



FIDDLERS' FORUM

From Violin to Fiddle: Bridging the Gap

by Christine Whyatt

Almost everyone agrees that most string students enjoy playing folk music and that fiddling can provide a refreshing change for classically trained students and teachers. Many students have worked hard to establish good playing skills, and may need a break from the oftentimes long, difficult pieces that are a part of the classical repertoire. Not only does fiddling help students relax and explore another style of playing, but it opens up new possibilities to string players. It exposes them to a whole new genre of playing that has evolved out of a long cultural tradition. Bridging the gap from classical music to folk music, however, is a challenge for string teachers who have been classically trained and are accustomed to learning music by reading the notes and interpreting the page in front of them. By contrast, fiddlers rarely use music while they are performing, and most players learn pieces entirely by ear. The written music is often used only as a guide to bowings (if they are written out) or helping the player recall a particular passage.

For string teachers who have never done any fiddling, it may be hard to know where to begin. It is all too easy to purchase a collection of fiddle tunes and assign some pieces for the student to learn. The student begins by reading the tune off the printed page and may ignore the CD or tape that is often included with fiddle books. This is unfortunate, and it is not the best way to approach fiddling. By learning the tunes out of a book, the student has a very limited idea of how the piece should sound, especially if it is a tune the child has never heard before. To the students who have acquired good reading skills, it is even more tempting to turn to the notes to learn the tunes. This will surely appear to be the easiest way to learn the tune. These students may think they are fiddling when, in fact, they are doing little more than improving their note reading skills. And they may feel that the tunes are too easy, and quickly get bored with them. Learning a sixteen bar tune is a breeze after spending weeks and sometimes months studying difficult etudes, concertos,

and long classical works. Even students with limited reading skills, however, learn fiddle tunes by following the notes on the page. Many of the beginning fiddle books have large notes with finger numbers assigned to them, which make it possible for students to “play by the numbers” without actually hearing the tunes.

If fiddling is approached without a listening model, the student will never experience the joy of fiddling or learn the stylistic elements that identify pieces as belonging to one tradition or another. Today, most fiddle collections come with a tape or CD. Learning the piece by ear gives it a whole new meaning, and what looks like a simple piece on the page can often be challenging to learn by ear. Listening for bowings, accents, double stops, complex rhythmic patterns, ornaments and other stylistic elements takes patience and time. Most of these are not apparent in the music. Folk music that is written out rarely shows the small, subtle elements of the style of the pieces. It is these things that bring the piece to life and distinguish it as an American, Irish, Middle Eastern or a Scandinavian tune. For many traditional fiddlers it is as important to be true to the style of the piece as it is to learn the tune itself. In fact, most tunes are played many different ways no one of which is “correct.” Yet, the stylistic features are very evident if it is played by a player who knows the tradition. For example, in Irish music, hornpipes are usually notated with even quarter notes or eighth notes, but they are always played with one note in a pair longer than the other and have their own unique rhythm. The sound is entirely different from what one sees on the page. In jigs and airs, the slurs and accents are often left out of the music as well as trills, rolls and grace notes — the subtle things which give the music that Irish sound that is so alluring to many listeners. In Swedish polskas the beat is often very different from the familiar 3/4 time signature most players are familiar with. The three beats may not be even and sometimes the stress falls on the second beat instead of the first depending on the type of

dance tune the piece relates to.

To succeed at introducing fiddling to students, teachers must first and foremost show interest in learning the tunes they want to teach, and learn some pieces by ear and become familiar with the style of the pieces. As a fiddle teacher with classical training, I find it important to enjoy the tunes and value them. Take the time to listen for bowings, accents, double stops, complex rhythmic patterns, ornaments and other stylistic elements. Many students may not have the patience to do so when they have the music in front of them. These students need to be encouraged to put the music aside and try imitating what they hear. And students who are serious about fiddling must listen to many renditions of the same piece to truly understand the style. By listening to a variety of fiddlers playing in the same tradition, students will learn to identify the subtleties in the music, and gradually, start implementing them in their own playing.

For teachers it is easy to get caught up with all the difficult classical pieces students are learning at the lesson or playing in their orchestras. Yet it may well be the folk music that keeps many students playing and motivated. Fiddling is especially good for young teens who are interested in playing and socializing together. Sharing common tunes in groups is a wonderful way to bring young people together. Playing without music stands and adding other instruments including recorders, guitars, keyboard or accordion exposes students to new sounds. Harmonies can be added and “back-up” on other instruments. Good playing position and technique need not be lost and can only enhance the pieces if one is sensitive to the style.

Some recommendations for teachers:

1. Choose a style of fiddling that appeals to you and learn several pieces by ear before introducing them to students. Try to identify and incorporate some of the stylistic elements in your own playing

2. Choose a fiddle collection that includes a good tape or CD, or make a tape for the student. You might try teaching your students a few tunes by ear. Introduce one phrase at a time and move on when nearly everyone can play it.
3. Encourage daily listening. Insist that all playing be done without the printed music, both in groups and in the lesson. In the lesson, refer to the music only to check bowings or fix problem spots.
4. Encourage the students to play tunes together. Older students can learn second parts and back up harmonies when they are appropriate. In groups, try to get out of the “teaching” mode and let the students choose tunes and enjoy playing together. Don’t insist on everyone bowing the same way. If a

student’s bowing seems backward and is not working, address it in the lesson and discuss bowings appropriate to the style.

5. Play some recordings in group lessons. Point out things for the students to listen for.
6. Encourage parents who play other instruments including guitar, keyboard, flute, etc. to play along and add harmonies.
7. Include some fiddle tunes on your programs or recitals. They always seem to relax everyone and make the program more enjoyable.
8. Most of all enjoy fiddling with your students. Fiddling is fun!

Coming in the next issue:

In the next issue of *String Notes*, there will be a listing of fiddle collections that are

available in the Twin Cities with recommendations for teachers on the level of difficulty, special features of each collection and an overall review. If you are using materials that you would like to recommend to other teachers, I would appreciate hearing from you and welcome your ideas on introducing the tunes to students. Please contact me: Christine Whyatt, 3844 43rd Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55406, Whyat002@tc.umn.edu, 612-728-1966

Christine Whyatt teaches both 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. †