

THE FRIDAY FIDDLE CLUB

by Christine Whyatt

The Friday Fiddle Club is made up of young musicians from the Merriam Park Music Studio in St. Paul. The director, Christine Whyatt, teaches both violin and fiddle, and introduces her students to a variety of folk music including American fiddle tunes and music from the British Isles and Scandinavia. The Fiddle Club has focused particularly on the music of Sweden, and has performed at Scandinavian festivals and dances and special events in the community. It all started informally in the fall of 1999 with rehearsals on Friday evenings, which were often followed by playing at the Scandinavian dance at the Tapestry Folkdance Center in Minneapolis. Since most of the group's music consists of dance tunes, this provided an opportunity for students to experience the music on another level in its original context. Seeing the dancers whirl around the floor to the polskas, schottisches and waltzes helped bring the music to life. Many of the young fiddlers have tried out the dances themselves, and have had many hearty laughs with their partners on the dance floor! The group now plays for a dance almost every month. Second parts have been added to many of the tunes, and a few other instruments including guitar, accordion, and recorder provide back-up rhythms and add color to the sound.

The children have attended local workshops and festivals to learn tunes from area fiddlers and from visiting musicians from Sweden. Last summer they attended the July Fiddle Camp in St. Paul where they learned dozens of tunes from the visiting clinician, Margaretha Mattsson from Dalarna, Sweden. Members of the group

also housed Margaretha's teen-aged children, who accompanied her and who are also fiddlers. The experience deepened the children's understanding of the music and culture, and gave them new friends from across the globe.

The group started with informal costumes, some representing a region in Sweden that a family member came from



Members of the Friday Fiddle Club (left to right) Millie Walsh, Lucy Steinmann, Clara Olson, Emma Struss, Lena Olson, Rose Wright, Josiah Sommer, Eden Anderson, Kent Sommer, Nelson Whyatt, Cody Sommer, Amy Walsh and Christine Whyatt. Not shown are Helen Rose and Keenan Porter. Photo by Kim Kelly-Sommer

and others were colorful renditions of a folk costume. Aprons, white blouses or shirts, a long skirt or dark pants, and vests were the only requirement. Later on, a parent in the studio who is an experienced seamstress volunteered to offer a workshop for making costumes that would coordinate and have a Swedish look. The group voted on some possible samples for the vest and skirt pattern and then, one Saturday, got together for a sewing session. Sewing machines were brought in and stations set up around the room. Although most costumes were not completed that day, they got a good start, and eventually everyone was outfitted!

The Fiddle Club has been active playing at a variety of events in the Twin Cities area. Recently, the group played for a large gathering at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. Last November they performed for the annual Lutefisk Dinner at Immanuel Lutheran Church. They have also been featured at the Svenskarnas Dag celebration in Minnehaha Park, and have performed several times at the Minnesota State Fair and at the mid-summer Swedish festivals in Scandia, Minnesota. They now have a repertoire of several dozen tunes, and many students have learned the harmonies and have enhanced the tunes with ornaments and other stylistic elements.

The experience of playing folk music has been very motivating for the students, and complements the classical pieces which most of them study in private lessons. Folk music has an immediate appeal that taps the energy and emotions of young people. It also connects them to a long historical tradition, and gives them opportunities to participate in the living traditions of their own community.

Christine Whyatt teaches both violin and fiddle at the Merriam Park Music Studio in St. Paul. It is housed in St. Mary's Episcopal Church. She is active playing Swedish music in the Twin Cities area, and plays with the Twin Cities Nyckelharpalag and the ASI Spelmanslag. She also directs the July Fiddle Camp that draws fiddlers from the Twin Cities area, Stillwater, Rochester and smaller communities throughout the state. She and her husband, Nelson, perform together on fiddle and accordion. †