

# Brian Wicklund Fiddle Workshop

by Cristina Seaborn

I attended a Brian Wicklund Fiddle Workshop last September at the Milaca High School. There were fiddlers from five different states, and fiddle clinicians from Canada and Nashville. What a fun event to attend, and the price was right! The rate was \$65 for the all day workshops, including a Friday and Saturday night barn dance and concert. It was a “major fiddling event in Minnesota” according to project director, Gloria Schoening.

The class for beginners included advanced players who were also attending the later class. Brian started with basics such as how to hold the bow

about posture, but he called it our Position and told us to: sit on the front of the chair; keep our backs straight; puff up the chest like a peacock; keep the violin parallel to the ground at about 80 degrees; and to do bowing strokes between the knees.

Brian’s approach was methodical and logical. Next he talked about the Left Hand. He said to keep the wrist straight for vibrato, and to play on the tips of the fingers because it is much more exact. The pads, however, are squishy and inexact. I especially liked when he talked about when a finger is down on the string, the fingernail is

warbly,” he told us.

I thought that Brian was innovative when he talked about Overtones. “Here’s a trick I wish someone had told me when I was your age — if your violin is in tune, other notes will vibrate when you play in tune.”

In order to demonstrate overtones Brian did the following exercise:

- Who can tell me what note is third finger on the A string? [D]
- Play D, D#, Db, D. Do you hear when it’s in tune?
- Who wants to be my guinea pig? What is third finger on the D string? [G]
- Notice that third finger on any string is the same note as the next string lower.
- Can you play the first finger on the G string? Listen to my A string go bonkers, even the E string vibrates...
- Fourth finger on the G string makes the D string vibrates. Watch my D string while I play this...

“My fiddle sounds like a bell when I play in tune, slightly open,” he said. “Save your family a lot of grief by playing in tune!”

## Bonaparte’s Retreat

Our first tune, *Bonaparte’s Retreat*, had to wait until we got some basics down on how to figure out the form of a tune. Brian suggested that we take a fiddle tune and divide it into the A and B section. We can divide the A part in half or into four parts. Instead of calling the parts fancy words, we can give them animal names: horse, donkey, horse, gopher. Then we can play each animal.

## Advanced Workshop

These advanced subjects were covered later in the workshop: Philosophy



Brian Wicklund intrigues young students

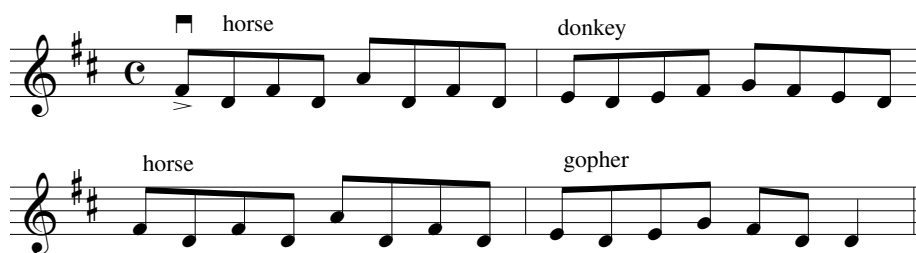
and violin, then answered advanced fiddlers’ questions about style. The workshop covered bowing on the beat, chords, and improvisation.

I appreciated that Brian cares about tuning and actually tuned everyone’s fiddle five minutes before the workshop. He has a friendly approach toward youngsters and first time attendees at workshops, and is knowledgeable about the advanced fiddlers’ questions as well.

Starting with the Bow Hold, he instructed us to wave the right wrist and notice that the wrist doesn’t bend sidewise. He said to use the wrist as a hinge in your bow hold. “My thumbnail is pointing away from me on the bow hold. I can feel the hair of the bow with my cuticle. My pinkie is bent and everything is slanted.” Next he talked

a mirror you can look into. “Are you lookin’ good?”

Then he said that Tone is really important. In his fiddle books (mentioned later) he explains that the place on the violin where the tone sounds nicest is what he calls “the highway.” The book contains some really fun cartoons of the highway. “Play near the bridge and it makes your teeth hurt. Play near the fingerboard and it sounds



Bonaparte’s Retreat

of Bowing, Chords, Chunks, and Improvisation.

### Philosophy of Bowing

Brian said that there aren't many rules in fiddle playing. He likes to do things his own way and he likes to see people tapping their feet when they play. He asked, "Which stroke is stronger, the up bow or the down bow?" [down bow] "When you're playing fiddle music, play down bows on the beat."

*Devil's Dream*, for example, has a consistent rhythm, a saw stroke with the bow. Everybody was asked to tap on the beat while Brian played *Devil's Dream* slowly. Next he played up to speed and we kept the beat. First we were tapping the beat to two 8<sup>th</sup> notes, and then to four 16<sup>th</sup> notes. Then he tried to reverse the bowing so that the up bow was on the beat. He said, "It sounds like a car I had. Did you hear the difference? With the up bow on the beat, you drive or spin out of control."

Most tunes have a more complex rhythm than *Devil's Dream*. The rhythm causes the down bow on the down beat to get switched around. Half the time bowing is backward. What does a fiddler have to do to fix that? [bow retake or slur] It's the quarter note that changes the bowing in a series of eighth notes.

### Corrective Bowing

Here's an exercise Brian suggested we use: Pretend that you're a mario-nette and your down bow is connected by a string with your foot. They both are going down on the beat. Think of yourself as a jazz drummer when you're playing fiddle.

### Chording

A chord is made up of three notes. Because of the shape of our violin, we only play two of the notes. Brian said that the last note of a song will give you the key most of the time, and that the secret to chording is knowing the I-IV-V progression.

Exercise: Stick out your thumb. That's the I chord. Count your fingers. The ring finger is the IV chord, the pinkie is the V chord. Now if the thumb is A, count B, C, ring finger is D, and the pinkie is E.

He had us sing *She'll Be Coming*

*Round the Mountain* while Brian played chords on the violin. He said to say out loud "I IV V" or "A D E" and guess what chord he was playing. Then we tried a rock tune, *Johnny Be Good*. Hint: The first and last chord is the I chord, the second to last chord is the V chord.

Brian also had us try figuring out the chords in the key of D, counting on our fingers. Here are some ways to chord in the key of D on the violin:

D chord      G chord      A chord

### Chunks

Exercise: Play right at the frog. Drop the bow onto the string from two inches above the string; smack it! "It's fun to be the fiddler, guitar player and drummer." When you are playing Off Beats, your foot is going up when the bow is going down.

Exercise: Stand up and step march to keep the beat. Lift your knee up for off beats and say, "uh!" Brian commented, "I think the African-American influence put the offbeat into European music." He said, "Sing Charlie Parker bebop accenting the offbeat, then on the beat to show how ridiculous it sounds. Do the same thing with a Bob Wills tune."

### Style Tips

Now we finally came to the point the advanced fiddlers were all waiting for: style tips.

### Irish/Celtic

In Irish/Celtic fiddle music he brought out the tune *The Musical Priest*. He said that bagpipe players and fiddle players have been friends for hundreds of years and that they've influenced each other. Pipers used ornaments, then the fiddle players copied them. Here are the stylistic tricks Brian gave for Irish/Celtic fiddle music:

**Pull Off:** 1 or 2 notes above. Put your first finger on the A string. Pull of your third finger, while leaving first finger down.

**Slide:** A half step below the note.

**Half Roll:** Use fingering of 1-3-1 on the A string. Brush the third finger on

the string. It doesn't make a solid note.

**5 note Roll:** On the A string finger 1-3-1-0-1. Rhythm is longer on the first and last note:

1 3 1 0 1

**Treble:** A triplet. Bow this way:

### Cajun

Bowing falls into small parameters of rhythm. You're the drum when you play fiddle. Brian uses a heavier bow for Cajun. Waltz bowing is up on the down-beat beat, down bow on beats 2 and 3:

Cajun music uses the washboard, finger cymbals and a special Cajun triangle made out of wrought iron as well as other traditional instruments: the accordion, guitar, bass, and fiddle. The triangle keeps a steady eighth note beat.

### Two Step

Use "ghost strokes" where there is not much tone in the note, with hemiola accents. This is used in *Orange Blossom Special*.

Brian helped me to define the difference between Texas Swing and Western Swing Styles. He said to stay ahead of the beat with Texas Swing. Texas swing is more like Celtic music. Western swing has a looser rhythm and improvisation.

### Improvisation

We had a little taste of improvisation where he encouraged everyone to respond with "You go girl!" or "That's the stuff!" or "Man, that was great!" when somebody played a solo.

Everyone had to play the A scale. We couldn't play a wrong note if we used the notes of the A scale. He played a beautiful chord progression on the guitar, using waltz time.

I would highly recommend Brian Wicklund if you would like to have an

artist in residence or a fiddling workshop for your orchestra. He is expensive, but worth every penny of it!

Brian Wicklund's fiddle books are: *American Fiddle Method* Volume 1 and 2, which are now going to be published by Mel Bay. They still can be ordered

through Granger Music at 800-575-4402; the website is [granger-music.com](http://granger-music.com). Brian Wicklund can be reached at 800 Broadway St., Marine on St. Croix, MN 55047, 651-433-4428, or 800/575-4402; e-mail [wicklund@minn.net](mailto:wicklund@minn.net).

*Cristina Seaborn is pursuing a Masters in Orchestral Conducting at St. Cloud State University. She gives workshops on improvisation and writes for string orchestra. She has self-published arrangements in fiddle, Celtic, Cajun and jazz styles. †*

Swampwalk ©1989 Brian Wicklund, BMI from *American Fiddle Method* Volume 2  
Available from Mel Bay publications and Granger Music 800-575-4402, used with permission.