

Fiddle Music of the Upper Midwest

“The Upper Midwest was not the America of New England villages, New York tenements, Pennsylvania Dutch farms, Appalachian hollows, Southern cotton plantations, or Western plains celebrated by folklorists and familiar to the nation. Here was a territory of deep woods, inland seas, mines, mills and hardscrabble farms; a place wherein Native peoples, native-born and newcomers jostled, jangled and intermingled to forge Another America.” From “Folksongs of Another America

The Upper Midwest United States is generally considered to be Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota along with the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and northern Iowa and Illinois. There are a wide variety of different fiddling styles throughout the United States, and this statement seems to capture the essence of Upper Midwest fiddle; it is quite different in the tunes and musical styles. Some of these distinctions include:

Cultural Influences: Traditional fiddle music in this region is dominated by the music of Norwegians, Swedes and Finns, as well as Irish and Scottish tunes and French-Canadian lumberjack music.

Type of tunes - Fiddlers from the Upper Midwest typically play a blend of waltzes, schottisches, polkas, jigs and reels (or hoedowns). Waltzes are particularly important in this style; they are not played in the Appalachian or Irish styles at all. Irish tunes in $\frac{3}{4}$ time are considered “airs” rather than waltzes.

Tone - The music has a clear quality to it, generally a sweeter more melodic sound than the hard driving rhythmic music of the south.

Melodic line - Unlike Appalachian music, with its simple melodic lines, the tunes are quite “notey” with lots of runs and arpeggios.

Harmony – Because of the more complicated melodic line, there aren’t as many drones or double stops (two notes at once).

Accompaniment - Backup is nearly always guitar, sometimes mandolin, and occasionally a banjo. Accordion backup became popular in the early 1900’s. Norwegian immigrants played their Hardanger Fiddle, the type of fiddle common in Norway. The Hardanger looks like the standard violin, except that it has four or five strings that run under the fingerboard that vibrate sympathetically when the top strings are played. Many early fiddlers to Minnesota played the Hardanger, then switched to the standard (or what they called the “flat”) fiddle.

Tuning – While opinions differ, most Upper Midwest fiddlers tune their fiddle in standard tuning, G-D-A-E. In an account by Iva Dingwall regarding her father, fiddler Dewitt Andrus (1852-1932), Elk River, Minnesota, she indicates that she learned to tune her fiddle to standard tuning, which allows a fiddler to play in a wider variety of keys. This is quite different from southern fiddlers, who nearly always play in “cross tuning,” (alternative tuning used for the open strings of a string instrument) and play most of their tunes in only a few keys.

Key Signatures – Upper Midwest tunes are typically in major keys and other than Irish tunes, very rarely are they in minor or modal keys. They are most often in the “open” keys of G, D and A as these are the easiest keys for a fiddler to play in. Some Upper Midwest tunes that have been collected are in F, C and Bb, which is unheard of in Appalachian music. Tunes may sometimes switch keys (most commonly D to A) between parts (most tunes are two-part, A and B). This also suggests that the banjo was not used as often as accompaniment as it is more difficult for the traditional banjo to change keys quickly.

Folk Processing - Much of the music brought over by immigrants has been simplified; perhaps because it was played by amateurs – hardworking men and women who picked up an instrument only when their demanding lives allowed a little leisure time. It is not unusual to hear stories of fiddlers who only played in the winter, or who may have stopped playing for a while when other work demands took precedence. Scandinavian tunes that had three parts were shortened to two, and some ornamentation was dropped. This is evident when we compare current day Norwegian musicians with musicians from the Upper Midwest; the tunes have a very different quality to them. There are also many Upper Midwest tunes that have been collected that have an A or B part from another tune, so they are essentially “mash ups” of the tunes.

Religious influences – The fiddle in some parts of America has long been associated with the devil, but in the Upper Midwest, this imagery was not as strong. In Farmhouse Fiddlers, one of the fiddler’s recounts that when they had a house party on a Saturday night, they’d simply turn the picture of “The Last Supper” towards the wall.

Gender differences – Women fiddlers were rare; by and large the fiddle was considered an instrument to be played by men. Women generally played piano and men played the fiddle.

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