



Traditional Music and the People Who Make It

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 19, Sam Bartlett](#)

Sam Bartlett is a musician who teaches and plays various traditional styles including Irish, old-time, bluegrass, Dixieland and contra dance music. He began playing the tenor banjo at age 14 and went on to learn the five-string banjo, mandolin and guitar. Sam is also an artist who draws constantly; his specialty is drawing tricks and stunts.

Sam has spent a lot of his career touring the country playing for contra dances, which are [danced in long lines of couples](#). A caller leads the dancers in figures, which are dance moves with names like "[left hand star](#)" and "[ladies chain](#)."

Between six and twelve figures are danced over 64 beats of music. These are repeated as many times as needed to let dancers or couples progress up and down the lines, eventually dancing with every other dancer or couple in the line. Contra dance has its origins in English and Scottish country dances, as well as French dances from the 1600s.

Contra dancing is usually done to live traditional music such as Irish, old-time and French-Canadian music. The fiddle is a central instrument in a traditional band, playing with any combination of banjo, guitar, flute, piano, mandolin, accordion, hammered dulcimer, and other instruments. As Sam notes, instrumentation changes with the times. In the 1920s brass instruments were popular; now, some musicians use electronics, synthesizer and drum machines. Contra dance tunes are in 4/4 time. At several points during the evening, individual couples [dance a waltz](#) around the room in 3/4 time.

Sam writes his own dance tunes like "[Mary Devlin's](#)," which he and his son Stefan play on our episode. Contra dance tunes are in sections; you can hear a marked difference between sections in the melody and chords. If you give each section a letter, the structure of the tune looks like this: AABB AABB, or a variation like AABB AACC. Within the "square" tune of 64 beats, tune writers change things up with interesting rhythms, melodies and chords. In the waltz "[Steciak's](#)" the composer (Sam's friend Larry Unger) uses an Eastern European scale for the tune, giving it an exotic feel.

The tenor banjo Sam plays on our episode has a shorter neck than the five-string banjo. Sam's instrument has four strings tuned an octave lower than a violin, to G D A E. (Tenor banjos can also be tuned to C G D A.) The drum-like "head" and open-fifth tuning make it a loud, resonant instrument, which means it can be heard over the noise of many dancers. Tenor banjo is also used in jazz (here in the song "[Mood Indigo](#)"), [Irish music](#) and [Dixieland jazz](#).

Sam began his musical journey by picking up a mandolin and a guitar lying around the house and experimenting with them. His father listened to traditional music often, and Sam heard other musicians who played different styles, including his mother, who played church music. Sam advises, "The best way to learn a tune is to listen to it, and then to 'doodle' it, or to sing it any way you can. If you can sing the tune you're immediately halfway there."

Vocabulary

Beat – A unit of rhythm that you can tap out. For example, in "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," you would probably tap on **TWINK-le TWINK-le LIT-tle STAR**—giving you four strong beats in the first line of the song.

Bluegrass music – A fast-tempo style invented for stage performance. Its influences include old-time and country music, blues, gospel and jazz. Bluegrass is played by a band of stringed instruments, usually fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, steel or dobro guitar, and bass.

Fiddle and violin – Two names for the same instrument, a portable four-string instrument made of wood with pegs for tuning the strings. The main difference between fiddle and violin 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.

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

Jazz – A type of music originating in African American communities of the US. It developed from ragtime and blues music, absorbing influences from African rhythms and European harmonic structure. There are many types of jazz, including Dixieland, which arose in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the early 1900s.

Old-time music – A traditional style of North America that comes from the music and cultures of settlers from the British Isles (Ireland, Scotland and England), as well as France, Germany and Africa. Old-time music is sung or played live on acoustic instruments, sometimes fiddle alone, sometimes with banjo, guitar and possibly string bass.

Stunt – A trick that requires physical or special skills, such as balancing a spinning basketball on the end of one finger. Stunts are often performed for audiences.

Time signature (or meter) – The division of music into patterns of 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. For example, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" has two strong beats that repeat, so the meter is 2/4.

Activities and Questions for Students

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

Countries: England and Scotland (in the United Kingdom), France and the US.

States: Vermont (where Sam is from), Indiana (where he lives now) and Louisiana (find New Orleans, home of Dixieland jazz).

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

1. Sam has an apprentice who is learning tenor banjo. An apprentice is someone who learns from a master teacher over a period of time. If you could be an apprentice to anyone, who would it be? What would you want to learn?
2. If an apprentice were assigned to you, what would you teach them?
3. Sam wrote the tune "[Mary Devlin's](#)" as an auction prize. If you were going to write a piece of music as a prize, what would the contest be?
4. You'll need two people for this exercise, or groups of two. [At beginning of this video](#), watch the demonstration of the first four dance figures: do-si-do, seesaw, allemande and swing. Now try them without music, just going through the steps.
5. After you do Activity #4, try dancing those figures [to the first tune](#) that Sam and Stefan play on our episode. You don't have to do anything fancy—just move to the beat. Repeat as many times as you like. How easy or hard is this? Now assign someone to call out the figures, telling you when to do-si-do, seesaw, allemande or swing. Is it easier or harder with the caller? And how easy is it for the caller to call the dance?
6. After you try Activities #4 and #5, make up your own contra dance figure. Remember to keep it short and doable for two people. Now dance it with some friends. Does it work?
7. Sam says the tenor banjo is a loud instrument. Read the first section of our guide above, about other instruments used for contra dance. Can you think of any others that might be loud enough to be heard over dancers laughing, talking and stomping on the floor?
8. Sam mentions people who've taught and influenced him. Pretend you're being interviewed about your "personal influencers," people who've had a positive impact on your musical life, or your life in general. Who would you mention? What effect have they had on your life?
9. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of Sam and Stefan, what they 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!

10. Sam says if you can "deedle" a song (sing it any way you can), you're close to learning it. Listen once to the first part of "Troy's Wedding" and try deedling it. How much can you remember? Now listen again. How much can you remember now? If you play an instrument, can you pick out the tune on it?
11. Analyze the structure of the first contra dance song, using letters (A, B, etc.). How many different sections do you come up with? Remember that each section is 16 beats long.
12. The tune "Troy's Wedding" has an interesting rhythmic pattern that Sam starts playing HERE. Can you tap out the pattern? Can you describe musically what's happening with the rhythm?
13. What's the time signature of "Troy's Wedding"? (Hint: this tune is a jig.)
14. Listen to the waltz tune "Steciak's," which Sam says is based on an Eastern European scale. Can you replicate it, by singing or playing it on your instrument? Can you write it down with musical notation?
15. Write your own contra dance song, or just make up the melody. Make it square! That means the complete tune consists of 64 beats (usually in 4/4 time).
16. Even though contra music maintains a certain structure to fit the dance, as Sam demonstrates when he plays a tune with an Eastern European scale, there's room for innovation and creativity. Do Activity #15 and change up the tune or the rhythm to give it a unique sound.

Additional Resources

Sam Bartlett, Musician

[Sam's website](#).

Sam's [Facebook page](#).

[Sam's YouTube channel](#) – Music, music lessons and stuntology.

[Evil Diane](#) – Sam's 2004 album. Click the link to listen on Spotify.

Sam Bartlett, Artist

Sam Bartlett's art on [his website](#).

In addition to music, Sam is a documentarian and drawer of tricks and stunts. His book [Stuntology](#) is a book of stunt cartoons.

[Fans of Sam Bartlett's Stuntology](#) – Facebook page with videos of fun stunts posted (and often performed) by lovers of stuntology.

[Stuntology—Crazy Examples from the Book](#). Sam doing real-live stunts on YouTube.

Contra Dance

[Contra dance lessons](#) – Eight instructional videos—everything you need to know about contra dance!

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