

VIOLIN OR FIDDLE?

Many people ask that question and the answer is..... both.

When you play classical music, such as by Mozart or Brahms, and play in a very dignified manner, you would call your instrument a violin.

When you are playing fiddle music of any style - Celtic, Western, Old Time, Blue Grass, Appalachian or Eastern European, you would call the instrument a fiddle. The music is usually very rhythmic in style and gets you tapping your feet, moving about or dancing.

Traditional Celtic fiddle music predominately came to Canada from two main countries Ireland and Scotland as people started to immigrate here in the 16 and 1700's. Many of the tunes were originally composed out in the fields where the workers probably first hummed them, then were played on an instrument once the farmer came home at night. They were not necessarily played on a fiddle, which was very hard to come by and expensive, but often upon a flute or a whistle which could easily be made from a piece of wood. It was an imaginative world at that time, full of fears and uncertainty and the music emerged from that. Eventually neighbors would learn each other's tunes and there came to be different regional styles within the country. The music listeners would develop dances for the tunes, which served to unify the family, provide recreation and entertainment for their simple but hard lives. Music became a unifying factor in their communities. Over time, some very distinct styles of rhythms began to be played and various styles of dances were created to accompany the music.

Irish fiddling is often more lyrical, played quite smoothly and often played quickly. The fiddle player can add his own "ornaments" with his fingers as he plays, creating lovely sounds as well as creating various tones with his bow. The addition of flutes, uilleann pipes, button accordions and more recently the bodhran drum, give the Irish music its own distinct sound.

Scottish fiddling is often very precise with a greater variation of rhythms and key signatures. Scottish fiddle music was first written for the bagpipes so sometimes the tunes have a very strong sense of beat such as in a march. The Scots are unique in one style of playing called "strathspeys" which are very dignified dances the music having lots of dotted rhythms, played with a light staccato or bounce on the notes.

Celtic music is written in different formats and time signatures that characterize the steps of a traditional dance. The main styles of music and dance are:

Marches - 4/4 time

Jigs 6/8 time

Slip Jigs 9/8 time

Reels/Hornpipes 2/4 or 4/4 time

Airs or waltzes 3/4 time

Strathspeys 4/4 time

When you listen to a fiddler play his music you will be able to hear the rhythms change when he is playing a “set” a grouping of 3 to 5 tunes. They are usually played 2 times through, sometimes 3, depending on the length of the dance. The set may start off slowly with a waltz, then move into strathspeys or jigs, then get really fast with the reels. The dancer’s steps also change with the change of the rhythms.

When the Irish and Scottish people immigrated to Canada, they brought with them their wonderful music and dance and it has settled in four predominant regions of Canada. Today the most popular form of Celtic music in Canada is Cape Breton music. The people there have really made an effort to resurrect and popularize this mostly Scottish music that is usually played with driving hard bows and stomping of the feet. Vamping on a piano is the most common accompaniment with the fiddle. Step dancing is learned by most everyone living there so the music is enjoyed by all.

French Canadian fiddling has it’s own unique sound and style of playing. It has taken the traditional tunes and made them into their own unique style of playing. The music is very happy and very rhythmic. The use of clogging (heel/toe tapping) on a wooden board to the rhythms and playing the spoons are very popular as an accompaniment as well as accordion and guitar.

The Metis people of Manitoba and Saskatchewan first learned the fiddle in the early 1800’s from the fur traders of Quebec that headed west. Their style of playing has strong French Canadian influences but frequently they structure their tunes with old Native song traditions. Two very unique things the Metis people do with their fiddle is something called “cross tuning” where the standard tuning of a fiddle from EADG is changed to EAEA which gives a very cool sound to the fiddle, almost like a banjo. They also will play on more than one string called “double stopping” which creates harmonies and a fuller sound. The Metis also love to accompany their music with foot rhythms played on a board as well as with spoons, bones or drums.

West Coast fiddle music has been made popular through the establishment of “fiddle camps”, old time groups and fiddle orchestras that are found in several areas of B.C. most notably in Prince George. Generally all styles of fiddle music are enjoyed and usually played for fun or for a listening audience. There are a few fiddle composers here in B.C. that have given fiddle tunes a more modern take although they are written in the same format as traditional. Because fiddle music is usually listened to rather than danced to here in B.C., a composer can take some liberties with his writing style that couldn't be taken if the music was to be used for dancing.

Daniel Lapp, Zav RT, the late Oliver Schroer and Kíerah Raymond have contributed much of the B.C. repertoire of West Coast fiddle tunes. These composers have their own identifying “mark” or style of writing attached to them. Over time, as their tunes are played, people will be able to discern “that was an Oliver Schroer tune” or a “Kierah Raymond tune”, just as many traditional fiddlers would know an 18th C Scottish “Niel Gow tune” or a “Michael Coleman” tune of 20th C Ireland.

As with all music, it is very important to play it from the heart and to be creative and expressive in your own style. Many people just play notes, but a good fiddler will let his bow “speak” and when he does, he will move his audience and hopefully create within them a love for the music!

Students:

Why is tapping to music an important feature of listening?

How and why were the original tunes first composed?

What kind of recreation did people enjoy in the 16 and 1700's?

Can you name some of the styles of the written tunes and dances?

Name some the instruments used today to accompany Celtic music.