

## Fiddling for classical violinists

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**Abstract:** This article is part of my doctoral dissertation (University of Iowa, USA, 1999) and has a twofold purpose. The first is to analyze and define the technique of American folk fiddling, based on my observation of hundreds of fiddlers, on twenty four years of my own experience as a traditional American fiddler and on a comparison between this style (basic shuffle, string crossing, drones, melodic ornaments, slides, hoe-downs, hornpipes, breakdowns, waltzes and reels) and the style of the classical violin. The second purpose of this paper is to provide the classical violinist with a systematized approach for learning how to reproduce an authentic fiddle sound. It also includes a brief "state of the art" review of classical violin methods and anticipates parts of my book "Fiddling for Classical Violinists", scheduled to be released in the beginning of 2001 by Mel Bay Publishing.

**Keywords:** American folk fiddling, violin technique, performance practice, popular music, instrumental music.

### O violino "country" norte-americano para violinistas clássicos

**Resumo:** Esse artigo é parte de minha tese de doutorado (University of Iowa, EUA, 1999) e tem dois objetivos. Primeiro, analisar e definir a técnica do violino *folk* norte-americano, com base na observação de centenas de violinistas *folk* tradicionais, na minha própria experiência de 24 anos como violinista *folk* e numa comparação entre esse estilo (*basic shuffle, string crossing, drones, melodic ornaments, slides, hoe-downs, hornpipes, breakdowns, waltzes* e *reels*) e o estilo do violino erudito. Segundo, discutir uma abordagem sistemática de aprendizagem e reprodução do autêntico som do violino *folk* para o violinista erudito. Inclui uma breve revisão da literatura dos métodos de violino erudito e antecipa partes do meu livro *Fiddling for Classical Violinists*, a ser publicado pela editora *Mel Bay Publishing* no início de 2001.

**Palavras-chave:** violino *folk* norte-americano, técnica do violino, práticas de performance, música popular, música instrumental.

### 1. Introduction

Traditional folk fiddling has been part of America's musical heritage since colonial times. Through the years, the fiddle has continued to be the most prominent instrument used in American folk music. The fiddle's capacity for strong rhythmic articulations as well as beautiful singing tones has made it the perfect instrument for folk music of all styles in countries on four continents. Settlers from England, Scotland, Germany, and France as well as African slaves brought with them well established musical traditions from their respective countries. This cultural diversity found in early America resulted in a wide variety of fiddling styles. Traditionally, these styles of music were passed down by self-taught performers from generation to generation through aural transmission. Recently, classically trained musicians have taken a greater interest in documenting and performing this traditional music.

I have taught traditional American fiddling to classical violinists for the past eight years. Over this span of time, I have been faced with the daunting task of trying to articulate a technical approach to violin playing which has never been fully documented. After being introduced to traditional Missouri fiddling by my grandfather at an early age (5 years old), achieving an authentic fiddle sound has always been second nature to me. Although I began formal classical violin training at approximately the same time in my life, I made an attempt to keep separate the two differing technical approaches to playing.



In my earliest attempts to teach fiddling to classical violinists I experienced extreme difficulty in describing the technical features of the style. At first, I would play a tune several times for a student and then ask them to imitate what they heard. All of the students could easily detect that the style of playing was very different. A few of them responded well to this approach, but the overwhelming majority needed detailed verbal descriptions. I had learned all of my fiddling “by ear” and I was now in a situation in which I had to explain what I was doing using terminology a classical violinist could understand.

Early on, I realized that in order to teach the classical violinist how to accurately perform fiddle repertoire, some sort of written material was needed. The majority of fiddle music collections either include only a brief introduction to the technique of fiddling or none at all. The main focus of these works is to provide transcriptions of traditional fiddle tunes. With a few exceptions, the available printed material does not attempt to provide the violinist with an in-depth study of the technical elements associated with fiddling.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. The first is to clearly analyze and define the technique of American folk fiddling. This analysis is based on twenty four years of my own experience as a traditional American fiddler. In addition, I have had the opportunity to observe hundreds of fiddlers through the years and have paid close attention to their technical approach to the instrument. This analysis sometimes includes a comparison to classical technique to help clarify the specific differences between the two styles of playing. The second purpose of this paper is to provide the violinist with a systematized approach for learning how to reproduce an authentic fiddle sound. The exercises included in the chapters of the book *Fiddling for Classical Violinists*, scheduled to be released in the beginning of 2001 by Mel Bay Publishing, have been extremely helpful in my own teaching of fiddling to classical violinists. I have experimented with a variety of approaches during this time, and have included the most useful technical exercises for this book. To aid those violinists who are interested in fiddling but have a limited knowledge of the style, I have included a brief history of folk fiddling in America.

While this written analysis should aid violinists in their study of folk fiddling, there is no substitute for listening extensively to various performers in order to appreciate the nuances of the style. When learning the performance practice of fiddling, violinists should couple their study of the material contained in this paper with regular listening. In my own experience, I found great inspiration from the recordings of Mark O'Connor. I purchased my first Mark O'Connor album in 1980 and consistently have been amazed by his versatility and virtuosity. While O'Connor initially became known among fiddle players as a master of “Texas style” fiddling, he has become comfortable in almost every musical setting in which a violin can be used. As a studio musician in Nashville, he has recorded on hundreds of major label recordings. Over the last five years, O'Connor has been introducing his brand of fiddling to classical audiences with his CDs *Fiddle Concerto* and *Appalachia Waltz*. In addition, he performs regularly in classical music venues presenting his own compositions as well as historic American tunes. Any Mark O'Connor recording would be useful (and hopefully inspiring) to a violinist interested in fiddle music.

Mark O'Connor may be the most well-known fiddler in America right now, but many other accomplished fiddlers have recorded extensively and should be on a “listening list” for the violinist. Stuart Duncan, Byron Berline, Vassar Clements, Buddy Spicher, Kenny Baker, Allison Krauss,



Bobby Hicks, Sam Bush, Doug Kershaw, Michael Doucet, and Tim O'Brien are all prominent American fiddlers. By regularly listening to some or all of these musicians, the classical violinist can expose himself to a variety of American fiddle styles.

The violinist will also need to have a source of printed fiddle tunes to aid in her development of an authentic fiddle sound. I have found R.P. Christeson's *The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory* extremely useful in my fiddle teaching. While this work provides little insight into the authentic performance practice of fiddling, it does include hundreds of meticulously transcribed hoe-downs, hornpipes, breakdowns, and waltzes. Another useful source of printed fiddle tunes is *The Phillips Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*, a two-volume collection that includes hundreds of tunes (hoe-downs, breakdowns, reels, waltzes) transcribed by Stacey Phillips. I have also provided over twenty hoe-downs and hornpipes in my upcoming book with bowing indications to clarify the authentic style.

## 2. Fiddle technique versus classical technique

The technique developed over the last 400 years by violinists and violin pedagogues is much better documented and more scientifically approached than fiddling. Among the first treatises on violin performance were the works published by Francesco Geminiani and Leopold Mozart (1751 and 1756, respectively). Since that time, many violinists and teachers have found the need to write down their own methods for developing the technical aspects of playing the instrument. In general, the technical literature of the nineteenth century is still the most used by violinists in their daily practice routines. The etudes of Kreutzer, Dont, and Rode are common training repertoire materials (AUER, 1980, p.97). Technical studies for the left and right hand by Otakar Sevcik are also an essential part of the modern violinist's library of technical study literature (FLESCH, 1924, v.1, p.115).

Even though so many etudes and studies were being written in the nineteenth century, teachers were not writing descriptions of the physical mechanics of playing the violin. Finally, in the early twentieth century, violin teachers saw the need for codified publications of their teaching methods, as in the treatises by Leopold Auer and Carl Flesch, which appeared in the early part of the century.

*The Art of Violin Playing* (1924) by Carl Flesch is the most complete and forward looking of these works. He provides lengthy verbal descriptions, photographs, and musical examples for all of the technical aspects of violin playing. In addition, he recommends the relevant etudes and technical studies which should be consulted for each specific area of technique.

The violin books and treatises which have been written after *The Art of Violin Playing* have followed Flesch's general organization or have investigated other aspects of violin playing. Probably the most comprehensive of the recent treatises is Ivan Galamian's *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*. Galamian's main innovation is the development of mental control over our physical movements. Paul Rolland's motion studies at the University of Illinois were primarily concerned with the field of performance physiology, exploring the most efficient use of the body while playing the violin. The Suzuki method of music instruction changed the way many teachers approached teaching young students, but most Suzuki teachers have found that they must also incorporate traditional technical studies into their teaching as their students progress (STARR, 1979, p.142). In contrast to this well documented technical heritage, American folk fiddle technique essentially



has had no written history. A few early 20th century collections of fiddle tunes have been published, but these works provide no insight into the authentic performance practice of the included compositions. The aural transmission of fiddling from one generation to the next coupled with the plethora of regional styles have made defining specific fiddle techniques a difficult task.

For the purposes of this study, I will focus primarily on old-time Missouri fiddling. Not only is this the style I am most intimately acquainted with (my grandfather is a traditional Missouri fiddler), but Missouri fiddling contains elements drawn from many other regional styles. In a Missouri fiddle contest, contestants will often play hoe-downs commonly found in the southeastern or Texas traditions, hornpipes related to the New England style, and waltzes with roots in Cajun and Western music.

It should be noted that fiddle players, unlike classical violinists, can enjoy a much more “relaxed” approach to holding the instrument due to the nature of the fiddle repertoire. Most fiddle tunes never require the performer to leave first position. Since the left hand does not have to perform any upward shifts, the instrument can largely be supported by the hand instead of the head and left shoulder. While this position may look incorrect to a classically trained player, the fiddler can perform almost all fiddle tunes with a collapsed wrist and free head and neck.

The following sections include a detailed look at both the left and right hand techniques unique to fiddling. These techniques include slurs, string crossings, added drones and double-stops, melodic ornaments, slides, and left finger articulations. Each of these elements contribute to the overall sound of fiddling. Before looking at these individual techniques, we must become familiar with the technical components of the basic “fiddle shuffle,” a bow stroke which provides the backbone of all up-tempo fiddle tunes.

### **3. The basic shuffle**

When classical violinists play a fast fiddle tune, the result is often a rhythmically precise performance devoid of the nuances associated with authentic folk fiddling; the right wrist is usually stiff, all notes are played with separate bowings, down and up bows are equally accented, and notes are sustained to their full value. The sonic result reflects a lack of understanding on the classically trained violinist’s part of the performance practice of folk fiddling.

The “basic shuffle,” an eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes, is the most commonly found rhythmic pattern in fast fiddle tunes. While this bowing pattern seems simple to perform, it actually offers a real challenge to the violinist. With some patience and diligence when practicing the “basic shuffle” (in which listening to recommended performances will help), the violinist can enjoy a much more authentic sound when playing fiddle tunes. Fiddle players allow the bow to move in a way that is quite different from a classically trained violinist. While violinists work from their earliest lessons on trying to make down and up bow strokes even (without rhythmic accents), fiddlers allow natural forces (gravity) to create an uneven relationship between bow strokes. This stylistic effect which results in the difference between down and up bows can sometimes cause confusion on the part of non-fiddlers. Often an attempt is made to “swing” or “dot” notes to sound more authentic. In reality, these musicians are getting further away from the true nature of the shuffle bow stroke. Down bow strokes are moving with gravity so the bow moves faster and is heavier. The up bow stroke fights gravity so the bow is lighter and slightly slower. Another contributing factor is the balance and weight of a violin bow itself. The middle of the bow (where the

shuffle pattern begins) is heavier and stronger than the tip (where the up bow stroke begins).

These natural forces are allowed to have a greater impact on a fiddler's bow due to the loose and relaxed bow hold and flexible wrist incorporated by traditional folk musicians. Since the bow is often held by the thumb and a few fingers and the wrist bends freely, the bow is again allowed to be acted upon by the natural weight of the hand. This relaxed bow technique is a critical factor in obtaining a "fiddle sound."

The first step in learning the "basic shuffle" is to master what I call the "breathing" bow stroke. When the shuffle is performed by a fiddler, it sounds more like two quarter notes than eighth notes coupled with sixteenth notes. The end product places the rhythmic emphasis (not accents) on the first and third beats of each measure. If a fiddler were to perform continuous quarter notes, the notes have a similar sound to a person taking normal size breaths. The down bow imitates the exhalation and the up bow imitates the inhalation. Of extreme importance in this comparison is the relationship between these two actions.

When breathing through your nose you should notice a few things. First, listen to the beginning of the exhalation, compared to the beginning of the inhalation. The exhalation (down bow) has a more forceful sound and feeling than the inhalation (up bow). Take note, however, at the quality of this exhalation. The initial force does not have a sharp accent or "pop" associated with it. The sound rushes out and gradually decreases as the next stroke (inhalation) approaches. Now consider the action of inhaling. There is noticeably less force at the start of this stroke but it is the same length rhythmically as the exhalation. Probably the most important factor to pay attention to is the amount of space and quality of the space between the exhale and inhale stroke. As previously mentioned, the exhalation naturally decreases in sound. Does the sound ever fully stop? No. The breath never has an abrupt pause from inhalation to exhalation. Now these observations can be transferred into our performance of some simple quarter notes.

Start in the middle of the bow and hold the bow with the thumb and 1st finger only. On the first down bow remember to allow the bow to move quickly at the beginning of the stroke but not to sustain too much. The sound must have a natural decay as the bow gets lighter toward the tip. Also, the speed decreases as the stroke continues. With as little pause as possible, change to an up bow. The wrist should flex upward (toward the player) and the speed should increase at the beginning of the stroke. As the stroke continues, the speed will decrease in preparation for another down bow.

This exercise needs to be repeated until the sound of breathing is fully imitated. Both down and up bow strokes should always begin with a fast bow speed. Following this surge of speed at the beginning of each stroke, the player must allow the bow speed to decrease in anticipation of the change of bow direction. This swell placed on each note is a critical element in achieving a "breathing" sound. The down bow swell is sometimes easier to execute than the up bow swell. Many fiddlers raise the right shoulder during the up bow phase of the shuffle bow stroke. This slight raising helps lighten the stroke and allows a faster bow speed. The violinist may want to experiment with this right shoulder lift. Also, be sure to avoid an abrupt break or pause between notes. The bow must always be moving in order to properly imitate a fiddle sound. The *marcato* or *martelé* stroke does not exist in a fiddler's technical equipment. As the player gains comfort and confidence with this approach, the other fingers of the right hand should be placed on the top of the bow, with care that the added fingers do not result in added tension.



The next step in properly executing the “basic shuffle” bowing pattern is to add the sixteenth notes. This is the step in which many violinists lose the fiddle sound they were obtaining in the previous exercise. Always keep in mind that the “breathing” quarter notes must consistently prevail. The sixteenth notes in the shuffle must not be played too evenly and also cannot be too loud. The violinist must fight the temptation to “press” the sixteenths into the string with excessive bow pressure or to use too much bow on these notes. Following the first eighth note down bow, the bow should be at the tip. The two sixteenth notes need to be played with tiny bows (1/2 inch of the bow maximum) and with an unpressured bow. The bow should still be at the tip and the “breathing” up bow can now be executed. Following the up bow, one needs to take care not to be any higher in the bow than the middle. Also to be avoided is the use of too much bow. The sixteenth notes in the middle should likewise be played with small bows and little pressure.

If this bowing is performed properly, the eighth notes should still have the “breathing” sound achieved in the quarter note exercise. The violinist must remember that the strong beats of each measure are slightly elongated. The eighth notes also have a slight swell or burst of bow speed that helps to emulate the sound of a person breathing. The sixteenth notes merely ornament the eighths! This “shuffle” or “hoe-down” bow stroke can be heard as a basic element in most fast tunes. Careful work on this bowing pattern may require some time and thought but the result will be a more free and authentic approach to fiddling.

#### **4. String crossings**

The action of moving the bow from one string to another may seem easy to a non-violinist, but to execute this motion smoothly takes years of careful practice. Many different types of string crossings exist and each type requires a slightly different coordination between the bow, fingers, hand, forearm and upper arm. Classical pedagogical writers have dedicated entire chapters to the development of clean string crossings. Open string exercises (without the placement of left hand fingers) have been composed and many examples of string crossings from the literature have been cited to help violinists find ways of perfecting this technique (LELAND, 1949, p.15).

Most reasonably accomplished fiddlers can execute intricate string crossings with precision and accuracy. They can also perform these crossings at extremely fast tempos. How is it that these self-taught musicians have mastered a technique that takes years for classical violinists to develop? The answer lies in the more relaxed manner in which the fiddler holds the bow and right arm. The muscles of the right arm are as flexible as possible when a fiddler plays, and the bow hold is also loose and flexible. This is sharply contrasted with the sometimes tense muscles of the traditional violinist’s right arm and wrist. Another reason that fiddlers execute string crossings with relative ease lies in the nature of the fiddlers’ repertoire. Even the most basic fiddle tunes incorporate many string crossings.

Crossing from one string to an adjacent string, the most rudimentary transfer of the bow, must be mastered before more difficult string crossings can be attempted. Rocking the bow between the D and A strings is the easiest exercise to begin with. Carl Flesch has written extensively on the mechanics of this motion and asserts that in this type of string crossing the wrist moves in a circular pattern while the forearm and upper arm remain virtually motionless (FLESCH, 1924, p.61). In observing a fiddler playing this type of passage one would think they had studied Flesch’s recommendations their entire life. The wrist moves in a fluid manner while the rest of the arm remains relatively static.

When preparing for this motion some thought should go into the wrist movement without holding the instrument or bow. I have found that the motion of crossing from a lower string to a higher string consecutively is very much like scooping ice cream. Try this movement in the air. Notice that the wrist causes the hand to move in a clockwise direction. In addition, the shoulder, upper arm, and forearm contribute very little to the rotation of the wrist and hand.

This scooping action is exactly what a fiddler does during string crossings. With the bow placed on the D string, begin the downward phase of the scoop. This should cause that string to sound. As the motion continues and the wrist moves downward, the bow will change levels and rock to the A string. The continued rotation of the wrist moves the bow along the A string and eventually back to the D string. By repeating this motion over and over again and increasing the tempo the wrist movement looks like a blurred circle in the air.

The main caution to violinists when performing these string crossings is not to use too much bow. In order to clearly execute string crossings at the extremely fast tempo of most fiddle tunes, very little bow should be used. Fiddling does not necessarily have to be very loud. The temptation on the non-fiddler's part may be to try to "saw" the instrument in half in these kinds of passages. The best fiddlers have a smooth accurate sound in string crossings. They allow the wrist and hand to do the work. The result is less sound but greater precision.

In these basic string crossings (between two adjacent strings), fiddlers seem to intuitively add another element which most pedagogues fail to address. This element is an extremely loose and flexible bow hold. The lighter, less tense bow hold employed by fiddlers allows the wrist to move freely at its hinge joint (GUNTARP, 1980, p.43). This flexibility allows the wrist to be more active in the bow stroke.

Classical violinists often find string crossings difficult due to tight wrists. They fail to make the connection between their bow hold and their wrist. To experience this sensation of excess tension, hold your right wrist with your left hand placing the thumb on the tendons on the underside of the right wrist. Now bend the right thumb inward and clench the right fingers. Notice that those right wrist tendons nearly pop out. This added tension inhibits the natural fluidity of the wrist joint. In no way do violin pedagogues suggest stiff bow holds, but the fact remains that many classical players suffer from wrists that are rigid and locked (ROLLAND, 1974, p.145). This rigidity is usually due to stiff and tense fingers. Awkward and uneven string crossings result from this added tension.

After the violinist is totally comfortable with the "ice cream scoop" string crossing method they should find tunes with multiple string crossings relatively easy to negotiate. A fine example of such a tune is the *Cincinnati Hornpipe*. This tune is largely constructed of string crossings and can be played with the scooping right hand. In fact, the first measures are almost identical to the previously written about open string exercise.

When first performing the *Cincinnati Hornpipe*, it is best to take a slow tempo so the fingers and wrist can remain flexible. Notice that in the second bar of the tune, three strings are crossed and then the pattern of alternating strings is resumed. It is especially important not to use too much bow and to maintain an even bow pressure. If the pressure does not remain constant the crossing will sound uneven. When too much bow is used, the forearm is overly active. The crossing will not be



clean. One must remember to adhere to the previously mentioned guidelines of string crossings and the rules stated in performing the “basic shuffle.”

The same concepts are applied to performing larger string crossings (a crossing which requires the bow to skip a string). To help the bow travel to its new destination, a slight raising or lowering of the upper arm must be made (FLESCH, 1924, p.62). This added movement cannot interfere with the general flexibility previously mentioned. The bulk of the crossing is still made by the wrist. The upper arm simply assists in the extra distance being covered. Many exercises have been written to help develop these larger crossings by classical pedagogues. *Urstudien* by Carl Flesch contains an especially demanding exercise that requires the performer to jump the bow from the G to E strings. Although fiddle tunes do not incorporate as many of these large crossings consecutively, many instances of large melodic leaps can be found in the fiddle repertoire, as in the tune *Stoney Point*.

As violinists advance through the repertoire, they are required to perform bowing patterns which are increasingly complicated. One of the most challenging of those patterns is the baroque *bariolage* bowing (GERLE, 1991, p.35). This pattern is found in the works of numerous baroque composers. Possibly the most famous example of *bariolage* comes from *Partita no. 3 in E major for Solo Violin* by J.S. Bach.

This pattern requires the violinists to cross the bow between three strings. As in the other string crossings, the wrist is still heavily involved in the stroke. The added movement in executing the *bariolage* bowing occurs in the lower arm. A circular motion of the forearm assists the wrist in the quick changes from string to string. If violinists were to practice the “double shuffle” bowing of country fiddling, they could greatly enhance the fluidity of their wrist and forearm motion. This bowing pattern involves three strings (as does the Bach) and requires an extremely quick change from one string to another.

When fiddlers play the “double shuffle” pattern, the wrist and arm are so flexible they almost seem snake-like. In slow motion, this pattern would reveal a wrist and forearm motion identical to that of a classical violinist playing the *bariolage* passage. The “double shuffle” can be an excellent alternative for teaching complicated bowings by adding left hand chords. The first two measures from the breakdown section of the tune *Orange Blossom Special* utilizes the open string pattern from the “double shuffle” with chords added.

## 5. Bowing single note passages

One of the most individual techniques employed by traditional fiddlers is the bowing of repeated sixteenth notes in up-tempo tunes, commonly found in hoe-downs. Rarely, if ever, do fiddlers play extended passages of rapid notes using separate bow strokes. Instead, the traditional performer plays these passages with a combination of slurred and separate notes. The contrast between the slurred and separate articulations produces a variety of rhythmic effects essential in creating an authentic performance.

The main difficulty in studying the bowing of single note passages is the seemingly arbitrary manner in which fiddle players add slurs. In observing a multitude of fiddlers, I have never seen a performer



bow the same tune the same way twice. Single note bowings seem to be governed not by conscious thought, but by the dance-like character of the music. The intricate bowing patterns found in

hoe-downs are in fact improvised by the performer. It is this improvised quality that makes the analysis and performance of specific bow strokes a daunting task for the violinist.

The first step in performing a long passage of sixteenth notes in a hoe-down is to identify the types of bowing combinations used by fiddle players.

Luckily, certain patterns of separate and slurred notes can be isolated and analyzed. These patterns can be placed into the following categories: (1) slurs that emphasize a strong beat, (2) slurs that create syncopations inside the bar and (3) slurs that obscure the bar line. Another related stroke used in hoe-downs that needs to be considered is the "double down bow". Through careful study of these patterns the violinist will greatly enhance their performance of fiddle tunes.

Probably the most common reason fiddlers add slurs to a tune is to place a rhythmic accent on a strong (dance) beat of a measure. One of the most common examples of such a stroke is the "one separate + three-slurred" pattern.

This stroke involves a lightening fast down bow contrasted with a slower up bow. The resulting sound of this sudden burst of bow speed on beats one and two of the measure is a strong accent. This accent brings the dance beats out in a way that would be impossible using separate bow strokes.

To practice this stroke, the violinist will find it helpful to play the stroke on an open string. In general, the same rules and guidelines set forth in the "shuffle bowing" section regarding wrist flexibility should be followed. The real challenge is in producing the proper type of accent on the first note. The accent should be achieved not through any added pressure, but rather through the speed of the bow. The accent is also enhanced by a "whipping" movement of the wrist.

In the air (without the bow) it is helpful to try "throwing" the right hand towards the floor with a quick forearm motion. If the wrist is sufficiently loose, the hand will snap downward and then quickly rebound. When trying this exercise it is critical to allow the hand to hang towards the floor like a wet rag from the wrist joint. The rapid downward snap of the forearm will work properly only if the wrist joint is allowed to react to the movement. This initial movement should mimic the cracking of a whip.

Immediately following the "whipping" downward movement of the hand, the forearm then gently "drags" the wrist (and hand) back to their initial level. Once this exercise is mastered, an accented sixteenth note followed by a dotted quarter note should be attempted with the bow in hand. While the initial stroke is extremely fast, care should be exercised not to apply undue pressure to the bow. The accent will be more effective if the string is allowed to respond to the lateral energy (speed) as opposed to vertical energy (pressure).

The "one separate + three-slurred" bowing pattern can be found throughout the fiddle repertoire. The difficulty for the classical violinist is the improvised nature of the added slurs. Luckily, this particular pattern is most often used in conjunction with certain melodic structures. Probably the most common usage of this bow stroke is found in repeated melodic patterns. The other frequent use of the "one separate + three-slurred" bow stroke is found in scale passages. This bowing adds



rhythmic accents which alternating down and up bows cannot produce.

The next commonly found bowing pattern also involves three slurred notes contrasted with one or more separate notes. Rather than favoring strong beats, this combination of separate and slurred notes is added by the performer to accentuate a weak beat. The most typical application of this bow stroke is found at bar lines and strong beats in the middle of measures.

As is common with these types of bowings, the separate notes are played with an extremely fast bow speed. The resulting accents create syncopations that help produce an authentic fiddle sound. When performing this bowing pattern, as well as all other bowings studied in this article, bow distribution plays an important role. Fiddle players rarely, if ever, use the lower half of the bow. They normally stay in the upper third, especially when performing fast tunes. This preference for the lighter part of the bow results in a sound which is open and free. Care should be exercised by the violinist to remain in the upper half at all times when practicing any up-tempo piece.

This pattern occurs with less regularity than the “one separate + three-slurred” pattern. To help the violinist learn more about this improvised combination of slurred and separate notes, it will be helpful to study a variety of bowings of this type. Although this pattern will invariably accentuate a different note of each measure, it always involves a slur which is placed over a strong beat followed by one or more separate notes. The violinist will need to experiment with the addition of slurs of this type to produce an authentic sound.

A bowing that appears with more regularity can be found at the beginning of fiddle tunes involving pick-up notes. This bowing obscures the bar line and creates a syncopation. As a general rule, triplet pick-up notes should always be slurred to the first note of the first bar. This type of bowing can also often be added at the end of a section before a repeat. The syncopated effect is extremely characteristic of a traditional fiddle sound and can be observed in the fiddling of many regions. Usually, the final sixteenth note of a section is slurred into the first note of the next section. This bowing adds a rhythmic flair commonly associated with fiddling. As a general rule, this type of slur can be added at the end of any section before a repeat.

Another frequent bowing pattern is the “double down bow”. This bow stroke normally appears when an eighth note is followed by two or more sixteenth notes. Classically trained violinists will tend to perform this bow stroke with an audible pause between the two down bow strokes. In addition, the classically trained performer usually applies a good deal of pressure to the bow. This added weight causes the bow to remain on the string between notes. A fiddler, on the other hand, performs this stroke in a much different manner. The bow is held loosely and is allowed to make a slight jump or retake between notes. This minuscule raising of the bow should not be confused with a complete lifting of the bow off of the string. The bow is merely allowed to “breathe” between the two down bows.

To achieve this sound the violinist must perform the bowing pattern of the “double down bows” on an open string. Each of the two down bows should begin in the same approximate spot in the bow. As with all fiddle bowings discussed here, the upper third of the bow must be used. The space between the notes can almost be completely eliminated if the violinist allows the bow to move as



freely as possible.

## **6. Drones, melodic ornaments and slides**

A variety of left-hand techniques are used by fiddle players which create sounds unique to American folk fiddling. Drones, melodic ornaments, and slides are probably the most characteristic left-hand devices employed by fiddlers. The violinist will need to be technically fluent in all three of these areas in order to accurately reproduce an authentic fiddle sound.

The addition of drone strings to a fiddle tune is one of the most basic techniques used by American fiddlers. Even beginning players have the ability to add open strings to the simple melodies they are performing. Irish fiddle tunes do not incorporate many drones. These compositions tend to favor a single-note melodic style. Why did early American fiddlers develop a style so dependent upon the use of double-stops (two simultaneous sounding notes)? The answer to this question can be found when examining the difference in instrumentation between an Irish fiddle group and an American fiddle band. The use of the bagpipe in Irish music creates constant drones. Therefore, Irish fiddlers do not have to add drone strings when playing their melodies. The bagpipe was not incorporated into the American folk music tradition. This may be due to the national identity attached to this instrument. The bagpipe has always been associated with Ireland and Scotland. Colonists may have wanted to break a direct link to the old country by excluding the bagpipe in early American musical groups. To replicate the bagpipe sound, American fiddlers added droning open strings to traditional melodies. This technique also increases the overall volume level of the instrument since two strings are constantly being played.

A knowledge of the underlying harmony is essential when adding these drones. For example, a tune in the key of D major should involve an open A-string or open D-string depending on the melodic contour. As the harmonies change the appropriate drones will also change. Most often, the bow never actually changes string level when adding drones. Both strings are played constantly through a given passage while the left fingers play the melody. The drones are merely the addition of an adjacent open string.

Some fiddle tune collections include accompanying harmonic changes, making the process of adding appropriate drone strings easier. However, the majority of collections contain melodies without chord indications. In these instances, the performer must determine the underlying harmony by analyzing the melody. Luckily, most fiddle tunes favor melodic figures that outline a particular chord in some way. In addition, identifiable scales and arpeggios frequently appear. As the violinist gets more familiar with the nature of the fiddle literature, she will find the process of adding appropriate drones easier. The performer must learn to trust his ears.

Drones are not always created by adding an open string. Certain chords are sometimes played in which no open string can be incorporated. If a drone sound is desired for such a chord, the fiddler executes a "fingered drone." This type of drone is performed by placing a particular finger (usually the first finger) on two adjacent strings. This finger placement creates the interval of a perfect fifth. The most common instance of this technique occurs when a fiddler plays accompaniment figures.

Fingered drones appear more frequently as the number of sharps or flats increase in the key signature. In bluegrass music, when the fiddler must often accommodate the range of a particular



singer, the keys of B-flat, E-flat, E, and B major are commonly used. In order to obtain an open string drone sound in these keys, the fiddler uses the “fingered drone” technique. In the key of B major, the fiddler can employ a fingered drone on the tonic, subdominant and dominant chords.

Another left hand technique found in American folk fiddling is a melodic ornament I have termed the “fiddle turn.” This ornament, like a classical mordent, involves the addition of a tone one step above the initial tone. While many ornaments found in classical music involve the left fingers to perform a lightening fast movement (the trill or mordent), the “fiddle turn” is executed in a more relaxed manner. The end result is an added ornament that is the equivalent of a sixteenth note triplet.

The upper note “fiddle turn” is used to the greatest extent by Texas fiddlers. The jazz and big band influence on Texas fiddling can be observed in the sometimes excessive amount of ornamentation in the music. A fine example of this florid style is the tune *Limerock*, in which Texas fiddlers will often add a turn to every note of a descending D major scale pattern.

In addition to a turn which incorporates a tone one step above the initial note, turns involving a tone the interval of a third above the initial tone are often found. Most often, this turn is played with the second and fourth fingers. In the key of A major, for example, the second finger on the A-string plays a C-sharp. By adding a fourth finger turn to an E-natural, fiddlers add some pizzazz to an otherwise plain passage.

Turns, much like single note bowings, are added at the discretion of the player. This improvised quality is sometimes intimidating to the classically trained musician. In order for violinists to become comfortable with adding these ornaments, they must experiment while performing fiddle tunes. As with all techniques studied in this paper, listening to recommended recordings and to live fiddle performances is essential to the classical violinist's ability to assimilate the correct style when attempting “fiddle turns.”

The final aspect of left hand fiddle technique for the violinist to learn is the manner in which fiddlers slide their fingers on the fingerboard. This technique, sometimes termed the “gypsy slide,” is commonly used by players of all styles and serves various purposes.

Fiddlers often incorporate slides to play melodic patterns which would require a difficult or unfamiliar fingering. These types of slides normally are used to play two-note chromatic figures, B-flat followed by B-natural, for example. The violinist would more than likely choose a half position fingering when performing these figures. This allows each note to be played by an individual finger. While this fingering choice results in greater precision, it is not within the technical grasp of most fiddlers. Rather than play the first two notes of the bar with two different fingers, the fiddler will use a first finger for the B-flat and slide it up to the B-natural. While these slides were most likely added by fiddlers to overcome a deficiency in their left hand technique, the slide has now become a staple of the fiddler's technical equipment. The ability to perform slides accurately is a must for anyone interested in the performance practice of fiddling.

Ascending and descending chromatic slides can be found throughout the fiddle repertoire. When performing these slides, the violinist needs to consider a few technical elements in order to



authentically replicate the sound of a traditional fiddler. First, fiddlers tend to play on the fleshy pad of their left fingers as opposed to the finger tips. Since the pad of the finger is softer than the finger tip, a thick or warm sound is produced in the slide. Another technical element of the fiddler's slide is the speed of the sliding finger. The fiddler moves the finger at a fairly slow and steady rate. No attempt is made to pause the finger between notes to accentuate the chromatic movement. These musicians prefer to glide the finger in a fluid manner from the approximate starting pitch to the next desired pitch. Finally, the sliding finger of a fiddler is very lightly pressed on the fingerboard. If the finger is pressed down too heavily, it will not have the freedom to slide smoothly. If these general guidelines are followed by the violinist, an authentic sound can be reproduced.

The advent of phonograph and radio in the first part of this century exposed American folk fiddlers to a wide variety of musical styles. Soon, some fiddlers were trying to imitate the wind instruments they heard playing with jazz and big band groups as well as the slide guitar found in early country blues recordings. Expressive finger slides were incorporated by fiddlers to better replicate the bends and slides of instruments they were hearing on radio and phonograph recordings.

Expressive slides are often found at the beginning and/or end of a particular phrase and provide an ear-catching sound for the listener. Unlike the chromatic slide, the expressive slide involves notes centered around an approximate location on the fingerboard. Rather than one finger playing adjacent notes on the fingerboard (as in the chromatic slide), the expressive slide may require one finger to ascend and descend around an approximate pitch area. This technique is almost impossible to express with traditional notation due to the approximation. For instance, a simple ascending expressive slide up to an A-natural on the E-string will begin with the third finger a whole step below the A-natural. However, when a classical violinist looks at this passage he will probably not begin the slide from so far below the written pitch.

More expressive slides will present additional problems regarding the notation. A commonly found slide in Texas fiddle music involves a bend or slide around the lowered third degree of the scale traveling to the tonic degree of the scale. This particular slide is extremely common and can be transposed to any key. In G major the slide is performed by the fourth finger on the E-string (B-flat travelling to G-natural) and should begin somewhere around an A-flat. The fourth finger then smoothly slides up to the approximate pitch area of a B-flat and then creeps back down. As the fourth finger is performing the descending slide, the second finger is placed on the G-natural. The timing of the slide is free. The ascent and descent should not be rhythmically regulated.

Expressive slides add a vocal quality to fiddling. They also reflect the plethora of musical styles which have influenced the genre. The classically trained violinist may at first find the concept of approximate pitch location foreign. He must remain patient and open-minded when developing this technique and remember to allow the left hand fingers to glide evenly across the fingerboard. Given the limitation of notation to accurately represent the sound of expressive slides, the violinist must become accustomed to the various styles of the fiddlers referred to in the recommended recordings contained in the introduction to this paper.

## **7. Conclusion**

The rich history of American fiddle music dates to the colonial period. President Thomas Jefferson, explorers Lewis and Clark, and author Hawthorne are a few examples of American icons dedicated to the melodic strains of the fiddle. Classical violinists can help to keep alive the historic traditions of this brand of music, but doing so requires a clear understanding of its performance practice.



This study has endeavored to provide the violinist with the information needed to produce an authentic fiddle sound. The preceding technical descriptions and exercises that will appear in my upcoming book have been designed to enhance the violinist's knowledge of the proper performance practice of fiddling. Coupled with regular listening, this study should aid the interested musician in better understanding the nuances of American fiddling.

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