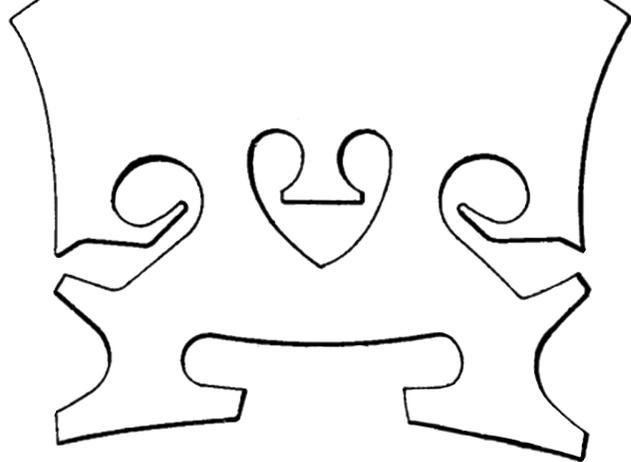


# The Bridge

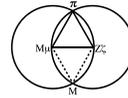
Connecting Violin and Fiddle Worlds



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# Dedication

*To the late George E. Custer (1926-2014),  
violinist, fiddler, and teacher of both*

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*Heritage only lives by passing on tradition. If young people are not exposed to the heritage of their culture and country, that heritage may be in danger of dying out.*

Annemieke Pronker-Coron

## Foreword

**I**t takes a lot of courage and desire to follow your heart and chase your dreams. Born in Holland and studying to become a classical violinist, Annemieke Pronker had the courage and desire to follow her interest in learning alternate styles of violin playing.

From her classical background and all her years of playing classically, she still wanted to learn about bluegrass and country and cajun fiddling. She did the right thing and went to where there were good fiddlers. I am certain that others told her she couldn't play multiple styles and do them all well. When I was a young contest fiddler, older fiddlers told me that playing bluegrass would ruin my fiddling. Annemieke didn't listen to those voices, but followed her heart and chased her dream. That takes courage and desire.

I was born in the middle of the U.S. and grew up playing the style of fiddle music my Dad had learned from the local musicians. Every section of the country has a unique fiddle style, sort of their own language you might say. But I believe

the most amazing thing about the world of music is that folks from anywhere can learn from each other regardless of the local culture.

I was pleased to learn that Annemieke discovered my fiddling in her home country of Holland. My band, Country Gazette, toured there often and even had a hit record in 1973. When I first met her in Florida, I could tell she had a passion to learn more about “fiddling.” I also thought it was cool that she was from Holland.

I am proud of Annemieke for bridging her way into both worlds of fiddling. I believe this book is a must for any player who would like to explore other musical styles, and become more of a well-rounded musician.

Byron Berline

Three-Time National Fiddle Champion

Founder of the Oklahoma International Bluegrass Festival

Member of Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys (1966-1967)

More information at [www.doublestop.com](http://www.doublestop.com)

## Preface

**I**n musical instrument language a bridge usually refers to the part of the violin that supports the strings and transfers its vibrations to the instrument's body. It conducts the sound as well as the music produced by the player. In a wider sense, however, a bridge is a passage that connects two worlds—in this case the world of the violin and the world of the fiddle.

As a freshly minted classically trained violin teacher in Holland at the beginning of my career, I was naturally trying to become a better teacher and musician. My students were interested in learning to play classical as well as popular music. It troubled me that I was unable to help them learn non-classical music. Due to a personal connection in Gainesville, Florida I decided—while still in the Netherlands—to go to Florida and explore the music culture of fiddling. Thinking that it would enhance my teaching to learn more about fiddling—I had heard it was actively present in the music culture in the southeastern United States—I found incredible connections and explored this new world of fiddling.

Three components formed the foundation for the musical persona that evolved on my journey to the United States and into the fiddle world. I grew up with a mix of classical and popular music, then immersed myself in the baroque and classical violin world at the conservatory, and finally became aware of the importance of improvisation during my music-therapy training. My musical journey to the United States allowed me to realize a great need for sharing my views and experience in the form of this book that intends to shed light on a gap between the classical violin and popular fiddle cultures formed centuries ago, and form a bridge uniting these two worlds. In these pages I share my views on the importance to bridge that gap by learning about the roots of both cultures as well as the commonalities and differences between them.

## The Gap AndThe Bridge

Typically fiddlers refer to classical violinists as musicians using a completely different technique than their own, e.g. the use of long-drawn bows and vibrato are main pillars of the classical approach. At the very beginning of my journey I was shown some of the main characteristics of old-time fiddling i.e., shorter bow strokes, relaxed bow arm, circular bow movement, and occasional swing strokes. I was excited to discover that these fiddle techniques in the United States were directly linked to baroque violin technique with which I was so familiar from my studies in the Netherlands.

This realization encouraged me to take a closer look at the history of violin and fiddle music in order to find perhaps

a common ground. In Europe, during the Renaissance era (1450-1600), a gap started to develop between the fiddle music in taverns and the music played at the courts. At first the gap was not very apparent because dance music was featured in both venues. However, gradually the music world began to divide into two streams, namely popular and classical music. During the Baroque era (1600-1750) more formal compositions, such as the suite (a collection of dances), became common at the courts. An aural tradition continued among folk musicians. The gap widened. Both fiddle and violin worlds developed virtuoso techniques. New styles evolved in the popular realm, like jazz and bluegrass. Violin solos composed by Nicolo Paganini and “Fritz” (Friedrich) Kreisler were filled with virtuoso grandstands, and romantic violin concertos displayed, arguably, the most technically complex cadenzas. The gap between violinists and fiddlers continued to widen.

Today professional training academies no longer focus only on classical music. Violinists and fiddlers explore different styles. Take Mark O’Connor, for example, who is a great American fiddler building bridges between bluegrass, jazz, classical, and other music as he creates fiddle concertos and other cross-style-based compositions. In 2009 he launched his violin method that covers American music and bridges the gap. This movement is encouraging. It appears that now is a wonderful time to learn more about the roots and developments of violin and fiddle performance.

## Sharing A Musical Journey

I would like to invite you to travel together on a journey. This book will help the reader better understand why it is important to explore beyond the known extent of one's violin or fiddle style of playing and teaching. It shares stories to which you may relate, and consists of experiences on a journey leading to realizations that hopefully brings musicians, whether beginner or advanced, closer to their desire to bridge the gap.

One day I had the great honor to host master fiddler Byron Berline. He and several others were sharing their recordings in an intimate setting. I was excited to be part of a lively conversation and asked the group to listen to a recorded piece that I had performed with my Greek band. Byron commented, "Did you use sheet music?" He was right. My excitement was suddenly dampened by a new insight. The track with my solo, well enough liked by my colleagues, was missing certain qualities of freedom and imagination that would have been present by way of improvisation. Experienced musicians like Berline were able to recognize the lack of improvisation and hear the connection to the actual sheet music in the recording. Berline and fiddlers like him are masters of improvisation. A tune like this one would definitely be enhanced by some freedom—along with an audible increase in speed—to bring out the exciting qualities of the music.

My approach is that of a violinist from Europe seeking to bridge this gap, starting in the violin world and reaching out to the fiddle world. I believe that violinists and fiddlers alike

have a strong sense of knowing just what the other world is about. Assumptions and sometimes very strong statements are made regarding the musicians ‘on the other side’. For me this is accompanied with a certain sense of discomfort since my personal journey gave me a great opportunity to witness the incredible beauty of music in both worlds. Yet it became clear how the gap, formed centuries ago, has not disappeared.

It is the lack of knowledge of the other world that widens this gap. It is natural to hold on to what we know best, our own way of playing the instrument. We expand the gap when we feel the other way of playing represents a threat to our own. Yet we need not see that other way of playing as a style that will supplant ours. It is the exploration of that other territory, and learning more about it, that will give us the opportunity to enrich and deepen our musicianship.

I have come to believe that we can learn to play both fiddle and violin in their distinctly different styles. We can teach a comprehensive approach right from the start. We don’t even need different instruments. Instead, we need an appreciation for and an understanding of the depth of the styles we want to play. I hope you enjoy my explorations and find this book food for thought—and maybe for action—to join me in bridging the gap between the violin and fiddle culture.

This book is for violin educators, violin and fiddle students who would like to teach and perform, and fiddlers who are curious to learn more about the connection of the fiddle heritage with the European baroque and classical world. It bridges a gap that I have witnessed between the world of violinists and fiddlers, a gap that was formed centuries ago. Fear

of possibly being influenced in technique and artistry seems to lie behind the utterances of each group about the other group. Each group appears to hold up high their conviction that the other group has no clue how to play in their style. With this book I hope to encourage both worlds to consider exploring the other in order to enrich their own musicianship. I hope to find common ground and understanding by exploring common roots.