

ELLINOR BENEDICT

A real crowd pleaser and frequent winner of the “Fiddle Championship”

Written by **Dan Whetzel**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

“I PLAY FOR FUN.”

After more than eight decades of enjoying music, Ellinor Benedict believes there is no better reason to play a musical instrument. And Ellinor also believes that she is one of the most unlikely musicians in Western Maryland to enjoy bluegrass music, particularly the high, lonesome sounds that come from a fiddle.

Music has been an integral part of Ellinor’s life ever since she can remember. Her mother, a classically trained musician, provided opportunities for excelling in music. Ellinor was encouraged to play the cello at an early age, and her mother would accompany on the piano. Rigorous classical training on the cello at their Melrose, Massachusetts, home meant there was no time for playing or studying popular tunes. “She wanted me to play the cello. Mother had no use at all for popular music. The cello was always a very serious experience.”

Professional musical training later provided Ellinor with opportunities to instill the love of music in children. A public school teacher in Saint Mary’s County, Maryland, for 21 years, Ellinor had the privilege of instructing students in kindergarten through senior high school. But at no time in her musical training or teaching experience did she play the fiddle. So how does a classically trained musician from Melrose, Massachusetts, come to be a bluegrass fiddler residing in Western Maryland? What a long strange trip it’s been.

Ellinor’s introduction to bluegrass fiddling occurred during a visit to her daughter who resided in Grantsville, Maryland. The 1986 Friendsville fiddle contest happened to be occurring that week, “So my daughter took me to the Friendsville contest as a joke to see if, after spending my life in classical music, I would turn up my nose at bluegrass fiddle. To our surprise, I loved it. I decided to play the fiddle and returned to play in the contest the following year. My daughter said ‘You have never played the violin in any form. You can’t get good enough in one year to play in this contest!’ I replied, ‘I don’t know if I can or not but I am sure as heck going to try’.”

Immediately after returning home to Florida, Ellinor began a daily routine of two hour practice sessions. No instructor was present; instead, bluegrass recordings served as both teacher and inspiration. It wasn’t easy adapting to the bluegrass sound or learning the mechanics of a fiddle. “I didn’t pick up the fiddle until I was 65 years old. You just can’t pick up one and start to play because the fiddle is



backwards from a cello player’s point of view. And bluegrass music requires a different style of playing because there is more improvisation than what I was used to.”

Phone calls from her daughter always brought a humorous inquiry, “Are you still going to play in the fiddle contest?” Ellinor’s husband knew the answer to the question because “Everyday when I got the fiddle out, he would jump in the boat and go fishing.” The practice

sessions continued through winter and into summer. Finally the big day arrived at the Friendsville fiddle contest. What happened next was completely unanticipated.

“I had a brand new sensation when I walked on the stage—stage fright! I never had that with the cello. When I walked out to perform, I thought to myself, ‘What am I doing here? This is not my instrument.’ I wanted to run but played three tunes and saw it through.” Ellinor did more than see it through; she finished runner-up in a field of eight contestants in the over 60 category. No one was laughing any longer.

Ellinor acknowledges the winner was the better musician, but that didn’t discourage her from striving to improve. “The next year I beat him to win the contest.” And she continued sharpening her skills for upcoming events. “Depending on the judges, sometimes I would win, sometimes he would win.” Ellinor later added a first place trophy to her accolades at Oakland’s Autumn Glory Festival in the early 1990’s.

Winning contests sometimes depends on what musical sound the judges prefer and desire to hear. Fiddlers create their own musical styles, and uniqueness is both appreciated and expected in the genre. “We all sound different. Musical training influences my music and makes it a lot different than the ones who grew up with it.”

And what happened to the cello that once occupied much of her musical talents? “I only play it once a year in church at Christmas.”

Ellinor moved to Garrett County several years ago to be near family members. Now in her 86th year, she breaks out the fiddle whenever the mood strikes. No more daily practice sessions. “I first tried playing the fiddle for fun, and now I keep playing it for fun.”

What better reason to continue a lifetime of enjoying music.