



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 27, Sierra Hull](#)

Hailing from the small Tennessee hamlet of Byrdstown, **Sierra Hull** learned to sing from her mother as a toddler. She took up the mandolin just a few years later and began joining local bluegrass jams by the age of 8. She performed onstage at the Grand Ole Opry at age 10, Carnegie Hall at age 12, and at age 13 was signed to Rounder Records, releasing her first album when she was 16.

Sierra's father was a fan of traditional music, so Sierra heard it from an early age. She began playing on a mandolin that belonged to her uncle. For an 8-year-old, the mandolin was easier to play than other, larger instruments, and she fell in love with it.

The mandolin is a member of the lute family. The origins of the lute date back about 5,000 years. In Europe, the lute evolved into the mandolin, which in Italian means "small mandola." There are larger types of mandolins with longer strings, which are pitched lower. But the type favored by Sierra and bluegrass musicians is the highest pitched. It is tuned the same as a violin (which is the highest-pitched member of the violin family).

As Sierra mentions, the bowl-back mandolin is often played by classical musicians. It has also been used by European musicians who play traditional music. It was imported to the US, where mandolin orchestras became popular, just as they were in Europe. (See Resources, below, for a link to a video of a mandolin orchestra.) Just before 1900, a luthier named Orville Gibson invented the modern archtop mandolin. The Gibson company made both F-style and A-style mandolins. Sierra shows us all three styles of mandolin [HERE](#).

Once a string is struck, the sound of the mandolin fades quickly. So mandolin makers and players boost the sound of the instrument in several ways:

- Doubling the strings – Using two strings for each pitch results in eight strings (two for each pitch) instead of four. This roughly doubles the volume of the sound. Sierra demonstrates [how she "plays through" both strings](#) when she plucks a note.
- Tremolo – Striking rapid, repeated notes on a single string. Watch and listen to a lesson in playing tremolo [HERE](#).
- Fast picking – Playing one note after the other in quick succession ensures a continuous sound, making the instrument stand out. (On slower songs, players use tremolo when they don't want the sound to fade too quickly.)

Sierra has received three awards for Mandolin Player of the Year from the International Bluegrass Music Association—the first woman to receive the award. She has also been nominated for two GRAMMY awards, Best Folk Album and Best American Roots Song. She learned to play in the bluegrass style pioneered by Bill Monroe, a mandolin player known as the Father of Bluegrass.

Bluegrass was meant to be performed on stage for an audience. It is showy music that takes inspiration and elements from old-time music, country, blues, jazz and gospel. The traditional bluegrass band uses acoustic stringed instruments such as fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, bass, and sometimes steel or dobro guitar. Classic bluegrass music features:

- A fast, driving rhythm that's almost ahead of the beat, creating a lot of energy and forward momentum.
- Solo "breaks" that allow players to showcase their instrumental virtuosity with improvisation and fast runs, string picking and finger work. A bluegrass "breakdown" is a tune that features a series of breaks, rotating through the different instruments.
- High, tight vocal harmonies that often create a "lonesome" sound.

As Sierra explains, the mandolin's role in the band varies. Players can play syncopated chords by "chopping" on the upbeat to sound like a percussion instrument. They can also play fast, intricate solos, or chop or strum in the background, or use tremolo. All these techniques help to create the sound of a bluegrass band.

Monroe popularized bluegrass in the late 1930s. He performed often at the [Grand Ole Opry](#), a live radio show broadcast from the stage of the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville. Other musicians imitated his style and soon, a new musical genre was born. Many artists have performed at the Opry, including Sierra. [Here she is at age 11](#) performing with her mentor Alison Krauss; Sierra's mandolin break comes in [HERE](#).

Since then, Sierra has taken her music into new territory, writing her own songs and stretching the boundaries of bluegrass. She incorporated electric instruments and percussion on her newest album, [25 Trips](#). Her song "Beautifully Out of Place" from that album [is on our episode](#), featuring Sierra's vocals against an animated video.

Vocabulary

Chord – A group of three or more notes played together.

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.

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

Improvisation, improvise – To perform dance or music without preparation, on the spur of the moment. Also, to change a melody with different notes and "decorations," keeping it recognizable but making it a little different.

Jam – When musicians gather to play unrehearsed music together.

Luthier – Someone who makes or repairs stringed instruments.

Old-time music – Traditional music often associated with the mountains of the southeast US. Its roots are in traditional music of indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and settlers from the British Isles (especially England, Scotland and Ireland) and other European regions.

Pitch – The position of a note in a range of notes. A high pitch means that the note is higher than most other pitches in the range.

Upbeat, or offbeat – The weaker beat. In 4/4 time, the upbeat occurs on beats 2 and 4, which are normally weaker beats. In certain styles of music, upbeats are emphasized, giving the music bounce and energy.

Volume – The softness or loudness of music.

Activities and Questions for Students

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

Kentucky: Bill Monroe's home; his band The Blue Grass Boys is named for Kentucky, "the bluegrass state."

Tennessee: Sierra's home; find Byrdstown (where she's from) and Nashville (where she lives).

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

1. Sierra calls the bowl-back mandolin a "tater bug" mandolin. (Tater is short for "potato.") It's called that because it looks like a [potato bug, or beetle](#). Give descriptive names like this to instruments we've featured on Carry On: [nyckelharpa](#), [hammered dulcimer](#) and [accordion](#). Have some fun with your names!

2. Sierra has appeared on stage at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry many times since she was 10. Have you ever heard the words "ole" or "opry"? In Tennessee, they are everyday words that substitute for the actual words. What do you think the actual words are?
3. On our episode Sierra plays the tune "[Billy in the Lowground](#)." Then [she explains the form](#), or the structure, of the tune. Traditional tunes follow certain structures that you can "map" using different letters for the different sections. Try your hand at mapping! Map the structure of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" or "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." Remember that different sections sound markedly different; it helps to pay attention to the sections that sound exactly, or close to exactly, the same.
4. Listen to Sierra play "Billy in the Lowground" [on the mandolin](#). Now listen to her playing it [on the guitar](#). Describe the difference in the sound between the two instruments—use adjectives! Now explain your personal preference for the mandolin or the guitar. If you don't have a preference, explain why—what do you like about both?
5. Sierra [explains that she likes to improvise](#) when she repeats a melody or a section of music (see Vocabulary, above, for a definition of "improvise"). If you know the song "Baby Beluga," sing it and change up the melody the second time you sing it. This song has kind of a jazzy swing, which might help!
6. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of Sierra, 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!
7. [Watch this video](#) on differences between the A style mandolin and the F style (popularized by Bill Monroe). Describe the differences in the sound. Which style mandolin would YOU prefer to play?
8. Listen to Bill Monroe [play with his brother](#) Charlie in 1936 (before he invented bluegrass). Now compare that sound to Bill Monroe [playing with his band](#) The Blue Grass Boys in 1965. What stylistic differences do you hear? There are no right or wrong answers; reading the discussion at the beginning of this Guide might help you hear differences.
9. Bluegrass has evolved since Bill Monroe's day. The Punch Brothers is a "newgrass" band, which is newer, progressive bluegrass that incorporates elements of other genres. Here are the Punch Brothers in an [NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert](#). Now listen to a little of Bill Monroe's [traditional bluegrass band](#). Describe similarities and differences between newgrass and traditional bluegrass (which itself was once new!).
10. Sierra ventured into new musical territory with her 2016 album *Weighted Mind*. Listen to the album's song "[Choices and Changes](#)" that she co-wrote with Jon Weisberger (for better sound, [listen on Spotify](#)). Now listen to her song "[Bombshell](#)" from an album she did five years earlier (for better sound, [listen on Spotify](#)). What can you say about her growth as an artist over those five years? Read about bluegrass in the description above—what do you notice about her adherence to the bluegrass genre in the earlier vs. the later song?
11. Listen to Sierra perform the song "[25 Trips](#)" from her album of the same name. (Here is a [solo version of the song](#), just in case you prefer that one!) What musical influences besides bluegrass do you hear in this song? Your ears and your opinion, please!

Additional Resources

Sierra Hull

[Sierra's website](#), [Facebook Music page](#) and [Instagram page](#).

Sierra's [YouTube channel](#), including her GRAMMY-nominated song "[Ceiling to the Floor](#)."

Sierra's [music and albums on Spotify](#).

Learning to Play the Mandolin

[Mandolin Café](#) – Tons of resources for players of all skill levels, including tablature, discussion forums, blog posts, videos, and news of workshops, lessons and festivals.

[TablEdit](#) – "A program for creating, editing, printing and listening to tablature and sheet music... for guitar and other fretted, stringed instruments" including the mandolin.

Free and subscription resources: [Lessons with Sierra](#) on ArtistWorks, [Jazzmando.com](#), [Mandozine](#), [Peghead Nation](#) and [Mandolessons](#).

Music and Musicians

[Sierra performing at the White House](#) with her mentor, Alison Krauss, a bluegrass star who blends country, pop and folk elements into her music.

Three of Sierra's mandolin heroes: [Adam Steffey](#), [Sam Bush](#) and [Chris Thile](#).

[The Ger Mandolin Orchestra](#) – Hear and see the entire mandolin family, including the bass mandolin. The Ger Mandolin Orchestra [is a recreation](#) of a pre-WWII Jewish mandolin orchestra in eastern Europe.

The Modern Mandolin Quartet – These four musicians specialize in playing classical string quartet pieces arranged for mandolins and other well-known classical works, including pieces by composers [Phillip Glass](#) and [Maurice Ravel](#).

The mandolin in movies and popular culture – Perhaps the most famous movie example is [The Godfather](#). (The conductor of this mandolin orchestra has a little fun at the start of the video imitating Marlon Brando, the star of the movie.) The most famous tune from the movie [is played on a bowl-back mandolin](#).

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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