



FIDDLE FORUM

A Fiddle Orchestra for Your School?

by Christine Whyatt

St. Cloud is home to a talented, versatile fiddler who also is a conductor, teacher and composer. Cristina Seaborn, a teacher at the Central Minnesota Music School (CMMS), has arranged a wealth of music for string groups, including four fiddle packets for violin, viola, cello and bass, and folk music for string orchestras with the chord changes and back-up rhythms written out. In addition, she conducts 3 orchestras at the CMMS, which include a youth orchestra, and a fiddle orchestra. The St. Cloud based music school is a non-profit organization lead by Dr. Paul Wirth, and offers private lessons and classes for students of all ages. Although the focus of CMMS is on classical music, the school encompasses other styles including folk music and rock and roll.

Before coming to central Minnesota in 1998, Cristina spent many years in the Black Hills teaching mandolin, violin, viola, and piano to over 50 students! She has also conducted workshops in composition, improvisation, and Celtic music in the Rapid City schools. She began studying classical music as a child, switched to jazz at age 17, and started fiddling at age 28. She recommends classical training first because it provides a solid technical foundation for trying other styles. She also believes that learning to improvise in fiddling or jazz improves sight reading. It helps the player imagine what is going on in the composer's creative mind.

The Fiddle Orchestra in St. Cloud began in 2003 after the public schools let go of 92 untenured teachers and closed 3 schools. Cristina, the St. Cloud Technical High School orchestra director, started her own private fiddle orchestra after the orchestra

position was cut 40%. Her group, which meets at the CMMS, is for musicians of all ages and abilities who play violin, viola, cello, and rhythm instruments. The latter group consists of a variety of instruments including bass, piano, guitar, mandolin, banjo, and percussion. The rhythm section sometimes meets independently during the week to have a jam session.

Students sign up for 10 weekly sessions that end with a concert on the final week. Each session has a theme and every student receives one of Cristina's fiddle packets of 10 tunes in the style that relates to the theme. It may be Celtic music or Old-Timey tunes one session, and Canadian or Scandinavian tunes the next session. The tunes in the packets include familiar ones such as *Arkansas Traveler*, *Cripple Creek*, *Old Joe Clark* and *Sheebeg and Sheemore*.

Each fiddle packet has three easy pieces, three intermediate and four advanced tunes so that everyone has something to play at his level and a challenge as well. Beginners are encouraged to learn three tunes, but often go on to learn more advanced pieces. For the beginner group, there are parts with open strings and a few fingered notes, which are bowed or plucked.

The Fiddle Orchestra has between 15 and 30 musicians and the numbers fluctuate from one session to another. Students are recruited in various ways — concerts in the public schools, invitations to students already enrolled at the music school, and of course by word of mouth from those already performing with the string group.

At the final concert, the arrangement of each tune is decided by the director and

the group. Sometimes the cello section will start the tune, followed by the viola section, with everyone on the melody the third time. Guest artists on guitar, accordion, percussion, etc., add spice to the performance. Adding lyrics to the traditional tunes can give the tunes a cultural context. Cristina feels, however, that the most important thing is that the kids "feel that they shine at the concert," and encourages them to announce the tunes, play the solos, create artwork for the program and even name their own group. Students have fun dressing up, sometimes in western outfits with boots, cowboy hats, and scarves. The groups have performed for many organizations and events in St. Cloud including the Norwood Young America Festival, the Earth Day Half Marathon, the Paramount Theater, and at St. Cloud State University.

Cristina Seaborn's fiddle packets and string orchestra arrangements can be viewed and ordered on line at seabornstrings.com. The website is a good source of information about Cristina's musical activities and publications. Contact her about a session for your program.

Christine Whyatt is the 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. The group traveled to Orsa, Sweden, last summer where they attended a summer fiddle camp and performed at Midsummer events. †