



Introduction to playing folk music

***Working with intermediate and
advanced players new to folk music.***

Written by Rob Harbron





The Full English Extra

The Full English Extra was an initiative to preserve and promote the folk arts, building on the success of EFDSS' flagship project The Full English, which created the world's largest digital archive of folk songs, dances, tunes and customs, and a nationwide learning programme that reached more than 16,000 people. The project was led by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Full English Extra saw the collections of Mary Neal, suffragette, radical arts practitioner and founder of the Esperance Girls Club, and folk dance educator Daisy Caroline Daking added to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library online archive (www.vwml.org), alongside its collection of 19th century broadside ballads and songsters.

The Full English learning programme worked with three national museums – the Museum of English Rural Life at the University of Reading, the National Coal Mining Museum for England near Wakefield in West Yorkshire and the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London – combining folk arts and museum education to provide powerful new learning experiences for schools and music hubs.

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Additional Resources

Audio recordings of all the tunes and exercises in this pack are available for free download from www.efdss.org/resourcebank.

Introduction

In January 2016, Miranda Rutter and I spent four sessions working with the Reading String Orchestra – the senior string ensemble of Berkshire Maestros, the Berkshire Music Hub. In addition to our experience of playing and teaching folk music, we were also able to draw on our previous experience of working with classical players, as well as personal experiences of classical music training and ensemble playing from our own teenage years.

Hopefully this resource pack will be helpful to folk musicians who have the opportunity to work with intermediate and advanced players with no previous experience of folk music.

First impressions - perceptions and preparation



Miranda Rutter at Berkshire Maestros

the skills to do so. This may not always have been so, but things have really changed and most classical music educators now realise the need to help their students develop as broad a range of skills as possible. Working by ear is a crucial

It is easy for folk musicians to feel nervous when working in 'formal' musical settings. There can be an expectation that we will be looked down on, that folk music might be seen as simple or inferior, or that we won't be able to communicate our ideas without having to resort to written notation. However, I have done a lot of work in non-folk settings and with non-folk musicians – BBC Radio 3, the Royal Shakespeare Company, work with orchestras and ensembles, workshops, etc. – and I have hardly ever encountered the sort of musical snobbery we might fear.

People may not know much about folk music but my experience is that most classical musicians and music educators today would love to feel free to work by ear but have never had the chance to develop

skill yet many classical music teachers feel ill-equipped to work that way, so the skills folk musicians and educators have are valuable in non-folk contexts.

Because folk music is often learned by ear and played instinctively, it is also easy for folk musicians to underestimate the depth of technique they themselves possess. The techniques used in playing morris tunes may be different from those needed to play Mendelssohn, but they can be just as deeply held. In my experience, it is not enough just to teach repertoire to non-folk players; it is important to be able to teach the essential technique for making the tune work. For a classical student, the folk technique for playing even a simple tune – the way we use swing, pulse, bowing, ornamentation, variation, structure and communication – will be very different to what they are used to. It is important to have some strategies for teaching these things alongside your chosen repertoire.

Before our sessions with the Reading String Orchestra, I had a conversation with the orchestra's regular conductor, Jonathan Burnett, who is also Head of Strings for Berkshire Maestros. He was extremely supportive and positive about the project from day one, and outlined various aspects of musicianship he hoped our project would help develop: he wanted us to stretch and challenge the players, to develop their listening and creative skills. This gave me the chance to mention areas of technique we intended to work on – bowing, phrasing, ensemble playing – which in turn probably reassured him that his students would be in safe hands for a few weeks.

Some things you might like to consider in planning your own project:

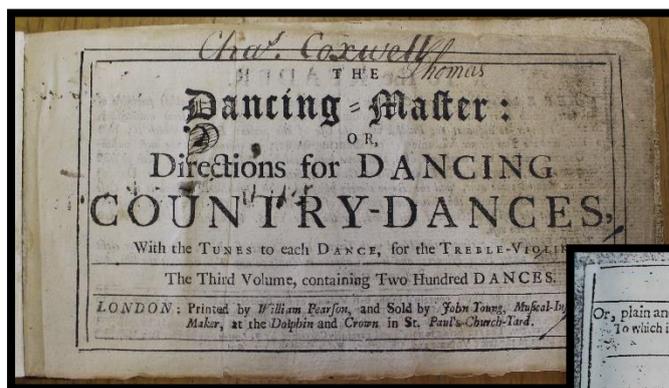
- **Learn as much as you can about the group before your first visit** – instrumentation, ability levels, time in that ensemble, and experience of any previous non-classical projects.
- **Ability levels** are likely to be expressed in terms of ABRSM grades (the exam board of the Royal Schools of Music, www.abrsm.org). The simplest sort of tune a folk musician might play (e.g. *Donkey Riding*, *Jamie Allen*) might be considered about Grade II level, but the sort of phrasing and interpretation that folk musicians might expect would only come with higher level players. Most 'interesting' tunes could be considered Grade V or above.
- Find out if any of the group has **any previous experience of or interest in folk music**. At Berkshire Maestros, we were told about one player who turned out to be a key member of the group.

-
- In terms of folk tunes, **not all instruments are equal**. Violin players will find tunes much easier to play than viola or cello players of the same grade; flute players will generally find it easier to learn folk tunes than players of other woodwind instruments.
 - Make sure you **learn about the musical conventions of the instruments** you'll be working with. If you end up needing to use written notation, be aware that viola players will be used to working in alto clef, clarinet and brass players will usually be transposing (so a tune the key of D to you will be in E major to a clarinettist), cello and bassoon players won't usually be able to read in treble clef, and so on.
 - Make sure you **know your repertoire** inside out. The better you play it, the easier they'll find it to learn by ear.
 - **Be prepared** with ideas of what all the instruments can do, and take into account their potential limitations. For example, classical guitar players may not necessarily be familiar with the sort of chord shapes or strumming patterns that folk players normally use, and double bass players may not be used to 'jamming out' a bass line.
 - Make sure you **know the range of different instruments**. For example, the viola has three strings in common with the violin (G, D and A) but because it doesn't have the top E, many fiddle tunes will be very hard on the viola. But the viola and the cello share the same strings (C, G, D & A) an octave apart, so cello players may find it easier to learn from a viola player than a fiddle player.
 - **Be adaptable**. A tune which most folk musicians consider tricky might be no problem for a good violin student, but improvising a 'simple' harmony or rhythm part might appear impossible!

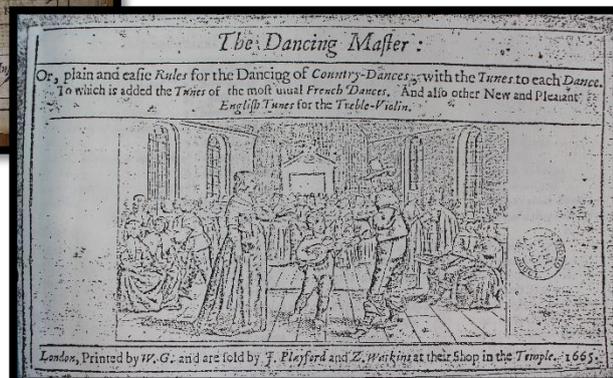
Choosing Repertoire and Developing Technique

In our experience, when classical string players first experience folk music, they often tend to do the same things: lots of vibrato, very long bows, playing very legato and filling all the gaps up! So we set about choosing repertoire that would help us deliver some folk-specific technique early on in the project. We'd decided that a set of three tunes would be a good starting point, and in the end we spent most of our time working just on that set and the associated technique, arrangements and ensemble playing.

We had hoped to use material that was local to the particular region we were working in. However, I could find very little suitable music that had been collected in Berkshire. In the end, I had to widen the search to include neighbouring counties and also a published source. I wanted the first tune to be a common time tune (4/4 or 2/4) that would let us get some basic bow pulse and swing going, and also let us begin to explore the polyrhythmic foundation of many traditional English tunes, so the first tune we looked at was *Glory of the Sun*, published in the 3rd Edition of Playford's Dancing Master (therefore reasonable to assume it might have been played in Berkshire even though it wasn't known to have been!).



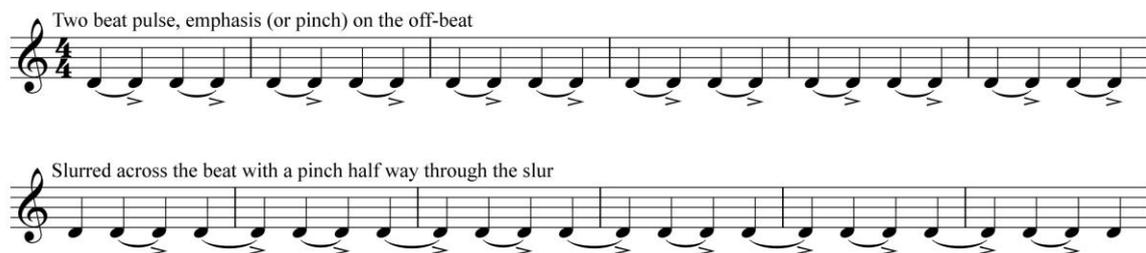
Photos from
Vaughan Williams Memorial Library



Crotchet Pulse

In my opinion, establishing this basic crotchet 'pulse' and its off-beat variations is a really essential element of playing and teaching English folk music well. There are many variations and ways of developing it for different abilities and instruments but this is a good starting point.

1. Crotchets



Additional Resources: a free downloadable audio file of this notation, *Crotchets*, is available at www.efdss.org.uk/resourcebank

Musical notation doesn't really convey the subtleties of these patterns very well. The first one is something like 'daa-YA daa-YA' and the second one something like 'da daa-YA daa-YA'. In fact, that sort of phonetic example can be very effective for communicating all manner of phrasing details which written notation might lack the subtlety for. With these exercises, it is important to talk about how players should use the bow: classical players will often tend to use more bow on the second note of each slurred pair, whereas what we were trying to get them to do was use less bow and a bit of extra pressure (from the first finger of the right hand). Emma Reid (who first learned the fiddle with Suzuki technique) calls this action a 'panda pinch' – I don't know if that's a regular term, but I quite like it.

Once they had got the idea, we played the tune over the top while I kept the beat going with my feet. We talked a bit about how much bow to use, and got them to try the exercise again using half as much bow. We tried it quiet, and loud, with crescendo and diminuendo. Then we got half of them to play one pattern, and half the other, and we played the tune over the top several more times.

Microrhythms

The next exercise uses quavers and is really useful for helping people play the numerous short notes that are found in many traditional tunes. In this case, we used the exercise to help classical players learn ways of articulating quavers that are appropriate to folk music. In fact, it is an area in which many folk players are not always in control of their technique so this can be a good thing to work on with any group.

We talked a bit about how much bow to use, and crucially which part of the bow, and got them to try the exercise again using half as much bow. We tried it quiet, and loud, with crescendo and diminuendo. Then we got half of them to play one pattern, and half the other, and we played the tune over the top several more times.

2. Quavers

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff is labeled 'Basic quavers...' and '... with an off-beat emphasis ...'. It contains two measures of eighth notes with accents. The second staff is labeled '... and with a polyrhythmic pulse' and contains two measures of eighth notes with accents, showing a different rhythmic grouping.

Additional Resources: a free downloadable audio file of this notation, *Quavers*, is available at www.efdss.org.uk/resourcebank

Of course there are plenty more ways to develop this exercise, and these variants can be developed. In particular, we really wanted to establish the 'polyrhythmic' version to go with *Glory of the Sun*. Again, we talked about bowing, suggesting that fiddle players should be around the balance point rather than up near the tip, and discussing how to make it work for the cellos with their different bow angle and hold. To free up the bow hand it can be helpful to think of reducing the pressure on the unaccented notes rather than increasing the pressure on the accents. Then we played the tune over the top, and talked afterwards about how different it felt for them to play the exercise with the tune happening as well.

Teaching by Ear

The next stage was to learn the tune. By now, they had all heard the tune a number of times, and played along with it, albeit only on one-note patterns. It is really important in the early stages of learning by ear to make sure the tune has been heard many times before teaching it.

- **Pick the right tune** – a tune that falls into regular phrases will be easier to learn and teach by ear than a tune with complex phrases, upbeats, etc. Sometimes an 'easy' tune with a tricky turnaround can be harder for new ear-learners to pick up than a more athletic tune which has a simple structure.
- **Be rhythmically consistent** – I usually establish a constant metronome with my feet, then everything works to that.
- **Define roles clearly** – my preferred way of teaching by ear is to establish a system where I play a phrase while they listen then they play it back while I listen. This all happens over that foot-metronome and I cue them in by nods or voice while playing.
- **Talk about structure** – it can be really helpful for players to know that certain phrases will be used again and again, or that some phrases are 'questions' and others 'answers'.
- **Repeat things many times** – even the players who pick up a phrase straight away will need several repetitions before they internalise the tune.
- **Watch the group** – watching where people's fingers and bows are going can give a more accurate idea of how people are doing than asking 'is everyone ok?'
- **Join phrases together** – teach the opening phrase and repeat it, then teach the closing phrases and repeat it, then teach the two phrases together.
- **Be reasonable** – try not to change the tune each time you play it (!) but don't be afraid to let some ambiguous moments in the tune change each time.
- **Don't hand out the music straight away** – if you have written music prepared, it may be a better idea to give it out at the end of the session so players can remember the tune at home. Don't hand it out too soon! If one or two players are clearly struggling then give them a copy, but generally wait.
- **Be prepared** – if/when you do use written music, you need the right formats for the different instruments you are working with: alto clef for violas, bass clef for cellos and basses, transposing into Bb for clarinets, trumpets & tenor saxophones, into Eb for alto saxes, etc.

Since this group were all string players, we decided that Miranda should take the lead on all of this process on the fiddle, as both the right and left hands of the fiddle give so many visual clues compared to the concertina. In the end, I played Miranda's viola to give the viola and cello players the same help, and it was amazing how quickly it seemed to help them despite my rusty playing!

Glory of the Sun - tune

from Playford's English Dancing Master 3rd Edition [1665]



Additional Resources: free downloadable audio files of *Glory of the Sun (tune)* and *Glory of the Sun (full arrangement)* are available at www.efdss.org.uk/resourcebank

After learning the tune, we played it all together and then tried splitting the group between the tune and quaver patterns. Then we introduced some other elements: a bass line which picked up on the 'polyrhythmic' version ('one two three one two three one two') emphasis from the crotchet pulse exercise (see p6), and a 'scrubby' rhythm line (see notation on next page) which picked up on the polyrhythmic quaver pattern. Combining those two parts gave a new energy to the rhythmic exercises, and putting the tune on top too gave the whole sound a big lift.

Glory of the Sun - full

from Playford's English Dancing Master 3rd Edition [1665]

Tune plus rhythmic scrub & bass line

[Trad./Arr. R.Harbron]

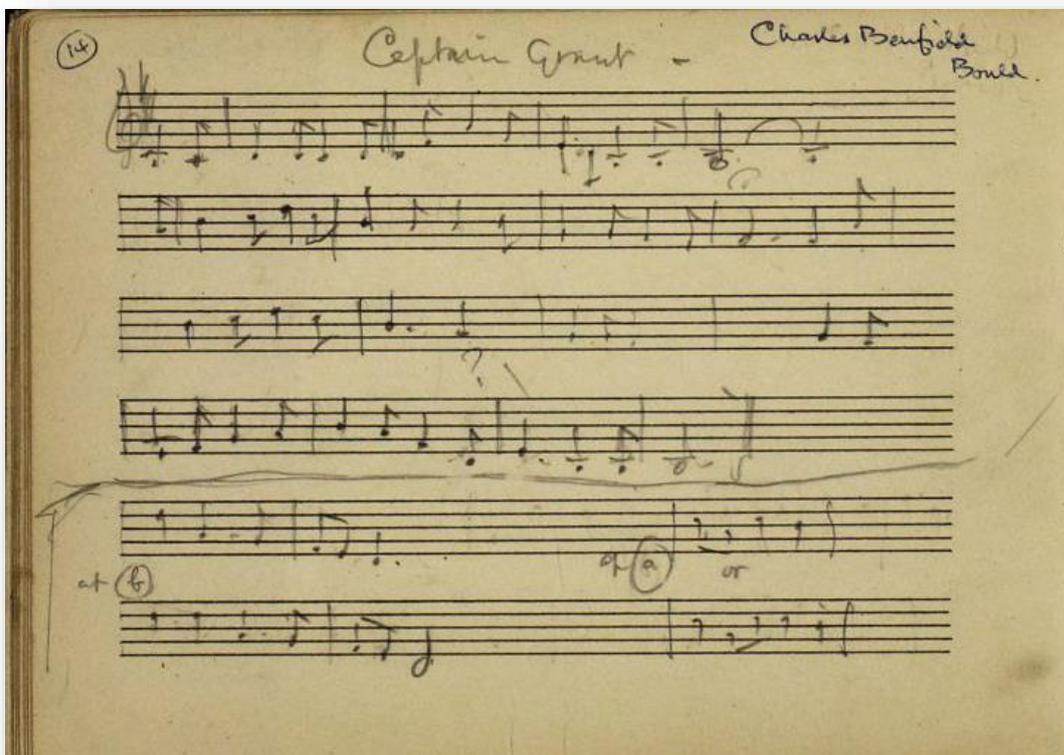
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10

14

Captain Grant

By contrast to the busy and rhythmic *Glory of the Sun*, we wanted something more pastoral and melodic, and something that might feel more familiar to the group. I went looking for a tune that would work well, and from the neighbouring county of Oxfordshire I found a song called *Captain Grant*. It had a particular resonance as it was collected from Charles Benfield, a fiddle player who was a key contact for several of the early collectors.



Visit the digital archive: www.vwml.org/record/CC/1/300

As I played it around I let it evolve slightly until I'd come up with a four-phrase, one-part minor tune which I thought would work well as a string ensemble piece. Although it is written in 6/8, I was playing it very smoothly and quite slowly so it didn't feel like a jig, more like a walking tune. Consequently, it allowed us to introduce the rhythm of 6/8 without needing too much folk-specific technique.

Captain Grant - tune

Collected from Charles Benfield by Clive Carey, 24 March 1913, from Bould (Oxfordshire/Berkshire)

[Adapted by Rob Harbron]



Additional Resources: a free downloadable audio file of this tune, *Captain Grant (tune)*, is available at www.efdss.org.uk/resourcebank

The group picked up the tune quickly and we encouraged them to use all their good tone production so it sounded great. We wanted to get some harmony involved too; ideally we would have helped the group develop their harmonic instincts so they could come up with their own lines, but that's a hard thing even for experienced ear-players to do and in the time that we had it just didn't seem possible. So we compromised and I did a very basic arrangement, adding a viola and cello part. We taught the parts by ear, although I had a few copies available for the players who needed them.



Captain Grant - full

Collected from Charles Benfield by Clive Carey, 24 March 1913, from Bould (Oxfordshire/Berkshire)

[Adapted and arranged by. R.Harbron]

Additional Resources: a free downloadable audio file of this arrangement of *Captain Grant (full)* is available at www.efdss.org.uk/resourcebank

This tune came together quite quickly so we were soon ready for the challenge of a 'real' jig. However, this time we prefaced the tune with some jig bowing exercises both to introduce the students to the technique they'd need and establish the 'groove' of the tune before we learned the notes.

Jig Bowing Exercises

This set of exercises is designed both to make it clear that in a jig the six quavers are not equal, and to start establishing good articulation to make that possible. These are just a starting point and you could develop and adapt them as appropriate, but the important thing is that it is only in the very first exercise that the emphasis is on the downbeat; at all other times we're trying to emphasise other notes in the bar.

3. Jigs

Additional Resources: a free downloadable audio file of this notation, *Jigs*, is available at www.efdss.org.uk/resourcebank

The musical notation of this exercise makes it all look very precise and emphatic, but please listen to the audio recording too as it is really the subtlety and small movements that make it work. For string players there's an optimum point in the bow for this (about a third of the way from heel to tip) and the actual movements of the bow should be very small – perhaps only a few centimetres. Our catchphrase was 'use less bow but make it do more'. These patterns can be adapted easily for other woodwind, bellows and plucked instruments.

We talked about how jigs are dance tunes, and that the most important thing when playing for dancing is not to help the dancers land (gravity does that!) but to help them get off the ground. Then we introduced the tune. This little jig is found all over England, commonly known as *Hunting the Hare* and used as the tune for a song. However, I found it under this title in a recently published manuscript of tunes from Hampshire fiddle player William Pyle, and it seemed ideal.

Delights of the Packet - tune



Additional Resources: a free downloadable audio file of this tune, *Delights of the Packet (tune)*, is available at www.efdss.org.uk/resourcebank

We taught this tune the same way, establishing a constant tempo and alternating between us playing and them playing it back. They picked this one up very quickly, and the only thing that caused a bit of confusion was the B part being twice as long as the A part but still being repeated. I was aware that might happen and we had tried playing the tune with only one B part but it didn't seem right!

We then introduced a really simple bass line and rhythm part. These were all taught by ear, in a 'quickfire' style and they picked up on them very well – time pressure working to our advantage for once. We encouraged them to choose their own parts and switch between tune and parts as they wished, as well as reminding them that a rhythmic C or G drone would work pretty much throughout if they 'fell off'.

Delights of the Packet - full

[Trad./Arr. Rob Harbron]



Additional Resources: a free downloadable audio file of this arrangement, *Delights of the Packet (full)*, is available at www.efdss.org.uk/resourcebank

Putting it all together

Reading String Ensemble, Berkshire Maestros



This project was about the process more than the outcome and there was no specific event to work towards. However, it still felt right to work towards a final performance for the musicians we were working with, so we invited parents and family and some EFDSS and Berkshire Maestros staff for a presentation at the end of the final session. This session was also being filmed so there was a definite incentive to present our work in as finished a form as we could. The three pieces I've described in this booklet were what we spent the majority of the time working on so they were a key important part of our final concert (the other piece, *The Threshing Machine*, is described in a separate resource available from the EFDSS Resource Bank www.efdss/resourcebank).

I thought about presenting them as three separate pieces but didn't want it to feel bitty so we decided to make a medley of the three pieces. Time pressure during the project meant that we'd had to be more prescriptive than I might have liked so we were keen to involve the group as much as possible in constructing the final arrangement. I had an idea of the right order to play the tunes in but I asked the group first and fortunately they suggested the same order I was imagining so we set about constructing a set in the same order that the tunes are presented here.

The final arrangement went something like this:

Glory of the Sun

Intro	8 bars	Bass part plus rhythm scrub
1 st time	AABB	Tune, bass part, rhythm scrub (only some fiddles)
2 nd time	AABB	Tune, bass part, rhythm scrub (all fiddles)
3 rd time	AABB	More! Some fiddles to harmony, volume up, ending coda A brief breath then straight into...

Captain Grant

1 st time		Tune – just fiddles
2 nd time		Tune plus viola / cello lines
3 rd time		Tune plus viola / cello lines
Break	8 bars	Four bars jig rhythm on a D note, then 4 bars jig rhythm on a D min7 chord, gradually accelerating and getting louder, straight into...

Delights of the Packet

1 st time	AABB	Tune plus cello part
2 nd time	AABB	Tune plus cello part and fiddle / viola scrub
3 rd time	AAB	Tune plus cello part and fiddle / viola scrub, louder
	2 nd B	All – sudden quiet then crescendo to staccato D; big ending with a staccato C chord.

Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading

The Museum of English Rural Life was established just after the Second World War to capture a record of the rapidly changing English countryside. Today its recently redeveloped displays aim to present the changes in agriculture and rural life that have transformed the English countryside in the last sixty years.



Through innovative new interpretation each gallery explores different aspects of life and skills of the rural past. It introduces visitors to important debates about the future of food and the environment and helps us understand the relevance of rural histories to all our lives. www.reading.ac.uk/merl
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As a music hub we offer a wide ranging and uniquely tailored musical experience. This includes an exciting Early Years Department, providing classes, professional training, active partnerships and provision within schools. We also offer opportunities at 5 local music centres across the county. In addition, we are committed to identifying and supporting exceptionally talented young musicians and offer incredible opportunities for these individuals as part of our Academy and County schemes. www.berkshiremaestros.org.uk

Biographies



Rob Harbron

Rob is a sought-after multi-instrumentalist, composer and producer and one of the country's leading players of the English concertina. He performs and records with numerous artists including Leveret, Fay Hield and the Hurricane Party, Emma Reid, Jon Boden and the Remnant Kings, Kerr Fagan Harbron and Fieldfare. He was Musical Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2013 production of *The Winter's Tale*, and he has recently been commissioned to write music for the British Silent Film Festival, the English Folk Dance and Song Society and the Royal Geographical Society. He is a popular teacher and workshop leader, directs the English Acoustic Collective Summer School and is a core tutor for the new National Youth Folk Ensemble. www.robertharbron.co.uk

Miranda Rutter

Miranda is a fiddle and viola player. She performs with Methera who focus on making folk music through the voice of the string quartet. She has also performed with the English Acoustic Collective and Morris Offspring in 'On English Ground' and with Chris Wood in his 'Listening to the River'. She was also a member of Jabadaw and Fika. She has taught on Newcastle University's Folk Music degree course, at Folkworks' Fiddles on Fire Festival and led a youth music project in Somerset.



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