

# The Accordion Is Making A Comeback In Chicagoland



*In*

the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, the accordion was a very popular instrument in Chicago. There were accordion schools in every section of the city with hundreds of students at each school taking lessons and participating in “accordion band.” When the students were very young and novices at the accordion, they played in the “beginner band” at their school. As the young accordionists developed skills, they would progress moving up to the intermediate band and ultimately to the senior level “accordion orchestra.” My personal experience with this process began in 1968 at Monti’s Music Center in Berkeley, IL, toward the tail-end of the “heyday” of the accordion. I could not wait to be promoted to the larger and more advanced accordion band or orchestra. I practiced diligently each day and was thrilled to advance to the accordion orchestra in short order, where we learned actual orchestral works arranged for the accordion group.

This same process was happening in other areas of the country, especially in Kansas City and in the Northeast (New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island to name a few states). At that time, it seemed that almost everyone had an accordion or knew someone who played the accordion. There were two major accordion organizations in the United States, the Accordionists & Teachers Guild, International (ATG) and the American Accordionists Association (AAA). Each organization sponsored solo and accordion orchestra competitions at all levels in various parts of the country. At the highest level, solo accordionists competed for the opportunity to represent the United States in the Coupe Mondiale (World Competition) sponsored by the Confédération Internationale des Accordéonistes (CIA).

As a young student, I participated in competitions and festivals sponsored by both organizations. In the summer of 1975, when I was a senior in high school, I had the good fortune of attending an ATG event held in Chicago where I heard the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) Accordion Orchestra, conducted by Joan Cochran Sommers (an SAI member and world-renowned accordion teacher and orchestra







conductor). They performed *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Paul Dukas. You can listen to the UMKC Accordion Orchestra performing this work on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/WXrieopMZhU>. The accordion orchestra included electronic instruments that duplicated important orchestral solo instruments, particularly brass and woodwinds, in addition to a full percussion section. It was at that moment that I knew I would attend UMKC, major in accordion performance, and study with Joan Cochran Sommers, Professor of Accordion at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music. Little did I know that many years later, after a 30-year career as an attorney, I would return to the accordion world and become the president of the Accordionists & Teachers Guild, International and open an accordion school in the Chicago area, Chicagoland Accordion Academy!

The Accordionists & Teachers Guild, International ([www.atgaccordions.com](http://www.atgaccordions.com)) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting excellence in teaching and performing the accordion. It was founded in 1940 by Anthony Galla-Rini, a composer of original accordion works, including two concerti, an ingenious and prolific arranger of non-accordion works and a renowned teacher and director. During the "heyday" of the accordion (1940-early 1970s), each year the ATG held a competition for students of all levels with a focus on the highest level of competition where the winning soloist would represent the United States in the Coupe

Mondiale (<http://coupemondiale.org>). The competitors striving to represent the United States at the Coupe Mondiale would perform three selections – one work using the free bass system for the left hand (see explanation later in this article), one original work written for accordion, and one work to show strong technical virtuoso abilities. If the ATG Champion chose to go to the World Competition, they would be required to prepare three rounds of music. The first round of music would be any baroque work plus two choice pieces - one lyrical and one virtuosic. Round two required a performance of one complete original work. Those selected to move on to the final round would then perform three or more pieces of different styles and characters. Karen Fremar, whose works I performed at the 2022 SAI National Convention, is an SAI composer who was commissioned to write a test piece for Senior Coupe Mondiale in 1981 and 2007. She also represented the United States in the Coupe Mondiale in 1974.

Today, at the ATG annual Festival, we still

host a competition; however, as the popularity of the accordion dwindled due to the growing popularity of the guitar and rock 'n roll, there have been fewer competitors at the highest level. Currently, the biggest attraction at our festivals features an opportunity for all accordionists to gather and play in the Festival Accordion Orchestra under the direction of world-renowned conductor Joan Cochran Sommers. Professor Sommers founded the very first World Accordion Orchestra in 2007 when the ATG and AAA hosted the Coupe Mondial in Washington,

D.C. Last year, we had 80 participants celebrating the ATG's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary. You can view our concert on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/ObmCddQ6gDM>. Each year, accordionists of all ages, from age 13–88, from all around the country are thrilled to join together to play under the baton of Joan Sommers to create music of the highest caliber. Last year, our program included an Anthony Galla-Rini arrangement of *Finlandia* by Sibelius along with a beautiful arrangement of a *Sound of Music Medley*.

We also bring in the top accordion artists from around the world to perform. Last year, we featured Dr. Michael Bridge ([michaelbridge.ca](http://michaelbridge.ca)), a soloist from Canada, who recently completed his doctorate in accordion performance at the University of Toronto. Another featured soloist was Stas Venglevski (<http://www.stasv.com>), originally from Moldova, who performed Anthony Galla-Rini's 2<sup>nd</sup> *Accordion Concerto* with the Racine Symphony Orchestra. Mirco Patarini, from Italy, performed a beautiful classical program, while Murl Allen Sanders



brought the audience an eclectic program featuring folk and jazz tunes. The UMKC Community Accordion Ensemble, of which I am a member, also performed an exquisite classical program premiering a new work composed by Stas Venglevski. Featured performers for our July 2023 Festival will include Grayson Masefield from New Zealand (<http://www.accordion.com/gmasefield/>) and a flute and accordion duo from Austria (Das Duo Kollektiv: <http://www.daskollektivduo.com/en/>).

Throughout the school year, the ATG offers free online workshops twice per month to our membership presenting topics such as “how to form 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> chords on your left hand,” “what to put in your gig bag,” “notation software,” “music software,” “how to use the new ATG syllabus,” historical topics, and much more. We also present occasional online programs of special interest such as hearing from leading European teachers and providing a forum for US accordion teachers to meet and share teaching/ learning techniques. Our most recent addition to our Festival included an “Accordion Petting Zoo” offering the public the opportunity to “try out” an accordion with the help of one of our ATG instructors. It is our hope that this will encourage young people to learn the accordion and return to the pre-rock ‘n roll “heyday” of the accordion. All teachers and students can be guided by the new ATG Syllabus, published in 2022, that contains listings of music and theory requirements for students at eight different levels.

The ATG Syllabus provides literature suggestions and performance requirements for both stradella and free bass accordions. The stradella left-hand system is what you typically hear when you see the average accordionist performing at a restaurant or in a wedding band or as a street performer. This system has two rows of single bass notes along with four rows of buttons that play pre-formed chords – major, minor, dominant seventh, and diminished chords. The free-bass accordion system “frees” up all buttons to be single notes allowing the accordionist to play any repertoire exactly as it is written. This system works particularly well in playing Baroque music. There are now several different arrangements



**Mary Ann Covone performed a diverse program at the Welcome Luncheon at the 2022 National Convention in Greensboro**

**Tango Abstraktigo  
by Adolf Götz**

**Ave Maria  
by Astor Piazzolla  
Accompanist: Friend of the Arts  
Michael Braz**

**Nocturne (for Free Bass Accordion)  
by Karen Fremar, Tau-Sigma**

**Introduction and Allegro  
for Accordion and Synthesized Tape  
by Karen Fremar**

of free-bass systems that today’s accordionists may choose to play. The free bass system is offered on an accordion in addition to the stradella system. Switching between the systems is common and requires a simple gesture of pushing a lever on the bass side of the accordion to activate the desired system. The quality of the accordions has improved over the years, with hand-made reeds and innovative manufacturing to create a lighter instrument. Most accordions of quality are manufactured in Castelfidardo, Italy. Currently, there are ten major manufacturers in the town, making it the mecca of accordion manufacturing. In December, the CBS Morning

Show had a feature on Castelfidardo. You can view it on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/y0v-CtSwBak>.

When I began studying the accordion, students in the United States played piano accordions almost exclusively. Some played free bass, but it was not common. However, in order to succeed at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory, a student was expected to play free bass in order to perform the required repertoire to earn a music degree. Now, many young serious players in the United States have switched to a chromatic button accordion with a chromatic system of buttons on both the right hand and left hand. This has been common in Europe for a long time.

Turning our attention to accordion activity in the Chicagoland area, I can tell you with certainty that the accordion is on the upswing again in Chicago. Three years ago, as I began to wind down my law practice, I put the word out that I wouldn’t mind taking on a few accordion students again. I taught accordion and piano for eight years after I graduated from UMKC before I entered law school. Today, just a few years after I expressed my desire to teach again, I conduct an accordion group of 18-20 members and teach around 25 accordion students each week. Last week alone, I started six new accordion students!

My students range in age from 7-80 and have varied reasons for wanting to play the accordion. Some started because their aunt or grandfather gave them an accordion. Some just love the sound of the accordion. Others play because they want to play tunes of their heritage. I have one student who is a licensed music therapist, and she wanted to learn the accordion to use in her therapy sessions. Of course, this makes sense as the accordion is portable and can play both a melody and accompaniment. The accordion also comes in many different sizes, with 12 bass buttons, 50 bass buttons, 72, 96, or 120 bass buttons. The smaller instruments would work beautifully in a music therapy session or in any situation where a performer might be standing or moving around as on a stage in musical theater. That opportunity is also becoming more abundant. I have received several calls looking

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for accordionists to work on stage or in a pit orchestra for musicals. One of my students was a professional actress who wanted to learn the accordion so she could audition for parts that used the accordion on-stage.

Although their reasons for playing are varied, there is no doubt that our common ground is joining together to make music in our "accordion band." A few of my students have music education degrees and work in the Chicago Public School System. It is our hope to incorporate the accordion into their music education programs. In the meantime, these students are now accordion section leaders and bass and electronic accordion players in our group. We come together three Saturdays per

month for two hours. The group prepares and presents programs outdoors twice per year and online during the winter. You can view some of our programs on our website under the Performance tab at: <https://chicagolandaccordionacademy.com>. You can also follow us on Facebook and Instagram. We play each year at the ATG Festival, and this year, we have been invited to be on the main stage for an event at the Geneva Swedish Days in Geneva, IL. We are learning and growing together!

Essentially, Chicagoland Accordion Academy has become a community of folks who love to create music together and care about each other. We encourage each other through an ongoing chat on WhatsApp. We celebrate birthdays, engagements, and

weddings, and we support each other through COVID, hip replacements, and knee replacements. Chicagoland Accordion Academy has become an accordion community!

*Mary Ann Covone is the president of the Accordionists & Teachers Guild, International, the director of Chicagoland Accordion Academy, and she is still practicing law on a part-time basis. Mary Ann is currently a member of the Oak Park Alumnae Chapter and has previously served as president of the LaGrange Alumnae Chapter.*

