

Fiddle Tablature

Traditionally, the Fiddle does not use tablature like the Guitar, Banjo, Mandolin and Dobro. However, there is a way to incorporate tablature in Fiddle music.

Fiddle Tablature ('Tab', for short) looks a lot like Mandolin Tablature (4 lines representing the 4 string pairs), with the exception that, instead of the numbers representing the frets, the numbers represent the LEFT HAND FINGERS on the Fiddle. That really makes it very simple for someone that can not read regular music notation.

Position Markers

Most violin teachers place three (or more) small pieces of slender tape across the fingerboard of a first year student. These indicate where to place the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers on the fingerboard. I used tapes for many years with my students but, I found that they slide around a lot and, in time, create a sticky mess on the fingerboard. I experimented a little bit and found placing small white dots of liquid paper or any other correction fluid on the fingerboard at the same positions. If the dots start to fade, I just put another dot on it!

If you are going to do this or use tape, these are the positions to place the markers on a FULL SIZE VIOLIN:

- 1st marker should be $1 \frac{7}{16}$ inch (36 mm) from the nut (where the strings start to vibrate at the peg head)
- 2nd marker should be $2 \frac{21}{32}$ inch (68 mm) from the nut.
- 3rd marker should be $3 \frac{1}{4}$ inches (82 mm) from the nut.
- 4th marker (If you decide to add a marker for the 4th finger) will be $4 \frac{1}{4}$ inches (108 mm) from the nut.

These measurements are for a full size violin. If you have a smaller fiddle, say, a 3/4 or smaller, these marker positions will not work. They will be too far apart.

If you have a smaller fiddle, there is a formula called the 'Rule of 18' that will help you find your marks. It involves successively dividing the scale length (the distance between the bridge to the nut) minus the offset to the previous fret by 18. Below is an explanation of how this formula works:

1. With the instrument in tune and your bridge in the proper place (normally the bridge should have it's feet in line with the notches in the F holes), measure the length of the strings from the bridge to the nut. This is called the 'scale length'.

2. Divide this number by 17.817. If, for example, your scale length on your 'small' fiddle is 12 inches, you would divide $12 / 17.817 = .673$

3. The first fret on your smaller fiddle would be .673 inches from the nut. However, **THIS IS NOT** WHERE YOU WANT TO PUT THE FIRST FINGER POSITION MARKER. The first finger position mark will be on the 'SECOND FRET'.

4. Now, measure the distance from the bridge to this new 'first fret' position mark. Then, divide that length by 17.817 again. This new number will be the distance from the first fret to the new second fret. **THIS is where you want to place the first position mark on your fiddle.**

5. Again, measure the distance from the 'second fret' to the bridge then divide this by 17.817. This number is the distance in inches from the 'second fret' to the new third fret.

Is this starting to make a little sense?

Now, for Fiddle Tablature, you will need 4 position marks. The first finger mark will be the 'second fret', the 2nd finger mark will be the 'fourth fret', the 3rd finger mark will be the 'fifth fret' and the fourth fret mark will be the 'seventh fret'.

You may be wondering, 'Do I really need to be this accurate for my position marks?' Actually, no. This formula is used by luthiers when constructing fretted instruments. What you are interested in is a close approximation of where the finger markers should be. Remember, the Fiddle has unique playing techniques, like 'vibrato' and 'slides' that don't recognize 'frets'.

If you have trouble with math (2+2=5 kind of thing) there is a faster and easier way to find your finger positions on your fiddle: buy yourself a good chromatic instrument tuner. Get your Fiddle in tune, then, pluck the D string with your first finger in its 'approximate' position. This first finger note is an 'E'. Simply watch your tuner as you move your finger back and forth to find the 'E' note. When you do, put a mark there! Then do the same with the second finger 'F#', then third finger 'G'. Finally the fourth finger will be 'A' and you will have them all.

I wanted to show you the mathematical way to find the markers first so you will have that as an option. If you do decided to use the mathematical formula to find your finger positions, use the tuner to check your accuracy.

How to read Fiddle Tablature

My Fiddle Tablature uses 4 lines, each line will represent one of the Fiddle strings. The top line of the Tab will be your high E string. The line below that, the second line will be the A string, then the D string will be represented by the 3rd line and finally the bottom, fourth line will be the G string. The numbers on these lines represent the LEFT HAND FINGERS. This is different from the tablatures used on the other fretted instruments. The numbers on those tabs are the FRETS. So, don't get confused.

The main problem with Fiddle Tablature is that it is a little tricky to indicate the sharps and flats in a song. To illustrate these, I will use an 'L' and an 'H' for the 'Low' and 'High' fingers. For example, if you see a '2' on the second line, this would be a normal 2nd finger on the A string; a C# note. But sometimes you may need to play the regular C note that is between the 1st and 2nd finger position markers. So, in the tablature, I will indicate this adjustment with an 'L' below the 2 meaning, 'low 2'. If there is an 'H' below, say, the 3, this would be a 'High 3'. That is, the third finger will be placed just between the 3rd and 4th position markers.

To illustrate, look at the Fiddle Tablature for the song, 'Happy Birthday'. Everything is regular except for the 'Low 2' at measure 8. These are the two notes with the 'L' above them. The rest of the Tablature will be similar to standard music notation with Slurs, Bow Markings, etc.

All of the Fiddle music at www.jaybuckey.com includes Fiddle Tablature and is similar in appearance to this version of 'Happy Birthday'. Of course, the arrangements can become complicated with more notes and other symbols. These are explained in my books. However, this brief tutorial will give you a good foundation on understanding Fiddle Tablature.

Playing Beyond 1st Position

Many of the songs, starting with **Fiddle Volume 2**, will have arrangements higher than the first position. The Left-hand will be shifting to the 2nd and 3rd positions, closer to the bridge on many of these.

Tablature for the Guitar, Mandolin, Bass and Dobro use higher numbers (5, 6, 7, and so on) for these higher notes, each representing a *new fret*. Playing in a higher position on the Fiddle presents a special challenge for *Fiddle Tablature* since the numbers are the Left-hand fingers, not frets.

The best way to find these higher notes is to use a color-coded fingerboard decal for the Fiddle, called, 'Fiddle Frets'. This item is available on the *Fiddle Page* at www.jaybuckeymusic.com/fiddle.htm

When playing in **First Position**:

- The **Index finger** will be placed on the Yellow stripe.
- The **Middle finger** will be placed on the Red stripe,
- The **Ring finger** will be assigned the Blue stripe and
- The **Pinky**, the Orange stripe. See the photo below (Note: Fiddle Volume 2 with Tablature **eBook** has these photos in color. The hard copy does not).



When playing in Third position, the Index finger will shift up to the blue stripe replacing the Ring finger.



The Middle finger will replace the Pinky at the orange stripe and the Ring finger will be placed on the Purple stripe.

When the Pinky is used in Third position, it will be placed on the 4th white stripe or the green stripe.

There are 5 white stripes on the decal and they are identified on the Fiddle Tablature as White 1st, White 2nd, White 3rd, White 4th and White 5th.

As an example, look at the song, Arkansas Traveler beginning with measure 26:

The top line is standard music notation as found in Violin music. The line below is the Fiddle Tablature. The numbers on the Tablature represent the Left-hand fingers and the horizontal lines are the Fiddle strings. Below the numbers are the words, 'White 4th', blue, orange, purple and green. These refer to the colored stripes of the decal.

Using the example above, the first note at measure 26 would be played with the Left-hand pinky (4th finger) on the 1st string at the 4th white stripe. The next note would be played with the Index finger (1st finger) on the 1st string on the blue stripe. The next note would be played with the Ring finger (3rd), on the first string on the 3rd white stripe. The next note after that would be the Middle finger (2nd) on the first string orange stripe and so on.

So, in review:

- The **HORIZONTAL LINES** are the strings on the Fiddle, the top line being the high E string, the second line, the A string, the 3rd line the D string and the 4th line the G string.
- The **NUMBERS** are the Left-hand fingers. Index = 1, Middle = 2, Ring = 3 and Pinky = 4
- The **COLORS** are the colored stripes on the decal when we move into the higher position. Colors are not indicated on the Fiddle Tablature when playing in first position.

When the arrangement goes beyond First position, it will be stated on the tablature. For example, at measure 10 in the song, 'Train 45', the Left-hand will shift up to 3rd position and remain there through measure 17:

The image shows two systems of musical notation for measures 10-17 of the song 'Train 45'. The first system covers measures 10-13, and the second system covers measures 14-17. Both systems are in 1/4 time and G major (one sharp). The first system is labeled '3rd Position' and includes a 'V' (vibrato) marking above the first measure. The tablature below the staff uses numbers 1-4 for fingers and colors (purple, blue, orange, white, green) for the strings. The second system includes 'F#' and 'B' markings above the staff. The tablature continues with numbers and colors.

System 1 (Measures 10-13):

- Measure 10: *V* (vibrato), notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Tablature: 1 3 (purple), 2 3 (purple).
- Measure 11: notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Tablature: 1 3 (blue), 2 3 (orange).
- Measure 12: notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Tablature: 4 4 (white), 4 4 (green).
- Measure 13: notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Tablature: 2 (orange).

System 2 (Measures 14-17):

- Measure 14: notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Tablature: 1 2 1 0 (blue orange blue), 1 2 1 0 (blue orange blue).
- Measure 15: notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Tablature: 2 1 2 1 (blue orange blue orange), 4 2 1 4 (white blue orange white orange).
- Measure 16: notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Tablature: 2 4 4 (white orange white orange), 2 4 4 (white green orange).
- Measure 17: notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Tablature: 2* (white green orange).

At measures 10 and 11, there are two notes played at the same time, called a Double Stop. At measure 10, the top note is played with the Index finger on the first string at the blue stripe. The Ring finger plays the second string at the purple stripe; *both at the same time*.

Measure 11 is similar. The Middle finger plays the first string at the orange stripe and the Ring finger plays the second string at the purple stripe at the same time.

Beginning with measure 18, the Left-hand will now shift back to First position:

The image shows a musical score for measures 18 through 23. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature. A 'B' time signature is present above the first measure. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, some beamed together. Below the staff, the text '1st Position' is written. The bottom staff is a fiddle tablature with six lines representing strings. The notes are indicated by numbers 0-4. Below the tablature, the letters 'L' and 'H' are placed under specific measures to indicate left-hand and right-hand actions. Measure 18 starts with a 'B' above the staff and '1st Position' below it. The tablature for measure 18 is: 2 4 2 0 1 4 1 1. Measure 19: 0 1 0 3 3 1 0 3. Measure 20: 3 1 0 1 3 2 1 3. Measure 21: 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3. Measure 22: 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3. Measure 23: 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3. The letters 'L' and 'H' are placed under measures 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23 respectively.

(Remember, when in first position, *we do not use colors to describe the notes*)

If you are not using a Fiddle Tablature decal, you could use pin stripe and graphic detailing tape found at most auto supply stores or something similar. The only problem with small pieces of tape is that through time and use, they have a tendency to move out of position. The **Fiddle Tablature Decal** stays in place since it is a one-piece decal.

If you decide to use auto detailing pin stripes, or some other method of identifying these color-coded markers, the positions of each one (full size fiddle) are listed below in **millimeters** measured from the *inside of the string nut to the center of the tape*:

White 1st = 19 mm

Yellow = 36 mm

White 2nd = 52 mm

Red = 62 mm

Blue = 82 mm

White 3rd = 95 mm

Orange = 108 mm

White 4th = 120 mm

Purple = 132 mm

White 5th = 142 mm

Green = 152 mm

Red 2nd = 162 mm

(If you are using a smaller Fiddle, you will need to adjust the tape measurements above using the formula at the beginning of this article)

If you find playing in positions a bit difficult to comprehend, using the color stripes and so on, you may find the video tutorial, '**Fiddle Volume 2**' of real benefit where this is explained in detail. If there is one instrument that really needs a video, it's the Fiddle.

ETA of this video (currently in production) will be posted at www.jaybuckey.com/fiddle.htm and/or www.jaybuckey.com/whats_new.htm when it is ready for release.

Fiddle Tablature may be confusing at first but once you get the idea of how it is used as a coordinate system to find the notes on the fingerboard, in time, it will get easier to follow along. Of course, Fiddle Tablature is only a means to an end. Ultimately, you will want to memorize your music or at least get to the point where you can play your songs WITHOUT the printed page, Fiddle Tablature or Standard Music Notation.

Playing from the heart is always the best. Eventually, you will want to make the music your own so that your live performance will sound more natural. Books, sheet music and Fiddle Tablature are only a means to get you started and accelerate the learning process.

Good luck and Happy Fiddling!

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