

Fiddler's ShopTalk

By Roy Johnstone

Writing this column is a bit of a challenge because trying to illustrate aspects of playing the fiddle by trying to describe specific details without the reader being able to see and hear what is being described is hard to do. I would appreciate any feedback to let me know if any of this stuff is useful. Did any of you try the pentatonic scale last issue or use the ten minute focused practice interval? Send me an email and let me know what you want to learn about. (hello@royjohnstone.com)

I thought I would take a more general approach in this issue and talk about developing your own unique style of playing. It's a good approach to start by mimicking other players but eventually you might want to consider evolving your own distinctive sound. The more you explore and understand how different sounds are produced the more mastery you have over the instrument and the greater repertoire of styles and interpretations you have at your finger tips. Listening to a lot of the best players is a good start; some of my favourite Irish style players are Kevin Burke, Tommy Peoples, Matt Cranitch and Martin Hayes. Each of these players has a distinctive sound characteristic of the area in Ireland where they grew up or they were influenced by specific teachers who taught them. On the Scottish side some of my favourites are Buddy MacMaster, Alister Fraser and Bonnie Rideout. I also have many other folk, jazz and blues fiddlers whom I much admire such as Stuff Smith, Joe Venuti, and Staphane Grappelli.

Choose your favourites and listen closely to the sound they produce and try to recreate it. A great tool for listening to and learning tunes by ear is Tascam's guitar trainer. It will slow down a phrase and maintain the pitch. It's a great addition to any serious player's gig bag.

After having listened to a lot of players and trying to mimic their sound you can begin to refine your own sound. As you listen closely you will realize that the way your finger hits the finger board influences the sound you make. What part of your finger you press down, the amount of pressure you use and whether you slide into the note will all affect the quality of the sound you produce.

The movement of the bow probably influences the sound as much or more than how you place your fingers. The tension, pressure and speed of the bow on the strings is a major factor in the sound produced. How much rosin you use and whether you play close to the bridge or down over the end of the finger board all affect the sound. Try exploring these different elements in your daily practice and I think you will be pleasantly surprised at the improvement and you will be well on your way to creating your own distinctive fiddle sound..

Till next time keep the bow rosined and the fiddle in tune!!!

Roy Johnstone @ 2006