



FIDDLE

How to Get Started in Fiddling Contests

by Cristina Seaborn

There are many types of fiddling and contests for fiddling. In contests all over the U.S., different styles of fiddling are accepted, but generally Texas Swing wins the big money. The farther north the contest is, the more Canadian fiddling is acceptable. The Peace Gardens fiddle contest has quite a few Canadian fiddlers because it is on the border of North Dakota and Manitoba. Maine fiddling includes Quebécois and New England Contra dance styles. Other fiddling styles include Celtic, Old Time, Cajun, Swedish (Scandinavian), and many local styles like Missouri Valley or Appalachian fiddling.

To prepare for contest fiddling

Memorize a waltz and a hoedown. Usually a third tune is required, which is a tune of choice. At most contests, your tunes have to be memorized. Only a few allow sheet music, except for the guitar player. The hoedown is in $\frac{4}{4}$ time and is played at a danceable tempo. The waltz is obviously in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, and to be considered in the championship division, must have impressive, in tune double stops and slides. The tune of choice is a rag or polka.

Age divisions at the fiddle contests are approximately 9 and under (small fry), under 13 (junior-junior), less than 18 (junior—the toughest division of all), 18 to 36 (not many compete in this age group), 37 to 59 (adult), 60 to 69 (senior) and at least 70 years of age (senior-senior). Some people start fiddling at 50 and are proud to be playing in this age bracket.

The fiddle contest judge determines what style will be accepted. If you want to win the contest, it helps to know the judge's taste in fiddle styles. Before some contests, (e.g. Cotton, MN) there is a conversation with the judges where contestants can ask questions.

Arrive about an hour early to the contest so you can find a guitarist to rehearse your tunes with. Fiddle tunes sound so much better with the guitar accompaniment. Let the guitarist know the name of your tune and what key it is in. Guitarists will know the chords to most fiddle tunes.

Often times, at the end of the contest, all the fiddlers get on stage and play some tunes together while the scores are being added up. Usually, whatever tunes the youngest contestants know how to play are chosen.

Fiddle Contests in Minnesota

Pillager, Big Lake, Annandale and Princeton have the best fiddle contests for a beginning fiddler in Minnesota. There is a friendly mixed crowd of elderly and young people. The Pillager contest is held in the high school gym, decorated with hay bales, and gives away prizes of cans of oil and car washes in Pillager. Big Lake gives a 100-pound sack of potatoes to every contestant and their accompanist! The Annandale fiddle contest is held at the wonderful historic Pioneer Park, with people in colonial dress, cotton candy, an Old School House, and a gift shop. Princeton has a "first-timers" division if it is your first time ever playing in a contest. Every contestant gets a certificate of participation, and winners receive a check. There are tens of dollars to be made in this business! Sometimes the big prize money is as high as \$500.

The serious fiddle contests in Minnesota are in the small northern town of Cotton, and the Minnesota State Fair. Both claim to be the State Fiddle Contest. In order to be the State Fiddle Contest, and have the winner qualified to go to the National Old Time Fiddler's Contest in Weiser, Idaho, the contest has to have judges who are qualified by Weiser. For more info see fiddlecontest.com.

Illegal Contest Fiddling Tunes

Over time, three tunes have been banned from fiddle contests: *Orange Blossom Special*, *Black Mountain Rag*, and *Listen to the Mockingbird*. I think a fiddle player needs to learn all three of these tunes, especially for playing in a band or solo; they are such crowd pleasers. These tunes are allowed in the "trick fiddling" division of a contest. The *Orange Blossom Special* was banned because of the hokum bowing (basically a

hemiola of playing 3 against 4 time). *Black Mountain Rag* has an alternative tuning, A E A C#, (from low to high string). *Listen to the Mockingbird* has birdcalls, slides, and pizzicato. Pizzicato and alternative tunings are not allowed at most fiddle contests today. Hokum bowing is allowed at most fiddle contests, but check the contest rules.

2008 Fiddle Contests in Minnesota

(Please contact to confirm dates)

Apr 5, **Pillager Fiddle Contest**. Contact: Arnold Cole 218-746-3764; Cass County Ag Society 218-746-3348

June 20-22, **Little Falls Dam Festival**. Contact: 320-616-4959, 800-325-5916, info@littlefallsmn.com, www.littlefallsmn.com/Dam-Festival

June 26, **Big Lake Spud Festival Fiddle Contest**. No entry fee to the festival or contest. Contact Norm or Dee Leslie 763-263-2218.

July 27, **Wright County Fair Fiddler Competition**, Hwy 12 & County Road 6, Howard Lake, MN. No entrance fee. 4 divisions plus trick fiddle and banjo division. Contact: Dan Mueller 612-802-3790, daninmonti@aol.com, www.wrightcountyfair.com/fiddlercontest.htm

August 1-2, **Cotton State Championship**. Rules of National Old Time Fiddle Association. No entrance fee. Camping on school grounds. Friday eliminations, Saturday finals. Contact: MSOTF Contest, P.O. Box 205, Cotton, MN 55724, Arlette Krog 218-482-5592, Jo Anne Robich 218-482-3351, Festival info: 218-482-3303 or 218-482-3420, <http://cottontownship.org/content/view/18/50/>

Aug 10, **Princeton-Mille Lacs County Fair**. Contact: Deb Bistodeau 763-389-2739

Aug 17, **Big Woods Old-Time Fiddlers' Contest**, 725 Pioneer Trail Park, Annandale, MN. Contact: Carol Weir 320-274-8489

Aug 22-23, **Minnesota State Fair**, St. Paul. Pre-register or you don't get in. State Fiddle Contest is sponsored by the MN State Fiddlers Association and the MN State Fair. Contact: Dee Scott 952-472-2987 or Judy McKeand 952-472-7587, www.mnstatefair.org

mnstatefair.org

Sept 27, **Albany Pioneer Days**, Albany, MN. Has a tractor parade. Fiddle Contest with cash prizes. Contact: 320-845-7410

September 28, **Annual Fall Festival & Fiddlers' Contest**, 27165 Old Mill Pond Road, Terrace, MN. Open to only amateur status. Contact: Alaire Soupir 320-278-3261, Jana Thorton 320-278-3019

Feb 7, 2009, **Saint Peter Fiddle Contest**. Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Peter MN. Contact: Adrian Lo 507-934-4649, alo@blc.edu, www.saintpeterfiddle.com

Cristina Seaborn is a violinist and fiddler with over thirty years of experience. She holds a Bachelor of Music Degree in jazz violin performance from Berklee College of

Music in Boston, and a Masters in Conducting for Orchestra from St. Cloud State University. She has produced an instructional video for fiddling through Mel Bay entitled Anyone Can Play Country Fiddle, CDs entitled Inside the Heart of a Musician and Spirit Wind, and many arrangements for string orchestra of fiddle music, jazz, Celtic, Scandinavian, Cajun and original. †