



FIDDLERS' FORUM

Keep Them Fiddling

by Christine Whyatt

Since this fiddling column is a new addition to *String Notes*, I would like to use the first article to talk about the value of fiddling in string teaching, and also to mention some areas that I plan to cover in upcoming issues. And I would like to invite your input.

Having spent most of my teaching and playing career divided between the two arenas of fiddling and classical playing, I am aware of the gulf that often exists between them. Classically trained teachers may not have the confidence to teach fiddle tunes or to know where to begin. Fiddle teachers may not always know how to help students acquire a better sound or to improve their technical skills. More contact between the two worlds can be beneficial to teachers and students alike. In recent years, the line that separates the two areas has become less defined. More and more young people with classical training are exploring folk music, and many folk musicians are seeking out better training on their instruments to further their skills.

Traditionally, fiddlers usually came from rural areas where they learned from self-taught players with little or no formal training. Travel was limited, there were no radios or recordings, and styles of fiddling emerged (and still exist) that were unique to a particular town or region. Learning was done by ear using little or no written notation. Students listened closely to live musicians, and learned tunes in the local style. It is easy to imagine that many early fiddlers had a limited technique and often played on instruments that were mediocre by today's standards. Yet their music had a vitality and an appeal that modern fiddlers work hard to imitate. This living tradition created tunes for dances, festivals, and special occasions that come down to us as a wonderful legacy of music that touches the heart and energizes the player and listener alike. It is no wonder that many young people today get hooked on fiddling after they discover what it has to offer.

The fiddling scene today, which owes much to the folk revival of the 1960s and

1970s, is rich and complex. Folk music, with all its varying traditions and styles, is now oriented toward an urban audience which has grown up in a modern musical environment. The technical ability of many fiddlers is very high, and there are numerous opportunities to hear first class folk musicians perform live in a variety of settings. There are also hundreds of recordings of traditional fiddlers, as well as of new groups who bring together elements of folk, pop, jazz, and world music.

There is a creative tension in contemporary folk music between the desire to preserve traditional tunes and the desire to experiment with new forms and arrangements. Good reading skills give today's fiddlers access to collections of folk tunes from around the world, but written notation cannot be relied on to play the tunes the way they were originally intended. Rhythmic subtleties, articulation, ornamentation, and other stylistic features can only be learned from listening. Many collections are sold with CDs and tapes, however, which is by far the preferred way of learning them. Even with all the materials available, however, achieving the playing style of any particular region or culture may take many years if not a lifetime.

Young violinists can benefit immensely from playing folk music. After they have acquired good basic skills, they can learn a large repertoire of tunes within a relatively short length of time. And students who are accustomed to learning by ear can pick up tunes very quickly from other students, from recordings, and from printed material. They need not have a teacher directing them all the time.

Playing folk music can be very beneficial to students who are working on long, difficult pieces in private lessons. When plateaus are reached or interest lags, folk music is a great way to rejuvenate young players of all ages. A few chords on the piano or guitar are all that is needed to liven up the tunes and create fun for all.

Performing for family parties and other

gatherings can be done on the spot, and a friend or relative can often join in on another instrument. There are fewer tense muscles and rapid heartbeats in this kind of setting, and young performers almost always receive an enthusiastic response. In fact, students soon get the idea that performing is fun, which often helps their classical performances.

Fiddle tunes also help young perfectionists loosen up and let go. They can also improve their musicianship by playing shorter tunes with beautiful melodies that are easy to grasp. With a feel for the structure of the music, they can focus on expression and interpretation, and can add individual touches to make the music "their own."

In the upcoming issues I will be including profiles of some teachers in the Twin Cities and throughout the state who do fiddling with their students on a regular basis. I would also like to include a calendar of upcoming events in each issue — folk festivals, workshops, etc. — and mention some materials including fiddle collections appropriate for different levels and interests. I welcome contributions from the membership and would like to invite you to submit ideas or share information on the following:

- Upcoming workshops or summer camps in your region
- School or community events or concerts featuring you or your students.
- Recommendations for collections of fiddle tunes.
- Your experience introducing students to folk music.

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St. Paul. 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, which 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. †