



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 2, Jake Kouwe](#)

Jake Kouwe is an **accordion player** in the Cleveland, Ohio area. He leads the Chardon Polka Band, a group he founded in 2003 with the help of four high school friends. Jake got his start at age 14 when he saw Weird Al Yankovic on TV playing the "[Accordion Boogie](#)," an old rock 'n roll song from the 1950s. Jake's parents got him a thrift-store accordion and he fell in love with the instrument and with polka music.

Polka music and dance originated in a central European region known as Bohemia, located in modern-day Czechoslovakia. The story of polka—fact or legend, depending on who you ask!—is that around 1830 a young peasant girl invented new dance steps to a lively tune. "Polkomania" spread like wildfire throughout Europe. By the late 1840s, European immigrants had introduced the polka to the Americas. The word "polka" may come from the Czech phrase *půl kroku* for "half-step" (the light, quick step that is part of the dance) or from *polská žena*, Czech for "Polish woman" (Czechoslovakia is next door to Poland).

The polka dance was probably an offshoot of a number of dances in the region, including the waltz. At the time, the way couples held each other while waltzing was considered shocking. The polka kept the "close hold," adding half-steps as well as hops, jumps, kicks and spins.

Polka music is fast, happy music, usually in 2/4 meter with driving rhythms, bouncy emphasis on the downbeat and funny little flourishes, especially at the end of songs. There are several different styles in the US, depending on where immigrants came from, where they settled and which musical influences the polka absorbed.

Slovenian – Also called Cleveland style, Slovenian polka features a piano accordion, often with a "button box" accordion, tenor saxophone, drums and bass. Keyboards, banjos, guitars and clarinets are also used. Immigrants from Slovenia brought traditional songs with them to the US; their descendants wrote English lyrics and set them to a polka beat. (Jake plays one of these—"[Oj, Marička pegla](#)"—in our episode.) Elements of classical, jazz and swing music show up in Cleveland style, which first appeared in the Cleveland region as well as parts of Pennsylvania.

Polish – In Chicago style polka, songs are often sung in Polish. [Chicago "push" style](#) features two trumpets, usually with accordion, concertina, drums and bass; saxophone, clarinet or fiddle may be added. Syncopation and a louder sound echo rock-and-roll's influence. The "push" is in the "shaking" of the bellows. [Chicago "honky" style](#) uses clarinet and trumpet as main instruments in a Dixieland (jazzy) style. East Coast Polish style is faster and often uses big-band instrumentation with more horns and reed instruments along with accordion, piano, bass and drums; [this example uses fiddles](#), a holdover from the "old country."

German – [German style polka](#) emphasizes brass instruments, incorporating the tuba or a heavy bass line for its distinctive "oom-pah" sound. German style is also called Dutchman style, a corruption of the word *Deutsch* (which actually means "German"). Oktoberfests (October festivals) all over the US feature German style polka bands and dancing, but the style originally took hold where German immigrants settled—North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas. Czech style is related to German style polka.

Other styles have appeared in the Southwestern US, where ["chicken scratch" dance music](#) of American Indians in Arizona features elements of polkas and Mexican songs. [Mexico](#) is home to styles of polka that incorporate regional instruments and musical elements. European immigrants also brought the polka into South America.

There are hundreds of polka bands in the US and some "punk polka" bands in several countries. Classical composers have written polka pieces, and modern polka musicians often adapt pop tunes. Polka is a versatile genre that's remained popular for nearly 200 years.

The accordion features heavily in most polka styles. In the beginning, fiddle was probably the main instrument until community bands got into the act. The accordion, invented in Europe in the 1820s, became king of the polka because of its versatility as a one-person, portable band that could play melody, accompaniment and rhythm. Besides polkas, accordions are used in zydeco (Cajun) music in Louisiana, mariachi music in Mexico and in other settings.

Vocabulary

Accordion – An instrument descended from Asian free-reed instruments brought to Europe by spice traders. Pushing and pulling on cardboard bellows [forces air across steel reeds](#), vibrating them to produce sound. Pressing buttons or keys opens air holes for the desired notes. The piano accordion has a keyboard for melody notes and buttons for chords; the button accordion has buttons for both melody and chords.

Free-reed instruments – Free reeds are flexible strips of metal or wood attached on one end, allowing the other (free) end to vibrate to produce sound. Free-reed instruments were used in

eastern Asia starting around 3,000 BC, probably with the [Chinese sheng](#). Other free-reed instruments include the shō in Japan and the khaen in Laos and Thailand. (Host [Hal plays a khaen](#) in our episode). Concertinas and [harmonicas](#) are also free-reed instruments.

Instrumentation – The group of instruments used to play a particular piece or style of music.

Meter – The division of music into patterns of repeated rhythm, or beats. A 2/4 meter indicates two beats repeated over and over in units called measures, or bars. The bottom number (4) means that the quarter note gets one beat. You can usually identify the meter by tapping along and noticing how often the strong beats occur. In polka, it's ONE – two | ONE – two | ONE – two, which is a 2/4 meter.

Polka – The name of a dance and a type of music. The polka dance has [six basic steps](#), quick-quick-slow starting on alternate feet. [Experienced dancers add lots of embellishments](#), with turns, skips, hops and spins, traveling quickly across the floor. Polka is danced at festivals, community clubs, events and weddings. Polka music is in 2/4 or 4/4 meter, in regular 4- or 8-measure patterns, usually in a quick tempo.

Polyrhythm – Use of two or more markedly different rhythms at the same time. For example, playing three beats against an underlying meter of two regular beats, or four beats against a meter of three beats. [This video illustrates polyrhythms beautifully](#).

Tempo – The speed at which the music is played.

Activities and Questions for Students

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

- Europe: [Europe in 1910 and after 1924](#) – Look for Bohemia on the first (older) map.
- Europe: Czechoslovakia, Germany, Poland and Slovenia.
- US: Cleveland, Chicago, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas.
- Regions: North America (Mexico) and South America.

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

1. Jake says that when you move to a new home, just like you take your clothes and books with you, you take your culture. If you were moving to a new country, what parts of your culture would you want to take? It could be food, music, traditions—whatever reminds you of your family or your place of origin.
2. Jake's first band was a punk rock band that played rock-and-roll. If you formed a band—punk or otherwise—what would you call it?
3. With the help of an adult, make your own sheng (a free-reed instrument) [using these instructions](#).
4. Jake announces himself on our episode with a funny little musical introduction. What kind of musical intro would you invent for yourself? Dramatic? Funny? Can you sing or play it?

5. Polka players often put funny little endings on songs. Think of a tune you know (a folk song, a Christmas carol, the "Star Spangled Banner") and invent a little musical flourish for the end.
6. If you can, name the instruments [in Jake's band](#). What name would you invent for the silly-looking instrument the guy second from the left is playing? Can you identify some of the instrument's noisemakers?
7. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of Jake, what he talked about, and the music you heard. Describe the music, your favorite things about it, and what you wish you could know more about. Be sure to give your article a descriptive title!
8. One US state names the polka as its state dance. Do a little Internet research [with this link](#)—what state is it? Find your state's official state dance, if it has one.
9. Polka steps are quick-quick-slow, repeated over and over to the beat. [Watch this short video](#) on how to do the steps, then try dancing along with "[The Red Wing Polka](#)" played by Jake's band. How easy is it to stay on the beat? To keep up with the tempo?
10. Polka music is upbeat, happy music. What kinds of music give you energy and put a smile on your face? What songs make you feel like dancing around the house or getting things done? If you can, name characteristics of your "happy" music. What genre is it—rock, hip hop, Big Band? What meter is it in? What instruments or voices are used? What language is it in?
11. Polka bands encourage [audience engagement](#). If you were part of Jake's audience, how would you interact with [this part of his song](#) from our episode?
12. Invent a unique instrumentation for your area of the country, your neighborhood or your family. What group of instruments would represent your sound and vibe?
13. Jake plays the pop song "All About That Bass." Compare [his version](#) with [the original](#) (with family-friendly lyrics). What similarities and differences do you notice between the two versions? In the sound, instruments, beat, spirit, tempo? Anything else?
14. Clap along with Jake's first song, the "[Tik Tok Polka](#)." Can you hear the polyrhythm that Jake uses?
15. The accordion is a reed instrument. Name all the reed instruments you can—use of the Internet is allowed and encouraged!
16. Jake's original band played punk music. Jake points out that punk rock uses only three or four chords in a song. How many chords can you count in "[Oj, Marička pegla](#)," played here by Jake's band? Be sure to listen into the second section of the song. If you're feeling ambitious, pick out the tune by ear and put chords to it, identifying the chords—if possible, by their function—for example, I – V – V7 – I.

Additional Resources

Jake Kouwe

[Jake Kouwe's bio](#) on the website of his band, The Chardon Polka Band.

The Accordion

[The Misunderstood Instrument: The Accordion](#) – A short, fun video about people learning the accordion only to become... accordion fanatics.

Want to know what lots of accordions sound like playing together? Here's an accordion orchestra playing Glinka's "[Overture to Ruslan and Ludmila](#)."

Global Accordion Project Orchestra – "[Peace 2020](#)." This virtual performance features accordionists from around the world playing a slow, thoughtful composition.

[This video](#) from the TV show *How It's Made* shows in detail how the accordion is made. Accordions can have up to 600 reeds, and final tuning can take up to 16 hours!

Polka Traditions

"[History of Polka Music | The Origin of Polka Music](#)" – Excerpts from the Public television documentary *Polka*!

"[Polkas](#)" (article) – Case Western Reserve's Encyclopedia of Cleveland History on the history of the polka in Cleveland.

[The National Cleveland-Style Polka Hall of Fame](#) (website) – museum and sponsored events. After the pandemic ends, polka festivals and events will resume across the US, including: [Thanksgiving Polka Weekend](#), the [Slovenian Sausage Festival](#) and [Cleveland Dyngus Day](#), all in the Cleveland area.

The three-day [National Polka Festival](#) in Ennis, Texas celebrates the city's Czech heritage. [Pulaski Polka Days](#) in Pulaski, Wisconsin.

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We want to make Carry On™ even more useful and enjoyable for students and educators across the country. [Send us your feedback!](#) Tell us what you liked and what we could do better. And please... tell other educators and schools about the show. Help us all carry on!

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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