involved in that, and we are preparing the repertoire of that era. We will play mandolin concertos with a bowed orchestra.

Of course, I'm always teaching and doing workshops and master classes. We are just done with the NYC workshop; it was a blast! We are very tired, but very, very happy. The level of classical mandolin has grown so much; when I came here, the level was very low. Mostly Americans played bluegrass. Now it is growing up very much.

### ***You're very much a scholar of the mandolin and its history in Italy. Briefly, can you describe some of the origins of the instrument and how it developed?***

Is very Italian. The instrument represents Italy, actually. The story of the mandolin is very complicated. I like to explain to my students, with the research, from paintings, any image of the past to show them how the mandolin was developing through the centuries.

It takes two hours to explain. The kind of mandolin that went around the world is the Neapolitan mandolin, which was created around 1750s. But the history of the mandolin is much older. There are medieval images that represent the mandolin in the 1200s.

### ***Will you be publishing your research in a book?***

Yes, for sure. Those research is like one long life, but of course I want to print my discoveries. I've done some nice discoveries.

### ***Tell me about your instrument.***

It is a 1994 mandolin (seen in the cover photo) built by



Photo Luigi Cerati

### ***Tuning the Goldrake mandolin by Corrado Giacomel, Genova***

Gabriele Pandini from Ferrara; it is a city known for incredible instruments, and I think mine is the best. It is an important kind of mandolin; the materials are a red spruce top from Simi Valley; the ribs are maple and of course the fingerboard is ebony; the nut is bone. I have a scratch plate on it.

### ***Ever try an f-hole mandolin? Any interest there?***

I won the Gibson in Winfield; it is so different, the way to play, the power and the scale of the fingerboard is longer. So for me, it is like another instrument. And I think maybe I can play better the guitar than the American FS mandolin. My own mandolin fills me up so much, I have not to search for other sounds or other expressions.

### ***Strings?***

Dogal, from Venice. Those are made with carbon, a special layer. Very, very good for that Italian sound, very brilliant sound you need for Italian music, and also have a long life.

### ***Picks?***

I was using a tortoiseshell pick, but now with the new material, there's an artificial tortoise pick from TorTis that is working for me, so we may do my own shape of pick.

### ***How do you shape the pick?***

I like a teardrop, in respect to bluegrass kind of pick, it has a sharper point, and I always just use the point. Because you need that brilliant sound.

## Do you have any practice tips, or have a regular practice routine you follow?

I always invent new exercises. Many times I have found some difficulties in new pieces, so I like to build exercises to solve those problems. One of my best training in Italy was a new way to make the fingers independent of each other.

I had an accident in my job and cut my hand. I was lucky not to injure any tendons or nerves, but I had to come back to my agility, so I found some new, important gymnastics for fingers that give me now better independence of fingers.

In one day of practice, I think that morning is good for gymnastics to improve technique, then the afternoon is good for working on new repertoire to play and to build our musical future. And of course the night is good to enjoy music and play with others, to make music and do concerts. ♪

## Discography

*Antonio Vivaldi – Concerti per Mandolino, Concerti per Orchestra with Ligurian Plucked Orchestra*  
Carlo Aonzo, soloist and conductor, (Edt, 2004)

*Traversata – Italian Music in America*  
with Beppe Gambetta & David Grisman  
(Acoustic Disc Records, 2001)

*Paganini – Integrale per amandorlino e chitarra francese*  
(Arion Paris, 1998)

*Serenata with Beppe Gambetta*  
(Acoustic Music Records, 1997)

## Video

*Carlo Aonzo, Classical Mandolin Virtuoso*  
(Mel Bay Publications, 1999)

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## A Look at a Carlo Aonzo Workshop

By Anne Rivera

Last summer en route to Steve Kaufman's Mandolin Kamp in Maryville, Tennessee, where he was to be an instructor, Italian mandolin virtuoso Carlo Aonzo made a stop in New York City where he met a group of eight mandolin aficionados who wanted to play Vivaldi. They came from the New York metropolitan area, from upstate New York, and even from Montreal. I drove in from central New Jersey.

Carlo was definitely the man we all needed to see. Winner of the "Vivaldi Prize" at the sixth National Mandolin competition in Venice, he is the director of the Ligurian Plectrum Orchestra, which he founded. The orchestra had just released a CD of *Vivaldi Mandolin Concerti*, which Carlo brought with him. He told us that he had played the CD in Italy for his orchestra members — mostly amateurs — without telling them who the performers were.

"They were ready to give up the mandolin," he reported. "They said they would never be able to play like that. When I told them they had made this music, they couldn't believe it!" Maybe, Carlo suggested, the New York Vivaldi players could also make a CD some day!

That day certainly is not imminent, but Carlo's words underscored the truth that love of music and a gifted director can transform even amateur musicians into skilled performers.

At the moment, however, we were struggling. Most of us did not know ahead of time what music we would be playing — only that it would be Vivaldi. The first music we worked on was *Vivaldi's Concerto in C for mandolin, orchestra, and continuous bass*. Chaim Caron (who organized the master class) played the mandocello; Carlo played all of the solo parts; and everyone else played first or second mandolin.

Given the fact that we were sight-reading and that the concerto begins at a fast Allegro, the result was surprisingly harmonious. After the first run-through, Carlo elaborated on interpretation. He discouraged the use of the tremolo, focusing on tempo, strong, clear notes and varied dynamics.

The next concerto was the G Major, *Alla Rustica*. The notes of the first movement, written in nine/eight time are

deceptively simple. With a Presto tempo it was hard — at least for me — to keep up. Relief came in the second Adagio movement. We all began to play this movement tremolo, but Carlo asked us not to.

"What does 'tutto tremolato' mean?" objected one participant, pointing to the editorial direction. "It means 'play everything tremolo!'" Carlo responded, and we all started laughing. Carlo then explained that the composer provided no such editorial directions, that Baroque musicians in Vivaldi's time (1678-1741) were free to embellish and interpret music as they wished and that Carlo disagreed with the editor.

Vivaldi's *Concerto in D* for lute, strings, and continuo was our next challenge. During the Allegro movement Carlo still used the tremolo sparingly. He directed players to slow the tempo for a moment after the first theme to mark a transition.

Finally we had a chance to play tremolo in the second movement. Carlo recommended that it be used throughout the Largo, which is primarily a harmonic support to the solo line and consists of half and whole notes. Once we got the hang of it, the volume of soft vibrations — with a slight crescendo toward the end — produced a hauntingly beautiful sound. The tremolo had been saved for the moment in which it would be most effective.

Our last selection was a concerto by Emanuele Barbella, a Neapolitan composer who followed Vivaldi by a generation and was known in classical circles for his mandolin duets and concerti. This concerto concluded with the first Baroque Giga (jig) we had encountered.

Neither as popular as Vivaldi during his lifetime nor as widely played today, Barbella was nevertheless an important composer of music for the mandolin. His inclusion in the Vivaldi workshop gave participants an opportunity to hear and play a composer from the same general era as Vivaldi, whose music is refreshingly original.

To participate in an ensemble conducted by a world-renowned concert artist could easily be an intimidating experience. Carlo, however, was such a sensitive and patient teacher that our nervousness dissipated. He inspired us all to put forward our best efforts — and the result was a day filled with learning, camaraderie and the joy of making music together. ♪