



FIDDLER'S FORUM

The Young Fiddlers Association of Minnesota

by Christine Whyatt

Young fiddlers in the area now have an organization of their very own. It brings them together to meet each other, to jam together, and to learn new tunes from many folk traditions. The Young Fiddlers Association of Minnesota (YFA) began this fall with a Celtic workshop on October 22 at the Tapestry Folkdance Center. It was led by Jim Price, a local fiddler and teacher. Parents, teachers and friends of folk music sat in on the session, and young fiddlers came from Minneapolis, St. Paul, and surrounding areas including Stillwater and Hudson, WI.

This event was the culmination of months of planning and many conversations over coffee in South Minneapolis. It all began last April after an email was sent out announcing the first meeting at the home of Christine and Nelson Whyatt. A small group of enthusiastic teachers and parents met to share a vision of creating a new organization for young folk musicians. Everyone recognized the need to bring students together to share their music and to have fun in an informal setting. In the world of classical music, there are many opportunities for students to play in school orchestras, youth orchestras, chamber groups, and summer camps. Young fiddlers have fewer chances to play together, and they often feel isolated and outside the mainstream in traditional school orchestra programs. Young fiddlers also enjoy playing along with guitars, banjos, mandolins, whistles, and accordions — all instruments that are rarely played in school settings. There was overall agreement that the new organization would approach fiddling as a recreational activity rather than a competitive one, and seek to build a community of young fiddlers who can support each other and share their love of folk music. After many discussions, the group came up with the following format:

- 1) Membership will be open to fiddlers ages 8 to 18 who have basic playing skills. While most activities will be centered in the Twin Cities, fiddlers

from anywhere in the state can join. Membership is also open to fiddle teachers.

- 2) The YFA will offer a Saturday morning jam session or workshop most months throughout the year.
- 3) Each year the YFA will produce a music book and CD for members featuring tunes drawn from a variety of fiddling traditions. These will serve as the core of a set of common tunes that can be shared by YFA members at workshops, jam sessions, and other gatherings.
- 4) The workshops and the jam sessions will be lead by local fiddle teachers who will choose tunes to play that have been pre-recorded on the YFA CD. The workshops will each focus on teaching one particular style or technique of fiddling, while the jam sessions will be more loosely structured, and students can choose their favorite tunes. The musical traditions represented in the first year's tune list include Celtic, French Canadian, Klezmer, Scandinavian, Bluegrass, Old Time, and Appalachian tunes.
- 5) The YFA will also sponsor the July Fiddle Camp (July 19–21), which will feature Brian Wicklund as one of the fiddle teachers next summer. He is the author of the popular *American Fiddle Method* books and has taught classes at the camp twice in recent years. The camp has a unique format that integrates music, dance and craft classes. More information on the camp will be posted on the website after the holidays.
- 6) Students can become members of the organization for a modest fee and in return receive a free t-shirt and a CD and music book with the year's tunes. Members also receive a discount on workshops, free jam sessions, and first notification of upcoming events.

Lisa Fuglie, a local bluegrass fiddler with

the band Monroe Crossing, took on the task of making the first YFA CD and music book. Several area fiddlers recorded tunes for the CD. They include Mag McDermott (Irish), Linda Breitag (French Canadian), Christine Whyatt (Swedish), Lisa Fuglie (Irish and American), Jim Price (Celtic), Rachel Nelson (cross-tuning and rag), and Judith Eisner (Klezmer). Both slow and fast versions of the workshop tunes are played to help the students learn the notes. The CD has many wonderful tunes — easy, familiar ones for beginners and some new tunes that are challenging and exciting to play for more experienced players.

Kim Kelly-Sommer, a parent of three enthusiastic young fiddlers, volunteered to set up a website for the group at www.youngfiddlers.com. It contains information about the YFA, a membership form, and a full schedule of events for the year including workshops and jam sessions. There is also a section that lists fiddle teachers in the area.

Students ages 8–18 with basic playing skills and teachers who would like to learn more about the Young Fiddlers Association are encouraged to sit in on a jam session and play along with the group. It may be just the answer for students who need rejuvenating, who have reached a plateau in their playing and want to regain their enthusiasm. They can also get information by visiting the website, or by calling 651-487-6206.

The next YFA event is a workshop scheduled for 10:00 A.M.–1:00 P.M. on Saturday, January 21, at the Tapestry Folkdance center in Minneapolis. Rachel Nelson will be teaching rag tunes and introducing children to cross-tuning techniques. The next jam session will be on Saturday, February 18, from 10:00 to noon.

Christine Whyatt is the new president of the Young Fiddlers Association. She teaches both violin and fiddle at her home in Minneapolis and in her studio in St. Paul. She is the leader of the Friday Fiddle Club, a group of young fiddlers who perform Scandinavian music in costume in the community. †