

APPlause!

K-12 Performing Arts Series



Enriching lives, sparking imaginations, and inspiring a love of learning through the arts!

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Josh Goforth**

March 18, 2025

**The Schaefer Center for the
Performing Arts**

Appalachian
STATE UNIVERSITY

**The Music of Appalachia:
Its Past History and Present Influences
An Introduction for Educators**

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The Settling of the Region

The Appalachian mountains are said to be the oldest in the world, 500 million years in age. The Southern Appalachian region measures 112,000 square miles and includes the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Virginia, West Virginia and Alabama. Many consider counties of Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York and Maryland to be part of the region. The mountains are a sparsely settled region and for the first 150 years of their occupation they remained largely isolated from the rest of the nation and its development.

The first settlers came to the region between 1720 and 1770, primarily Germans and the Ulster-Scotch or Scotch-Irish from Northern Ireland. They were, for the most part, working-class people seeking refuge in the new world for a variety of religious, political and economic reasons.

The first large movement of these folks was to the mountain country of Pennsylvania. The migration continued southward as the settlers searched for more space and for land that was fertile and suitable for farming. By the time of the American Revolution, the Valley of Virginia was well populated. Small settlements were to be found in southwest Virginia as well as northeastern Tennessee, and Daniel Boone had left his mark on the territory of Kentucky.

The discovery of gold in 1828 in North Georgia brought those seeking a quick fortune to the mountains of Cherokee County. As a result, one of the most advanced cultures of Native Americans, the Cherokee Indians, were brutally displaced from their homeland by the white man. From 1830 to 1850, the westward migration continued as those caught in the financial depression of the agricultural lowlands moved to the northwest and the southwest. The mountain people, although garnering few possessions, were rich in the abundance of fertile land - land they owned. Ownership of land promised independence, and no one could take that away.

Through the following years, the mountain region continued to subsist on an agrarian economy feeling little impact from the developing nation. The onset of the Civil War sent many a mountaineer into the ranks of the Union Army, a surprising occurrence within the southern states. In fact, Eastern Tennessee provided the Union Army with more soldiers per capita than any other state in the North or South. The mountaineer did not own slaves and sympathized with the issues of freedom and independence which they themselves had been striving to preserve. Most of the mountain soldiers, seeing the outside world for the first time, returned home preferring to avoid the competition and the fast pace of the quickly industrializing nation.

Periods of Rediscovery

During the next century, Appalachia endured many periods of rediscovery. A rise in the popularity of regional novels after the Civil War brought forth countless volumes of romantic style, depicting the mountaineer in his quaint cabin on the hillside living his backwards ways and speaking with a queer dialect. These literary accounts defined Appalachia as a sub-culture within a nation.

The rise of the settlement and mission schools, brought the second rediscovery in the late 1800's. These schools, often founded by well-meaning church women of the north, had a profound influence on the education of the mountaineer. They often encouraged the old-time crafts and music indigenous to the region while teaching the people modern ways and providing them with "book learning."

Coal mining was largely responsible for the third major rediscovery in the 1930's. Wealthy coal barons took advantage of the cheap labor in the mountains and abuse of this resource was common. The mountaineer fell into a pattern of dependence as an unfamiliar cash based economy was introduced. Union organizers took up their cause hoping to improve the working conditions and economic plight of the miners. Many movements, like the attempted organization of the workers by the union, were short lived and had little lasting effect. Thus, the motives of subsequent agencies sponsored by the federal government and other well-meaning liberal organizations continued to be met with suspicion.

The region has remained a curious place, often studied and redefined. Mountain people tend to watch these groups come and go while striving to maintain their independence and their simpler way of life. The isolation of many of these communities has been paramount in the preservation of this earlier way of life in America. Appalachian born and bred traditional singer, Jean Ritchie, states in her book *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*:

"To stand in the bottom of any of the valleys is to have the feeling of being down in the center of a great round cup. To stand on top of one of the narrow ridges is like balancing on one of the innermost petals of a gigantic rose, from which you can see all around you the other petals falling away in wide rings to the horizon. Travelers from the level lands, usually the Blue Grass section of Kentucky to the west of us, always complained that they felt hemmed in by our hills, cut off from the wide skies and the rest of the world. For us it was hard to believe there was any 'rest of the world,' and if there should be such a thing, why, we trusted the mountains to protect us from it."

The Ballads

The earliest music found in the mountains came from the old countries, primarily those of the British Isles. The ballads, characterized as an unaccompanied style of singing, frequently recalled stories of the homeland. These descriptive and often violent texts, enhanced by their haunting melodic quality, became a piece of talking history for those who passed them from one generation to the next. Many recalled legendary Kings and Queens, tales of far away places and missives of long lost love. Some were adapted to fit the new world, changing and adapting to the new country which had its own sets of trials and tribulations. The singing of a ballad offered an outlet for unspeakable feelings and their haunting lonesome sound would echo in the valley.

In 1916 English collector, Cecil Sharp, traveled throughout the southern mountains searching for the English ballads. His hope was that the isolation of the mountains would have preserved the ballads in a purer form, much as they would have been sung in England hundreds of years before. He was not disappointed. Due to the encouragement of Olive Dame Campbell, (who helped to found the John C. Campbell Folk School, in Brasstown, NC), much of Sharp's most important collecting was done in the mountains of Western North Carolina, in communities such as Hot Springs and Marshall, communities that still foster ballad singing as an important family tradition.

Early Instruments in the Region

Fiddles and dulcimers were the first melodic instruments found in the region. The dulcimer, of Germanic origin, has its roots in the earliest forms of stringed instruments, and remains, in its modern form, a very simple melodic instrument. The lap dulcimer, as it is known for its placement when playing, is often tear drop or hour glass shaped. Generally, there are three strings which are tuned modally employing the scales of medieval times. The first string plays the melody line while the additional strings serve as drones. Melodically simple and easy to play, the dulcimer was suited to the solo singing of ballads and of children's songs which are often based on the pentatonic scale (a five-note scale). The dulcimer was simple to make and required little musical expertise to play.

The fiddle (violin) was found throughout Europe for several hundred years before making its way to America. Primarily used for dance music, the fiddle was the key component of many a corn-shucking, molasses stir-off or family gathering where there was sure to be dancing or running sets. Many of the early dance figures were danced to singing calls and the fiddle was added as one became available in a community. Fiddles were easily made and there were generally several in a community. Early fiddle tunes had their origins in the old country and are still a part of today's basic repertoire.

The Banjo

The banjo found its way into the mountains after the Civil War. In its earliest form, the banjo was brought to this country by the African slaves. It was a gourd-like instrument often with only two or three strings. The structural development of the banjo included adding a wooden rim, skin heads made from the hides of groundhogs and other animals, and the addition of a wooden neck with, eventually, five strings. The banjo was a popular instrument in the minstrel and medicine shows and may have been introduced into the region through these comical displays. Banjos were often homemade, sometimes from cigar boxes or cake tins. Early string bands often consisted of only a banjo and a fiddle and provided entertainment for many a community function. Nonsense or comical songs were often sung with the banjo adding to its appeal. And the ever popular ballad found new life through the implementation of the haunting modal keys so well suited to the banjo.

The Guitar

The industrial revolution gave America an abundance of mass-produced items, including the guitar. Although the instrument became more plentiful, guitars remained rare in mountain communities as they had to be purchased, and cash was a rare commodity. As the soldiers returned home from the Civil War, guitars became more common in the mountains. The guitar helped to round out the string band sound which was so popular in early country music. The guitar also contributed to the change in vocal music in the mountains. The chordal structure of the guitar made the old ballads more square thus eliminating their modal character.

The Autoharp

The Autoharp was an instrument generally sold door-to-door but was also found in the Sears-Roebuck mail-order catalog. It was easy to play and accessible to both children and adults. The Autoharp required no musical training and in fact was a tool for the teaching of music theory. The Carter Family of Virginia brought the Autoharp to national attention on their radio programs of the 1930's and 40's. Mother Maybelle Carter's style was characterized by her using finger picks to pick out the melody on the Autoharp. Maybelle also brought lead guitar playing into popular favor. Her style was greatly influenced by African-American blues players that the Carter's met on their travels. Maybelle's instrumental prowess, the great quality of material the family introduced and their harmony singing made the Carter Family the most influential family in country music history. To this day their songs are among the most recorded, played and performed. Every aspiring guitarist is sure to learn Maybelle's unique guitar version of "Wildwood Flower".

Early Country Music

Country music, or folk music (literally music of the folk), became a commercial oddity in the 1920's when Ralph Peer of Okeh Records discovered that if you recorded this music country people would buy it. In 1927, Peer advertised in Bristol, Virginia for country musicians to audition for a recording session to be held there. (Peer had previously recorded Georgia fiddler "Fiddlin'" John Carson with overwhelming commercial and public appeal.) It was here that country music history was made. The Carter Family, probably the most prolific recording artists ever, came from their small southwestern Virginia community of Maces Springs, with their brand of country music. The group consisted of A.P. Carter, his wife Sara, and his sister-in-law Maybelle. Their popularity continued throughout their recording career which lasted until 1941 and a radio career which continued until 1943. A.P. collected hundreds of mountain songs, some religious in nature and some of the parlor variety, which became the basis of their repertoire. Sara's singing and Mother Maybelle's adept hand on both the autoharp and lead guitar brought continued success to the family.

Contemporary Cultural Influences

Traditional music is still an important and living aspect of the southern culture. Folk festivals, fiddling contests and dance competitions abound in the south. The music is less and less the primary source of family entertainment as television and radio have left their mark on the culture. Even though families are still passing along the traditions of ballad singing, fiddling and banjo playing to their young, today, traditional music is more often presented by and subjected to the interpretation of the revivalist musician or folklorist. The music of a culture is the voice of the people and will continue to reflect the moods and attitudes of that society, but only if its preservation is encouraged from within and nurtured from outside its cultural boundary. These traditions of music as a reflection of a culture are truly a valuable renewable resource.

Further Suggested Readings

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Additional Resources

Each of these companies produces a variety of high quality books and recordings
featuring traditional music and storytelling. Call or write for their catalogs.

August House Publishers, PO Box 3223, Little Rock, AR 72203

High Windy Audio, PO Box 553, Fairview, NC 28730

Native Ground Music, 109 Bell Road, Asheville, NC 28805 1-800-75 BANJO

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Arts education and outreach programming at Appalachian is committed to connecting university arts resources to a diverse audience of community arts patrons, teachers and learners in the campus community, and in the public, private and home school network across our region. In doing so, the series strives to broaden and deepen arts experiences for audiences of all ages, while ensuring access to the arts for young audiences, building future audiences for the arts, and inspiring a love of learning through the arts.

Every season, affordable music, dance, film, and theatre events are offered to students and their teachers from K-12 classrooms across the region. Students experience everything from high-energy acrobatics and Appalachian music to international dance and literary classics brought to life through theatrical productions. In recent seasons, thousands of students across our region have attended APPlause! Series events.

This academic year, the APPlause! Series offers compelling programming to connect to K-12 classrooms, thanks in large part to generous donors who believe in supplying educators with arts programming that will spark creativity and inspire a love of learning.

Thank You to Our Sponsors!

The APPlause! 2024-25 season has been generously supported by individual support from

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Sustaining support for the series is provided by the

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