



Janet Farrar-Royce teaching alternative music at an American camp



Mark Wood shows that strings needn't be staid

More than ten years ago I drove through a snowstorm to upstate New York for a three-day course on how to fiddle. Since that workshop, I have enjoyed introducing my students to alternative styles, including fiddle, jazz, rock and mariachi, and many of them have said that exposure to new ways of playing has changed their attitude towards their instruments. But I have found that some teachers are hesitant to include music that is a departure from the classics, worrying that their students won't learn as much or that their parents won't accept it. So what are the advantages of including this kind of music in your lessons?

Alternative styles are a good way to broaden the horizons of young musicians. Teachers can work on them with all students from beginners to advanced, and they often give a student who is losing interest a new spark for their instrument. Michael Gagliardo from Etowah Youth Orchestras in Gadsden, Alabama, believes that students appreciate the opportunity to play in a variety of styles: 'Our programme continues to attract students because of the vast range of musical opportunities afforded to them.' I often

tell future music teachers that students sometimes don't even realise how proficient they're becoming on their instrument through fiddle, jazz and rock music, because they're having so much fun at the same time.

Alternative styles are also useful in developing certain technical skills, and many students are often more motivated when they are learning to play the type of music they listen to and can relate to. 'Students enjoy learning skills in this way,' says Nick Rozonsa, a teacher at Tenafly Middle School in New Jersey. 'Rapid notes, string-crossings and double-stops are all featured a lot in the alternative styles.' Peter Lemonds from Duluth High School in Georgia agrees: 'My students are attracted to the "cooler" aspect of alternative styles,' he says.

I find that my own students often learn these technical concepts more quickly through memorisation. This improves their

ALL THAT JAZZ

MIMI BUTLER offers advice on how to introduce alternative music styles into lessons and explains why this can revolutionise your students' playing

listening skills, as well as releasing performance tension and helping them acquire better stage presence. I encourage my students to add body movement when they fiddle or play jazz or rock, which really loosens them up. It's a good idea to introduce different techniques to your students by playing them recordings in relevant styles.

Performances in different genres are one of the best ways of recruiting new instrumental students. I recently watched a rock concert at Cinnaminson High School in New Jersey in which 200 string students aged 9 to 18 performed with Mark Wood, a well-known electric violinist with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra and inventor of the Viper violin. The audience was filled with future music students who were inspired by this great performer.

GETTING STARTED

Group classes, which work with as few as four students, are a good way for teachers to include fiddle, jazz or rock. I incorporate these alternative styles into my once-a-month private studio group class, while school teachers tend to find it best to form a special club that meets before or after school, or at lunchtime. There are plenty of instruments with which to experiment, depending on your budget: an electric violin starts at around \$500 (£270), while cheaper additions to your ensemble range from penny whistles to mandolins, banjos, autoharps and ukuleles.

Rzonsa runs a fiddle club that students attend voluntarily before school. The group comprises 20 students, who play American bluegrass and Irish fiddle music. It includes guitar, piano, a washboard that he bought on eBay for \$15 (£8), and even a spoons player, and the students memorise most of their music so they can stroll while they are playing. Janet Farrar-Royce, who teaches at Cheshire High School in Connecticut, runs a fiddle club

called Not Just Fiddle Club that meets for 90 minutes every Thursday night to prepare for monthly performances. She teaches her beginners a fiddle tune first by ear, and then asks them to write variations on it. She says that rote teaching of the tunes allows the students to concentrate on the positions of their hands and to listen to their pitches as they play. She even asks them to sing the tunes and add words.

Many teachers incorporate rock, fiddle and jazz into their daily teaching, along with traditional method books and classical orchestral music. Dave Hercock, who teaches at Cinnaminson High School, asks his beginners to create their own jazz improvisation pieces and finds that their compositions are often more difficult than the music in their method books.

Laura Mitchell from Bellefontaine City Schools in Ohio also encourages creativity by teaching her students to compose their own alternative styles music. 'It's wonderful to see high-school students, who are at an uncomfortable age, break out and express themselves through music,' she says. Philip Sheppard, cello professor at the Royal Academy of Music, London, and a composer who explores both conventional and electric instruments and effects in his music, agrees: 'I find classical music doesn't move my students until they're able to create music for themselves.'

An excellent way to introduce alternative styles is to employ a professional musician from the relevant field to work with the students. These professionals (known as clinicians in the US) introduce students and teachers to all the forms of alternative styles and work with them so that their inhibitions are diminished and their creativity is heightened. It can be a costly endeavour, but many teachers have found creative ways to raise the necessary money.

Hercock hired Wood to introduce his students and the school system to rock music. To finance this he asked the parent-teacher organisation and the school's administration to pay for an assembly programme featuring Wood. Once they realised that a great many students would benefit, including future string students and those in the audience as well as those that already played stringed instruments, they agreed to allow Wood to perform with all the string



Performers on a Mark Wood course embrace different forms of music



PHOTOS: BOB CARROLL



JOHN HICKSON, COURTESY BROOKLYN COLLEGE

Martha Mooke (centre) expands the musical horizons of young performers

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players in the Cinnamon schools. Wood worked closely with the students in rehearsals and stayed for the evening performances; Hercock charged the parents of his students a nominal fee of \$40 (£22), which included a t-shirt; and tickets to the performances were sold for \$10 (£5.50).

Mitchell managed to get grants from American retailers Wal-Mart and Target to pay for performers to work and perform with students at her school. She just walked into local shops and filled out a form, and is now granted the money each year. She also sells tickets for the concerts and receives donations from parents, who enjoy getting involved.

Clinicians sometimes find that when they work with students in a school setting, they feel they're training the teacher as well. In fact they can also help schools to launch an alternative styles

programme by leading a training session for teachers, many of whom admit that they feel they lack the relevant expertise.

The experience can be a revelation for students. Martha Mooke, an electric violist and clinician from Nyack, New York, says: 'I led an improvisation workshop with music students who didn't have a clue what to play without printed music in front of them. Little by little they opened up to the possibilities of expanding their musical language and trusting their instincts to communicate through sounds. At the end of the workshop, one of the students came over to me and told me this session had changed his life, that he had never imagined approaching music this way.'

Many teachers find that concert audiences double in size when they include music in alternative styles. At my students' annual chamber music recital in April, one small group played the pizzicato fiddle tune from the movie *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. They searched for months to find the music, and even had to rewrite parts of it to fit their instrumentation. The audience loved it.

Alternative styles also allow teachers to plan different types of performances. Lemonds's orchestra marches and fiddles each year in the Duluth Fall Festival parade. It's now a tradition that the townspeople expect, making it impossible for Lemonds and his students to take a year off. Alternative groups can also be more creative with their costumes: my student fiddlers wear blue jeans, a white buttoned-down shirt and a red bandana, while young rock musicians can opt for leather trousers and flamboyant shirts. >

TEACHING TOOLS

It is essential that you equip yourself with the correct tools to teach alternative styles. There are plenty of method books for fiddle, jazz and mariachi music, many of which include a CD.

Many teachers make recordings for their students of themselves or other professionals playing in alternative styles. Nick Rzonca encourages his students to buy CDs and gives them lists of websites and performers.

The American String Teachers Association (www.astaweb.com) has produced a modestly priced CD, *Ultimate Strings, vol. 1: Alternative Styles*, that includes fiddle, jazz and rock selections performed by musicians such as Mark O'Connor, Matt Glaser, Christian Howes, Mark Wood and the Hampton (rock) Quartet. See overleaf for useful websites and recommended method books.



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LAURA MITCHELL, BELLEFONTAINE CITY SCHOOLS, OHIO

If you're worried about whether your school system or parent population will accept the teaching of alternative musical styles, start by including one jazz, rock or fiddle piece in each concert, and offer verbal or written notes about the works. Another great way to

convince the sceptics is to involve the school and the parents in activities such as performances by fiddle or rock clubs. Hercock puts on a rock concert each year with Wood and the entire student string population, and the school's administrative staff and faculty often choose to perform, assist with equipment, write the press announcements and design the programmes.

It benefits both students and the community if you can find performing venues that are outside the school, such as a shopping centre or a nursing home. Farrar-Royce's fiddle clubs perform at dances throughout her state, asking for a modest donation so they can purchase more instruments.

Chuck Berry might have proclaimed 'roll over Beethoven', but the reality is that change could come a little slower to your school or performance group. You might even need to temper the enthusiasm of your players. But there is plenty of room for manoeuvre within these genres, and if you proceed carefully, you can be a hero with the parents and supervisors who witness your students blossom with their exciting new challenge. ■

METHOD BOOKS

Alternative Strings: The New Curriculum

by Julie Lynn Lieberman HUIKSE MUSIC COMPANY

The Contemporary Violinist

by Julie Lynn Lieberman HUIKSE MUSIC COMPANY

The Fiddler's Fakebook by David Brody OAK PUBLICATIONS

Fiddler's Philharmonic

by Andrew Dabczynski and Bob Phillips ALFRED PUBLISHING

Fiddletunes (two collections)

by Dean Marshall and John Crozman MARSHALL CROZMAN

The Fiddling Cellist by Renata Bratt NEIL BAY

Jazz Fiddle Wizard Junior by Martin Norgaard NEIL BAY

Jazz Improvisation Made Easy

by John Blake Jr and Jody Harmon

Jazz Philharmonic, vols. 1 & 2

by Randy Sabien and Bob Phillips ALFRED PUBLISHING

Mariachi Mastery by Jeffrey W. Nevitt NEIL A. KJOS MUSIC COMPANY

WEBSITES

- > www.woodviolins.com
Mark Wood's site, where students can listen to him playing
- > www.jazzfiddlewizard.com
Introduces students to all kinds of jazz, old and new
- > www.marthamooke.com
Martha Mooke's website, which sells CDs
- > www.markoconnor.com
Includes information on camps and conference listings, and sells sheet music
- > www.monalisasound.com
Sells music for rock string quartet, and you can listen to samples of CDs