

## The Mandolino Perfetto: First Impressions

By Robert Margo

I have been a member of the CMSA since 2004, and active in its administration for several years. I can say confidently that our members are some of the nicest people on the planet, and generous, too. A prime example is long-time member Jan McIntosh, who recently gifted the CMSA with a fabulous, brand-new instrument that she commissioned – a “Mandolino Perfetto”. Jan retrieved the Perfetto while in Italy for Carlo Aonzo’s *Accademia* this past August. She brought the instrument to the CMSA’s Kalamazoo convention where it was on display to be ogled by all. Post-convention it is temporarily in my custody, while the CMSA’s Board of Directors decides on how best to realize the benefits of Jan’s generosity. While the Perfetto resides at my house Jan asked me to write a review of the instrument for the *Journal* – hence this article.



The Perfetto is the fruit of collaboration between the Italian luthiers Martino Quintavalla and Federico Gabrielli; and the Italian mandolinist and CMSA Honorary Board member Carlo Aonzo. Quintavalla has a somewhat unusual background for a luthier – an MA degree in Materials Engineering, a PhD from the Politechno di Milano, and extensive experience as a post-doc at the CNR Institute of Photonics and Nanotechnology in Padua, Italy, where he worked on materials used in adaptive optics. In 2019 after a decade as an amateur luthier, he decided to devote his time to professional instrument making. He maintains his workshop in Valltellina, Italy and teaches acoustics at the Civica Scuola di Luteria di Milano. A research project in 2019 sponsored by the World Wood Day Foundation brought a collaboration with Federico Gabrielli, a former student of Tiziano Rizzi, long established as a world-class maker of modern mandolins and historical copies; and also renowned as a restorer of historical instruments, especially for his work at the Museo degli Strumenti Musicali – Castello Sforzesco (Museum of Musical Instruments of the Castello Sforzesco) in Milan.

Jan’s Perfetto was shipped in a gorgeous, lightweight, form-fitting hard case by Dogal, covered in elegant red fabric – eye-catching



to say the least. As one might expect, the instrument is beautifully constructed, with superb materials, and like the case, very lightweight. There is detailed discussion of construction methods on Quintavalla's website (<https://www.liuteriaquintavalla.it/>) that notes, for example, the unusual bracing pattern and use of composite materials. The back is half-round, inspired by the classic Mozzani design of the mid-twentieth century. The neck has a triangular shape, although not as pronounced as, say, on an Embergher mandolin. The nut width is standard Italian, 25 mm, or just shy of an inch. By American or German mandolin convention this is quite narrow (German, especially). While I did not have trouble adapting to it, if I ordered one of my own, I would opt for a wider nut, a standard option. The setup was very low, making the instrument exceptionally easy to fret – I could imagine some players might prefer a slightly higher action for various reasons, but this can be readily adjusted by any competent luthier.



Given that the instrument was designed in consultation with Carlo, one might expect it to reflect Carlo's playing style tastes – his posture, left-hand orientation, and so on – which is broadly like other modern Italian classical mandolinists. My playing style is derived from modern German, with significant modifications via Keith Harris – I use a footstool under my right leg; Zupfertuch (lap cloth) and a strap to hold the instrument stable; and my left-hand orientation is classical guitar-like (*a la* Gertrud Weyhofen). These and other differences aside, I had no difficulty adapting to the Perfetto – true to Martino's claims on his website, the instrument is well designed to allow for player variation.

I put the instrument through its paces – Bach, Calace, Kioulaphides, my “pop” arrangements. The sound is very (very) clear and precise everywhere, but especially so on the G and D strings, which allowed me to articulate contrapuntal motion accurately (and musically). The Perfetto is loud -- it projects extremely well and can be played forcefully without breaking up the sound. It is, without question, a professional instrument. To realize the full benefits of its innovative design, one's technique needs to be well-developed and precise; it does not suffer sloppiness in either the right or left hand. Jan's Perfetto came strung with Dogals, not normally what I use (Thomastik); while I did not change the strings for the purpose of the review, I see no reason why one could not opt for an alternative. For readers eager for an A/V sample, you can hear Maestro Aonzo play one most persuasively on Martino's YouTube channel, solo and with guitar accompaniment (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBMd93MBCIAMShVxKKgXZrA>).

Let me close by again thanking Jan for her extraordinary generosity in commissioning the instrument and donating it to the CMSA – bravo Jan!