

FIDDLE GUIDELINES

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Rhythm, Tone & Heart

Get ready to take your fiddling to a higher level. We are going to improve the tone and rhythmic power of your playing, then learn how to play with the abandon that makes the music soar!

1) **Rhythm**, the regular pulse that makes fiddle music so attractive is produced by the regular changes in bow direction. Alterations in that regular rhythm make the music more exciting. In 4/4 tunes such as reels and hornpipes there is (usually) a regular pattern of emphasizing the 1st and 3rd beats in a 4 beat measure with the 2nd and 4th beats weaker.

A syncopated bowing pattern, alternating a slightly stronger and longer downbow with a shorter and slightly weaker upbow makes for a "skipping" feel to the music, making it more exciting and danceable. This syncopation is strongly emphasized in hornpipes.

A quick, snappy change of bow direction on sixteenth and eighth notes helps produce a stronger rhythm. This, alternating with smooth, sustained bowing on the longer dotted quarter notes and half notes, helps define the melody and keep the music from sounding monotonous.

Example tune: Angeline the Baker

2) **Musical tone** has duration, pitch, loudness, and timbre or tone color. On the fiddle, duration and tone color are mostly controlled by the bow. Changes in bow pressure and velocity can alter the quality and intensity of the notes. Changes in fingering and bow direction change the duration of the notes.

It is important when fingering a note to place the finger in position before drawing the bow. If the bow is in motion before the finger is firmly in position, the tone will be scratchy and unpleasant sounding. It is also important for the finger to remain firmly in position until the instant before changing to another note. Prematurely lifting, even partially lifting, the finger also tends towards a scratchy sound. It is important to use the tip of the finger to play notes rather than the fleshy side of the digit. This helps the intonation.

Example tune: Liberty

3) **Heart** is what I call the essence of music. This is the spirit that you bring to the music that communicates the emotion of the tune. It can be joyous or sad, playful, wistful or soulful, but the emotion and energy that you infuse into the notes and rhythm is what turns that series of sounds into Music (with a capital "M")!

Mastering the techniques that you use to play music on the fiddle is a goal, however that goal seems to be ever out of reach. BUT.....if you bring energy and enthusiasm to your playing, the music will have an appeal far in excess of what would be expected from your technical level. The more you work on the technical aspects of playing the fiddle, the more confident you feel, so you are able to put more heart into the music. It is vital to focus on the techniques when you are practicing, but it is really important (IMHO) to give your attention to putting heart into the tune as opposed to concentrating on technical issues when you are actually performing the music.

Example tune: John Ryan's Polka