

# A Special Series of Music Concerts and Dances devoted to **MASTERS OF REGIONAL & ETHNIC TRADITIONS**

**SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 9**

Concert and Dance

Conjunto Music of Texas and Mexico

**ECOS DEL NORTE**

American Legion Hall

**FRIDAY, MARCH 1**

Concert

Chinese Erhu and Missouri Fiddle Music

**JI QIU MIN**

**VESTA JOHNSON**

Studio Theatre

**SATURDAY, MARCH 16**

Concert and Dance

Music from the Tatra Mountains of Poland

**POLISH HIGHLANDERS**

American Legion Hall

**FRIDAY, APRIL 5**

Concert

Country and Urban Blues

**YANK RACHELL**

**JOHN CAMPBELL**

Studio Theatre

**SATURDAY, APRIL 20**

Concert and Dance

German-American Music

**KARL AND THE COUNTRY**

**DUTCHMEN**

American Legion Hall



**FRIDAY, MAY 3**

Concert

Music from Puerto Rico and Ireland

**ANDANDO SOLO**

**JIMMY KEANE**

Studio Theatre

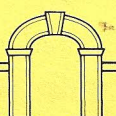
Concert-only programs will be held at the Libertyville High School Studio Theatre, 708 W. Park (Route 176), Libertyville, IL.

Concert/Dances will be held at the American Legion Hall, 715 N. Milwaukee (Route 21) in Libertyville. Concert/Dance programs will feature a concert followed by a participatory dance with demonstrations and basic instruction. All events will begin at 8:00 p.m.

**For tickets or other information call:**

**(708) 367-0707.**

This series is supported in part by grants from Baxter Healthcare Corporation, the National Endowment for the Arts and by the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

  
**DAVID N. ADLER**  
**CULTURAL CENTER**



**THE UNIVERSAL FIDDLER:**  
**VESTA JOHNSON OF MISSOURI AND JI QIU MIN OF CHINA**

Out of the hundreds, or is it thousands, of old-time fiddlers in Missouri-- a state that may have more fiddlers per square mile than any other in the Union-- only a figurative handful are women. Vesta Johnson knows that she is an exception to the rule. At one time, she says, "women just didn't do things like that. That was the way our system was set up for years. You know, women didn't drive cars, women didn't go out in public very much."

Even though her father "was of the old school," she never encountered any overt opposition from her family to her fiddle playing. In fact, her mother played the fiddle, and still, at the age of 87, will occasionally play for a bunch of dancers. Though both of Vesta's parents, and her brother as well, were fiddlers, she didn't learn from any of them, but from her mother's cousin, who made a deal with her when she was seven. He would buy some of the Christmas seals she was selling as a school project, if she would learn to fiddle:

He was a fiddler in his own way. But he had this finger off at the joint and so he only had three fingers to play with. But he sat down with me and taught me my first tune-- "Golden Slippers." And the thing of it is, you know, I'm a three-finger fiddler.

Born Vesta Wilson in 1922 in the northern Missouri county of Linn, she has been living in St. Louis County for many years. Elsewhere, adult fiddlers often put their instruments aside during their family-raising years. Perhaps in Missouri male fiddlers take such sabbaticals from music-making less frequently. But as a woman with the primary responsibility for the rearing of her three children, Vesta had to forget about the fiddle for a number of years.

It was in the 1960s, after her children were grown, that she was able to pick it up once more. It was then that she first became aware of fiddle contests. Contests were not a part of Vesta's music world during her younger career. Back then she was a square dance fiddler. Her first performing experience, like that of her parents, was probably in playing for dancing at a house party. By the 1930s, when she was in her teens, Vesta was in demand for square dances held at pie and box suppers in the area around Chillicothe in Livingston County. At that time she performed regularly with the Hooten Brothers, Merle and Marion, in an informal, unnamed ensemble.

Now, in her second career in music, fiddle contests play a bigger role. Vesta is glad that contests in Missouri usually have a separate Ladies Division, though not because women don't play at the same level as the men, but because of the expectations and prejudices that come out in the heat of competition: "Competing with men, there's no way. Most of them are judged by men to begin with, and they're not about to put a woman in there."



Though you can frequently find Vesta Johnson at contests, standing before a panel of judges is not her favorite setting for playing the fiddle. It's the jam sessions she is most fond of, and contests are a ready context for informal tune-swapping and sharing with fiddlers from many different areas. Vesta is also an active organizer in her home area. She is a leader in the St. Louis-based Missouri Fiddlers and Country Music Association; she plays for community dances; and she sometimes serves as a contest judge. In addition, she was recognized by the University of Missouri and the Missouri Arts Council as a Master in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Her playing appears on two recordings: four selections are on the 2-disc anthology, *Now That's a Good Tune: Masters of Traditional Missouri Fiddling*, published by the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri in Columbia; and on her own cassette album, *Down Home Rag*, on Marimac Recordings.

Vesta's fiddling is representative of the north Missouri style, which along with Little Dixie and Ozark fiddling, is one of three broad regional styles discernible in a wide range of cultural expressions, from architecture and foodways to music-making. The north Missouri style, as far as it can be generally characterized, features "complex melodies played at a relatively slow pace." Other descriptive terms for this style of playing would include such notions as "hornpipe" style-- that is slower playing, sometimes in flat keys, of densely noted tunes-- and "long bow" style-- referring to the use of smooth bowing strokes in contrast to the more rhythmic and accented short strokes favored in the Ozarks. Taylor McBaine (who was part of the last "In the Tradition" series) is a fiddler from the heart of Little Dixie, whose playing shows that region's characteristic mix of long and short strokes to create a rolling rhythm. The melodic line shaped by Little Dixie fiddlers tends to be more intricate than that of the Ozark style found to the south, yet less complex than that achieved by north Missouri fiddlers.

Still, a fiddler's repertoire is shaped by more than regional generalizations. The influences of charismatic or exceptionally able models found in the local neighborhood, on radio broadcasts, or through recordings also shapes the playing style and repertoire of an individual fiddler. Vesta Johnson has learned from many sources and has favored no single one in particular. She just "grew up with fiddling" in her family, and she has continued to flourish in the rich soil of Missouri fiddling. The result, it has been said, is "a rare and diverse repertoire that is probably one of Missouri's best kept secrets." Vesta Johnson will be accompanied on guitar by Steven Hall, one of her seven grandchildren.

Patrons of the "In the Tradition" series will be able to glimpse another rich musical tradition that seldom appears on the American music scene. Ji Qiu Min, a young woman in her thirties, is a student in the Chicago area and a very accomplished player of the Chinese *erhu*. This two-string, bowed lute is a distant relative of the fiddle. The *erhu* emerged in the East during the tenth century, about the same time that bowed instruments began to appear in the West. These two relatives developed quite differently, however. Where the violin family of



instruments, and all its immediate precursors, make use of a "liberated" bow, the hair of the *erhu*'s bow is caught between the two strings. Also, while the violin has a fingerboard, the *erhu* has none. Strings are stopped simply by the pressure of the fingers, not by pinching a string against a smooth surface.

A native of Nanjing in southeastern China, Ji Qiu Min began to study the *erhu* at the age of ten. She studied at the Music Conservatory at Henan University and embarked on a career as a professional musician, both as a performer and a teacher of classical Chinese music. In China she played with the Kaifeng Chinese Ensemble, and won several prizes as a soloist in district and municipal music competitions.

For all its complexity, music in the Western world can be generally classed as classical, popular, and folk. This set of terms does not translate quite so easily to Eastern music. The classical music that Ms. Ji performs is, in many cases, based on folk melodies or ancient melodies that have been elaborated on by trained composers and performers. While in Western classical music, the norm is for the performer to adhere strictly to a score, adding only that intangible element known as feeling or interpretation; in the Chinese tradition, the performer internalizes the music as it has been noted down and often adds embellishments or whole phrases of her own to complete the piece.

Ji Qiu Min, who came to the U.S. in 1989 to be a student at Bethany Seminary in Oak Park, believes that music is a bridge that can bring together people from diverse cultures. She points out that an award-winning jazz ensemble in New York includes an *erhu* player who renders both Occidental and Oriental music on his two-stringed fiddle. Ms. Ji's mission is to introduce the *erhu* and Chinese music to American people and to encourage further sharing. An accomplished performer on violin and accordion as well, she understands how divergent musical traditions can be made to coalesce. Where the *erhu* is traditionally accompanied by the *yangqin* (the Chinese dulcimer) or is incorporated into a larger ensemble of Chinese wind and string instruments, Ms. Ji asserts that it can just as well be accompanied by the piano or the Western concert harp. In fact, she plans to end her performance with such a joining of music worlds by bringing out a pianist to accompany her last two pieces.

--by Paul L. Tyler

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