

Clinic: How to Start a Fiddle Orchestra

presented by Cristina Seaborn
reported by Michelle Schettler

Incorporating fiddle music into the string classroom and/or studio is something that many teachers are interested in doing but knowing where to start can be a challenge. Cristina Seaborn shared her tips and tricks for this daunting task to a room full of curious participants at the Fall String Clinic.

Having a catchy group name that students will like is good for starters. Some examples Cristina gave were: Fiddle Club, Fiddle Fire, Fiddle Fever, Jazz Strings, String Fling Thing, and BowDacious String Band. Advertising for the group can be done via e-mail, school newsletters, music school mailings, radio, television, billboards and newspapers. Local school music and private studio teachers can help spread the word through the community.

Groups that are part of the school orchestra program can meet either during the scheduled orchestra class or after school hours. She suggested having the group perform at school orchestra concerts and playing in the community often. Another program design option is to create a group that is separate from existing school programs. Cristina encouraged recruiting a combination of players of traditional string orchestra instruments along with traditional folk instruments such as guitar, mandolin, banjo, dobro, electric bass and piano. The program can be offered to group members of any age or ability level if the program is outside of the school setting.

If you are brave enough to try your hand at making your own arrangements for your fiddle group here are some of Cristina's arranging tips:

- Have a variety of levels of difficulty in the music: 3 easy pieces, 3 intermediate, and 4 advanced tunes.
- Choose melodically interesting pieces and seek out rhythmic variety.
- Transpose jazz and fiddle tunes for violin, viola, cello and bass, keeping tunes in first position. Give the melody with chord symbols for the rhythm section. Write a chord chart for the rhythm section.
- Use $\frac{3}{4}$ time on some slow, melodic fiddle or jazz waltzes for the beginner pieces.
- For the easy version of the tune, use half notes, quarter notes, dotted half notes, and whole notes. You can make the easy version from the root notes of the chord.
- Make an easy part that is open strings for students who have just started playing. Let them choose to pluck or bow. Include a few repeat signs and enlarge the music 120 percent. Leave out extensions in the easy version of the tunes (i.e. high 3rd finger in violin/viola, or extended 4th finger in cello).
- For the intermediate version, take the first note of each beat from the tune, or the note on the 1st and 3rd beat, or just the downbeat. Replace extensions by using a half note or quarter note that will blend harmonically with the original tune. Stay in first position.

Cristina stressed the importance of players knowing the traditional key that the fiddle tunes are played in. If players go

to jam sessions with other fiddlers they will be able to play the tunes without throwing off other players and accompanists at the session. She suggested transposing fiddle tunes down a fifth for the viola and cello so they can play in first position. The tune can be played through three times: first in the traditional key, then transposed down a fifth, and then back to the original key.

The presentation transitioned into a hands-on workshop opportunity for clinic participants to read through some examples of materials that can be used for fiddle groups. Cristina talked musicians through several stylistic points such as the proper way to do slides as we read through Mel Bay's *American Fiddle Method* by Brian Wicklund and Faith Farr. These books are available for homogeneous use in a fiddle setting.

Cristina also has several of her own arrangements for fiddle orchestras. Clinic participants got a chance to read through several of these and also listened to a triple fiddle arrangement by Cristina. These arrangements are available for purchase on her website www.seabornstrings.com along with more information on fiddling.

Michelle Schettler has been teaching orchestra in Monticello, MN for six years. She also coaches two after-school fiddle clubs for her middle school students. She is the current Mid-America Old Time Fiddle Champion and is a former South Dakota State Champion. Her orchestra students are looking forward to performing with the internationally known fiddle group, Barrage, in Monticello on February 9, 2009! ♪