

All-State: Baroque Bowing in Comparison to Old-Time Fiddle Bowing

by Betsy Neil

The first time I heard a violinist playing in the Baroque style of bowing, it was a very familiar sound; I believe there are some parallels between the Baroque and old-time style of fiddling. This style has been the best preserved of all fiddle styles, especially in the mountain areas of the Appalachians, primarily because of its remoteness. Today there are still old fiddlers who learned their tunes and style from parents, who learned from parents, and on down several generations. That means that style has been imitated since the Baroque era.

The style similarities that jump out are the lightness with the bow and what are referred to as swells. Swells are achieved by changing the bow pressure

or speed, creating a tone which grows and fades in one bow stroke. This is most easily heard in a *detache* passage, or in fiddle terms, the saw stroke. It is more pronounced in some fiddlers than others, and mastered better by some. But it is clear when listening to fiddlers who have paid close attention to detail and have studied the history. Many choke up on the bow to shorten the stick and give it a lighter sound— another parallel to the Baroque style.

Another technique found both in Baroque and old-time fiddling is lack of vibrato. Most master fiddlers have excellent intonation and pay close attention to style and phrasing. Fiddling is a folk style so it may be difficult to find an

authentic master because so much of what anyone hears these days is in the form of pop music which compromises style for popularity.

If you hear a fiddler, think of the performance as a different musical language. Think of it as an invitation to explore another culture and time in history.

Betsy Neil first heard fiddling at a high school summer camp where a St. Paul Chamber Orchestra violinist was casually playing fiddle tunes! Betsy proceeded to learn fiddle styles and now includes in her repertoire: Bluegrass, old-time Appalachian, Irish, Scandinavian, Cajun and Swing. †