

John Bullard (right) at a recital with VCU Associate Professor John Patykula.



# John Bullard

## Banjo Baroque

**Almost every instrument used in pop music has classical roots – with the exception of the banjo. Even the dobro or resonator guitar began as a device to make a regular guitar louder. But the first banjos to arrive in North America and Europe came clutched in the hands of slaves from Africa. Even the Italian composer Vivaldi, who wrote solo concertos for every instrument known to the European orchestra, never wrote anything specifically for a banjo.**

Given the dearth of classical material created for the banjo, you would think it rather foolhardy for a classical musician to choose it as his principal instrument. But that is exactly what John Bullard has done. Rather than spell disaster for his musical career, Bullard has proved the banjo is quite adept with classical material, especially on Baroque compositions.

Bullard's path toward becoming a classical banjo virtuoso began with Earl Scruggs. At age 11, he heard Scruggs perform "The Ballad of Jed Clampett" on "The Beverly Hillbillies."

"I was hooked," he said. "The sound of the banjo was really different, and it just appealed to me."

So he began taking lessons, and soon he was playing bluegrass music with his dad on guitar. Although he continued to play banjo, Bullard didn't play with a band until college in 1977, and then it was on electric guitar. Just before graduating in 1981, Bullard returned to banjo, playing in a newgrass/acoustic fusion-style band with a mandolin, guitar, and bass. "We

played mostly R&B or rock tunes with acoustic instruments."

Soon after college, in 1982, Bullard began playing with more traditional bluegrass bands on weekends while working various "day" jobs. In 1985 Bullard decided to go back to college to major in classical music. Since banjo wasn't offered at Virginia Commonwealth University, Bullard majored in guitar. Yet his teachers suggested he try using it for classical music. At first he had trouble finding material that would work, but in 1986 while at the Galax fiddler's convention, he heard banjo player Fred Boyce playing Bach. "That was a pivotal point. It floored me, and I decided right then and there that I was going to do classical music."

Boyce soon moved to nearby Charlottesville, Virginia, and Bullard began visiting him on regular basis and exchanging ideas. In 1987, after several semesters on guitar, his primary teachers suggested that Bullard try using his banjo. They even developed a course curriculum entitled "selected plucked strings" but the rest of

the music department wasn't receptive to the idea. Bullard left school soon after and did not complete his musical degree at that time. Instead he began to play classical music concerts up and down the East Coast. By 1989 Bullard's principal guitar teacher at Virginia Commonwealth University, John Patykula, had joined him to form a duo on guitar and banjo. They have been touring and playing together ever since.

In 2002, Bullard "was bitten by the academic bug" and wanted to go back and finish his degree in music. He discussed his options with Patykula, who was now the vice-chairman of Virginia Commonwealth University's music department. Patykula arranged for Bullard to continue his studies as a performance major on banjo. Bullard is scheduled to graduate in December 2005 as the first person to get a Bachelor's degree on the banjo from the university.

### Classical Banjo Music

Since no older classical music was ever written for the banjo (a few contemporary pieces exist), Bullard must find and transcribe material.

"The hardest part of using a banjo for classical music is its limited tonal range," he said. "Many classical pieces have counterpoint working along in the bass line. That represents a transcription problem. The most successful transcriptions have been Bach solo pieces for cello and violin. The cello, in particular, although it is lower pitched than a banjo, has a similar pitch range, so cello music played up two octaves fits well."

For his live guitar/banjo duo concert performances with Patykula, Bullard performs quite a bit of transcribed keyboard music. "I usually take the right hand and

the guitar takes the left hand." On transcribed lute pieces the banjo again takes the higher part and the guitar the lower part. "We also do some modern classical music including Bartok's Romanian Folk Dances. There's a lot of music we want to do, we're in the early stages of working on some of Grieg's folk music pieces."

On Bullard's two CDs, *The Classical Banjo* (Dargason Music DMCD-115) and *Five-String Banjo* (Albany Records TROY 255) most of the musical compositions are by Bach, but Scarlatti, Handel, Telemann, Albenez, Vivaldi, and Dowland also make an appearance. While a few solo pieces are included, most of the selections have other instruments including guitar, mandolin, violin, viola, cello, harpsichord, harp guitar, and vibraphone.

### The Well-Tempered Banjo

Listening to Bullard's two CDs, one is impressed by his rich banjo tone. Robin Smith, who built Scott Vestal's special "Stealth" banjo design, re-built Bullard's '93 Gibson RB-3.

"Many of Scott's innovations have been incorporated into my RB-3 including a brass tube under the fingerboard so that the fifth string's tuner can be placed on the headstock instead of at the fifth fret as on traditional five-string banjos." The fingerboard on Bullard's banjo has been radiused with the same curve as a Telecaster. It also has a shorter scale length

than a traditional five-string. Its scale matches that of a standard six-string guitar.

The neck on Bullard's banjo is also slightly wider than a traditional five-string.

"Mine has more mass on the neck because of the wider, thicker neck profile. I think this gives it a

deeper, fuller tone, which is better for classical music. I really try to get away from that harsh, klanky sound, toward a more mellow tone."

### The Future of Classical Banjo

Bullard has a full schedule of projects in the planning stages. "I wrote a book for Mel Bay with transcriptions of Bach pieces for the banjo, but I want to do another book with easier classical pieces for players who want to begin to get their feet wet in classical repertoire. I also plan to do some more recording in the near future, in addition to more extensive touring. With my music and graduate degree, I'm also interested in teaching at a higher academic level."

Given Bullard's talent and passion for classical music, I have little doubt that he will continue to expand the banjo's scope and presence in the concert hall, academia, and on recordings. — **Steven Stone**

To see and hear more of Bullard's work, visit [johnbullard.com](http://johnbullard.com). 

