

# FIDDLE CLUB CONTRADANCE BAND

by Jan Farrarr-Royce

Last May was the premier “performance” of Dodd Middle School’s (Cheshire, CT) Fiddle Club Contradance Band. I want to let you know how one school is bringing *real* fiddling into our curriculum and what it has done for us.

For three years we had been including some fiddle tunes and techniques as part of our string curriculum from the first year of lessons. Last year it was time for an “Honors” Fiddle Club. My educational goals for the club were to increase the students’ ability to learn and retain tunes learned by ear, learn some fiddling techniques and become more aware of harmonic structure and how the beat drives the music. I also wanted a new kind of performing experience for them and I wanted to make my string program more inclusive by helping new students to obtain instruments and lessons on the guitar, mandolin and banjo.

I got the first year off the ground by getting grants to hire teachers and purchase instruments (which I rented out to kids on the same kind of rental-purchase program as commercial vendors offer for violins, violas, cello and basses). We met for about 15 Thursday nights. I began with a ½ hour fiddling lesson (everything from sharing and practicing using fiddling techniques, to learning about chords and how to write a simple bass line and chunks, to reading fiddle tablature and learning about “retuning” (scordature) and Singing Squares) and a 45-minute “jam” where we learned new tunes and reviewed the old ones. The musicians helped pick out the tunes they wanted to learn, but we worked with a caller to also create a dance. We began with two banjos, two mandolins and six guitar students, but only two guitar students felt ready to play

the first dance last May.

As part of their “lessons” the Fiddle Club musicians each attended a local adult jam. I was thankful that these adult groups were so gracious as to let two or three of my kids attend several of their get-togethers. To my surprise ... they not only invited many of the kids to come back as “real” jammers, but I got several requests for these adults to come to *our* lessons/jams! This year, a “Pay for Play” situation for all after-school activities will actually work in our favor; I have gotten the administration to agree that I can open up our Fiddle Club to *anyone* from the greater Cheshire area (regardless of age) but I must charge \$1 for the ½ hour lesson and another \$1 for the one hour jam! *Perfect!* This will help me give community members something for their efforts when they help coach. We will also be able to include an Irish harpist, a hammered dulcimer and bodhran player in our group this year!

For the premier performance last May, I was worried. Would the kids be able to keep up the fast tempo of the tunes? Would they have the energy to keep this up for a two-hour dance? Every student kicked off one set and had a solo, where they played their “ornamentation” of a tune, but these kids were not all my top soloist-type students. Would the logistics work? Would we have too much music, or not enough? Would there be any dancers? If “real” contra dancers came, would they be annoyed at this young, inexperienced band?

Well, I am writing to tell you that the dance was a success beyond my wildest dreams!

I had a wonderful caller and dance band to back us up and we collected a stagefront full of amps and monitors. (The kids didn’t

even know what monitors were. *Now* they want to use them for orchestra. Ha!). The audience of about 100 people was just the right size and made up of parents, siblings, friends and other string students from the elementary to the high school who were there to support us and have fun. The dancers were as inexperienced as the musicians, so the tempi of the shorter dance sets (only 12 repetitions instead of 20!) was just right for everyone. Our caller is so professional; he knew *just* how long to keep each dance set going so that our program was perfect for the two hours of the dance. We had the pro band play one set, too, while all the Fiddle Club musicians got out and danced. Then the kids played *Drowsy Maggie* and *Spoontiskerry*, our two hardest tunes, as a short performance. We ended with the cello soloing on the *Sheebeg* and *Sheemore Waltz*.

*Everyone* was so nice that they all stayed to help clean up and then most of the whole dance took off for the best ice cream parlor in town! Everyone was on their way home by 10 P.M.

It will always be a class... and too large a group to be a tight band... but I think that this year we might be able to put on our own dance that we *can* invite the more experienced dancing public to! I had to share this with you because I think you will think that this is as wonderful as I do. Thanks to all of you who have encouraged and helped me get this far and I hope that I have encouraged a few of you to try this in your own string program.

*Jan Farrarr-Royce presented “Orchestras that Fiddle” at the ASTA WITH NSOA conference in Columbus, OH, last March. †*