

How Fiddle Tab Makes Learning How to Play the Fiddle Easier

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The Problem:

Beginning violin students have to learn two difficult skills at once.

For more than 15 years, I have used fiddle tab in teaching both kids and adults how to play the fiddle. The benefits of this approach were apparent from the first day I tried it. But, until now, I haven't taken the time to explain, in writing, how it works.


Learning fiddle tab is so intuitive and so easy that a student picks it up in five minutes. This is true even for five-year-olds.

Recently, however, some parents of my new students at The Dayspring Academy have asked me about fiddle tab. They are concerned that this nontraditional approach might become a handicap later.

To answer the questions of both students and parents of younger students, I have written a brief summary of what fiddle tab is, how it relates to musical notation and why it is the preferred method of instruction for fiddle students, and even the majority of violin students.

First, let's recall what standard musical notation is. The familiar dot-shaped notes on or between the five lines of the musical staff represent exact pitches of musical notes. (See the illustration below.)



The dots show the pitch. The sharp signs, #, influence that pitch. The clef sign,  , also has an effect.

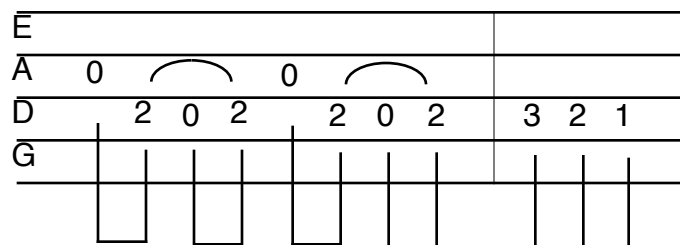
Attached to the dots are lines, called “stems” that intersect heavier lines called “beams.” In some cases, these stems stand alone.

These are rhythm symbols that show the relative duration of the notes. Other musical terminology, often Italian, indicates the speed of the rhythm. *Allegro con brio*, for example, means “lively, with enthusiasm.”

Sometimes a metronome marking shows the exact speed in number of beats per minute, (for example, MM=92). This is plainly faster than one beat per second. It’s about three beats every two seconds.

Musical notation tells nothing about how to play the music on any musical instrument. It is designed to be used with all musical instruments.

Fiddle tab, on the other hand, tells exactly what string to play and what finger to use. It’s intuitive and easy to learn. See the example below.



The above fragment of fiddle tab shows the same information as the previous fragment of music notation. But it shows the information in a form that only fiddle players can use. It is not universal. Because it is so focused, it is

simpler.

Each space of the staff represents a string. The top space represents the E-string, the next one, the A-string--and so on.

If you placed a violin with its side, with the neck extending to the left of the body, you would see the strings in exactly the same relationship. If you then reached both hands to pick up the violin, with your left hand under the neck, you would be in position to finger the strings the normal way.

The numbers correspond to the fingering indications. The number 1 is the first finger--the pointing finger, 2 is the middle finger, 3 the ring finger and 4 the pinkie. An 0 means use no finger, or leave the string open.

The only question remaining is placement of the fingers. We begin with the placement that would produce a major scale. This is the most common tradition in Western music. It's common to all the melody instruments that I'm aware of, and to singing as well.

All music teachers start with this basic instruction: the *do-re-mi* of music. These first three notes of the scale are found in countless children's songs: "Are You Sleeping, Brother John?," "Row, Row, Row your Boat," and, in the inverse order, "Hot Cross Buns," "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "London Bridge is Falling Down," "Three Blind Mice."

That sound, and the relationship of the fingers that produce that sound, is the assumption that underlies fiddle tablature, as I teach it. Any variation from that finger placement will be indicated by the letter L or H. These letters guide the student to place the finger lower or higher than usual.

The rhythm indication in fiddle tab is similar to musical notation, but simplified.

A simple line under a number is called a stem, just as in music notation. It shows the same thing, one beat of rhythm. Two numbers that have stems joined by another line (called a “beam” in music notation) would be played in one beat.

Rhythm can be as simple as a repeating single drumbeat. But as we get into real tunes and songs, this is not the case. The rhythm becomes more complex. The simple symbology of rhythmic notation can convey a complexity and sophistication equal to advanced musical ability.

Pitch as a quality of sound is somewhat subtle, though intuitive. When we use a number of different pitches, as in playing a tune, we are in a complex mode, just as in using different rhythms. In fiddle tab this ability is more dependent on ear training.

The development of standard musical notation in Western music was an achievement of magisterial greatness. It was the necessary precondition for the richly complex beauty, power and mystery of great music.

Learning this system is no easy matter. In Europe, a hundred years ago, kids going into music learned to sing solfeggio. This meant translating musical notation into do-re-mi.

In current practice, the problematic difficulty of learning to read music is handled by writing fingering notation over the particular note. This is true for keyboard or violin. Other instruments, such as brass and woodwind, have similar notations over certain notes to aid the student in translating the symbolism of the notational pitch into physical actions with their musical instruments.

Suzuki avoided this problem entirely by having his students learn the pieces by heart. Very young students would attend the class lessons for some time, or they would listen to tapes at home for a while. When they began to play, the instruction would be direct, without any notation being involved. Later,

musical notation was introduced for pieces that had already been learned.

In the American Suzuki Method, musical notation is given to the student immediately, but finger notations are placed over every note. The student has only to intuit when to change string. In this respect it differs not at all from classical violin pedagogy.

In the method that I use, which we may call the American fiddle method, I show the student tab charts after the initial stage of learning to play a scale. I have never had a student fail to learn how to read tab charts in one lesson. It is intuitive, natural and easy.

Making the transition to reading music later has, likewise, been no great challenge. Some students simply begin *Suzuki Violin Book One*, with its easy pieces and quickly learn to read. At the same time they follow the learning curve of progressive difficulty that characterizes the Suzuki method.

Students who prefer fiddling can use *Beginning Old-Time Fiddle*, by Alan Kaufman. It has both fiddle tab and musical notation. It's an excellent resource, both for learning fiddle tunes, and for the transition from tab to music notation.

For more information about learning how to play fiddle using tab charts, set your Web browser to <http://www.fiddleguru.com>. You will find an abundance of information and tab charts. And more of both is being added every month.

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