



FIDDLE

Why Not Five?

by Christine Whyatt

Since the 16th century when the violin with its present design was first crafted in the workshops in northern Italy, it has spread rapidly throughout the world and has been especially well received in the Western hemisphere. Because of its adaptability, many cultures have embraced the instrument and used it to express their unique styles. Early on the violin was used to entertain both the common folks in the streets and small villages and the upper classes in the courts and drawing rooms of Europe. Today, musicians in America, the British Isles, the Middle East, Scandinavia, continental Europe, and Russia play waltzes, hoedowns, reels, schottisches, jigs, and horas on the fiddle. They also play sonatas, concertos, string quartets, and symphonies on the violin. The instrument that exists today is almost identical in size, dimensions, and overall appearance to the first instruments that were made over four hundred years ago.



The "Dahlia," by Gary Bartig, G. Edward Lutherie

The oldest documented violin with four strings was constructed in 1555 by Andrea Amati. It was followed by the Golden Age of violin making, which was dominated by a few families in the 16th and 17th centuries. The names are very familiar — Stradivari, Gagliano, Guadagnini, Guarneri and Amati

— and the instruments they produced are sought after the world over. There have been many attempts to alter the basic design, and slight changes have been made in terms of the overall dimensions, the age and type of wood used, etc. The original instrument, however, always maintained its dominance in the string world and nothing else came close as its rival. The beautiful polished box with four resonating strings produced a full sound with good projection and a wide range of expression.

With a little research, one can find a number of variants or alternative instruments to the classic violin that we know today. Many of them survived only a short time and were only played by a few. The Bohemian violin had seven playable strings and seven resonating strings; the "fish fiddle" altered the basic shape to make it easier to reach the high positions; the Hardanger fiddle became the national instrument of Norway with its sympathetic strings adding overtones and echoes. Although the Norwegian instrument is firmly established in that country, it never caught on in large numbers anywhere else.

Another instrument that has been around for many years is the five-string

fiddle. It is of particular interest to jazz musicians and folk musicians who like to improvise. It has the same strings as the violin with an added C string a fifth below the G string. (There are also five-string violas with an added E string above the A string.) The extra string gives players a wider range and many more options for improvising. Many players have experimented with five strings by simply adding an extra string to their violins. It can be done with slight modifications, but having five strings makes it necessary for them to be closer together on the neck and therefore more challenging to play. The lower fifth string is often compromised by the smaller box and can produce a less than satisfactory sound. There are, however, a number of five-string instruments designed by luthiers today that make accommodations for the fifth string by slightly altering the basic violin specifications. They have been well received and are played by internationally recognized fiddlers such as Brittany Haas and Görgen Antonsson — both performing with five-string fiddles in concert and on their CDs. Brittany Haas, a prodigy who has played with Darol Anger and has studied with Mark O'Conner, plays a five-string Silakowski violin. She received ASTA's Best Recognition of Tradition award in 2003. Görgen Antonsson plays the five stringer with Draupner, a popular Swedish group that has performed at the Cedar Cultural Center in Minneapolis. Some other makers that feature five-string violins are familiar names to most teachers and performers — Gliga, Snow, and Scott Cao.

We are very fortunate, however, to have access to a very fine five-string instrument right here in the Twin Cities. It is beginning to stand out in the hands of several local players. It is called the "Dahlia" and was designed by Gary Bartig of G. Edward Lutherie, Inc. in northeast Minneapolis, with input from John Waddle, a highly regarded violin maker in St. Paul. Both luthiers feature it in their shops. The Dahlia has the same dimensions as the violin with a few alterations. The body of the instru-

ment is slightly wider than a standard violin, which gives the C string greater depth and clarity. The neck has been widened to accommodate the lower C string and allows the spacing between the strings to be the same as the violin. The neck and the vibrating string length are the same as the violin and the instrument feels familiar from the start. Many players like it because it has a contemporary look with two rounded corners on the body, and yet it looks similar to the violin at first glance. An optional pickup is available for those who want amplification with an acoustic sound.

Lisa Fuglie, a Brooklyn Center resident and the lead fiddler in the nationally known Bluegrass band Monroe Crossing, plays almost exclusively on her Dahlia. Another local fiddler, Mary Seim, who recently moved to Oslo, Norway, purchased a Dahlia before she left the Twin Cities last year. She also plays the Hardanger fiddler and was captivated by the resonance of the new instrument and the possibilities to expand her playing that it gives her. I bought my Dahlia last year and use it almost exclusively for my teaching. I play classical pieces on it for my violin students and back them up for fiddling. The instrument is easy to play and the C-string has a clear, full sound. I also use it to play for local dances and to jam with other fiddlers. Combining the low, warm sound of the viola with the high range of the violin opens up new possibilities. It allows me to double

melodies and play them an octave down, to provide backup to tunes with more chord options, and to improvise and support the higher melodies with passages in the low register. Arpeggios, scales and double stops can be moved down to embellish tunes. Four octave scales and arpeggios are possible in many keys. Even though I am often drawn to the C string, I am comfortable taking the lead and playing melodies in the higher registers. When I am working with students on classical pieces, playing student concertos and solo pieces that often require shifting into higher positions, there have been no problems. The E string may not have a violin sound to the ears of some players, but it blends well with the lower strings and has a nice overall sound. And even though I have a much more valuable violin sitting nearby, I often reach for my five-string fiddle when I am working with my students at home. The options are there when we play folk music together and I want to add backup. Although I don't have any viola students at the present, my instrument is ready in the event I have one studying with me.

For string teachers who have both viola and violin students, the five-string violin has tremendous advantages. One instrument serves both groups, and when working with ensembles the teacher can easily shift back and forth from viola to violin parts on one instrument. For teachers who have students in more than one location, only

one instrument needs to be transported which will function as both a violin and viola. Since the Dahlia is very affordable, priceless instruments can be left at home instead of risking them when traveling from school to school or rehearsals outside the home. And its nice sound and clarity will not compromise your playing.

For traditionalists, a five-string instrument may sound like a radical departure from the norm. It may not appeal to every string player, especially those who have had long professional careers in classical music. For them, the violin presents enough challenges for a lifetime and there is no need to look beyond it. And the standard classical repertory has no music written for a five-string instrument. For others who may want to be revitalized and take on a new challenge, it may be just the answer. It is a wonderful tool for improvising and for teaching. Purchasing a five-string instrument has renewed my interest in playing and has motivated me to explore new ideas and create new sounds.

Christine Whyatt is the director of the Young Fiddlers Association, a new organization that sponsors monthly jam sessions and workshops in Minneapolis for students, ages 8–18. She teaches both violin and fiddle at her home in South Minneapolis. Her students are active fiddlers and perform Scandinavian music in costume throughout the community. ♪