

All-State: Fiddling for Cello: More Than Just the Tunes

by Faith Farr

“But it sounds so classical when you play it that way,” Brian said. “Classical players play *Boil ’em Cabbage Down* like this...” and he played a few bars. “Fiddlers play like this...” and he played the same bars, at the same tempo, with the same dynamic, pretty well in the same part of the bow, but with a tiny change in bow distribution that gave an exciting kick to the tune. How did he do that? Finding out was part of my fascinating collaboration with Brian Wicklund that resulted with Mel Bay’s publication last spring of *The American Fiddle Method for Cello* and *The American Fiddle Method for Viola* — companions to Brian’s popular *The American Fiddle Method* (for fiddle). As a classical player who has dipped a toe in the big sea of bluegrass music, I’d like to give you some tips and hints that I hope will make fiddling more fun and interesting for you and your students.

Key

I knew that fiddling was an aural and improvisational tradition, but I was surprised to find that one of the things that fiddlers do *not* change is the key. *Boil ’em Cabbage* is always in A. *Turkey in the Straw* is always in G. There are pedagogical reasons that many fiddle tune books for middle school “move over a string.” But those books are not preparing students to sit in on a fiddle jam, where someone calls out the name of a tune, plays the ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ intro, and everyone joins in. The tunes in *The American Fiddle Method* series are all in the standard keys, so violin, viola and cello are always in the same key so that all instruments can play together.

Stroke and Groove

The Nashville shuffle ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ is one of the most characteristic bowings for bluegrass fiddling. I have been teaching it for decades in the ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ Twinkle variation. But this was the stroke and rhythmic feel that was hard for me at first. In Classic-land I spend a lot of time teaching bow distribution — long notes get long bows, and short notes get short bows. Twinkle is “Big, little, Big, little.” In Fiddle-land, the bow distribution is more equal — all the strokes are on the small side. In both styles, you play comfortably in the middle of the bow. In Classic-land, the down-beat is stronger and heavier than the off-beat, and it feels right to tap your foot on beat. In Fiddle-land, the off-beat is heavier. You can learn the right rhythmic feel (groove) if you keep all your bows small, kick the off-beat a bit, and keep your foot tapping *on the off-beat*. Instead of “Big, little, Big, little” it is “boom, CHka, boom CHka.”

In preparing to do the cello track for the CD that comes with the book, I practiced a lot with my foot tapping on the off-beats. And I practiced a lot with the metronome. Playing ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ with the metronome clicking quarters and ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ with the metronome clicking half notes was familiar. But having the click of the metronome sound on the “CHka” rather than the “boom” was new to me. I found it hard at first. But as I got used to it, I found I had more control over the ends of the beats; I rushed less in orchestra. I rehearsed my classical passagework with the metronome in the middle of the beat and found I was much more steady than I had ever been before. Off-beat metronome work is now a “must do” part of my technical practice.

Shifting

I knew that fiddle tunes were (always) in first position. I had assumed that was because the self-taught players just didn’t develop the technique to extend the instrument range. But when I started the cello arrangements, I was ready to let cellists shift when the violins went up to the E string. However, advice from several fiddlers, including cellist Natalie Haas who plays with Mark O’Connor’s Appalachia Waltz Trio, was not to shift. Cellists and violists are going to stay in first position too. That means that when the violin phrase rises to the E string, the cello/viola phrase often drops to the C and G strings. Natalie and Rushad Eggleston, another fiddling cellist, call the low register “the grumbles.” It is one of the reasons we love cello. Enjoy it!

I am thrilled that the result is *The American Fiddle Method for Cello* is a first position book, with lots of forward extensions (keys of A and D), and lots of C and G string. Since the tunes are fun, my students are motivated to get that full, deep, well-articulated, projecting C-string sound that they need in orchestra. And with repetition, I am pleased with improved hand shapes for forward extensions.

Melodic variation

I knew that as an aural tradition, fiddlers change the notes a bit when they play, and I knew that many fiddle arrangements for middle school offer plain and fancy versions of the tunes. Although I found these to be helpful for me in learning what some of the common variations are, I have found these arrangements to be difficult note-reading exercises for my students. Slogging through syncopated rhythms and complex bowings does not give my students the improvisatory feel that makes the fiddle experience their own.

Brian’s approach is to give a few examples of some easy ways to change a melody, and invite the player to use those ways on any tune where it seems it will sound good. I like it that the students are looking just as the simple printed melody — as a reminder, if it is not internalized yet — but are playing away the page, from their heart. For example, in a basic tune like *Cindy*:





One of the variations that is not in the book, but that all my students enjoy is changing the rhythm to the Nashville shuffle:



Once your students have some experience with fiddle tunes, they will probably start making up their own licks. Making a fancy ending is a good place to start, because you know what you are aiming for.



might become



Bowing

In fiddle music, like classical music, “down-bow on the down-beat” is a good rule to follow. However, fiddlers seem to be more comfortable than classical players “bowing backwards” — so if the phrase comes out up-bow on the down-beats, let it flow and see what happens. The slight difference in accent is probably quite appealing.



The way fiddlers add slurs to keep the down-bow on the down-beat is sometimes different from my classical tendencies. Adding a slur after a quarter is good for fiddling, and feels really comfortable to my classical bow arm.



However, adding the slur before the quarter gives the fiddle music more of a kick. If your tunes sound boring, try slurring this way:



With tunes that have lots of running notes, fiddlers use lots of different slurs to give variety to each verse. A common fiddle bowing that feels really weird to my classical bow arm is the Georgia shuffle. I can do this easily when the down-bow is on beats 1 and 3. But the Georgia shuffle has the down-bow on beats 2 and 4; and it is used in quick tunes. Challenge your hot-shot students to perform with this bowing:



Chord Chart and Bass Line

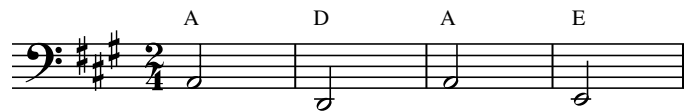
The most important part of the fiddle tune page is the part that classical players tend to ignore, and students may not even notice — the chord chart. By using the chord chart you can teach theory and harmony while creating instant arrangements from one page of music. For example, the music might look like this:



Notice the chord symbols, and play long bows. If it says A, play open A. If it says D, play open D. Even my Suzuki beginners who barely read can do this half by ear and half by eye. They feel really grown-up because they can play ensemble with the big kids.



Harmony is often under the melody, so it would be good to play the long bow as low as possible. Students who are vague about notes on the C and G strings, or who know the notes by finger number but not letter name will find it hard at first to locate the lowest chord name note.



Now that we are in the basement, we can start constructing a bass line. Play the chord tone, and play the note over a string. The theory lesson will tell you that you are playing the tonic and the dominant of the chord. But your brain just needs to find the tonic from the chord name, and your finger plays straight across the string.



The quick students will realize that they are almost playing a very common bass line. To make it sound more like a bass, play the chord note, and then go down a 4th instead of up a 5th. The theory lesson will show you that you are still playing the same note-names.



Rhythm

In addition to melody and harmony, ensembles like to have rhythm. Fiddlers have developed a whole variety of noises that they do with the bow — chops, chunks, ghosts — to give the impression that

there is a drummer in the group. The best do-it-yourself instruction I have found is a 2-hour DVD called *Chops and Grooves* available from www.homespunta.com. Fiddlers Darol Anger and Casey Driesen, and cellist Rushad Eggleston describe, demonstrate and jam together. You can see close-ups of each one as they play, and try it out for yourself.

A chunk, or a chop, is a dry percussive sound that imitates the off-beat “tchk” of the high hat in a drum kit. Keep your wrist and fingers flexible on the bow; the fingers release as you strike the string, like a down-bow collé. Keep your bow arm very loose and heavy as you drop your weight onto the string; chunks will never work if there is any suspension or lifting in your shoulder. The bow slides a bit towards the bridge as you drop, and you get a noise. The stroke ends with the bow stopped and the weight deep into the string. From this point you can make a sounded up-bow on the beat if you want to. The notes are fingered to get a drier sound than you would get from open strings.

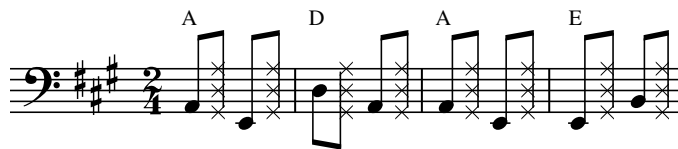


My students and I find effective chunking hard to do. But all my students have developed a bigger more resonant tone in normal playing from working to get the arm and shoulder relaxed enough for an effective splat onto the string. And the controlled hold that lets the fingers release in collé reaps nice rewards when we return to our classical legato bow changes.

As an alternative to the chunk, I let my students do slap off-beats. Put your bow down and just hit the open strings against the fingerboard with your right-hand fingers. This is another technique that my Suzuki beginners can do with the big kids. And if they learn to stay with the off-beat, they are learning a valuable rhythm skill.



Challenge your hot-shots to do the bass line and the slap. I find that if I pizz up with my thumb, and keep the bass notes on the C and G string that the pizz/slap is a lot of fun because it adds so much drive to the ensemble.



Ensemble

Now that you and your students have all these cool techniques that they have learned from the single page of printed music and your demonstrations — what’s next? Play in ensemble! The lively fiddle tunes are for dancing, so you have to play lots of verses, and you always do all the repeats so that the dance steps fit. Here is the 5-verse ensemble that we finished with at my fiddling session at All-State:

Violin 1	Violin 2	Viola	Cello/Bass
melody	melody	melody	melody
long bow harmony	slap or chunk	bass line	melody (plain)
slap or chunk	bass line	melody (Nashville shuffle)	long bow harmony
bass line	melody (slides)	long bow harmony	slap or chunk
melody (double stop drone)	long bow harmony	slap or chunk	bass line

Mix and match according to the skills of your group and their musical imagination. Since everyone is making stuff up on the spot, it doesn’t matter if the long bows are open string or low, if the bass line ascends or descends, if the rhythm section is slaps or chunks or pizz with slap. Have fiddling fun!

The American Fiddle Method

The American Fiddle Method is available for fiddle, viola and cello. In the back of each book is a chart that shows teachers at a glance the left-hand technique for each instrument for each piece. Contact faith@farrpublications.com for discount purchases. †