



# BAROQUE PRACTICE

## Baroque and Fiddle Music: How and Why These Genres Work So Well Together

by Mary Sorlie

Many students these days are exploring alternative styles of music. Jazz, tango, blues and fiddle music have become much more mainstream in the studio, the classroom and the concert hall. Music of the Baroque shares many elements of fiddle music. Whether it is American, Irish or Cape Breton fiddling, Baroque and fiddle music have many commonalities. Some of these include ornamentation, interpretation, function and technique.

The Baroque period is perhaps best known for ornamentation. This is not just in music, but in the art and architecture of the period. In Baroque music, the performer has a much greater say in the process and performance of a piece. You might hear two vastly different performances of the same piece, due to differences in ornamentation. Ornaments used in Baroque music include trills, mordents, vibrato, turns and appoggiaturas. During the Baroque period, performers were expected to know how and when to use ornaments. Particularly with bass lines, a skeletal line might be written with the expectation that the performer would fill it in with ornaments. *The Art of Violin Playing* by Francesco Geminiani (1751) and *On Playing the Flute* by Joachim Quantz (1752) are fantastic resources for Baroque ornamentation.

As in Baroque music, fiddle music allows for much ornamentation and improvisation. In Irish fiddling, the cut is similar to the mordent and the tap is similar to the inverted mordent. Fiddle tunes might begin with a simple melody and then add variations that include drones, slides, bowing variations and turns. The expectation is that the performer will add ornaments/variations to their performance of a fiddle melody, similar to Baroque performance practice.

David Greenberg is a violinist who has performed with Tafelmusik, one of the finest Baroque orchestras in the world. He also grew up playing folk music. On his CD *Bach Meets Cape Breton* he has done an incredible job of melding the *Gavotte from the Partita No. 3* by Bach, with a Cape Breton *Step Dance*. Both pieces are dance forms, both incorporate some ornamentation and these two styles are able to move seamlessly back and forth.

String crossings are abundant in both Baroque and fiddle music. Just about every fast movement of a Baroque sonata or concerto includes string crossings, particularly with the open strings. It is interesting to see what happens when you pair fast string crossings with these two genres. The second movement of the Handel *Sonata in D Major* has several four-measure passages of 16<sup>th</sup> notes. If you start with the melody of *Arkansas Traveller* or *Soldier's Joy*, you can alternate to one of the Handel excerpts every four or eight measures.

There are other similarities as well. One can often find pictures of 17<sup>th</sup> century violinists holding the violin several inches below the collarbone. This position is also true for some fiddlers. The spirit of a piece in the Baroque is referred to as affect. This could be determined by tempo indication or by key. The thought was that there was one affect or mood in that movement. The same is true for fiddle music.

Music of the Renaissance and early Baroque was often used to either accompany dancers or singers. New forms such as the concerto grosso, sonata and concerto were developed in the Baroque period, but composers still used dance movements and forms during the Baroque. There were still specific court dances. Some of these dance forms include the bourrée, chaconne, courante, gavotte, gigue, rondeau and tambourin. But there was also a shift in that dance suites were also being written for listening and not solely for dancing. In many ways this runs parallel with fiddle music. Fiddle music is often used to accompany dancing. Many fiddle tunes are in the form of a jig, reel, hornpipe, march and slip jig. Check out any Natalie MacMaster video if you want to see this done simultaneously. Fiddle tunes accompany both singers and dancers. But you can also hear some of the great fiddlers in the concert hall, instead of the dance hall.

Explore the possibilities of combining these two genres. Start with a Baroque movement and see what fiddle tune it leads you to. The combinations are endless and will probably be different every time. Enjoy where it leads you!

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### Handel Sonata in D Major example

The image shows three staves of musical notation for the Handel Sonata in D Major. The first staff is a single melodic line starting with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (D major), and a common time signature. It begins with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note D, then a half note E, and a quarter note F. A dynamic marking of *f* is placed below the first measure. The second staff is a bass line starting with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps, and a common time signature. It features a series of sixteenth-note patterns. A dynamic marking of *f* is placed below the first measure, and a dynamic marking of *p* is placed below the eighth measure. The third staff continues the bass line with similar sixteenth-note patterns and a dynamic marking of *f* below the first measure. A repeat sign is located at the end of the third staff.

### Arkansas Traveller example

The image shows three staves of musical notation for the Arkansas Traveller example. The first staff is a single melodic line starting with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (D major), and a common time signature. It begins with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note D, then a half note E, and a quarter note F. The second staff continues the melody with eighth-note patterns and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff continues the melody with eighth-note patterns and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The key signature of two sharps is maintained throughout.