

How to prepare for a contest

1. Make a tune your own. Start out with the most widely known version of the tune (most basic) and add variations to the second and third times through each A and B part to start with, eventually you can spice up the first time through (but keep it simple at first). Make sure the tune is still recognizable. Think of variations as embellishments, not a total rewrite of the tune.

2. Your variations or embellishments should be created early, then practiced to perfection for competition, not performed on the fly, unless you are really good at improvisation (and for your guitarist's sake, not even then). In practice, settle on a version you will be able to stick to and practice it over and over every day.

3. Recordings are wonderful aids – they help get a new tune in your head with the proper intonation and tempo and can provide ideas for embellishments (controlled improvisation), but don't continue to practice along to a recording for too long. You will only improve so far with a recording and your variations should be different than the recording, which can be confusing and messy to listen to while you are practicing. To get the best tone and clarity, you need to be the only sound in the room.

4. Clarity. The judges need to hear clear, crisp tones for each note. The tune should not be slidey, slippery, muddy or muddled to use a few fun descriptions. Here's how to improve the clarity:

- * Minimize slurs – try to slur no more than 2 notes at a time with the exception of the intro.

- * Practice the tune with a metronome slowly so that you can hear each note clearly. Speed up the metronome only to the rate that you can still hear each note clearly (record yourself to hold yourself accountable).

- * Use separate fingers for chromatic scales, do not attempt to slide from natural to sharp, etc. In general, don't slide into a note unless the slide adds something awesome, instead make deliberate finger/bow/position shift changes.

- * Hook the last 2 notes of an A or B part in an upbow so that the start of the next A or B part starts on a strong down bow.

- * Do not use vibrato on hoedowns or tunes of choice, as a rule and use care when using vibrato on a waltz – it should not sound “classical”.

5. Try not to sound hokey. What?! Aren't fiddle tunes hokey by nature. No not really. They should sound impressive, artistic, and fun. At the very least they should make the listener want to get up and dance!

- * Lose the potatoes at the beginning of your tune (for you Suzuki fans, no “grass--hopper, grass--hopper”). Start right in without a complicated introduction.

- * End the tune with correct timing - keep an ending tag within the 8-measure frame, don't go over – don't add shave and a haircut, 2 bits to the end of the tune, it adds extra notes that don't add up – great way to mess up your dancers – and it sounds hokey.

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* Keep a steady rhythm – this is a killer in competition because it is one of the most obvious things to judge, with all other things being so subjective, you need to be able to count on this (pun intended).

* Intonation – this is another killer in competition because it is also one of the most obvious things to judge. Play in tune, all the way through.

6. Practice your fiddle tunes over and over daily. Did you read this earlier? It bears repeating. Practice the tunes over and over, day after day. And get to the competition early and wear yourself out practicing a little. Practicing in front of your competitors takes the edge off a little, maybe just enough to keep you from tripping up in the middle of your tune.

7. When you practice, vary the tempo and practice the whole tune a little faster and a little slower than the intended speed to prepare you for the chance that you or your guitarist slows down or speeds up because of nerves (typically we speed up). This happens a lot and can mess you up if you aren't ready for it, especially if you don't have the skill to execute the tune faster than you've prepared for. If it happens that you start out too fast you have 2 choices – fish or cut bait. You can try to keep up the tempo or perhaps slow it down mid-tune or you can stop and start over. Stop and restart should be used as a last resort and should not be done if you are past the first 3 measures of the tune. Judges will not be kind if you start over in the middle of the tune or later and may disqualify you.

8. Performance quality rule of thumb. Do not expect your performance in front of a crowd to be any better than 80% of your best ability. Sometimes I wish my best performances hadn't been in front of my pets, but that is the reality. So, make sure you are practicing at a very high skill level before you step on stage.

9. Right before going on stage, check to make sure you and your guitarist are in tune, release the performance to the universe or say a quick prayer, and accept that you may not be the best competitor in the judges' or audience's opinion, but you sure can make the experience fun for you and for them. Put a smile on someone's face and make them want to dance. Regardless of how you rate against the others, the audience is for you, not against you. They are not there to judge you but wish you well and to enjoy your awesome fiddling skills! Don't worry about the judges, they will do what they do, and you will get what they give you, at this point it is out of your control.

* Smile and give your name, introduce your guitarist if you can manage it, and provide the names of your tunes (speak slowly and clearly so the judges can hear and write them down) and take a deep breath, and exhale!

* Time moves slowly on stage, a little bit of anticipation by the audience isn't a bad thing. Some people do a little tuning thing before starting – I don't prefer it myself; it can go the wrong way but it works for some pretty successful competitors. You decide if that helps you more than it hurts you on stage.

* Get your position set, make the agreed upon signal and start.

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Thanks to Paquita Ray for preparing this material.