

How to Turn your Classical Violinist into a Fiddler

If you've been trained as a classical violinist, but are interested in becoming a fiddler, there are two things you need to know:

1. Your classical training is definitely an asset... IF you follow number 2:
2. Embrace "beginner's mind"

There are a lot of ways that classical training can help you as a fiddler. Your technique is impeccable, you have great technical skills, and you are well set-up to be able to take on a lot of "fancy fiddling." But before you get there, it's important to focus on the second rule above: be humble, and embrace "beginner's mind." Fiddling, in all its various styles, is just as technical as playing classical music. To the untrained ear, it's often difficult to discern these subtleties, and so that's where beginner's mind comes in. If you haven't been listening to fiddle music for a long time, especially in a live context, you likely don't yet have the ear to figure out if you're capturing the style accurately if you're attempting to play in an Old Time, Bluegrass, Cajun, Irish, Contra, Blues, Jazz, or Indigenous American styles. Even for fiddlers of one fiddle genre, it's often difficult to tell if they're accurately capturing the style of another genre. It's similar to a foreign language - in speaking a foreign language, you may be doing everything in your power to accurately capture the pronunciations, but the only way to have an authentic accent is to immerse yourself in that culture. So that's what's necessary to turn your classical prowess into fiddle power. Immerse yourself in the scene in which you're wanting to play, and think of yourself as a complete beginner. Watch how they move their bow, and the fingers of their left hand, and copy that. So without further ado, here is my list of ____ ways to become a fiddler:

1. Choose one style of fiddling to start with. Each style is very different, so if you try to tackle just "fiddling" generically, you'll end up never sounding authentic in any one genre. Start with one style, and then you can branch off from there. If you choose Bluegrass, your biggest challenge will be learning to improvise. If you choose Old-time, your biggest challenge will be capturing the right rhythmic feel.
2. Listen, listen, listen! Ask around to find out who are the best "authentic" players in any one genre, or do some snooping on Spotify playlists (just search "old time", "bluegrass" etc. on Spotify and check out the playlists that come up). Then do your Suzuki practice by listening to these musicians over and over again. It's best if you can pick 3-5 tunes you want to learn from some of the more respected musicians in the genre, and just listen to those tracks over and over and over again. Make sure you actually like the recordings you've chosen.
3. When you do start practicing - start by taking out bowings all together. The bowings used in fiddle music are particular to the style of fiddle music, and very different from classical music. So start by removing your classical habits. Practice that way for awhile, and get used to a less smooth way of playing.
4. Take out vibrato. There are some places where a little bit of vibrato might be used (especially in bluegrass), but for the most part, it's avoided, so it's a good habit to get out of for the time being.

5. Make it sound “ugly.” No... uglier.. This is not to say that fiddle music is ugly. Obviously I don’t think so. But classical violinists often try to make their playing about 20 notches “prettier” than it should be for fiddle music. This is dance music, So picture other dance music - dubstep, hip-hop, etc... That’s the energy we’re going for here.

6. Copy others. After you’ve practiced without any slurs for awhile, it’s time to add them back in, in a new way. Spend some time copying the bowings of other fiddlers as exactly as you can. “The amazing slow-downer” is an app that serves as an incredible tool for this. The point is not to always play the tune or solo exactly like this musician, but instead to get the feeling of the bowing pattern in your muscle memory, with the idea that it will manifest on its own in your playing later.

7. Learn to improvise - If you’re attempting to learn a genre that includes improvisation, like Bluegrass, Jazz, or Blues, learning other fiddlers’ solos is still a great way to work on improvisation. There’s no particular need to learn “licks” outside of the context of an entire solo or tune. With either of those, the intention is not to play it note for note in the “real world,” but to get that feeling into your muscle memory. Beyond that, I would suggest two ways to work on improvisation. Both are important, but they should be practiced separately. The first is to work with the melody. Put on a track you want to learn - ideally slowed down a LOT through something like “the amazing slow downer.” Practice soloing first by just playing the straight melody. Then every time it comes around again, add or change a few notes. The other way to practice is to pretty much completely forget the melody and think of it in terms of chords and scales. Put on the backing track again, and just play scales over it. The start playing with the scales, by using little bits in different places, speeding up and drawing out different notes, etc. Ideally, in “the real world,” your soloing should be somewhere in between. You should never be soloing without some amount of following the melody, but you should have the chord progression in your head well enough that you can deviate from the melody a little bit and then come back.

8. Add slides and double stops. These are the “cheap tricks” that add a lot of the fiddle sound to fiddling. Pay attention to where and how other fiddlers use double stops and slides and try to imitate them.

9. Depending on what style of fiddling you’re doing, more or less swing will be required. Pay attention to the fiddlers you’re listening to in order to ascertain if you’re using the same amount of swing.

10. Tap your foot. The importance of rhythm in fiddling can’t be overstated. So tapping your foot is an important tool for keeping your playing “in the pocket” (meaning: super-duper on beat).

11. There’s no need to adopt any of the various ways fiddlers hold their instrument.

12. Once you’ve done a bit of due diligence in practicing the style of music you’re wanting to play - GET OUT THERE and jam! Fiddling is all about playing with other people. You’ll never feel “ready” to jam, but eventually, after you’ve put in a little bit of practice, it’s time to get out there. Immersion is really the best learning strategy, and motivator for practice. Just try to pay attention to the subtle social cues from the jammers around you. There are unspoken rules to jamming. For more information on that, see the other documents in this module.