



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 26, Rayna Gellert](#)

Rayna Gellert grew up in a musical family and has spent most of her life immersed in the sounds of rural string band music. After honing her skills playing fiddle at jam sessions and square dances, she began traveling and performing. Her recordings are widely celebrated in the old-time music community, and she is a sought-after workshop leader and fiddle teacher. Rayna now lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where she plays fiddle, writes songs, and collaborates with other musicians.

Although old-time is considered traditional music of all North America, it's often associated with the rural areas and mountains of the southeastern US. Old-time music has roots in traditional music of indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and settlers from the British Isles (especially England, Scotland and Ireland) and other European regions.

Old-time music includes tunes for dancing, ballads that tell stories, and songs about faith, nature and life. Many songs and tunes were imported by arriving immigrants, but many are purely North American. African influence appears in use of the banjo (an instrument of African origin) and in musical phrasing and syncopation.

Old-time music is sung or played live on acoustic instruments, often fiddle alone or with banjo, guitar and sometimes string bass. The violin's size and portability made it an instrument of choice for musicians who used it to "fiddle" (play traditional music) for dances, social occasions and pure pleasure.

Rayna points out several characteristics of southern Appalachian old-time fiddling in the tunes she plays on this episode. "[Cotton-Eyed Joe](#)" features double-stops, which is playing on two strings at the same time to produce two simultaneous notes. Droning also involves playing two notes at the same time, but one note stays the same—it "drones on."

"[Black-Eyed Susie](#)" uses alternate tuning, another feature of southern Appalachian fiddling. Instead of the strings tuned to the GDAE, Rayna tunes them to AEAE. She points out that this makes the instrument louder, because it increases the tension on the two lower strings; tuning them one note higher involves "pulling" them tighter. This alternate tuning also gives the fiddle more "ring" because it resonates more—see Vocabulary, below. Rayna also "slides" up to notes in "Black-Eyed Susie" and rocks from one string to another with the bow, producing a kind of yodel (see Vocabulary, below).

Before she learned to play old-time music as an adult, Rayna heard it at home; both her parents played instruments and her father, Dan Gellert, is an accomplished old-time fiddle and banjo player. In school, she learned classical violin, but later returned to traditional music, learning from recordings and friends. She had to change the way she played and used the bow, as she demonstrates [HERE](#).

Rayna is also a singer, songwriter and performer who collaborates with other musicians. See Resources, below, for links to her performances with others. On our episode she and other musicians perform "[Workin's Too Hard](#)," a song she wrote; the lyrics are [HERE](#). Songs like this—whether in country, pop or indie genres—often have a similar structure. The verses tell the story, and the chorus is the "hook"—the part that people remember and sing along to. Other sections of a classic song structure are the intro (at the beginning), the outro (at the end), the break (an instrumental section somewhere in the middle), and the bridge (a contrasting "connecting" section).

Vocabulary

Banjo – [A stringed instrument](#) with a drumhead and a long neck. Modern American banjos usually have five strings; the top-most string is a drone string that plays just one note. Enslaved Africans made early banjos out of anything they could find to mimic instruments from home.

Drone – A sustained sound of a single pitch that continues through all or most of a musical piece.

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 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.

Genre – A particular style of music. For example, jazz, country, classical, hip hop and traditional are all different genres of music.

Indigenous peoples / American Indian – People who were living in Canada and the US before the first wave of European settlers began arriving around 500 years ago.

Lyrics – The words of a song.

Resonance – Musical instruments create sound by making objects vibrate. Objects can include strings and the body of the instrument, as well the air inside the instrument. Vibrations cause sound waves to start moving. Resonance amplifies sound waves when an instrument responds to sound waves of certain frequencies. For example, when different strings are tuned to similar or sympathetic frequencies, the strings resonate with each other, making the instrument "ring."

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. For example, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" has two strong beats that repeat, so the meter is 2/4.

Yodel – Making sounds with the voice that alternate between the normal range of the voice and high notes (falsetto). Yodeling has been used to communicate across distances, for example, in the mountains. The shift is often abrupt. [Here's an example!](#)

Activities and Questions for Students

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

Countries: England, Scotland, Ireland and countries of west central Africa, where the banjo and its makers were from

Region: The southern Appalachian Mountain range, which runs through Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia.

US: Nashville, Tennessee (where Rayna lives) and Swannanoa, North Carolina (where she went to college).

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

1. At first, Rayna learned old-time fiddling from listening to her father play. Do you know someone who does something you would like to learn? Who is it, and what do they do? Is there any way you could observe them to learn? If you could learn what you wanted to know, what would you do with this knowledge—where would you take it?
2. 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. Lots of old-time musicians learn by ear. What song is "in your ear" that you can sing from memory?
3. [Listen to Rayna explain](#) why she is tuning her instrument differently and read the definition of Resonance above. Experiment with tapping pencils against the edge of dinner plates of the same size, and then plates of different sizes. Some taps will sound

like they're in tune, and some will clash. Which makes the sound resonate, or "travel," more? Why do you think that is?

4. Rayna talks about how she had to change the way she holds the bow, "choking up" toward the tip. Try changing the way you hold your pencil. Choke up to hold it higher on the pencil, and then hold it down near the writing tip. What does it do to the way you write? Compared to the way you normally hold a pencil, is it easier or harder to write holding it higher? How about holding it lower?
5. Listen to the first tune Rayna plays, "[Cotton-Eyed Joe](#)." Describe it in a sentence, in a poem, however you like. Now listen to a different version of "[Cotton-Eyed Joe](#)" with Rayna and friends playing and singing. Read your description—does it match the second version, or would you write a new description?
6. [Listen to Rayna](#) play "Black-Eyed Susie" on the fiddle. [Now listen to her father play it](#) on the banjo. If you hadn't been told it was the same tune, would you realize that? Why or why not?
7. Besides violin, what instruments—or what kind of instruments—would be easy to take with you to a new country?
8. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of Rayna's episode, what she 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!
9. If someone were interviewing you, how would YOU define a musical tradition?
10. Rayna wrote "[The Swannanoa Waltz](#)" in the style of an old-time tune. What parts of old-time fiddle playing has she used in her tune—what makes it old-time, even though it's new?
11. What is the time signature of "[The Swannanoa Waltz](#)"? See Vocabulary, above, for a hint on how to identify the time signature.
12. Analyze the structure of "[The Swannanoa Waltz](#)." Use different letters—A, B, etc.—for sections that are substantially different (don't be thrown by variations). Use the same letters for sections that are identical. (Hint: Each section has 8 bars, or measures.) What structure do you come up with?
13. Rayna plays several genres of music. What are your favorite genres? (To jog your memory, look at the very beginning of [this list on YourDictionary.com](#).) If you play an instrument, what genre do you usually play in? What other genres would you choose to experiment with if you had time?
14. Analyze the structure of the song "[Workin's Too Hard](#)." Basic parts of a song are described above. Just map the song—make a list of what happens first, second, etc. Your best guess is fine!
15. For the ambitious: Write your own old-time tune with a simple AABB structure, with each letter representing a 4- or 8-measure section. OR... Write your own song, with or without lyrics, using a similar structure as Rayna's song "[Workin's Too Hard](#)." (See the explanation of song structure under discussion, above.) Create just the melody line or a fully realized tune with chords.

Additional Resources

Rayna Gellert

[Rayna's website](#) with [teaching videos](#), information about online lessons, and [old-time music resources](#).

Rayna's music [on Spotify](#) and [on Bandcamp](#).

Rayna's playlist on Spotify of her [old-time music favorites](#).

[Rayna's Instagram profile](#), which features fiddling tips, discussions, videos and bits of tunes.

[Rayna's Facebook Music](#) page.

Rayna's [YouTube channel](#), with [Deep Geekery](#), a playlist of conversations about music with her father and other musicians.

Rayna Gellert and Musical Friends

Rayna with her band Uncle Earl performing "[The Last Goodbye](#)." The band consists of four women, all of whom are songwriters.

Rayna with Kieran Kane performing "[One More Time](#)." They perform often as a duo and write songs together.

Rayna with fellow songwriter Scott Miller performing "[Someday Sometime](#)."

Rayna's father Dan Gellert in a 2018 movie called *The Mountain Minor* about the people and culture behind old-time music. Watch the movie trailer [HERE](#). He and other old-time musicians acted in the movie and performed the music.

Old-Time Music and Fiddling

[Old-Time Fiddling Tips](#) (YouTube) – Bowing tips and techniques from fiddler Bruce Molsky.

"[20 Favorite Tunes from Old-Time Black Musicians](#)" (article with audio) – Old-time music has been performed by both Black and white performers; this article has a good selection of musical examples from Black performers.

[Classic Old-Time Music](#) from Smithsonian Folkways (Spotify) – A wide selection of old-time music from old and newer performances.

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](#).

© 2020 Northeast Ohio Musical Association, all rights reserved