

**STUDIA INSTRUMENTORUM MUSICAE POPULARIS XVI**  
**Tarptautinės tradicinės muzikos tarybos Liaudies muzikos instrumentų**  
**tyrimų grupės XVI tarptautinės konferencijos straipsniai /**  
**ICTM Study Group on Folk Musical Instruments**  
**Proceedings from the 16<sup>th</sup> International Meeting**

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*ISSN 1392-2831 Tautosakos darbai XXXII 2006*

**THE NORWEGIAN HARDANGER FIDDLE**  
**IN CLASSICAL MUSIC**

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**Subject:** The interrelationship between a traditional instrument and modern art music in Norway.

**Purpose of study:** To reveal how the special status of a folk instrument has influenced the development of art music from the period of national romanticism up to today.

**Methods:** Descriptive, historical.

**Keywords:** National romanticism, ideology, classical music, instrument history, contemporary music.

**The Roots of the Hardanger Fiddle**

The Norwegian Hardanger fiddle, with its rich decorations and sympathetic strings, dates back to at least the mid-17th century. The oldest surviving fiddle is the so-called Jaastad fiddle from 1651, made by the local sheriff in Ullensvang, Hardanger, Ole Jonsen Jaastad (1621–1694). This is a rather small instrument with a very curved body, supplied with two sympathetic strings. We believe that this and other similar fiddles which are found especially in Western Norway and in the Telemark area could be descendants from the Medieval fiddles in Scandinavia. To put sympathetic strings on bowed instruments was probably an impulse from the British Isles reaching the Hardanger region early in the 17th century. In this period, there were very good connections between Western Norway, England and Scotland, especially through the extensive timber trade.

During the 18th century the old West Norwegian fiddle containing sympathetic strings was modernized by the two fiddle makers Isak Nielsen Botnen (1669–1759) and Trond Isaksen Flatebø (1713–1772) from Kvam, Hardanger. They were in fact father and son, and by the mid-18th century their instruments, which were closer to the violin in shape and size, had become extremely popular in many parts of southern

Norway. Consequently, fiddles with resonant strings made by Botnen, Flatebø and their successors in Hardanger were called Hardanger fiddles from around 1800–1820 (Aksdal 2005b: 77f).

In the early 19th century the hegemony of Hardanger fiddle production moved gradually eastwards from the Hardanger region to Telemark. The fiddle makers living in the Bø area, especially those of the Helland family, gradually modernized the Hardanger fiddle even further and gave it quite a new look. Generally, the modern Hardanger fiddle was bigger and the body less curved than on the old type, it was far more decorated, and it normally had four sympathetic strings. The decorations, inspired by the Norwegian wood carving and rose painting traditions, made the instrument look even more Norwegian, and this was a development strongly in the spirit of the national romanticism.

### Entering the Urban Scene

From the mid-19th century the Hardanger fiddle became a more and more important symbol for the Norwegian nationalists, working hard to free Norway from the Swedish-Norwegian union established in 1814. This union had, after only a few months of national freedom, replaced the more than 400 years long Danish administration of Norway, often referred to by Norwegians as the 400 years night.

The legendary Telemark fiddler Myllarguten [Eng. the miller's son], whose birth name was Torgeir Augundsson (1801–1872), was the first fiddler in Norway ever to give a public concert when in 1849, by the help of the world-famous Norwegian violinist Ole Bull (1810–1880), he presented a program of local Hardanger fiddle tunes from Telemark in the Norwegian capital Christiania (Oslo). This event was followed up by several concert tours throughout Norway and even abroad. During the last decades of the 19th century many Hardanger fiddlers started to travel around in Norway, as well as in other countries, giving concerts with a traditional Norwegian repertoire. Some of them even went to the USA, mainly to play for the Norwegian immigrants. These Hardanger fiddle concerts were extremely popular in most places.

Around 1860, the fiddle maker Erik Johnsen Helland (1816–1868) from Bø in Telemark opened two new workshops in Oslo and Horten. Here, the modern Hardanger fiddle was introduced to amateur



Hardanger fiddle  
made by Trond Isaksen  
Flatebø 1756.

*Photo: The Hardanger  
fiddle project*

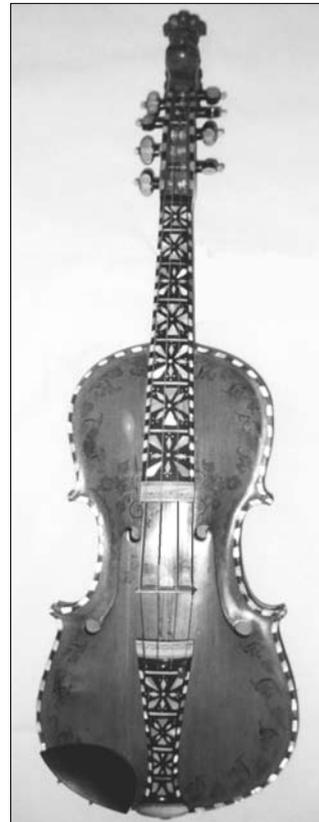
and professional violinists living in the urban areas. Soon even the composers became curious about this very special Norwegian instrument. Already in 1832–33 Ole Bull had composed music including the Hardanger fiddle. The piece was called “Souvenirs de Norvège” and was written for Hardanger fiddle, string quartet, flute, and double bass. It was first performed in 1833 in Paris, and later the piece was revised several times (1838–1863). One of the first revised versions was called “Norges Fjelde” (Eng. Norway’s mountains).

In the mid-1800s many composers started to write music based on melodies and rhythms found in the Hardanger fiddle music. Among the most important composers using traditional tunes were Edvard Grieg (1843–1907), Halfdan Kjerulf (1815–1868), and Thomas Tellefsen (1823–1874). However, it was only after 1900 that the Hardanger fiddle itself was included in classical art music.

### **Fossegrimen at the National Theater**

In 1904–05 the composer Johan Halvorsen (1864–1935) wrote music to the play “Fossegrimen” (op. 21), a so-called “troll-play in four parts” written by the actor Sigurd Eldegard while he was working with the National Theater in Oslo. The play was partly based upon the tale of Norway’s most celebrated fiddler, Myllarguten. He is said to have learned to play the Hardanger fiddle directly from Fossegrimen, the musical master of all underground creatures, by pawning his soul for the craft. Fossegrimen is even the name of a very popular Hardanger fiddle tune which Myllarguten played quite often. Eldegard further elaborated upon the myth, and additionally interwove Myllarguten’s encounter with Ole Bull, who in the play was referred to as the master fiddler (Dybsand 2002: 11).

In the Fossegrimen play the Hardanger fiddle was given a very central part, both to accompany singing, as a solo instrument, and to be accompanied by the symphony orchestra. Halvorsen was quite familiar with the traditional Hardanger fiddle music. In 1894, he had visited local fiddlers during his honeymoon in Hardanger in order to become acquainted with their manner of playing sl tter, the traditional Norwegian dance tunes. The following year Halvorsen obtained a Hardanger fiddle himself, and on three occasions he acted as a member of the jury at the fiddle and dance contests in Bergen organized by Vestmannalaget. In 1901 Edvard Grieg asked Halvorsen to transcribe 17



Modern Hardanger fiddle  
made by Erik Johnsen  
Helland 1863.  
*Photo: Bjørn Aksdal*

GETRETENER TANZ

*Transcription of a Hardanger fiddle tune made by Johan Halvorsens  
and published by Peters in Leipzig 1910 (Halvorsen 1910: 9)*

The musical score is written for a single melodic line in G major (one sharp) and 3/8 time. It begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 76. The piece consists of nine staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/8 time signature. The melody is characterized by frequent eighth-note patterns, often beamed together, and includes various ornaments such as grace notes and slurs. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots at the end of the ninth staff.

Hardanger fiddle tunes as played by Knut Dahle, an old traditional fiddler from Tinn, Telemark. In his younger years Dahle had learned tunes directly from famous folk fiddlers like Myllarguten and Håvard Gibøen (1809–1873). Now, Dahle wanted to preserve the tunes for future generations. These tunes as transcribed by Halvorsen later formed the basis for Grieg's own piece *Slåtter op. 72* (1902–03).

While writing the music to *Fossegrimen* Johan Halvorsen still had the inspiring collaboration with Knut Dahle fresh in mind. In addition to the important role that the music played in the dramatic context, Eldegard's many enchanted depictions of nature appealed strongly to Halvorsen. The premiere took place on January 29th 1905 and Johan Halvorsen himself acted as the soloist on the Hardanger fiddle. The play was indeed a fantastic success. *Fossegrimen* became one of the National Theater's most popular productions ever and was presented no less than 104 times between 1905 and 1909. Halvorsen was the soloist during all the performances. With his music to *Fossegrimen* Johan Halvorsen also became the first composer in musical history to make use of the Hardanger fiddle in a classical orchestral setting.

The most famous musical part of *Fossegrimen* is undoubtedly the ecstatic, devilish dancing tune "Fanitullen", inspired by the traditional slått "Førnesbrunen" as played by the fiddler Olav Moe in Valdres. Even if Fanitullen is based upon authentic folk music material, a great deal of this tune appears to have been composed by Halvorsen without the use of any source material. The dancing tune Fanitullen is frequently performed even as a solo piece by some of the educated and most skilled Hardanger fiddlers.

In the movement "Song of the master of ceremonies", the singer is accompanied by Hardanger fiddle, solo violin and an oboe imitating the ram's horn. The master of ceremonies sings without accompaniment during the first half of the song, while the on-stage ensemble makes use of a Hardanger fiddle gangar-motif to tie together his phrases. Initially the motivic material is strongly influenced by folk music elements, but ultimately acquires a more stylized character, accompanied by the orchestral strings.

In 2002 an excellent new CD-recording of the play *Fossegrimen* was released by the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, with the Norwegian professional violinist Arve Moen Bergset as the soloist on the Hardanger fiddle.

### **The Post-romantic Period**

Halvorsen's success with *Fossegrimen* inspired many composers to keep on writing music in a "Norwegian" musical language, using elements from the Hardanger fiddle music and other parts of the traditional music in Norway. However, in the first decades of the 20th century only a limited number of composers wrote music including the Hardanger fiddle, and soon even the use of Norwegian elements in the music strongly decreased. This discontinuation was probably due to several reasons. New musical impulses reached Norway from Europe, and thus the influence from local traditional music on the different national styles was no longer an obvious part

of the musical ideology among the composers. In Norway it was also very important that the organizations representing the peasant culture early in the 1900s gradually regained the control over the presentation of the Norwegian folk culture (Aksdal 2005c: 142ff).

During the 19th century the Hardanger fiddle had become a kind of national icon in Norway. At the turn of the century, the instrument was indeed regarded as one of the most important national symbols. When the bourgeoisie tried to find their national distinctive quality especially in relation to Sweden and Denmark, they often had to look to the Norwegian peasant culture. An important reason for this was that the culture of the bourgeoisie did not contain any distinctive Norwegian elements. In the field of music one discovered that the traditional music in Norway contained many characteristic features distinguishing this music clearly from the music on the European continent and to some degree even from the musical traditions in the other Scandinavian countries. This was a matter of both stylistic musical elements and specific instruments like the Hardanger fiddle. The bourgeoisie culture took these elements from the peasant culture and translated and transformed them to a classical bourgeoisie artistic style like what Edvard Grieg did within the classical music. After the union with Sweden was dissolved in 1905, the bourgeoisie's need for emphasizing its Norwegianness in the spirit of national romanticism was clearly reduced, and the folk tradition now became more strongly connected with life in the countryside in the increasing conflict between the urban and rural cultures. As a result of this, the traditional music became more distant from the urban culture, and the Hardanger fiddle disappeared more and more from the public scene.

The most important Norwegian composer who wrote music for the Hardanger fiddle in these years was undoubtedly Eivind Groven (1901–1977). He was himself an excellent Hardanger fiddler and even an active folk music collector. Groven wrote both chamber music and solo pieces for the Hardanger fiddle, especially in the late 1930s. In 1938 he wrote two pieces named “Fjell-tonar” and “Siklebekken” (op. 27), both for Hardanger fiddle and orchestra, and in 1962 he finished the work “Margjit Hjukse”, a traditional Norwegian ballad written for 4-part choir, 3 voices, Hardanger fiddle and 2 violins.

The first years after the Second World War were very hard for individuals and organizations working to promote the folk culture in Norway since, during the war, the national socialist party had tried to adopt many important symbols taken from the Norwegian cultural heritage. In these years, there was an increasing migration of people moving from the countryside to settle in the cities. Even more important was that small towns and rural townships now were urbanized, mainly by what we can call the American gas station culture. In this new situation, at the dawn of the modern mass culture society, the Hardanger fiddle, which was still regarded as the most typical symbol of traditional peasant culture in Norway, very often was met with disgust and aversion. Generally, the instrument was now seen as an obsolete symbol of national cultural expression no longer of any interest to a world asking for reconstruction and international solidarity as an important preventive tool against war.

## **The Hardanger Fiddle Concerto**

It was not until 1955 before we saw the first piece of music written for the Hardanger fiddle in the post-war period. Typically, the composer, Geirr Tveitt (1908–1981), came from Hardanger. In fact, his ancestral farm was located only a couple of miles from Botnen, where the Hardanger fiddle was modernized in the 18th century. Tveitt, who had been studying in Leipzig, was certain that his forefathers had been notable folk musicians for several generations. Already at the age of 16 he noted down his first folk tune, and his life-long collecting resulted in some thousand folk melodies.

For Tveitt, the Hardanger fiddle was the real treasure of Norwegian traditional music. A deep understanding of the instrument's character and his close contact with local fiddlers gave Tveitt the idea of developing larger works that could give the instrument status even in the concert halls. Johan Halvorsen had shown the way with *Fossegrimen*, but in this and in similar compositions the orchestra was more like an accompaniment to the fiddle. Using the Hardanger fiddle as the leading voice in collaboration with and in contrast to the symphony orchestra was a much more demanding and ambitious project. The challenge Tveitt saw here was to bring this instrument into art music as an equal partner.

Tveitt finished his “Concerto No. 1 for Hardanger fiddle and orchestra, op. 163” shortly before Christmas in 1955, and the first performance took place at the opening concert of the Bergen International Festival in May 1956 with the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Carl von Garaguly. The soloist was Magne Manheim, a young fiddler from Telemark, who unlike most of the traditional fiddlers in the 1950s, was a trained classical violinist who could read music. Tveitt had frequently consulted Manheim about the practical arrangement of the solo part. Manheim's performance of Tveitt's concerto led to a convincing victory for the composer. The audience was ecstatic, as were the critics.

Tveitt had a few problems to deal with in constructing his Hardanger fiddle concerto. The A string on the Hardanger fiddle is normally tuned from about a semitone to a tone and a half above concerto pitch. This is due both to the thickness and the sounding length of the strings. When used in a work with an orchestra, the instrument can be tuned to concert pitch, but then one normally needs to put on some thicker strings. The Hardanger fiddle also has a more even bridge than the modern violin, and at the premiere Manheim used a more steeply curved bridge than what is normal on the fiddle. This made it much easier to play the Hardanger fiddle part of the concerto, mainly because this part is more based on single string playing than the usual double string playing which is an important part of the Hardanger fiddle playing technique. Later, more experienced Hardanger fiddle soloists have played this concerto with no changes to the strings or bridge.

Ten years after the first concerto was finished Tveitt wrote his second Hardanger fiddle concerto. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) decided to commission a work from a Norwegian composer to be performed at the 1965 Nordzee Festival in

Ostende, Belgium and left it up to the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) to choose the composer. NRK placed the commission with Geirr Tveitt who wanted to write a concerto for Hardanger fiddle for his old friend, the famous fiddler Sigbjørn Bernhoft Osa (1910–1990). It was the fjords of Western Norway Tveitt wanted to honour with his second Hardanger fiddle concerto, and he named it “Tri fjordar, op. 252” (Three Fjords). The concerto has three movements, each bearing the name of a fjord: Hardangerfjord, Sognefjord, and Nordfjord. Again, the composer felt the need for frequent consultations with the soloist about the practical arrangements of the solo part. The first performance in Ostende with the Belgian Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Steve Candael and Sigbjørn Bernhoft Osa on the Hardanger fiddle was broadcasted throughout Europe, and a succession of performances with Osa as soloist followed. Since then the solo part has been revised by Professor Sven Nyhus (b. 1932), who himself has been the soloist of both concertos on several occasions.

Tveitt’s second concerto started a very active period for the Hardanger fiddle in a classical art music setting. In the next decades an increasing number of Norwegian composers wrote music for the Hardanger fiddle, and especially Johan Kvandals “Quintet for Hardanger fiddle and string quartet, op. 50”, which was ordered from The Festival of North Norway in Harstad 1978, was met with great interest. In 1995 Johan Kvandal (1919–1999) wrote another work for the instrument, “Fantasia for Hardanger fiddle and strings, op. 82”. The Fantasia was first performed at the Osa Festival in Voss in October 1995 by the Ole Bull Chamber Orchestra conducted by Arvid Engegård, and with Nils Økland as the soloist on the Hardanger fiddle.

### **A New Generation of Musicians and Composers**

An important basis for this increasing number of works for the Hardanger fiddle was a new generation of folk musicians entering the public scene of music. These musicians were both educated violinists and accomplished Hardanger fiddle players. Some of them had even been educated at the Norwegian Academy of Music as solo instrumentalists on the Hardanger fiddle. This study program was even offered to folk musicians after the Norwegian parliament in 1989 had made a resolution to establish a professorship in Norwegian traditional music at the Academy. Among the young musicians who showed the ability and skill to perform as soloists on Hardanger fiddle in a classical art music setting were Nils Økland (b. 1961), Arve Moen Bergset (b. 1972), and Åshild Breie Nyhus (b. 1975). Additionally, the more experienced bi-instrumentalists Sigbjørn Bernhoft Osa, Arne Viken (b. 1925), and especially Sven Nyhus were still active.

Some of the younger composers who have been writing music for the Hardanger fiddle after 1980 are Trygve Madsen (b. 1940), Gunnar Germeten jr. (1947–1999), Magnar Åm (b. 1952), Lasse Thoresen (b. 1949), Kjell Habbestad (b. 1955), and Henrik Ødegård (b. 1955). Madsen wrote a piece called “Fancy for Hardanger fiddle and strings”; Germeten jr. wrote music for Hardanger fiddle and chamber orchestra;

Magnar Åm (b. 1952) wrote two pieces for Hardanger fiddle, cello, and piano, Henrik Ødegård wrote a cantata for soprano, baritone solo, mixed choir, Hardanger fiddle, and organ; Habbestad wrote a piece for a symphonic band and Hardanger fiddle, and finally; Lasse Thoresen wrote a double concerto for Hardanger fiddle, nyckelharpa (Swedish keyed fiddle), and orchestra.

One of the most recent works written for the Hardanger fiddle is Henrik Ødegaard's "Nyslått. Concerto for two Hardanger fiddles and string orchestra" from 2000. The work was first performed and recorded in 2005. It was a big challenge that the two Hardanger fiddle soloists, Per Anders Buen Garnås (b. 1980) and Torgeir Straand (b. 1981), did not read music at all. To solve this problem, two experienced violinists, both being very familiar with the Hardanger fiddle, were asked to help the two young soloists to learn the solo passages. This worked very well, and the CD recording is excellent.

On this recording two different musical traditions with separate learning methods are combined in a very fruitful way. The dominant musical frame is art music, but the content is strongly based on traditional Hardanger fiddle music. The fiddlers learnt the music by ear, as they are accustomed to as traditional folk musicians, but performed their parts as soloists in an orchestral setting. This combination represents a quite new and very interesting approach to the meeting between orchestral art music and an instrumental folk music tradition.

### **Some Conclusive Remarks**

More than 170 years have passed since Ole Bull wrote the first piece of classical music including the Hardanger fiddle in 1832. Bull's piece started a period of great interest for the instrument and its repertoire, but during the 19th century this resulted merely in composers writing music based on melodies and rhythms found in the traditional fiddle music. It was more the Hardanger fiddle and its music as a symbol of Norwegianness and a bearer of a national sound than the actual possibilities and challenges attached to the specific instrument that attracted the composers. It took more than 70 years before the Hardanger fiddle was more seriously included in a classical orchestral setting. In Fossegrimen Halvorsen combined the traditional Hardanger fiddle music with new music composed for the instrument. This was also the situation with composers writing music for the Hardanger fiddle up to the Second World War. In his two Hardanger fiddle concertos composed in 1955–65 Geirr Tveitt experimented further with the Hardanger fiddle sound, however it remained strongly based on the traditional Hardanger fiddle music. After 1980, many young composers are treating the instrument more freely, stressing the actual sound and performing style more than the traditional idioms. This development has led to several interesting pieces of new music strengthening the position of the Hardanger fiddle even as a classical instrument on the threshold of the 21st century. Additionally, this situation has encouraged young violinists and Hardanger fiddlers to choose a career as bi-instrumentalists.

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## NORVEGIŠKASIS HARDANGERIO SMUIKAS IR KLASIKINĖ MUZIKA

BJØRN AKSDAL

### Santrauka

Norvegiškojo Hardangerio smuiko su jam būdinga puošmenų gausa ir simpatetinėmis stygomis iš-takos siekia mažiausiai XVII amžiaus vidurį. XIX amžiuje šis instrumentas tapo svarbiu norvegų nacio-naliniu simboliu. Legendinis Myllargutenas (malūnininko sūnus) buvo pirmasis kaimo smuikininkas, griežęs viešame koncerte: 1849 metais, padedamas garsaus norvegų smuikininko profesionalo Oles Bullo, Norvegijos sostinėje, tuometinėje Kristianijoje, jis atliko Hardangerio krašto (Telemarko srities) liaudiškų smuiko melodijų programą. Vėliau įvyko dar keli koncertiniai turai.

XIX amžiaus antroje pusėje jau visas būrys Hardangerio krašto smuikininkų leidosi į keliones po Norvegiją bei užsienio šalis, koncertuose grieždami tradicinį norvegišką repertuarą. Dauguma tokių koncertų pasirodė neįtikimai populiarūs, tad netrukus šis ypatingas norvegų liaudies instrumentas patraukė ir kompozitorių dėmesį. O. Bullas dar 1832–1833 metais parašė kūrinių, atliekamą, beje, ir Hardangerio smuiku. Jis vadinosi „Norvegijos suvenyrai“ ir buvo parašytas Hardangerio smuikui, styginių kvartetui, fleitai ir kontrabosui. Vis dėlto tik XX amžiaus pradžioje Hardangerio smuikas išties įsigalėjo klasikinėje muzikoje. 1904 metais Johanas Halvorsenas sukūrė muziką pjesei *Fossegrimen*, Hardangerio smuiką panaudodamas tiek kaip akompanimentą balsui, tiek kaip solinį instrumentą, kuriuo griežiama pritariant simfoniniam orkestrui. Pjesė sulaukė didžiulio pasisekimo.

Ir vėlesniais dešimtmečiais daugelis norvegų kompozitorių kūrė muziką Hardangerio smuikui: koncertus, kamerinę muziką, solinius etiudus. Be abejo, patys reikšmingiausi buvo du Geirro Tveitto koncertai Hardangerio smuikui, parašyti 1955 ir 1965 metais. Juose muzikas ir toliau eksperimentavo su Hardangerio smuiko skambesiu, nors iš esmės vis dar rėmėsi liaudiškąja šio krašto smuikavimo tradicija. Tačiau po 1980 metų atsirado nemaža jaunų kompozitorių, laisviau traktuojančių šį instrumentą ir daugiau eksploatuojančių tikrąjį jo skambėjimą ir smuikavimo būdus nei tradicinius šablonus. Šitaip radosi keletas itin įdomių, naujoviškų muzikos kūrinių, ant XXI amžiaus slenksčio dar labiau sutvirtinusių Hardangerio smuiko, kaip klasikinio instrumento, pozicijas.

Gauta 2006-06-14