



Fiddle Pedagogy, Research of the Irish Fiddle Method And A Pedagogical Outline Part Two

by Cassie Wetherill

Teaching Fiddling to Cello Students Mya

To conduct my project, I chose to teach 3 of my cello students, each from a different grade levels. My youngest student is named Mya, a fifth grader at Bexley Elementary School. Mya started cello with me a year and a half ago, well before students in her music class. Mya's mother is a talented pianist and vocalist. She teaches music in Columbus Public Schools and is very supportive of Mya.

Mya has wonderful technique and intonation and learns very easily by ear. I had previously experimented with teaching her Suzuki pieces by ear, but Mya would become frustrated to the point of tears. I wanted to try this fiddle project with her because I think that she has grown over the past years and can now handle this challenge.

I chose to teach Mya the Ash Grove for a variety of reasons. This piece is a traditional Welsh waltz, a style of piece that we had been working with before. The piece is also in G Major. Mya has just recently learned the notes on the G string and can play the G Major scale. Mya also works very well with patterns. To help her become less overwhelmed, we are constantly circling the patterns of notes in the songs in her book. We talk a lot about arpeggios and intervals and she can now look through a song and recognize the challenges in the patterns before she even plays the piece. The Ash Grove is a nice, moderately paced piece that allows for a nice full bow and tone production, another technique we have been working on.

I talked to Mya and her mother about the Fiddle Project before starting and they were both very excited! I think that this relaxed teaching method was exactly what Mya needed for the summer time. We worked on the Ash Grove in between other school and solo activities for 5 lessons.

On our first lesson I talked with Mya about the waltz genre and history. I shared with her the lyrics of the piece and we talked about what they meant. We reviewed where the emphasis goes in a waltz and the G Major Scale and arpeggio. We also reviewed pick up notes, bowing and ABA form of the piece. Mya was excited and jumped right in. In those 20 minutes we learned the first 4 measures. I would teach her notes a few at a time and have her repeat them back to me. I was concerned at first about the large number of slurs in this piece and was worried that she might get lost in them, but Mya took my demonstration and repeated it exactly, without any hesitation in bowing.

At the end of the first lesson with Ash Grove, I told Mya, "no cheating! You can listen, but do not look up the music online and read from it!" She seemed concerned that she wouldn't remember. I asked Mya if she could sing the piece in her head. And she of course said yes. So I told her, "If the music is in your head, you just need to get it out into your fingers. Pretend that there is a little man inside your head singing you the Ash Grove. Use that man to help you figure out the notes. If you get stuck, sing out loud and match the notes with what you hear." Mya seemed much more relieved!

The next week when I saw Mya, she was beaming with joy! She told me that she had run home and played the Ash Grove for her sister. She then played it everyday before she practiced and remembered everything perfectly. During her lesson we learned the rest of the A part. I pointed out to Mya the patterns in the scales coming down from D, C and B. What I also found interesting during this lesson was that Mya's posture had improved and her hand position was perfect. It seems as though without the book, she is able to focus on intonation and posture.

At Mya's next lesson we learned the repeat in the A part and what to do with the pick up note bowing the second time through. It was interesting to me that even without seeing the notes on paper, Mya realized the problem with the bowing for the pickup and pointed it out to me! Next we worked on the first 2 measures of the B part. I told her that the B part started on the note B, so she could always remember.

Then I attempted the impossible, a shift to a fourth position E to be completed by a 5th grader... I told Mya that there was nothing to be afraid of, that E was just another note. We talked about where your hand goes to play the note with the 4th finger so that the shift isn't very far. Mya played the shift perfectly. I pointed out to her that it was okay to shift from a fourth finger to fourth finger and back to a fourth finger, because the slide is a typical trait of fiddling music. We talked about how this would not be typical in a classical piece. Before Mya left that day we reviewed the A part and once again Mya's confidence and tone has improved.

At our fourth lesson for the piece, Mya and I continued to work on the B part. We reviewed the patterns, continuing to use the "repeat after me" method. Mya had forgotten some of the slurs in the beginning measures, but her shifting was much more clean and in tune. I realized that even though teaching in small sections helps with bowing, it seems to break the flow of the melody in Mya's ear. For the next few measures, I played sections with more notes and this did help to point out the patterns.

On our last lesson of learning the song, I taught Mya the rest of the B part. When we got to the C#, I asked her if this note was in the G Major scale. She thought about it, and then told me that it wasn't. Without getting into the theory behind this note, I told her that it was the magic note in the piece and that we needed to emphasize it. Just in saying this, she shaped the phrase perfectly. We played the whole piece through once more and Mya sounded wonderful. Over the next few lessons we would play the piece before we started our lesson. Mya would always get really excited and I think that it was a perfect way to build her confidence at the start of each lesson. Mya really enjoyed this project and I hope to teach her more songs in the future!

Katie

For my next student, Katie, I chose the Road to Lisdoonvarna. Katie is a middle school student in Gahanna. She has a great ear but becomes lazy in posture and with her bow hold. I was hoping that a fun and quick paced activity might help to fix this. Katie has recently been working on 6/8 time and had just completed a solo in e minor. Before we started the project, she pointed out to me that she had previously done Irish step dancing, so I figured this jig would be a perfect fit.

At the first lesson we talked about the piece and the characteristics of a jig. We discussed how the jig was a popular Irish dance structured in 2 eight bar sections. From my research I learned that the first 8 bars would be danced with the right foot leading the step, and the second 8 bars leading with the left foot. I also learned that it is typical for jigs to be strung together in sets.

This includes, single jigs - like Road to Lisdoonvarna in a slower 6/8 time, treble jigs, in 6/8 time with hard shoes and light jigs, in a faster 6/8 time with soft shoes.

Because of the simple patterns, we got through the entire A part in the first lesson. Katie was having some trouble with the bowings, but I decided to teach her the same way I was teaching Mya, and include the bowings with the “repeat after me” method. Another struggle was the 6/8 meter and rhythms. Although we have been working on 6/8 it was difficult for Katie to put the emphasis on the 1st and 4th beats. At the end of the lesson we reviewed the piece a few more times and Katie remembered.

At our next lesson, we started with the Road to Lisdoonvarna. Katie had worked on the piece and remembered all of the notes and bowings from the first lesson. We had to work a bit on polishing the rhythm. I reminded Katie that this was a dance and that it needed to be swung like a dance. The rhythms didn’t have to be perfectly timed, like in her solo, but played evenly so that a dancer could stay in step. We also reviewed the shifting to fourth position, something that Katie has done only a little bit of work in. I told Katie that if her hand touched the top of the cello when playing in fourth position, it would be burned because it was hot lava! That really got her thinking. We spent time in that lesson cleaning up the shifts and it sounded much better by the end of the lesson.

The next week when I saw Katie, she played through the A part with the repeat and it was quite nice. Our shifting and rhythm work from the previous week had paid off! I taught Katie the first measure of the B part. Katie, just like Mya, is playing with confidence, good tone, and near perfect intonation. Her posture, as I had suspected, has also improved.

At our next lesson Katie and I worked on the turn in the B part. She was a bit confused, but I reminded her to think of dancing to a jig and how the piece would turn at the end in order to signal the change in step. This really seemed to make sense to Katie. She is getting the shifts much more accurately now also!

At our final lesson for the piece, we finished the B part and talked about the over all AABA form. Katie had done so well that we began learning the Ash Grove as well. In the next few weeks I taught Katie the Ash Grove and we played through the Road to Lisdoonvarna. Katie was the perfect student to learn Irish music and had a lot of fun with the songs.

Nick

My third student to be involved in the project was Nick, a sophomore in Grove City. Nick is my best technical player (we are already working in thumb position!) but his intonation and phrasing is sometimes lacking. He really loves to play fast pieces, so I decided to see just how fast he could go! I chose to teach Nick Harvest Home, in D Major, also referred to as “Thanksgiving Waltz”, a hornpipe with very quick string crossings.

At our first lesson I discussed with Nick the background of the hornpipe genre. As I played the piece for him, Nick pointed out to me that he is Irish, and has heard music like this before. The hornpipe most likely originated as a popular form of Shepard’s music in England and lower Scotland. Fiddler and composer James Hill (1811-1853), helped to popularize the genre. The genre moved into Ireland and is now a typical dance in the culture. I told Nick how hornpipes are typically in 4/4 time and included both even eighth notes and dotted rhythms. I asked Nick to point out some characteristics of the piece that he had heard after listening just once. He had

already picked up on the multiple uses of arpeggios in the first section and the repeats of the music. We discussed the AABB form used in the piece.

As we started playing, Nick quickly found the arpeggiated section to be difficult. We learned the pick up and the first three bars through much repetition. He noticed that the dotted eighth note-sixteenth note rhythm was the same as the excerpts from the Berlioz that he is working on for school. I pointed out that the genre was completely different and that he was correct in that the style for Harvest Home should be played like swung triplets, rather than very precise and metric like the Berlioz.

The next time I saw Nick, two weeks had passed and I was somewhat nervous about how much of the piece he had retained. Surprisingly, he did well. We completed the A part and worked a lot on getting the shifts up to speed and swinging the dotted rhythm. This piece is great shifting practice for Nick. He also plays with much better posture, intonation and phrasing when not focusing so much on the sheet music.

At the next lesson, Nick and I completed the piece. Nick learns very quickly, so I figured this might be the case. The shifting this week is very precise and the rhythm is significantly more in style. We played the piece in entirety a few times though, each time trying to get a little faster. Nick really seemed to like this challenge and I hope that I can teach him more pieces in the future.

In conclusion, I have learned that fiddling can successfully be used as an alternative to traditional teaching methods. I plan to use fiddle songs from a variety of cultures to help my students with specific techniques that they each need to improve upon including intonation, posture, shifting, bowing, rhythmic training and aural training. While fiddling improved all of these aspects of my student's playing, the most important thing was that they were having fun with music and were playing confidently and with passionate style.

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Cassie Wetherill is a recent graduate of Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, and holds a Bachelors Degree of Music in Education. As a music education major specializing in strings, Miss Wetherill completed an independent study with Professor and fiddler, Carolyn Cutler Osborn, on the pedagogical effects of fiddle music in the traditional classroom.