

## **Bob and Alf Taylor of Tennessee: Fiddlers or Violinists?**

**By Bob Cox**

One of the most unusual political campaigns ever to transpire in the state of Tennessee was the now-famous 1886 governor's race, known as "The War of the Roses," between well-known local fiddle-playing brothers, Bob and Alf Taylor. The "Rose War" got its name from the fact that the supporters of Bob, the Democratic challenger, wore the white rose of York on their lapels, while the followers of Alf, the Republican contender, adorned the red rose of Lancaster."

When the election was concluded, the white roses triumphed across the state, eventually bestowing upon Bob three terms as governor and one term as U.S. senator. (Alf became governor for one stint in 1920). Bob began traveling the lecture circuit with his very popular discourse, "The Fiddle and Bow." Was the elected official aligning himself as a fiddler, or was he in actuality a violinist, applying the word in a more generic connotation?

Satirist Ambrose Bierce once defined a fiddle as "an instrument designed to tickle human ears by friction of a horse's tail [the bow] on the entrails of a cat [the strings]." The violin/fiddle is one of the most intriguing instruments ever conceived, with a price tag ranging from an economical pawnshop model to a rare and priceless authentic Stradivarius (not a "Stradivarius model").

Anyone who has mastered this unique contrivance will verify that it is a very difficult instrument to learn, requiring successfully coordination of finger motions on the fretless (no ridges on the fingerboard like other instruments) strings with the difficult fluctuating syncopated long and short movements of the bow. Such a feat requires years to achieve proficiency.

Ask any fiddler/violinist what his/her most frequently asked question is and the quick answer will be "Is there a difference between a fiddle and a violin?" The answer is both simple and complex. If someone were to enter a music store and tell the attendant that he/she wanted to purchase one fiddle and one violin, the attendant would sell the customer two identical instruments.

Such an action implies that the two devices are indistinguishable, rendering a fiddle a violin and a violin a fiddle. Some music scholars argue that the fiddle significantly predates the violin, in essence, making the latter a member of the fiddle family, and suggesting that a violin is a fiddle but that a fiddle is not necessarily a violin.

If there are no physical differences between the two devices (except for some minor adjustments made to them after they are purchased), why are some persons called fiddlers and others violinists? Obviously, the dissimilarity is more a function of the musician and the type of songs being played than the instrument itself. Perhaps the best way to distinguish between a fiddler and a violinist is to observe each one in action and note any differences firsthand.

Since most violinists play as a group member in an orchestra, they should be observed in a theatre setting. Such an ensemble finds the violinists clustered together on stage, their violins against their chins, properly postured in chairs,

attired in semi-formal dress, and interpreting notes from sheet music secured to music stands. The performers alternately maintain eye contact with their music and their conductor, the latter synchronizing all the musicians into one desired product. The audience, also properly dressed, sits motionless and appears to be comprised of people of above-average social class.

Violin music is one of sheer beauty and power; the audience expresses its approval with thunderous applause at appropriate times. This genre adheres to a long-held strict written standard for holding the violin and bow and for playing from a script, leaving no room for improvising or straying. The violinists have specific “marching orders” on their music stands and are fully committed to it along with their conductor’s leadership.

The violinist’s repertoire consists mostly of operatic and classical music from the masters: sonatas, suites, and concertos. The musicians’ performance is multifaceted -- playing their music without flaw, demonstrating a full understanding of each selection, the period it represents, and the composer’s intent for the piece.

Conversely, fiddlers play as a member of a small band (such as old-time, bluegrass, Cajun, western swing, and country), and a trip to one of their concerts is a vastly dissimilar experience. In an old-time string band, the fiddler is usually playing acoustical music with a group of other entertainers in an informal setting, fiddle against the shoulder, taking the lead as if a conductor, standing as opposed to sitting, and dressed in casual garb. He/she plays notes not contained in sheet music from a stand, but instead, learned by ear, mysteriously evolving from the head through the heart and into the strings.

Fiddle music is not so much one of beauty, but of rhythmic energy, haunting, and melodious, soaring heavenward full of life. The equally casually dressed audiences express their approval not with thunderous applause but by clapping to the beat, singing along, tapping their toes, and dancing.

The fiddler appears to be in a trance with a glazed look in his/her eyes, playing effortlessly and incessantly with little sign of tiring, stringing melody notes together like a skilled knitter, improvising along the way, and rarely playing a tune the same way twice. It is as if the performer takes a lifeless skeletal song structure and imparts life into it by “creative improvisation.”

The fiddler’s repertoire consists of ballads, hoedowns, jigs, reels, waltzes, blues, flings, and hornpipes. Like favorite jokes, the tunes have been passed around over the centuries from player to player who learn them, perhaps making some minor changes, and passing them on to others, a tradition unheard of in the violinist’s camp.

Many well-rounded musicians can comfortably play the violin one moment only to magically transform it into a fiddle the next and vice versa. The Irish folklorist, Brendan Breathnach, once stated, “A violinist is not an educated fiddler any more than a fiddler is an untutored violinist.”

Scores of jokes exist that contrast fiddlers with violinists, some being rather unflattering such as... Calling a violinist a fiddler is the supreme compliment; calling a fiddler a violinist is the supreme insult. The encore for a fiddler is

“more, more, more”; the encore for a violinist is “less, less, less.” *Fiddler Magazine* defines a fiddle as “a violin with attitude.”

A sure-fire way to drive someone totally insane is to nail his/her shoes to the floor and play a fast moving fiddle tune. A violinist’s worst nightmare is dreaming of becoming a fiddler. And finally... “A young theologian named Fiddle refused to accept an honorary doctor of divinity degree declaring, ‘It’s one thing to be Fiddle, yet another to be Fiddle DD.’”

To answer the question as to whether Bob Taylor was a fiddler or a violinist, perhaps it is best to let the politician settle the issue himself in an excerpt from a speech dated April 24, 1889 and addressed to “My Dear Fellow Sawyers.”... “I still have fond recollections of every fiddler who played at the old-time country dance, and when I hear those sweet old tunes, even now it is difficult for me to keep my soul above my socks... The classics of Mozart and Mendelssohn are grand and glorious to me, but I cannot be persuaded to turn my back on the classics of plain country fiddlers.”

