



FIDDLE

How to be a Winner in a Fiddle Contest

by Cristina Seaborn

Would you like to be a winner in a fiddle contest? How would you do this? What are the steps? What matters the most to you, the experience or winning the money?

Memorize Three Tunes

To enter a fiddle contest, you have to memorize three fiddle tunes: a waltz, a hoedown, and a tune of choice. The tune of choice is not really a choice because, to win, it has to be a rag or a hornpipe. With my students, we will start a year in advance on preparing the tunes for fiddle contests the next summer. It is also a good idea to have a fourth tune memorized in case of a tie.

Age Category

Once you are prepared with three memorized fiddle tunes, you will enter an age category at the contest. Register in advance so the planners can get organized, though you can sign up the day of contest.

- **Small Fry**, for contestants less than nine years of age;
- **Junior-Junior**, for contestants less than 13 years of age;
- **Junior**, for contestants less than 18 years of age;
- **Young Adult**, for ages 18–36;
- **Adult**, ages 37–59;
- **Senior**, ages 60 and above; and finally,
- **Grand Champion**, which is open to competitors of any age.

Practice Stage Performance Techniques

My students practice their memorized fiddle tunes standing under a microphone. It is good to learn how to point the sound holes of your instrument at the mic, to get used to the moment of performance. The distance between the fiddle and the mic is close, about 5 to 10 inches. The intensity of standing under a mic with the bright stage lights on you takes getting used to. The MC may announce your name and tune titles. Or you may be in dialogue with the MC and asked to announce your name, what city you are from, title of your tunes, and whether it is the waltz, hoedown, or your tune of choice. Practice this possible MC dialogue in advance.

Accompanists

At the fiddle contest, a guitarist is hired to accompany the fiddlers. You need to let the guitarist know what key your tune is in. The fiddler also gives the guitarist the signal and tempo to start the tune, usually with two chops or a traditional rhythmic introduction. This rhythm is called four potatoes: 1 tater, 2 tater, 3 tater, 4. Giving a count off will also work for the guitarist, but a musical introduction is preferable.

Rehearsal

Before you get on stage for the fiddle contest, there are rehearsals with the guitarist in other parts of the building or fairgrounds. The

fiddler can also be accompanied by a piano and a bass. Ideally, if you can bring your own accompanist, you will be much more comfortable and relaxed because you know each other's playing style.

Workshops

In addition to the contest, there are workshops offered to the fiddle players by teachers or by the judges prior to the contest. A great way to know the preferences of a judge is to take a workshop by one. This intimate contact with the judge might change your fiddle tune selections for the contest.

Prize Money

There are lots of trophies and money prizes because in each age division there is a first, second, and third place winner. Some contests have a "first timer" division of any age. In addition, there are "twin fiddle" divisions where you can play a duet, and "trick fiddling" where you can do stunts such as playing the fiddle behind your back and under your legs.

Jam Session

At the end of the fiddle contest, while the scorekeepers are tabulating the final winners, all fiddlers get on stage for a fiddle jam session. When I'm helping lead the jam session, I ask the youngest player what tune they want to play. See list of jam session tunes at the end of this article.

Research Minnesota Fiddle Contests

There are many fiddle contests in Minnesota and around the country. You can do a search for "fiddle contests in Minnesota" to find out the location, date, and prize money. To my younger students I say, "There are tens of dollars to be made in contest fiddling!" Also, get on the email list with Mary Pat Kleven who leads the Minnesota State Fiddlers Association by contacting her at her email or website www.fiddlemn.com. She offers information about fiddle jam sessions, workshops, and new tunes every month.

Local Fiddle Contests

In small town fiddle contests, the promoters are volunteers. They do this for the love of keeping the fiddle tradition alive. The event planners need to find three judges, set up a facility, provide an MC, collect money for the prizes, invite fiddlers to compete, and advertise for an audience to attend.

National Fiddle Contests

Some fiddle contests are very serious. There are big money prizes that attract fiddlers from many states. At these contests, there are several rounds. The fiddle contestant will need to play a new set of three tunes (waltz, hoedown, and tune of choice) for each of the three rounds. Now the fiddle player will need to have ten tunes

ready to perform, three tunes for three rounds, plus one in case of a tie. At the Weiser, Idaho hosts the National Old Time Fiddler's Contest there are seven rounds for the Grand Championship! See their website at <https://www.fiddlecontest.org/>

Start Local

Personally, I would prefer that my student's first fiddle contest is low key. I want my students to feel they are supported in a friendly environment, rather than the intense competitive spirit of the national fiddle contests. Pillager, Minnesota is one of the earliest of the season. You can win cans of oil or a car wash in Pillager with the raffle ticket. Big Lake Spud Fest offers 50 pounds of potatoes for every contestant and accompanist. Annandale offers cotton candy. Each fiddle contest has a different flavor and culture.

Practice

The way to win a fiddle contest is the same as how to perform at Carnegie Hall, practice, practice, practice. Even after all these year's performing, I feel the energy of being judged under those bright lights and loud microphone. If I can transform that into the energy of the music, then I've mastered my nerves.

Philosophy

There is the Grand Champion of the fiddle contest, but as far as who the real winner is, I believe every contestant is a winner for having the courage to get on the stage and compete. The fiddle contest is a fun tradition for teachers and students alike. Find out what is going on in your area and experience the fiddle contest culture for yourself. You can go with the attitude of listening to all the new fiddle tunes you will want to learn, or to win the big bucks. It's a tantalizing and courageous journey to explore contest fiddling.

Jam Session Tunes

- Arkansas Traveler (D)
- Bill Cheatham (A)
- Wildwood Flower (G)
- Cuckoo's Nest (D)
- Ragtime Annie (C)
- Flop Eared Mule (D)
- Cripple Creek (A)
- June Apple (G or A)
- Liberty (D)
- Old Joe Clark (A)
- Over the Waterfall (D)
- Red Haired Boy (A)
- Redwing (G)
- Devil's Dream (A)
- Salt Creek (A)

- Soldier's Joy (D)
- St. Anne's Reel (D)
- Blackberry Blossom (G)
- Turkey in the Straw (G)
- Whiskey Before Breakfast (D)

Popular Contest Tunes

Here are contest fiddle tune suggestions from: <http://www.fiddlemn.com/popular-contest-tunes.html>

Hoedowns

- Sally Goodin'
- Sally Johnson
- Ace of Spades
- Billy in the Lowground
- Forked Deer
- Leather Britches
- Dusty Miller
- Devils Dream
- Tom and Jerry
- Wagoner
- Grey Eagle
- Blackberry Blossom
- Durang's Hornpipe

Waltzes

- Waltz Quadrille
- Festival Waltz
- Wednesday Night Waltz
- Ootpiik Waltz
- Cabri Waltz
- Margaret's Waltz
- Westphalia Waltz
- Forty Years Ago Waltz
- Anniversary Waltz
- Goodnight Waltz
- Black Velvet Waltz

Tune of Choice

- Pig Ankle Rag
- Beaumont Rag
- Sweet Georgia Brown
- Clarinet Polka

Expert at fiddling and jazz improvisation, Cristina Seaborn holds a B.Mus Degree in jazz violin performance from Berklee College of Music in Boston, and a Masters in Conducting from St. Cloud State University. †