



## FIDDLERS' FORUM

### A Fiddler Extraordinaire

by Christine Whyatt

Today hundreds of teachers are using a set of fiddle books that introduce students to traditional American tunes that soon become the favorites of fiddlers of all ages. Once children discover these books, they are hooked on fiddling and often can't wait to move on to the next tune. *The American Fiddle Method*, volumes 1 and 2, was developed by Brian Wicklund over a period of 10 years and caught on like wildfire after publication by Mel Bay a few years ago. The two volumes are now the best selling fiddle books in America! And soon the piano accompaniment will be on the shelves and the cello version, co-authored by Faith Farr, will also be available in the near future.

Brian, who was born and raised in Minnesota, resides on the banks of the St. Croix River in the beautiful village of Marine, Minnesota, with his wife, Cynthia, two daughters and one son. He is the "Pied Piper" of young fiddlers today, many of whom travel long distances to attend his workshops and jam together. He has influenced thousands of players throughout the state and the country. His *American Fiddle Method* books differ from many other fiddle collections in a number of ways. They are user-friendly with funny and often informative illustrations that show up throughout the books. There is just one tune to a page, with large notes and fingerings in the first volume for beginning students or for those who are not reading notes. Many of the tunes have several verses printed on the bottom of the page in Volume 1. The words are often humorous and encourage students to sing along with the CD, sometimes long before they can play the tune on their instrument. The CD is excellent and fun to listen to. The tempos are relaxed and the pieces are repeated many times — the verses are varied and the fiddle alternates with vocals, mandolin, guitar and banjo. The music encourages sing-a-longs as well as play-a-longs. In his two volumes, he introduces children to a great body of American tunes such as *Turkey in the Straw*, *Shortnin' Bread*, *Ragtime Annie*, and *Old Joe Clark* — classic pieces that have been passed down

from one fiddler to another for generations. They are mainstays of our culture and tunes every child should be familiar with. The books also include some basic theory and tips to enhance the pieces with double stops, slides and tag endings.

Brian has given numerous workshops in the Twin Cities and throughout the state. He is also in demand at festivals and workshops across the country including bluegrass festivals in Louisville Kentucky, Anchorage Alaska and Tacoma Washington. He travels over three months every year, and his books are requested from as far away as Sweden and are popular in Japan. He keeps children energized and engaged in his classes with his humorous antics and positive approach. His wife, Cynthia, often participates in his workshops by teaching the children Appalachian clogging to the tunes. Brian has been at the July Fiddle Camp in St. Paul



Brian Wicklund

for two years and both times performed for the children and their parents on the final program. He is a fantastic bluegrass fiddler who spins out tunes effortlessly, improvises on the spot, and seems to have a great time doing it. He played with the bluegrass band

Stoney Lonesome for several years and has made guest appearances on *The Prairie Home Companion*. Currently, he performs at many venues in the Twin Cities and other locations throughout the state and the country. To learn more about his performances and upcoming workshops, check out his website at [www.brianwicklund.com](http://www.brianwicklund.com).

Earlier this summer I interviewed Brian about his background, his own teaching style and asked any advice he may have for classical teachers. Here are his responses:

Christine: When did you start playing the violin? Did you start as a Suzuki student or were you taught in a traditional way?

Brian: I started with Suzuki violin at the age of seven. Craig Timmerman was living in St. Peter, MN, where I grew up and taught me for two years. He is a well-known Suzuki teacher and especially gifted with beginners. He currently lives in Lexington, KY.

C: Did anyone encourage you to fiddle? When were you first introduced to fiddling?

B: I first heard bluegrass style fiddling when my mom checked out two Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs records from the library. It was like a button was pushed for me. I just loved the sound. My dad liked it too and he bought a banjo and started to teach himself. We occasionally traveled to some jams in the Twin Cities. There I met other fiddlers who were kind enough to show me new tunes. Everywhere I went I brought a tape recorder and recorded tunes to learn at home.

When I was 12, we were able to hook up with some bluegrass players in Mankato and began meeting for jams every week. These jams turned into a band. By then my dad had switched from banjo to bass. Later I met some musicians who were my age and also good players. We formed a band that won the Minnesota State Fair Talent contest in 1981. In addition I practiced for the local fiddle contest circuit. There are 10 or 15 contests in the area. The chance to win \$100 at a contest was a big motivator for me to improve my technique and challenge myself

to learn new tunes.

C: What different fiddling styles have you played? What got you interested in bluegrass fiddling?

B: I have been interested in all fiddle styles. I've always played a little Irish, Appalachian, Texas, French-Canadian, Swedish and New England, but I have always gravitated to styles that are improvisational such as bluegrass and swing. Elements of the other styles find their way into my improvising.

C: What groups or musicians did you listen to while growing up?

B: I listened to mostly bluegrass groups and fiddlers. I listened a lot to the first generation bluegrass groups: Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, Jimmy Martin, Ralph Stanley, Reno and Smiley. I also listened to more modern groups like County Gentlemen, Tony Rice, Doyle Lawson, and David Grisman. As far as bluegrass fiddlers, I listened to Byron Berline, Paul Warren, Chubby Wise, Darol Anger and many others; however the biggest bluegrass influence on my playing came from Kenny Baker and more recently from Stuart Duncan. I now listen to a lot of swing players. I am a big fan of Stuff Smith and Svend Asmussen.

C: How did you become a member of Stoney Lonesome? How long did you play with them? What group do you play with at the present time?

B: The bluegrass community is closely knit, so when the band was reforming in 1987, they thought of me. I currently play with the Kathy Kallick Band from San Francisco area, Ben Winship from Jackson, WY, Lorie Line's Pop Chamber Orchestra, and locally as a duo with Chris Silver.

C: What other instruments do you play?

B: Mandolin, guitar, banjo, and bass if I have to.

C: What got you interested in developing your own teaching method? How long did it take you to finish the first book and CD?

B: I started teaching in 1987 when I began working with Stoney Lonesome. I have a degree in education so it seemed to be a natural fit. At that time I looked for fiddle instructional materials to use but I couldn't find a method that was clear, graded, or written by someone who knew something about fiddle music. So I began to put together my own materials. It took at least ten drafts and nine years before I felt like the book was ready. The second book I finished in two years. I am co-authoring a piano accompaniment companion to my books, a viola version, and a cello version co-authored by Faith Farr. I am half finished with the draft of a bluegrass fiddle book as well. After those are done, I am contracted to write eight more books for Mel Bay.

C: How many books and CD's have you sold? Are students using your method outside the US?

B: I won't give exact numbers, but it is the best selling fiddle method book in the country. There are sales to Japan, UK, Germany and Sweden.

C: How many workshops do you give each year? How many outside the Twin Cities?

B: Around 20. Almost all are outside of Minnesota. My favorite format is when I work with a community's string program for two days, then end the workshop with a concert by me and a square dance where the students provide the music for the other classes and their parents dancing.

C: How do you balance your teaching and performing?

B: I have about 30 students here at home, too. I am traveling about 110 days a

year so unfortunately I can't take beginner students any more. I have also gone to teaching only group lessons of 3 to 5 students. The group lessons have worked out well because I am able to work on ensemble skills more.

C: How is teaching fiddling different than teaching classical music?

B: A lot more teaching by ear. The students learn to improvise and learn chording,

C: What recommendations do you have for teachers of classical music who would like to include fiddling in their programs?

B: The best advice that I can give classical teachers and students who are learning fiddling is to listen to recordings of the style of the tune that they are working on. Only reading the music off the page won't give you the nuances of the music. Bow articulation, tone, vibrato and the amount of swing in the bowing differ between fiddle genres. For example, many Irish and Appalachian players rarely use vibrato and play with a light bow, whereas Scottish and Texas style players play thick vibrato on slower numbers and really dig in their bowing for a fat, almost crunchy tone. Some fiddle styles swing and some are straight.

And buy my books! I wrote them so that teachers of classical music would find them easy to understand and use.

*Christine Whyatt teaches violin and fiddle at the Merriam Park Studio in St. Paul. She directs the July Fiddle Camp, which integrates dance and visual arts with fiddling, and draws students from the Twin Cities and surrounding areas. She is also the leader of the Friday Fiddle Club, a group of young fiddlers who play Scandinavian music in costume for special occasions. She and her husband perform together on fiddle and accordion. ♪*