

## ARTICLE



### **MUSIC SESSIONS** by Stewart Hendrickson

There are many types of sessions where musicians get together to make music. Some, like Irish sessions, are devoted to a particular genre of music, while others may be restricted to instrumental music or singing only. The best sessions, in my opinion, are those that occur spontaneously, are open to a variety of musical genres, and combine instrumental music and singing.

Many musical and interpersonal dynamics are involved in sessions. The main objective should be the enjoyment of music by all participants. While the enjoyment of good music should bring out the best in people, egos and expectations often get in the way. When this happens, it is no longer fun, and sessions tend to die. What considerations contribute to a good sessions, and what things should be avoided?

My own experience in musical sessions probably began with family camping trips where people would gather around a campfire, perhaps with a guitar or two, and sing songs. When I moved to Northfield, Minnesota in the late 1960s, at the height of the “folk craze” I met another folksinger and multi-instrumentalist. We would often get together with friends at our homes to sing and play music. By the late 1970s, when life became busier and more complicated, this type of musical session had pretty much died out. People seemed to have little time for these informal gatherings. However, by the time I left Minnesota in 1996, a small group had organized to meet on a regular basis and sing folk songs – a sort of “song circle.”

When I arrived in Seattle in 1996, I was pleasantly surprised to discover a wealth of folk music. I joined the [Seattle Song Circle](#), a group that meets every Sunday evening to sing, and later joined [Victory Music](#) and helped set up an open mic at Valdi's Ballard Bistro. While a long-time singer and guitar player, I also began to play fiddle, and became interested in seeking out sessions that combined my interests in both singing and instrumental music.

I then realized that there is a basic split between instrumentalists and singers. This should have come as no surprise, since I remember as a school orchestra player we considered singers somehow beneath us musically. The song circle will tolerate instruments, mostly guitars, if they are used to accompany singing, but not for purely instrumental music. And most instrumental sessions do not tolerate singing.

The reason for this has to do with musical expectations. Most musicians come to sessions to make music. Singers want to sing and instrumentalists want to play; they do not enjoy sitting and listening to others for any length of time. For the same reason, solo performances of either type are not well tolerated at most sessions. Here, a bit of tolerance can enhance the session. An occasional song in an instrumental session or instrumental in a singing session can provide a welcome break for the other musicians and a turning point in the music. It is good if the song includes instrumental breaks and choruses where other musicians can join in. A solo performance, well done, is also welcome. The only concern is that these interludes do not dominate the session.

Musicians who come to sessions have a responsibility to be musically prepared. Playing the same piece, or singing the same song every time can make for a dull session. Likewise, performing something that you don't know does not enhance the session. If you don't know the music, don't play or sing it. This also applies to joining in with other musicians. Attentive listening is the best way to learn new music. As you begin to learn the music, you can quietly join in.

Sessions should avoid the use of [books](#). Traditional music is best performed without the aid of printed words or musical "dots." The best way to learn traditional music is by ear. A musical score cannot well represent the way a traditional tune is played. And only when a song is memorized does it come alive. Only then do you understand what the song is about and it becomes your song. You can then mold the song to your own interpretation.

The way a particular session works can vary. Some go around a circle, giving each participant a turn, while others let anyone start a tune as the spirit moves. In my opinion, the latter type of session is more interesting, provided no one person dominates and all participants are given a chance. A good session leader will encourage the more reticent participants to take a turn. The music can often follow some interesting directions and take some surprising turns. Other than that, the session leader should be as unobtrusive as possible.

Every once in a while a session will turn magical. I once had a group of my favorite musician friends at my home for a session. I had no idea how to begin, but then someone began to strum some chords and another person added a simple melody, not any particular tune or song I knew, and it just grew organically for five to ten minutes. After that, I made sure that each person had a turn to start a tune. The songs all had interesting instrumental breaks where one or another musician would take the lead, and others quietly joined in as back-up. It was a mellow evening with no particular organization, and everyone shared in the music. It was musical spontaneity at its best.

### **Some sessions around Seattle:**

- [\*\*Seattle Song Circle\*\*](#) – every Sunday at 7pm at a home around Seattle.
- [\*\*Fado's Irish Session\*\*](#) - Sundays, 4-7pm at [\*Fado's Irish Pub\*](#), Seattle.
- [\*\*Couth Buzzard Books Irish Session\*\*](#) – 1st and 3rd Saturdays, 11am-1pm.
- [\*\*Dusty Strings Neighborhood SING!\*\*](#) – every Wednesday, 12noon-1pm.
- [\*\*Old Timey Social\*\*](#) - old timey musicians play favorite tunes, every Tuesday, 8-11pm, [\*Conor Byrne pub\*](#), Ballard.
- **Northern Tunes Session** - at [\*Couth Buzzard Books\*](#), 4th Sundays, 6-9pm, all levels welcome.
- [\*\*Chanty Sing Seattle\*\*](#) - 2nd Fridays, 8-10pm [\*Northwest Seaport\*](#), [check for location](#).

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