



Resource Guide for Educators and Students Grades 4–12

What is traditional music? It's music that's passed on from one person to another, music that arises from one or more cultures, from their history and geography. It's music that can tell a story or evoke emotions ranging from celebratory joy to quiet reflection. Traditional music is usually played live in community settings such as dances, people's houses and small halls.

In each 30-minute episode of Carry On™, musical explorer and TikTok sensation Hal Walker interviews a musician who plays traditional music. Episodes air live, allowing students to pose questions. Programs are then archived so you can listen to them any time from your classroom or home. Visit Carry On's [YouTube channel](#) for live shows and archived episodes.

[Episode 1, Alex Kusturok](#)

Alex Kusturok is a third-generation **Métis fiddler** from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. His passionate playing is influenced by Québécois and Cape Breton fiddle styles, but his Métis culture remains at the forefront of his playing.

Métis culture is a blend of European and First Nations cultures. (In the US, we use the term American Indian; other parts of the world may use the term "aboriginal.") In the 1700s, early French and Scottish fur traders married First Nations people in eastern Canada, mostly Ojibway and Cree, and gradually moved westward, settling beyond Ontario and Manitoba into the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and the Northwest Territories, as well as North Dakota and Montana in the US. The word Métis (pronounced may-TEE) comes from a French word meaning "mixed race"; it now denotes the distinctive Métis culture and its people.

Alex is from Winnipeg, Manitoba. His mother is of Ukrainian descent, and his father is Ojibway. Alex grew up listening to his mother's Métis fiddling at community dances, and at age 7 he began learning to play by ear. This taught him to hear the patterns in music, "shortening the distance" between listening and playing.

In addition to Métis style, Alex plays in Cape Breton and Québec fiddling styles. He also plays in a Celtic rock band, expanding his traditional roots. Alex's music continues to evolve, just like the Métis who transformed the traditional music of Scotland, Ireland, France and other parts of Europe into something new and exciting.

Métis fiddling is rooted in the two worlds it comes from: Europe (mainly Scotland and Ireland) and First Nations. Played for social occasions such as dances, house parties and weddings, tunes include fast Scots-Irish jigs and reels and French tunes via Québec—perfect for dancing, which has been known to go on for a whole night or days on end. The mix of traditions produces a unique Métis sound:

- "Crooked" tunes have extra or missing beats, irregular phrasing and syncopation that echo the steady beat pattern of aboriginal music, altering the predictable 3- and 4-beat patterns of European dance music.
- "Double-stringing" (playing drone notes simultaneously with the melody) and altered fiddle tunings show the influence of Scottish traditions.
- Fiddlers accompany themselves with foot tapping, a percussive element reminiscent both of the steady pulse of First Nations music and of Irish and French-Canadian step dancing. (Guitar and/or piano add even more percussive elements.)
- Storytelling was important to aboriginal cultures; each storyteller had their own style, and each fiddler adds their own flourishes and flair to the tunes to create their own sound.
- Fiddlers may add long introductory phrases, start with a high pitch and end low, or linger on last notes, an influence from First Nations singing styles.

Vocabulary

Aboriginal / indigenous – People who were living in Canada and the US before the first wave of European settlers began arriving around 500 years ago. The term also refers to their descendants and their arts.

Dance tunes – The most popular in Métis music are the jig and the reel. Both are in duple meters—you can beat out a count of two as you listen or dance—but the difference is how many fast notes are in between each main beat. If you can tap out three quick notes between beats, it's a jig, which is often in a 6/8 meter. If you can tap out two quick notes between beats, it's a reel, often in 4/4. The "Red River Jig" that Alex plays in the video—perhaps the most well-known Métis dance tune—is affectionately known as the "Métis National Anthem."

Fiddle and violin – two names for the same instrument, a portable 4-string instrument made of wood with pegs for tuning the strings. The main difference between them is the style of music played on the instrument—it's a fiddle if you play traditional or folk-based music; it's a violin if you play classical music on it.

First Nations – The University of British Columbia defines First Nations as "aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit." The Canadian government [lists more than 600 First Nation communities](#) that represent more than 50 larger Nations.

Métis (may-TEE) – when European fur traders arrived in Canada in the 1700s, they began to mix with the indigenous people living there. The Métis people are one of three aboriginal groups whose rights were recognized by Canada's Constitution Act of 1982.

Activities and Questions for Students

Before you watch the episode—locate the following places on [Google Maps](#) or a printed map.

Canada: The provinces of Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Northwest Territories, Québec and Nova Scotia. Find Cape Breton on Nova Scotia, and the Red River (hint: it runs through Winnipeg, capital of Manitoba).

US: North Dakota, Montana.

Europe: Scotland, Ireland, France, Ukraine.

After you watch the episode—Complete assigned activities and questions from this list, which progresses from simpler to more complex.

1. Trace the route that early settlers might have taken from Europe to places in Canada. What Canadian provinces would they encounter first?
2. What kind of instruments would be easy to take with you to a new country?
3. When you're learning to play music by ear, you listen to learn—just like when you're a baby learning to talk, you listen to people talking. What song is "in your ear" that you can sing from memory?
4. Using just your feet or hands, make up a "rhythm song."
5. Does anyone you know play an instrument? When did they start? How much and how often do they practice?
6. Did any of your ancestors play an instrument? If they played in a musical tradition, what was it?
7. How would you describe this music to someone who hasn't heard it? What adjectives would you use?
8. If you could choose a "national anthem" for your family, what would it be? A song you all like to listen to or sing together? Or a tune (funny or serious) that describes the vibe of your household?
9. What does Métis music tell you about the experience of the Métis people?
10. What "cultural marriages" can you think of? For example, words from other languages or food from other countries that Americans have adopted so completely we don't think about where they came from.
11. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of this artist, what he talked about, and the music you heard. Describe the music, your favorite things about it, and what more you wish you could see or know about. Be sure to give your article a descriptive title!
12. Choose something from the video that made an impression on you and write a poem about it, whether it's the way the fiddle looked, the rhythms, what you learned about the people behind the tradition, maybe about what they experienced in the past.
13. [Watch this YouTube video](#) that breaks down some moves from the "Red River Jig." Try the moves with the video—they go slowly at first, and then faster. (Here's Alex's version of the jig [in our episode](#).) How hard or easy is it to keep up? To hit the beats?

14. Traditional fiddlers often have different technique than violinists. What do you notice about Alex's technique, especially his bow hold? And how does he approach instrument maintenance differently than a violinist might?

15. Métis music often has extra or missing beats, which make the tune "crooked." Try a crooked rhythm! Tap out a slow, steady three-beat pattern:

ONE – two – three | ONE – two – three | ONE – two – three

Now insert some extra beats into your pattern, or miss some beats: ONE – two – three, ONE | ONE – two – three, 1-2-1 (quick beats for 1-2-1) | ONE – two | ONE – two – three...

What does adding or subtracting beats do to music? What happens when you try to dance to it?

16. In [this YouTube video](#), Alex plays "The Dusty Miller's Reel" in the Cape Breton style with a guitar and a piano. Listen to the song and compare it with the "[Red River Jig](#)" as it's played by Alex's mother Patti. What differences do you hear, in terms of melody and rhythm? Just mention what strikes you—there are no wrong answers!

- Melody – the tune, the single most noticeable line, usually the one you end up singing along with.
- Rhythm – the "time" element of music, as expressed and heard in musical beats and patterns of beats.

17. [Jamie Fox](#) is a Métis fiddler from the Fort Belknap reservation in Montana. She's an American Indian musician of the Aaniiih and Nakoda tribes who is also part French, Scottish and Irish. Jamie has a different style than Alex, even though both play in the Métis tradition. Listen to part of her first tune (time mark 3:30) and identify some broad differences in the way they play the music. (Jamie also offers some good insights at the beginning of the video about the Métis tradition.)

18. The Métis people are one of three aboriginal groups whose rights were recognized by Canada's Constitution Act of 1982. Who are the other two groups? And what led up to the 1982 Constitution Act? (Web research required!)

Additional Resources

Alex Kusturok

Alex Kusturok's [website and complete bio](#).

[YouTube of Alex and his mother](#) playing a "whole whack of tunes" together.

The Métis and Indigenous People of Canada

[Canada's First Peoples](#) – "The Métis," with pictures of Métis clothing and beadwork and the Métis sash, adopted from the sashes worn by the early fur traders.

[Canadian Broadcast Company](#) – "Exploring Identity: Who are the Métis and what are their rights?"

[Government of Canada](#) – First Nations history.

Fiddle, Music and Dance Traditions of Canada

[History of the Métis jig dance](#) (YouTube) – Connections with aboriginal dance (including the "Chicken Dance" shown here), the Scottish sword dance of the highlands, and French-Canadian percussive dancing.

[Canadian Museum of History](#) (website) – Musical instruments that have immigrated (with their owners) to Canada.

[Fiddling Around the World, Canadian Fiddle](#) (website) – Canadian fiddling styles and genres, including everything from Cape Breton to Ukrainian and country fiddling.

[FiddleVideo.com](#) (membership site) – Free and paid lessons from fiddlers in five styles: Métis, Irish/Celtic, Scottish/Celtic, Old Time/Contest, Québécois.

[Canadian Fiddle Tunes for Two](#) (sheet music) – transcribed fiddle tunes for violin, viola, cello and bass. Free samples of each collection are viewable.

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With the help of generous donors, [Carry On](#)™ is produced by the nonprofit [Northeast Ohio Musical Heritage Association](#) (NEOMHA). The show is programmed by [Laura Lewis](#), artistic director of NEOMHA's [Lake Erie Folk Fest](#). Carry On's resource guides are the work of writer and musician [Rita Lewis](#).

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