

Want to Learn More About Fiddle Styles, Jazz Strings and Rock?

by Renata Bratt and contributors: Jason Anick, Edgar Gabriel, Sheronna McMahon, and Duane Padilla

Eclectic styles music in its many forms is taught at music camps throughout the USA and Canada during the summer. It's not too early to begin planning to learn a new style of music to teach your students. Many camps begin registration now; some fill up by the end of March. The following is a short description of styles along with some tips for classroom teaching as you think about which style you may want to learn.

Keep your eyes out for ASTA summer workshop listings in *American String Teacher* and on the website astaweb.com.

Fiddle Styles

In its many sources from Irish, English, Scottish, Canadian, and African traditions, American fiddle music has, over the course of the past 300 years, become characterized as an indigenous musical style in the United States and is one that continues to thrive today. The study of American fiddle music overlaps with studies in cultural diversity, ethnomusicology, and American history.

Some characteristics common to American fiddling styles include accents, slurs, double stops, and embellishments. Traditional fiddle tunes usually consist of dance music including hoedowns, reels, jigs, and hornpipes. Other common types of dance music for fiddle include the polka, waltz, rag, and the schottische.

Fiddling may be further categorized by different styles, such as Appalachian, Bluegrass, Canadian, Celtic, Cajun, Jazz, Rock, Old Time and Western Swing. Quite a bit of our fiddling heritage derives from Celtic music. Celtic fiddling includes Scottish and Irish traditional music. Profuse ornamentation and rhythmic accents characterize both styles, though they are not always the same ornaments. Celtic fiddle music is mainly dance music, though some slow tunes, airs, are certainly part of the style.

Scottish tunes are placed into sets of three or four tunes—often from slow to fast, but also dance sets, using all reels or all jigs and so on. Scottish dances include the strathspey (found only in Scottish music), reels, and the 6/8 jig. Much Scottish music has been collected and published since the seventeenth century, but the style itself is not found in printed pages.

U.S. National Champion winner Jeremy Kittel composes new music in Scottish style as does Bonnie Rideout, Hanneke Cassel and Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser who performs with Scottish-style cellist Natalie Haas.

Cellists, violists and bassists—be sure to look for camps and institutes friendly to your instrument.

Irish Fiddling includes 6/8 jigs, 9/8 slip-jigs, slower

hornpipes and faster reels. Like Scottish music, Irish tunes are usually played in sets (often starting with a slow air and getting steadily faster, progressing into medium tempo), reels or jigs into very fast reels. Martin Hayes is a master of this style. Irish fiddle music is heavily ornamented and includes slides as well as turns and triplet bows.

Canadian styles include Cape Breton, Québécois and Métis as well as Old Time. Maritime and Cape Breton music derive from Scottish music and include dance styles such as the strathspey, reels, and the 6/8 jig. Cape Breton music is characterized by a heavy feel on the main beats, often accompanied by a kind of stride piano playing with a bit of a rag feel. The late Buddy MacMaster and now his niece, superstar Natalie MacMaster, have many albums in this style. Kimberly Fraser and Andrea Beaton are younger players carrying on the tradition.

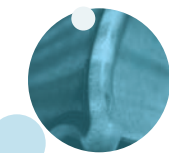
Quebec fiddle derives from French-speaking musicians interacting with Anglo-Celtic fiddle traditions. This style also features “crooked” tunes—where one beat is dropped or added in a section. The rhythm is driven by the seated fiddle players’ stamping feet—a dance style that is often accompanied by guitar or accordion. André Brunet is a champion Québécois fiddler.

Métis fiddle playing originated with First Nation peoples combining both the French and Scottish settlers’ music with their own. This style is also commonly accompanied by the fiddler’s feet and often includes crooked tunes. John Arcand is a master Métis fiddler.

The southernmost part of American fiddle, Mexican fiddle, has quite diverse styles. The fiddle is usually responsible for carrying the melody in most regions of Mexico. Most of the music is not written in musical notation, and as with many folk styles, pieces are rarely played the same way from one time to the next. Swing fiddler Paul Anastasio has transcribed many Mexican tunes.

Fiddlers who are really serious about honing their skills often attend fiddle contests. These contests are the best training ground available for goal-oriented fiddle players. Contest tunes are quite regimented. Some of the most common are: “Sally Goodin,” “Dusty Miller,” “Grey Eagle,” “Limerock,” “Tom and Jerry,” “Leather Britches,” “Tennessee Waggoner,” “Brillianty,” “Cattle in the Cane,” “Say Old Man,” and “Durang’s Hornpipe.” The granddaddy of American Fiddle contests is the National Oldtime Fiddlers’ Contest and Festival, which takes place in Weiser, Idaho. There are fiddle workshops each day and you can observe contest fiddling.

Cajun fiddle music has ties to historical French and African peoples and the songs are often sung in French.





Like jazz, its roots lie in Louisiana and New Orleans. The rhythmic drive of this music incorporates aspects of early blues and jazz. Cajun ensembles often include a second fiddle part playing lower notes than the melody and supplying the rhythmic pulse. Cajun fiddler Michael Doucet, founder of the band, Beau Soleil, is a leading Cajun fiddler.

Old Time and Appalachian style fiddling often uses Celtic-based tunes, which have been rhythmically transformed through interaction with African styles in the American South. One tune will be performed many times before the end of the tune. Much of the variation comes in the form of bowed syncopation. Younger Old Time fiddlers include Brittany Haas and Matt Brown. Bruce Molsky almost single handedly reinvigorated this style, which is now very popular.

New England style fiddling is based on the East Coast maritime style, integrating Canadian as well as Celtic styles into music for contra-dances, and square dancing. Social dancing is popular throughout the American fiddle world. Fiddlers Lissa Schneckenburger and Randy Miller are fine New England style musicians.

Bluegrass fiddling is a style of music invented by Bill Monroe integrating American/Celtic tunes, hymn tunes and original music with African syncopation and virtuoso soloing. Often, Bluegrass solos are pre-composed, but some are also improvised. Kenny Baker and Vassar Clements were legendary bluegrass fiddlers. Bluegrass fiddler Richard Greene performed with Bill Monroe, invented the percussive bow “chop” and toured with the seminal rock fusion band, Seatrain.

It is easy to start adding fiddling in the classroom by using the *Fiddlers Philharmonic* and *Basic Fiddlers Philharmonic* books by Dabczynski and Phillips. Students enjoy the format of these books as they can choose to play the accompaniment part, the basic solo, or the intricate advanced solo that usually sounds like an improvisation. Chord symbols are included, so guitar or mandolin players who do not read notes yet can play along in the ensemble. The *Barn Dance Fiddle Tunes for Two* series by Greenblatt and Seay also offer accompaniment, tune and chord symbols for all stringed instruments.

Learning written solos that sound improvised gives students ideas for their own improvisations. The students may challenge themselves with the difficult solos or try their own improvisations over chord progressions. The whole class can be involved with improvised accompaniment if some of the students are providing drones or simple offbeat background rhythms. The series of orchestra books by fiddle champion Mark O'Connor can be used in the mixed string classroom for formal learning. To facilitate the informal learning approach in the orchestra classroom, students could volunteer to improvise a phrase of a tune and have the class imitate and add their own variations.

Jazz fiddling is based on improvising solos within the jazz repertoire. Other characteristics of jazz fiddling include strong accents on beats two and four, eighth notes that may swing; slides, ornamenting important notes; vibrato that is used to emphasize important notes and has varying speeds and widths, and short riff patterns, or rhythmic motifs, that are played to accompany the solo line. Christian Howes is a master jazz fiddler.

Swing Jazz Violin

“Swing jazz” is an umbrella term that refers to a collection of styles of American music popular from around 1900 to 1950.

Some sub-genres that are considered “swing” include ragtime, hot jazz, and gypsy jazz. Early jazz string players such as Stuff Smith, Stephane Grappelli, and Joe Venuti helped to define the role of the violin in jazz as a lead instrument, similar in function to a trumpet or a saxophone.

As a lead instrument, a violin or viola can do several things:

1. **“Play the head.”** After a short four to eight measure introduction, a lead instrument or singer usually plays the melody through one cycle of the form of the song. This is referred to as “playing the head”. Much of the repertoire of the swing jazz era draws from songs from show tunes and other popular material generally referred to as “The Great American Song Book”. In their original form, many of these tunes were not conceived as “swing jazz” and consequently their original rhythmic structure is very similar to classical music. When “playing the head,” swing musicians aggressively embellish the original melody with syncopated rhythms and melodic ornaments to create what is commonly known as the “swing feel”. In the spirit of improvisation, these rhythmic embellishments and melodic ornaments are often different from performance to performance.
2. **“Take a solo.”** After an initial performer has “played the head”, musicians are then encouraged to “take a solo.” Players take turns improvising variations based on the form and harmonic structure of the original tune. With experienced performers, these variations can be quite elaborate. It is not uncommon for great performers to take a 16-measure song and expand it into a series of 20 or more variations. Improvisers use both a deep knowledge of harmonic theory as well as a large vocabulary of pre-learned musical phrases called riffs to generate these variations.

To create a stylistically correct “swing feel” when playing the head, or taking a solo, it is helpful to keep several points in mind.

- In swing jazz in 4/4 meter, the strong beats are beats 2 and 4 (This is the opposite of classical music where most of the emphasis is on beats 1 and 3). As a practice exercise, try playing a simple song such as “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” with a metronome beating only on beats 2 and 4. You will discover that even without any other rhythmic or melodic ornamentation, the music will start to take on a swing feel. When swing jazz musicians use a metronome, it is invariably marking beat 2 and 4.
- In swing jazz, the eighth notes are one of the primary building blocks used to create melodic ornaments and improvisations. When playing 2 or more consecutive eighth notes, they are often performed as a series of alternating long and short notes similar to (but not exactly) the feel of a “quarter note—eighth note triplet” in 12/8 meter.
- When playing long eighth note patterns, try to start bowing them on the offbeat with a two-note tie and an accent. This fundamental swing eighth note bowing is very similar to the overlapping bowing used in the beginning of Dvorak’s *Humoresque*.
- Use vibrato as an ornament and not as part of the basic sound. Be in control of your vibrato and only use it at the end of phrases or on longer notes, never on eighth notes.

- Be relaxed with your bow hand. A lot of the swing feel comes from subtle motion in your wrist and fingers. When the tempos get faster, the eighth notes tend to be played more “straight” and the swing feel comes more from the subtle finger motion.

Traditionally when not playing the melody or improvising a solo, the violinist would sit out of the music making and rest. These days, modern swing jazz violinists are experimenting with ways to contribute to the rhythm section:

- Cellists, and to a lesser extent, violas depending on the instrumentation of the particular ensemble, could play a pizzicato bass line usually played by an upright bass.
- Violinists can be seen strumming their instruments more like a guitar in a manner inspired by famous rhythm guitar player Freddie Green. He was known for playing simple 2 or 3 note chords as quarter notes on each beat of the measure. This “4 on the floor” style of strumming is especially useful when there is no drum set keeping time.
- Modern improvising violinists like Darol Anger and Casey Driessen have been developing and expanding the percussive bluegrass bow technique called “the Chop” to recreate the familiar sound profile of the high hat, snare and bass drum using only string instruments. Anger’s Turtle Island String Quartet was one of the first groups to successfully integrate this technique in the jazz setting.

While there were some jazz violinists in the early days of jazz, strings were overshadowed by trumpet, saxophone, and other horn instruments in jazz history. Currently there is a renaissance of string swing jazz. In addition to the players mentioned, be sure to listen to some of the current practitioners of swing jazz such as Tim Kliphuis, Florin Niculescu, Ben Powell, Aaron Weinstein and Jason Anick.

Rock Violin

The stringed instrument has no traditional role in rock (except for string lines and pads), so it is up to the individual player or leader/arranger/producer of the music to decide what role the string player will play. Often, the music is not notated so it is up to the player to compose/improvise their own part in whatever role they play. The great thing about this is that it leaves the field wide open to endless possibilities. Violinist Mark Wood and cellist Mike Block have been visionary leaders in rock string playing and education.

Strings can play many roles in rock including the following:

- **Melody.** Strings are the closest instrument to the human voice, so it is only natural that the stringed instrument is great for vocal lines. It is a very useful skill to be able to play (read) a rock or pop melody. Most rock melodies when written out have a great deal of 16th note syncopations. If the player reads these rhythms exactly they will not have the swing or feel

of the melody, the player must feel the strong beats, and syncopate accordingly. Also, if there are words to a given melody it is best to memorize the words and emulate those rhythms.

- **Lead solos and fills.** Here the role is clearly defined, the string player is taking the place of the lead guitar. The string player can be Jimi Hendrix or Eddie Van Halen. Often, classical players are perfect for this role, because lead guitar players are considered virtuosos and classical players are trained to be virtuosos. However we are not always trained to be improvisers and that is essential to soloing in some rock styles. Luckily, chord changes are much simpler in rock than in jazz or bluegrass. In rock you can usually use just one scale or mode for a rock solo, where jazz often requires several. Rock is closer to classical music than jazz in several aspects; the heavier the rock, the less it swings and metal music is the closest rock to classical music. Also, as in classical music, the strong beat is often on 1 and 3. It is important to note that some of the greatest living classical soloists such as Rachel Barton Pine, Nigel Kennedy and David Garrett are rocking out stages with their amazing technique; similar to the way Paganini did with the music of his day. Barton Pine’s podcasts are great resources and several are dedicated to Rock playing (www.rachelbartonpine.com).

All rock players should be well versed in the blues. The blues scale should be learned in any key that you are playing in. The key of E is most common in rock. The E blues scale is: E G A Bb B D. An easy way to remember the blues scale is to learn the minor pentatonic (this scale is essential to rock) which is the 1 3 4 5 7 degrees of the minor scale or E G A B D in E. To make it a blues scale add the flat 5 Bb in E. Another scale that is predominant in rock solos is the Dorian Mode. It is the minor scale with a raised 6th, so in E it is E F# G A B C# D. To change the feel of a solo often guitar soloists will alternate from blues to Dorian. Even if the tune is a major blues with Dominant 7th chords these minor scales can be used, because they create tension by clashing minor scales over major harmony. Of course major and minor scales are often used in rock and the Mixolydian mode. Keep in mind that most rock guitarists never think of these scales when improvising and the best way to learn rock is the way they did, from hours of improvising along with records and copying other rock and blues guitarists ‘licks’. A lick is a musical phrase improvised or worked out ahead of time to use in an improvised solo. It is good to have many licks at your disposal when improvising. Arpeggiating the chords is another good way to create licks.

Another important way to learn rock is by jamming with other musicians. You don’t need a whole band to do this and you can get together with a friend who knows a few chords on the guitar or piano and improvise over the chord changes. There are also some very useful published materials to learn rock such as *Electrify Your Strings* by Mark Wood, *Rockin’ Out With Blues Fiddle* by Julie Lyonn Lieberman and Edgar Gabriel’s *String Groove* materials. Some great rock

violin soloists to are: Jerry Goodman, Sugarcane Harris, Mark Wood, Papa John Creech, David Ragsdale, Bobby Yang, Ann Marie Calhoun, and Alex DePue (with Steve Vai) and Jean Luc Ponty plays possibly the greatest rock violin solo on Frank Zappa's 50/50. On cello, Aaron "Von Cello" Minsky has rocked out for years and has published lots of great rock for cello.

Rhythm Riffs, and Harmonies.

A riff is similar to a lick except that it is repeated often and used as a supporting rhythm or melody. Riffs usually are worked out and not improvised, however they were created out of improvisation and groove with the bass and drums. Many rock songs are based on riffs. Guitarists Jimmy Page and Keith Richards are two of the greatest riff masters that created some of the most iconic songs in rock. It is a given that the player should understand the chords and arpeggiating the chords can create great riffs. String players that have created their own unique sound with their recognizable riffs are Robbie Steinhardt from Kansas and Boyd Tinsley from the Dave Matthews Band. The Finnish cello group Apocalyptica has mastered the metal string genre with their cello riffs. Violinists such as Lindsey Stirling and Cait Lin have done a great job of combining rock riffs and harmonies over melodies and dance/rock rhythms. Lindsey Stirling's publications are excellent for students to learn rock, they are very well written and fun to play.

String Lines and Pads

This is the only role that is an industry standard for strings. If the part is written out then it is a reading session that most classical players can do. However if the player is to compose or improvise their own part, then they are an arranger and must use their knowledge of music to enhance the music. An easy way to write string pads is to find a common note, or notes close to each other to hold through the chord progression. For instance, for the chords A- G F, you can play C B C. Often strings are used as an afterthought in rock to sweeten up things, but sometimes they are an integral part or even the 'hook' in rock tunes such as Coldplay's *Bittersweet Symphony*.

Bass

Cellists are very fortunate that they can also play the role of bass player if needed. This is especially useful in string ensembles without bass. Violins and viola can also play this role with the aid of an octave effect to lower the pitch by an octave or two.

Percussion, Rhythm and Sound Effects

String instruments can perform many effects. One of these is what I call 'Rock Vibrato', where the acoustic bowed instrument can produce distortion and a whammy bar effect. Type "Rock Vibrato" into YouTube for a tutorial video from Edgar Gabriel's String Groove App.

A great source to learn bow techniques and rhythms performed on acoustic instruments is Darol Anger's video *Chops and Grooves*. (Google "Darol Anger Video Chops and Grooves.")

The electric instrument also opens up more possibilities for rhythms and sound effects. Adding effect and pedals like a Wah Wah pedal can create a vocal filtering for percussive rhythm much as a guitar would do, as in the 1970's Issac Hayes theme for the movie *Shaft*. With delay, chorus, overdrive and other effects the possibilities are limitless for the electric violin. Joe Denizon has a great book *Plugging In* which explores many possibilities for the electric violin. The loop pedal is a very useful tool, where one string player can play all of these roles simultaneously.



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