



FIDDLE

American Contest Fiddling and the Sequestered Judge

by Alan L. Kagan

The fiddle contest should be looked upon as an opportunity for students and teachers to develop their skills in performance and teaching. My own experience has been on both sides of the stage: as performer, judge, and teacher. This past August I was one of three judges for the State Contest held at the Minnesota State Fair under the authority of the Minnesota State Fiddlers Association, not for the first time, but alternating years for at least a decade. But, for the first time I experienced the circumstance of being a sequestered judge. That is, being placed in a closeted location so that we could not see the performers.

However, let me turn back the clock. My performance background is as a violinist, with orchestral engagements in the Seventh Army Symphony and the Indianapolis Orchestra. My academic training was in musicology and culminated with the Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at Indiana University. Opera and Chinese music were my specialties, not violin literature. Upon arriving at the University of Minnesota in 1968 I initiated the program in ethnomusicology. One of my first doctoral students was LeRoy Larson, enormously well-known as a gifted performer of Scandinavian-American music. LeRoy's dissertation project was the collection of Norwegian-Minnesotan dance music and this drew me into an appreciation of that repertoire and the skilled violinist/fiddlers of that tradition. I began learning these waltzes, schottisches and polkas, but as I became familiar with the broader Anglo-American fiddling repertoire, styles and techniques I developed a passion for being an involved performer. It engaged and challenged my violinistic abilities to the fullest and improved my memorization ability. My social life went through a change. Through jam sessions, square dances and performance activities I made a host of new friends: fiddlers, guitarists, mandolinists, banjoists and bassists. The old-timey and bluegrass musicians intermingled. For a long time I kept my fiddling life separate from my academic career. However, it was student violinists and future music educa-

tors who convinced me otherwise, and I added a course which balanced fiddling instruction with musicology. For performance instruction I combined both aural training and score reading.

1976 burst on the scene, the 200th anniversary of this nation. Communities sought to integrate American arts in the celebrations. The fiddle contest successfully served this need by providing a public event with the entertainment of a competition, a very American character indeed. The repertoire was regarded as an American original (although its sources are primarily British and Irish, with French, Austrian and Spanish less so), a symbol of rural and past popular culture. The fiddle contest had an uneven history but now was expected to erupt in full flower.

It was certainly not a tradition in the Upper Midwest, nor was the repertoire, representative of the East and the Southwest. Furthermore, there were few young practitioners. Minnesota communities announced contests with a resulting limited number of responses, mainly adults and seniors. I would see the same performers appearing in different locations. After entering a few contests I began to be called upon to be a judge. It is clear that my position as a university music professor prompted this request, providing an academic validation.

For all contests the repertoire specification is to play a waltz, a fast-paced hoedown, and a "tune of choice" (an instrumental rendition of a song or a dance genre other than the waltz and hoedown). Some contests limit the performance to a waltz and a fast tune. Always "understood," but only occasionally stated, is the issue of "authenticity" or "traditionality." Both the choice of tune and the performance style are expected to conform to the conventions of American fiddle tradition. Yet, what are the boundaries of the "tradition"? There is no absolute consensus across the nation, and decisions in a local community may vary from that of a state or national contest. On the other hand, certain restrictions have become commonly agreed upon. There is

a time limitation for the contestant, the requirement of acoustic instruments, and a limit to the number of accompanists. Tunes that have imitations of birds, animals or mechanical objects are prohibited. Thus, *Orange Blossom Special*, a great audience favorite, and *Listen to the Mocking Bird*, a song-tune once popular in Georgia contests, are taboo. Cross-tuning (scordatura) is also disallowed, despite its "tradition" in areas like the Ozarks and for specific tunes, e.g. *Black Mountain Rag*. The use of "double-shuffle," a delightful rhythmic device combined with string crossing and double-stops (usually), is a matter of contention between judges, although it is always accepted in *Cotton Patch Rag* as being integral to the tune structure.

Contestants are presented in age groups, the youngest typically being children under twelve. An enormous change has occurred over these three decades. The number of children playing fiddle tunes, many concurrently studying violin, has remarkably increased. This is an opportunity to have young students develop good stage behavior and gain self-confidence. Coordination with an accompanist is a skill that can be learned early and facilitates clean beginnings and endings, maintaining tempo and rhythm, and realizing the relationship of melody and harmony. Most generally, contests provide a guitarist fully familiar with the fiddle repertoire in the event anyone needs an accompanist. However, a child has much more security playing with the teacher, parent, older sibling, or jam session friend. The next older age division is the teenagers, followed by the broad span of the adult division and finally the seniors, generally set at 60 and older. Playing at a microphone is a new experience both for children and older contestants who have not competed before. It is necessary to have the violin close to the mike for good amplification, yet the proximity of this "foreign" object can be disconcerting. A practice session with a stand and boom mike hovering over the violin can be extremely helpful so that body movement and bowing is accom-

plished without interference.

The judging criteria have remained constant through the years: 1) intonation and tonal character; 2) tempo, pulse, and rhythmic regularity; and 3) degree of difficulty, execution and musicality. Judging remains subjective, despite the “scientific” appearance of numerical scoring. My judging approach is to set a different scoring standard for the children’s group than for older fiddlers. Whatever score I give to the first contestant of an age group becomes the measure for all that follow. This is clearly a problem if one is too generous with the first players in a division.

Judges in Minnesota contests have been placed facing the stage in front of the audience, or even in the middle of the audience, as was the “tradition” at the St. John’s “Swayed Pines” contest. The criticism of this is that one should not be influenced by the visual presentation and recognition of the performer. Audience reaction, or the sense that some are watching you during scoring, can be interferences. Thus it is that a requirement for judges to be sequestered has been enforced at the national contest (Weiser, ID) and most major contests. This has been greatly facilitated by technical advances in audio transmission. One can imagine future contests in which judges are located in other parts of the country, as is the innovation of the piano digital contest with international judges initiated here in the Twin Cities. At its heart the purpose of secluding the judges out of sight of the stage is to have a focus solely on the sound quality. For this reason, along with the careful selection of repertoire previously used by winning players and the rigor of practice for excellence, contest fiddling should be

considered a “classical” American tradition.

The State Fair contest is held at the stage in Heritage Square, an open-air venue with a tent-like covering. Two years ago the bad weather necessitated placing the judges on the stage itself. This year it was announced we would be sequestered. Our private space was a three-sided small canvas enclosed area with sound monitors facing us. The fourth side, a fence, faced the street, and beyond that a section of the midway carnival rides. I leave the distraction of sights and sounds to your imagination. Compare this with the national contest, at which I have performed successfully on the boxing-ring designed stage in the center of the high school gym. The judges are placed in separate corners of the library so that they cannot communicate with each other, except on demand. (An anecdote about that which concerned my repertoire selection must be left for another article.) On the other hand, I observed an outrageous result of judge sequestering at the World Series of Fiddling in Chickasha, Oklahoma. This was a contest with rather sizable monetary awards. Placed in an RV separate from the stage area, the judges drank liquor, passing around a jar of bourbon, joked with each other about the performances, and made guesses about the player’s identity. You can be assured that this is an anomaly, that judges do take their assignment seriously.

Recommendations for fiddlers and teachers

1. Attend contests to develop a better understanding of how to prepare. The winter is unfortunately an empty season, but here are two in opposite parts of the state: February 9—The St.

Peter Fiddle Contest (starts at noon in Trinity Lutheran Church). This contest offers three divisions under 18 years and an open contest for any age. Contact Adrian Lo for rules and registration: alo@hickorytech.net or 507-934-4649. April 5—23rd Annual Pillager Fiddle Contest (7 P.M. in High School North Gym). Pillager is on Hwy. 10 west of Brainerd. There will be six age divisions. Contact Arnold Cole, 218-746-3764 (P.O. Box 145, Pillager, MN 56473).

2. Attend jam sessions. The list for the state is too long, but can be accessed in *Inside Bluegrass*, the membership magazine for the Minnesota Bluegrass & Old Time Music Association www.minnesotabluegrass.org.
3. Listen to American folk music radio programs (again, see the list in *Inside Bluegrass*), purchase recordings and fiddle collection books (there are many now for all levels).
4. Become a member of the Minnesota State Fiddlers Association (\$10) and receive the quarterly newsletter, *Fiddling Around*, which will list the many contests in the state. MSFA c/o Judy, 6181 Bartlett Blvd., Mound, MN 55364.
5. Become a member of the Minnesota Bluegrass & Old Time Music Association and receive the monthly magazine *Inside Bluegrass* with its news about events, as well as articles.

Alan L. Kagan is Professor Emeritus at the University of Minnesota. †