



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 5, Nic Gareiss](#)

Nic Gareiss is a percussive dancer who blends Irish, Canadian and Appalachian dance styles. He was named one of “25 to watch” by *Dance Magazine* and has been called “the most inventive and expressive step dancer on the scene” by the *Boston Herald*.

Percussive dance is dance that makes music with dancers' feet. Similar to hands playing a drum, feet “play” the floor. Tapping, stomping or brushing against the floor produces both hard and soft sounds that the dancer arranges in rhythmic patterns. It complements the dance music, imitating the rhythm or playing off it in a kind of conversation. Dances can be choreographed, with steps and movements determined in advance. Or they can be improvised—made up on the spot.

Nic performs and collaborates with musicians and other dancers on dance pieces, concerts and performances for audiences in more than a dozen countries. He holds a bachelor's degree in anthropology and music, and a master's degree in ethnochoreology—the study of dance, movement and culture. Nic has studied traditional dance in various places, including Ireland, where he learned Irish step dancing. He likes to choreograph and improvise dances in a blend of styles from around the North Atlantic. These include Irish styles, as well as styles from Canada (like Québec step dancing) and clogging from the Appalachian Mountains.

The styles of dance Nic performs—some on our episode—include:

- *Sean-nós* – [Nic's first dance](#) on our episode is based on this style from Ireland. Sean-nós is an Irish term for "old style." It's a traditional style with close-to-the-ground footwork, improvised steps and arms that move freely. It's usually danced solo, but dancers can take turns in a kind of dance duel, playing off each other.
- Irish step dancing – A more formal type of dance from Ireland, performed solo or in groups. The upper body is held upright, arms still, and the feet move with fast, precise steps. It's very rhythmic; oftentimes fiberglass tips on the shoes make it easy to hear. In competition, dancers must complete certain steps on both their right and left sides to show proficiency. The touring show [Riverdance](#) was based on Irish step dance.
- Canadian step dances – These include several kinds of percussive dances from Québec province and the Maritimes (the provinces in eastern Canada next to the ocean), which originally came from Scotland, Ireland and France. [This video shows three of them](#): First, the clog, in a slower 2/2 or 4/4 time signature. Then the quicker jig, which is in 6/8 time. Then the fastest dance, the reel, in a quick 4/4 time.
- [Appalachian clogging](#) – A modern percussive dance in the Appalachian Mountains. Its roots are in dances from Ireland, Scotland and England that migrated to the region with early immigrants. Clogging also includes steps from African and native American traditions. It's more common in the mountainous regions of West Virginia, southwestern Virginia and western North Carolina.

Other forms of percussive dance from around the world include tap dance and soft shoe (from the US), buck dancing (US), flatfoot (US), [English clogging](#) (from England), [flamenco dance](#) (from Spain), the [gumboot dance](#) (from Africa) and [stomp dance](#) (native American), among others.

Vocabulary

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.

Improvisation – To perform dance or music without preparation, on the spur of the moment.

Rhythm – The time element of music and dance. Different elements of rhythm are the beat (the repeated emphasis you can hear; what you can tap your foot to), patterns of sound, duration of sound, tempo (speed) and meter (or time signature).

Syncopation – An emphasis on the "up" beat of the music. In 4/4 time, this accents what are usually weaker beats—the 2 and the 4 beats—which are sometimes called the "off-beat" or "backbeat." Syncopation gives the music bounce and energy.

Time signature (or 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.

Activities and Questions for Students

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

Countries: Ireland, Scotland, England, France, the United States and Canada (the provinces of Québec and the Maritime provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island).

US States: Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia and Michigan (where Nic is from).

Region: Appalachian Mountains—note how far north and south this mountain range goes.

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

1. [Nic dances to a harp on our episode](#). Write a poem about the music and the dance, about the way it sounds or looks, what it makes you feel, what you imagine it might be "talking" about, a possible story it brings to mind.
2. Stand or sit for this improvisation activity, whichever is easier. Play a piece of music on the radio or a phone. Find the beat and tap against the floor with your foot on the main beats. Now add taps in between the beats wherever you want. Keep this going and vary the rhythms you tap out. Tap on the beat, off the beat, in between the beat, add quick beats, make it slow—whatever you want. Try imitating the rhythms you hear in the music. Then don't imitate them exactly, but "answer" them (like your feet and the music are having a conversation). If you like, try this with a different piece of music. Add brush strokes against the floor and tap with both the toe and heel of your foot. Have fun!
3. Nic sings and dances at the same time, essentially "playing" two different rhythms at the same time. Try tapping your head with one hand and rubbing your stomach with the other. Is it easy? Hard? Does it become easier the longer you do it? Sit in a chair and try tapping against the table with your hand—get a rhythm going. Now try brushing against the floor with your foot in a different rhythm. Easy? Hard? Now sing a song and tap your foot along with it, using your foot as a percussion instrument. Easier? Harder?
4. Nic mentions dancing on a board outdoors. Why would he need to dance on a board when he's outside? Try clapping a rhythm or singing indoors and then outdoors. How does the sound change when you move outdoors?
5. Nic does a [one-person square dance](#) on our episode. Square dances usually take 8 people to perform, [as in this video](#). Try your own square dance following the instructions [in this video](#).
6. Look up the word anthropology. Words that end in "ology" are the study of something—what is anthropology the study of? How do you think it helps Nic with his dance practice and performances?
7. What's your favorite move that Nic does? Try to imitate it!
8. Do you know anyone who plays music or who dances? Anyone in your family? Did any of your ancestors? What kind of music or dance?
9. Nic describes what he does as part dance, part music. He recently made an album with his friend Laurel Premo, a fiddler. [This video is a collaboration](#) between them. Watch the

video first with your eyes closed. How would you describe the sounds you hear that aren't from the fiddle? Like random thumping, or like music from certain instruments or materials? Now watch the video with your eyes open. How does Nic make these sounds?

10. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of Nic's episode, what he talked about, and the music you heard. Describe the dance and the music, your favorite things about them, and what more you wish you could see or know about. Be sure to give your article a descriptive title!
11. [Nic's first dance](#), which he calls a lead around to the right, is based on sean-nós dancing. What techniques does he use to create his sounds? Describe, please! Does he stomp, pound, brush the floor? (Hint: At one point, he uses one body part besides his feet.)
12. [Nic's second dance](#), danced to the tune "The Peaks of Otter," is based on American flatfoot dancing, buck dance and clogging. [This video shows clogging](#)—can you spot any of the same moves that Nic uses?
13. [Nic's third dance](#) is danced to a fiddle tune. Does he seem to be "playing" against the rhythm of the fiddle, or with it (tapping out the same rhythms the fiddle does)?
14. [Nic dances to a harp](#). Describe the sound of the harp and this piece of music. How would you characterize them to someone who's never heard a harp or this kind of music? How does Nic "match" his dance to this instrument and music?
15. Think about the musical characteristics of [the harp piece Nic dances to](#). What's the meter? (Hint: Try "conducting" to the beat.) Do you hear any syncopation? Nic uses a [repeated brush stroke](#) at one point—what beat does it start on? What's the musical device used to signal that the end of the piece is coming?

Additional Resources

Nic Gareiss

[Nic Gareiss](#) – Website and bio.

[Nic performing with a fiddle player](#) in styles based on American clogging.

Nic demonstrating [Acadian step dancing](#) from Prince Edward Island.

Percussive Dance Traditions

"[High Mountains, Flatfeet: The History of Clogging in Appalachia](#)" (article) – This article has good videos that illustrate dances and different traditions like buck dancing, along with influences like African traditions, that have contributed to clogging.

[North American Percussive Dances](#) (videos) – Scroll down on this page to find links to videos of various styles of percussive dance, including Appalachian clogging, tap dance, soft shoe (related to tap dance), and sean-nós.

[Talking Feet](#) (video) – A 1987 documentary funded by the Smithsonian Institution, with 24 traditional dancers performing solo mountain dancing in West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina. Styles include flatfoot, buck dance, hoedown and rural tap dancing,

styles that modern clogging is based on. (Contains an index to the dancers and their locations.)

[Phil Jamison](#) (videos) – A scholar of traditional Appalachian dance styles, Jamison filmed more than 40 dancers in western North Carolina in 1993 performing traditional solo dances. Dancers included African Americans and American Indians as well as European Americans. They perform buck dancing, flatfoot dance and the Charleston (a dance from the 1920s).

Tell us what you think!

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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