

**The Vermont Fiddle Orchestra is a community orchestra open to all levels and ages of players. No audition is required. The orchestra performances span several generations, from beginning level players to professional soloists playing simultaneously while providing entertainment, education, and preserving the traditional fiddling of Vermont and beyond. The orchestra was founded in 2003 by Sarah Hotchkiss.**



The story goes that in May of 2003 I awoke in the middle of the night and paced the floor for a full hour because I had an idea that I realized I was going to have to bring to fruition, even though it was going to be a lot of work! Six weeks later, the VFO held its first rehearsal with about twenty new members at a church in downtown Montpelier, Vermont. I started the VFO because I wanted to find a way for adults in particular, but anyone from the community, to come together to learn how to perform in a multi-level group in a way that would be simultaneously fun and enriching for all participants. I wanted folks to get the opportunity to learn the basic skills of playing with others that one might learn in a middle school band or orchestra--an opportunity many people missed in their childhood. I also wanted to help preserve the tradition of fiddling and create an opportunity to feature Vermont Master Fiddlers (fiddlers who have been performing and sharing their own fiddling traditions for at least a couple of decades or more). By having a master fiddler on stage with us, and children to open our concerts, our events would be multi-generational as well as span the experience level from beginner to professional. Everyone involved would learn a great deal from the soloist and their particular genre, which would be the focus of our final concerts. The goal was to create a program that would entertain audiences and provide enjoyment for all present, while giving our participants a chance to experience every aspect of performance. I felt that the fiddle repertoire, along with the tradition of mentoring that is prevalent in the folk tradition would be the ideal music to fulfill this goal. It took several years of training the orchestra to have a strong enough and large enough group to actually fully attain this goal, but I believe we got there the year we had Andy Stewart and Mary Jo Slattery on stage performing Cajun music with us. The music was really challenging, but the orchestra sounded good, even though at least half of the group on stage were still beginners! The audience was dancing in the aisles and we got a standing ovation! On that evening of December, 2009, I knew that my dream came true thanks to the hard work of everyone who shared that vision with me along the way.

Now, as our first decade comes to a close, we have established an organizational structure that works quite well. Our format is to have three yearly sessions in spring, summer, and fall with a soloist during our December and April end of session concert. Each final concert opens with youth fiddlers who have learned tunes from our soloist as well as from area fiddle teachers. The VFO follows their performance with a few numbers that they have learned in the traditional manner, by ear, and then the soloist joins us for a set of tunes that are chosen from his/her repertoire by the musical director (myself), and assistant director (John Mowad) who is in charge of the rhythm section and for writing arrangements for the soloist to perform with us. These arrangements have several parts: the melody (Fiddle I), a harmony (Fiddle II), and a back up section which combines cello, Fiddle III/IV parts, guitar, mandolin, and bass so that we can maintain multiple levels of playing with a strong, traditional sounding back up section. We also have flute and concertina/accordion players to enhance our sound and arrangement options. In the second half of the concert, the soloist performs a solo set to the delight of the audience and we culminate the concert with a few sets of tunes that the VFO has learned by ear from the soloist. This is also a time that youth fiddlers can rejoin us on stage to perform during our finale numbers. We also perform at a nursing home a week prior to the concert to test out our repertoire before we go onto the big stage. Additionally, in order to keep older repertoire alive as well as visit other parts of the state, we hold a benefit concert each session in a town in Vermont which we call our "Town Hall Tour." We occasionally perform for hire and at festivals and contradances when the opportunity arises. This all gets accomplished thanks to the efforts of our orchestra manager (Joanne Puente) and officers of the VFO who offer considerable help with the organizational structure and fundraising efforts.

One of our most favorite things that we like to say at every concert is that it is common for someone to come to one of our concerts and (having never had any prior musical experience) be inspired to pick up a fiddle or other instrument and be on stage with us, possibly within a year! We hope that anyone who reads this will feel equally inspired by what we are doing and consider joining the VFO. --Sarah Hotchkiss, 2/2/2013

