

# ECLECTIC STYLES SURVEY 2012 AND WORKSHOPS 2013

by Cristina Seaborn

## The Survey

MNSOTA sponsored an on-line survey about eclectic strings from August 15 through December 1, 2012. The questions were:

- What is going on with Eclectic Strings in your area?
- Are you interested in: Check all that apply: Fiddling; Jazz; Improvisation; Composition; Folk; Rock; Celtic; Cajun, Scandinavian; Latin; Mariachi; Barn Dances; Electric Violin/ Viola; Electric Cello; Other (please specify)
- Who do you know in Minnesota who can give Eclectic Styles workshops for string orchestra?
- What instrument(s), level(s), or teaching situations (studio/school/college) are you in? Violin; Viola; Cello; Bass; Guitar; Harp; Private Lesson Studio; College-Level Private Lessons; Elementary Orchestra; Middle School Orchestra; High School Orchestra; College/University Orchestra; Community Orchestra
- Any other comments?
- Would you like a workshop from Randy Sabien or Cristina Seaborn for your orchestra program? If so, please describe what you would like.

The survey ended with an extended quote from Julie Lyonn Lieberman's book *Alternative Strings - The New Curriculum*:

Our students will definitely benefit from being exposed to the musical imagination of the world. But some orchestra directors assume that the inclusion of eclectic string styles or electric instruments will automatically generate higher levels of motivation and appreciation. This is not always so. Sometimes—but not always—change can take time. There is a mind-set from classical pedagogy that creates a fear of mistakes, an “eyes first, ears second” mental hierarchy, and an inability to play without being told exactly what to play note by note via sheet music. It may even take time to adjust to hearing and creating sounds that are new to them, or catching on to how they can create their own music. What transformation are we looking for? This is a question that would be useful to answer before you even get started. Here are some possible goals: Students who are: comfortable stepping in and out of leadership and being members of a team; equally adept at reading and improvising; equally adept at learning through their ears as well as their eyes; well versed in a number of styles (repertoire as well as appropriate left- and right-hand techniques); comfortable with more than one seating arrangement; comfortable playing as a soloist as well as within a group; capable of playing acoustic as well as electric and knowledgeable about the use of special effects; trained to compose, create variations on melodies, and interpret repertoire.

Sixteen teachers responded to the survey. Most were violin/viola teachers and private lesson studio. Many were school teachers and community orchestra leaders.

For eclectic activities, answers varied from “not much” to after school fiddle clubs, jazz string orchestras that meet outside of school hours, and composition included as a full-year school course.

Most teachers were interested in fiddling, Celtic, jazz and

improvisation.

Suggested workshop presenters for eclectic styles included:

- Judith Eisner, Minneapolis, klezmer, eisner.judith@macphail.org
- Pat Kelly, Minneapolis, has been teaching a mariachi orchestra to 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> graders for a number of years. Although no expert in mariachi, Pat is willing to do a lecture demo, violaondemand@yahoo.com, 651-276-6851
- Joe Mish, Pine Island, jmmbass@pitel.net, 507-356-8826, 507-356-8326
- Orange Mighty Trio, fiddle/jazz/pop violin/bass/keys trio, www.orangemightytrio.com
- Randy Sabien, St. Paul, jazz, randysabien@gmail.com, 715-634-7526
- Cristina Seaborn, St. Cloud, fiddle & jazz, seaborn@cloudnet.com, 320-654-9048
- Matt Turner, Wisconsin, jazz fusion cello, http://improvcellist.com, turnmatt@aol.com
- Brian Wicklund, Marine-on-St.-Croix, fiddle, www.fiddlepal.com, brian@fiddlepal.com
- (Apologies to the person who volunteered themselves, but did not identify themselves on this anonymous survey)

Additional resources for students suggested by the respondents included:

- Shell Lake summer camp Extreme Strings, Shell Lake Arts Center, 802 1st Street, Shell Lake, Wisconsin 54871-9700, 715-468-2414, www.shelllakeartscenter.org/?q=node/14
- Young Fiddlers Association of Minnesota, www.youngfiddlers.com, www.facebook.com/young.fiddler.3, youngfiddlers@yahoo.com
- The multi-day IAJE International Association for Jazz Education workshop. (Unfortunately IAJE disbanded several years ago.)

Comments from the survey included:

“I definitely agree that we want to make students as comfortable with ears as well as eyes. I believe if we are incorporating this into the school curriculum that we really need to look at how we can take students from reading/writing/playing, to learning in other ways... How to teach them the principles of reading, theory, playing *and* ear will need to become a balance somehow. It *must* happen over multiple grade levels, with all district orchestra teachers incorporating something, even if it is at a somewhat basic level, to prepare them for more advanced concepts in all areas. There are many gaps in the school curriculum where eclectic strings are concerned.”

## Workshops

After responding to the Eclectic Strings Style survey, those who wanted a workshop included Pat Kelly from Folwell School, Performing Arts Magnet in Minneapolis, Julie Schmidt from Anoka School for the Arts, Fred Moore Campus, and Joe Mish from Pine Island (orchestra grades 6-12). I presented workshops in January for Folwell and in February for Fred Moore. The Pine Island workshop had not taken place as of the time of writing this article.

## Folwell School Workshop

Pat Kelly and Mrs. Olcott are the orchestra teachers at Folwell School. Pat Kelly has formed a mariachi group and also has an electronic fiddle club. Two weeks prior, she had asked me for help in choosing what kind of pickups to buy. The Fishman pick up is a folded piece of metal that fits in the slot of the bridge. Some bridges needed to be filed to open the space. The more surface area of the pick up that is on the wood, the better sound. I like the pick up to be on the bass side of the violin bridge, and on the treble side of the violas, to pick up the opposite qualities of the instruments. Having a pre-amp is necessary for a rich sound. Otherwise an electronic pickup produces a thin sound.

At the workshop, the orchestras sounded great when they were playing, and I loved the repertoire that the directors had selected because it was fiddly with rock and blues elements. While I was there, a private lesson teacher from the Minnesota Orchestra came in to give lessons to the upper level students. Also, a volunteer came to pick up instruments that needed repair. Wouldn't these be nice additions to every orchestra program? After working with the other orchestras, I worked with the fiddle club. Pat has a new fiddle club that will meet after school on Tuesdays with a visiting fiddler.

Afterwards, Pat and I were able to process what had happened during the day. In reviewing the workshop, Pat said that I, "challenged students by jumping right into the music and expecting them to cook. There are times to break it up or to throw them into the deep end. We're going to cruise through it.

"Modeling says so much because students don't listen to what you say. They learn from modeling, how the body moves, what the music is supposed to sound like, how to make it musical. There are so many moving parts. You have to model, especially in strings."

## Fred Moore Campus Workshop

Julie Schmidt from Anoka School for the Arts – Fred Moore Campus, has 3 orchestras and a fiddle club. Last fall, Julie had the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students march in a city parade where they played *Cripple Creek* and *Boil dem Cabbage Down* from memory. During my workshop with the orchestra students, they learned the chord progression and took turns improvising on the fiddle tunes they knew. Half the class played the chord

progression while the other half improvised.

The improvisation had 3 different goals:

- Change 1, 2, or 3 notes.
- Change 1, 2, or 3 rhythms.
- Add sound effects such as birdcalls from *Listen the Mockingbird* (bobwhite, whippoorwill, robin, wren, woodpecker). Include changes in notes and rhythm.

Chord progressions were written on the board.

*Cripple Creek*

||:DDGD DDAD:||:DDDD DDAD:||

*Boil dem Cabbage Down*

DDGG DDAA DDGG DAD rest

Students also learned how to sing the lyrics to the songs:

*Goin' down to Cripple Creek -  
Gonna have fun*

*Goin' down to Cripple Creek -  
Goin' on a run*

*Goin' down to Cripple Creek -  
Goin' on a whirl*

*Goin' down to Cripple Creek -  
To see my girl*

*Boil dem cabbage down boys -  
Turn the hoecakes round*

*The only song that I can sing is -  
Boil dem cabbage down*

Throughout the workshop, I asked the students questions about improvising. A student teacher, Emma Hellmann, helped me write down student answers to questions.

*What did you hear when I played Boil Dem Cabbage Down?*

- Made it all up
- More than one string
- Slurring
- Used vibrato
- Went "eeerrrrwww" (sliding)
- Fast paced

*What did you hear when I did one change?*

- Changed strings
- Changed pitches

*What does improvising feel like?*

- Weird
- Feels like you're messing up
- Hear it more when there are less people playing
- Awkward
- Taking a risk
- Foreign

*What did you hear when I improvised a second time?*

- Added a whole bunch of notes
- Added rhythms
- Vibrato
- A lot of slides.

*How did it feel to improvise that time?*

- Even harder
- Un-continuous
- Don't want to play an "off" or gross note

*What did it feel like the last time?*

- I thought about the road map
- Feels a tiny bit more comfortable

*Comments from Emma Hellmann and Julie Schmitt:*

"It's great to have the students feeling uncomfortable. They kept saying improvising was weird and awkward. But the more students get used to improvising, the more comfortable they will be with doing it. And I think that this is an important part of learning: expanding the comfort zone and getting accustomed to new ideas. This is a lesson that students can carry with them in the music classroom and beyond.

"The benefits of improvisation include: playing isn't always playing the 'right' notes; listening to each other; difference between harmony and melody."

Julie Schmidt has fun Fridays for orchestra:

- Chocolate Fridays: Chocolates on the cello chairs. Chocolates on the violins so it doesn't fall off the entire class period. Then you get to eat it!
- Yoga Friday
- Aloha Friday: played Hawaiian songs while wearing the lei (flower necklace)

For the last 20 minutes of the school day, Julie Schmidt had reserved the auditorium for me to give a solo fiddle performance for the entire school. Three student helpers held large posters with the numbers 1, 2, and 3. They also had signs stating different styles of music that can be played on the violin and fiddle: classical, Swedish, Celtic, Cajun, rock, Texas swing, etc.

Students in the audience had to guess which of 3 styles was being played each time and vote using 1, 2, or 3 fingers. Then students were asked to compare two styles of music and describe the characteristics of each style. Answers could be shared using the microphones that were distributed

throughout the audience. Some of the students were quite colorful in their descriptions of the music!

### **Future Workshops**

Randy Sabien and I will hopefully be doing a workshop for Joe Mish in Pine

Island together. We are looking forward to doing workshops for anybody else who is interested in eclectic / alternative styles for string orchestra. Contact Cristina Seaborn, 320-654-9048, seaborn@cloudnet.com

Thanks for tuning in!

*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. †*