

# ALTERNATIVE STYLES

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## A CASE FOR THE AMERICAN VIOLA WALTZ

by David Wallace

Marimba players are an interesting breed. Shameless transcribers of anything and everything, they take pride in being the first to render a transcription on their instrument and are constantly expanding their repertoire by harvesting masterpieces from other musicians' catalogs. As a violist who has sometimes felt defensive or apologetic about playing transcriptions, I find their courage and zeal inspiring.

Ultimately, though, our choice to transcribe is best guided by an oft quoted slogan: "It sounds better on viola!" In this spirit, I wish to examine a genre that is ripe for our transcription and performance: the American fiddle waltz.

In America, the waltz became a popular ballroom dance during the 1820s,<sup>1</sup> but by 1925, a distinct style of southern waltz fiddling had emerged, which was quite distinct from the waltzes of Chopin and Johann Strauss, or even Celtic traditions:

*These waltzes are usually played on the fiddle with guitar, banjo, or mandolin accompaniment. They are distinguished from their Northern and British counterparts by more highly syncopated rhythm and by more varied and complex bowing and ornamentation. They are distinguished from the art-music waltz and its Continental descendants by their use of long flowing melodic lines instead of short, repeated motives (as in "Blue Danube"), and often by their slower tempo.<sup>2</sup>*

I first encountered the American fiddle waltz as a child listening to fiddle contests in Texas; it quickly became one of my favorite genres. When I was a student, the waltz almost single-handedly built my left-hand position, double-stop technique, and intonation. (So many waltzes involve sweet, non-droning

double stops and double-stop shifts that can only be executed well if the hand is in a comfortable, ergonomic position.)

When I first experimented with playing fiddle tunes on the viola, I found that the waltz's emphasis on lyricism, expressive tone, and harmony seemed in many ways more suited to the viola than the violin. I also began to think about how the waltz's technical benefits could fill significant developmental gaps in the viola repertoire. We owe it to ourselves to invade fiddle territory and take this genre by storm. Here's the plan:

### 1. Watch and Listen

To master any idiom, we need to study the greatest exponents of it. While there are many outstanding American fiddlers, here is a list of some who are particularly known for their interpretations and love of waltzes: Kenny Baker, James "Texas Shorty" Chancellor, Johnny Gimble, Aubrey Haynie, Randy Howard, Clark Kessinger, Mark O'Connor, and Jay Ungar. Purchase, download, or stream sound recordings and videos of their waltz performances. Internalize the lilting rhythms that are neither strictly triplets nor eighth notes. Get to know the phrasing and the way that non-harmonic tones get just a little extra tension and volume before they resolve and relax. Listen for when and how vibrato is used and not used. Capture the flavor of the portamento and slides. Observe the range of tempi among different fiddlers. When watching videos, observe bow distribution and how the bowings defy predictable patterns. See how expressive notes often occur on an up bow, because going against gravity adds a certain urgency to the sound.

### 2. Get Sheet Music for Fully Realized Authentic Arrangements and Learn Them

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In the old days, most published waltzes provided only the basic tune, but now it is possible to purchase highly accurate transcriptions with detailed bowings and ornamentation.

A great starting place for an advanced violist is Craig Duncan's excellent transcription of Johnny Gimble's *Gardenia Waltz*,<sup>3</sup> a harmonically lush double-stop workout that requires no transposition or recomposition for viola performance. As a frequent performer on five-string fiddle, Gimble is no stranger to the C string or the beauty of stringed instruments' lower registers. Except for the final double stop, this waltz entirely ignores the violin's E string.

*Pete's Waltz* by Peter Martin is written in a similar vein and is available from Petimar Press.<sup>4</sup> Mark O'Connor's *Appalachia Waltz* is a haunting tune that has already become a classic. While it is written in a slightly more classical style than the two aforementioned waltzes, a solo viola version can be downloaded from O'Connor's website (markoconnor.com). I have been nudging him to publish a viola rendition of his *Misty Moonlight Waltz*; your e-mails can help the effort!

When evaluating the quality of waltz arrangements, look for how much detail is provided, especially with bowing, ornamentation, and rhythm. Many of the best transcriptions and arrangements were edited or supervised by professionals or are from recorded performances. Keep an eye out for available source or companion recordings, as they are indispensable in understanding the printed page.

### 3. Learn Waltzes by Ear and Transcribe Performances

The American fiddle waltz tradition was largely developed and passed on by oral tradition. Fiddlers learned to play what they heard on records or radio, and they taught one another tunes by ear. At strings conferences, camps, and traditional music festivals, it is easy to expand one's repertoire by learning tunes directly from other musicians and by making video and audio recordings that may later be transcribed and learned. Video recordings are particularly help-

ful, as they help to confirm bowings and fingerings.

### 4. Make Your Own Arrangements of Existing Waltzes

Building on tunes you have heard, learned, or encountered in printed anthologies, begin to create your own arrangements. In the case of many idiomatic fiddle waltzes, it may be best simply to transpose the entire tune down a fifth. Some waltzes borrowed from popular music like *Tennessee Waltz* can be transposed into any key whatsoever without purists raising an eyebrow. Anthologies like *The Fiddler's Fake Book*<sup>5</sup> or *The Phillips Collection of Traditional American Fiddle Tunes, Volume Two*<sup>6</sup> provide a wealth of basic waltz tunes that may be developed and embellished to taste.

Highly melodic waltzes like Mexican composer Juventino Rosas's famous *Sobre las Olas* (*Over the Waves*) or minor-key waltzes like Andy Statman's klezmer tune *Flatbush Waltz* lend themselves particularly well to the viola.

### 5. Write Your Own American Viola Waltz

Once you know the idiom, expand the viola repertoire by writing your own waltz and sharing it with others. To practice what I preach, I am including *Tannehill*,<sup>7</sup> a viola waltz inspired in part by a camping trip to Tannehill State Park near Birmingham, Alabama. There is an unwritten law that when a fiddler gets married, he should write his wife a waltz. This is mine.

The piece can be played with varied accompaniment, but the ideal is an acoustic guitar, a double bass, and a tenor guitar or mandolin. The first measure is unaccompanied, and the accompanists sustain an A-flat chord in the penultimate bar before resolving to C major on the second beat of the final bar.

My friend, champion contest fiddler Daniel Carwile, recently told me that one of his violin students performed *Tannehill* at the Kentucky State Championship Fiddle Contest. I wonder if anyone echoed the sentiment a fan expressed after my first violin perform-

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ance of this waltz: “You know, I still liked it, but ... it sounds better on viola!”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds., *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Waltz.”

<sup>2</sup> Barrett E. Hanson, “The American Country Waltz,” *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 5, pt. 1 (1969): 4–6.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Duncan, *Mel Bay Presents Top Fiddle Solos* (Pacific, Mo.: Mel Bay Publications, 1986). Duncan’s book includes eight waltzes, all of which lend themselves well to viola transcription.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Martin, *Texas Style Fiddle Transcriptions*, vol. 2 (Seattle: Petimar Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> David Brody, *The Fiddler’s Fake Book* (New York: Oak Publications, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Stacy Phillips, *The Phillips Collection of Traditional American Fiddle Tunes*, vol. 2, *Rags, Blues, Hornpipes, Waltzes, Polkas, Jigs, etc.* (Pacific, Mo: Mel Bay Publications, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> The “e” is pronounced long (i.e., “tanny”).

*Dr. David Wallace is a faculty member of the Julliard School and author of the book Reaching Out: A Musician’s Guide to Interactive Performance. For a recording of David performing his waltz, Tannehill, please visit: <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/recordings/>*



