



# FIDDLE

## Hardanger Fiddle Study at St. Olaf College 1979-2007

By Andrea Een

When I came to teach violin and viola at St. Olaf College in the fall of 1977, I found to my delight that a Hardanger fiddle had been given to the school by Henry Halvorson to be displayed in the Music Library, which he had endowed in the new Christiansen Music Building. Happily, a display case had not yet been built for the instrument, so I was able to rescue the Norwegian-made fiddle from the fate of being just a beautiful object.

The Norwegian Hardanger fiddle, whose earliest extant fiddle is dated 1651 but which may be at least a hundred years older, is one of the most highly decorated instruments in the world: rosemaling patterns (acanthus leaves, flowers and geometric shapes) are inked on the wood before it is varnished, mother of pearl and silver inlay grace the fingerboard and tailpiece, a carved lion's head with an ivory or ebony tongue replaces the scroll, and eight or nine carved pegs support the four upper strings and four or five sympathetic strings which go under the fingerboard. It is this soulful sympathetic resonance which gives the Hardanger fiddle its characteristic silver-hued sound as well as the use of thinner gut strings, tuning a whole-step to a step and a half higher than the violin, thinner graduation of the top and back plates, a short Baroque neck and flatter bridge and fingerboard.

By an interesting coincidence, I had just written my doctoral dissertation about the Hardanger fiddle in May of 1977 when I finished my Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Violin Performance and Music Literature

at the University of Illinois. I owned a Hardanger fiddle from Numedal that my parents had bought for me in Norway in 1974, but I did not know how to play it. Or rather, I had tried, unsuccessfully, to learn to play from the Johan Halvorsen transcriptions of tunes, which Edvard Grieg set in his Op. 72 piano pieces. I was a pre-Suzuki violinist

His name was Knut Brakstad and his novice status was matched by my own inexperience in teaching an aural learning style. I taught him some tunes that I had learned from music manuscripts and tried to help him learn the intricacies of a string instrument since he was a beginner there, too! I don't think that we got too far together, but he

inspired me to learn in direct tradition in the summer of 1980.

During three months in Norway in 1980, I played in two fiddle contests, learned tunes by ear in Setesdal and Voss, and visited many fiddlers and dancers. I stayed with cousins on the farm where my grandfather, Knute Een, was born in 1882, and began studying with a great fiddler named Lars Skjervheim who lived a 40-minute bus ride away in Myrkdalen. Lars



Spelemannslag at Syttende Mai at St. Olaf  
(l to r) Andrea Een, Maria Stolen, Hannah Reitz, Geoff Carlisle, Rachel Nesvig, Jaimie Didier

and had never learned any repertoire by ear, much less a fiddle tradition.

In the summer of 1979 I had the opportunity to travel to Norway for the first time with the St. Olaf College Orchestra under the direction of Dr. Donald Berglund. After the three-week tour, I stayed on with the help of a summer study grant from St. Olaf to attend the National Fiddle Competition in Sunnfjord. Imagine my excitement to spend four days listening to hundreds of wonderful fiddlers in four classes compete and to watch them play for the dance competition and for dances in the evenings. I vowed to come back in 1980 and spend the summer learning in aural tradition.

In the fall of 1979 I had a request from a Norwegian student studying at St. Olaf to begin Hardanger fiddle lessons with me.

and I communicated mostly through music since my Norwegian was poor and his dialect was strong. His wife, Ragnhild, often "translated" for us since she could understand my Norwegian more easily and I could understand her Sogn dialect better than Lars' thick Vossestrand. It was sort of like the UN with simultaneous translation except we all three were speaking Norwegian! When I came back to Minnesota and looked at family pictures, I realized with a chill up my spine that Lars was the fiddler in the wedding pictures on the Een farm which had been sent in 1947 to my grandmother as a thank you for her gifts of food and clothing to our cousins after the privations of WWII. As a child, these pictures had represented Norway to me and, somehow through divine providence, I had

chosen to study with Lars.

Returning to St. Olaf in the fall of 1980, I established a small Hardanger fiddle class as I began to give public performances on the instrument and to expand my repertoire. From the beginning, I believed that it was important for me to teach exclusively through aural tradition and to have students use a “fiddle position” with a collapsed left hand cradling the short neck and a completely free chin. The fiddle floated on the collarbone rather than being clamped by the chin and the left hand position was optimal because almost all of the tunes consisted of double-stops and ornaments in first position. Instead of music to buy, my students listened to my recordings of the tunes from lessons as well as sources in the Halvorson Library where I was beginning to amass recordings and transcriptions from Norway.

Over time, more students began to arrive at St. Olaf with Hardanger fiddles in their possession. Erin Hanafin from the Twin Cities, whose grandmother played fiddle in South Dakota, was the first to give a distinction recital in Norwegian for her senior project. Judy Thon Jones’ father was inspired to make her a fiddle to play. Many of my most advanced students went on to study in Norway for an additional year. Kari Loing, biology major from the Twin Cities, spent a year after St. Olaf at a folk high school in Valdres and learned that rich dialect of fiddling. She is now a leader in the Twin Cities Hardanger Fiddle Lag. Anna Lisa Hembre, using the Halvorson fiddle, gave a successful distinction recital in Norwegian as well.

In 2005, Rebecca Lofft, a student from San Diego, won a Fulbright award to study fiddle and its traditions for a year in Norway at Rauland Folk Academy in Telemark. She is finishing a Master’s degree in Folk Arts this year, studying the traditions from Hallingdal. When she performed at the National Fiddle Competition in Gol, Hallingdal this summer, she received one of the highest places for an American. Sarah Nagell, a folk singer, dancer and fiddler who began her Hardanger studies at St. Olaf, also studied in Rauland for a year. Sarah is now concertizing in Canada and the United States with traditional tunes and her own compositions and arrangements. This spring Rachel Nesvig, from Tacoma, became the first Hardanger fiddler to achieve distinction in music at St. Olaf with a Hardanger senior recital, which included repertoire she had learned during a semester abroad in Stavanger.

By 1999, I realized that it was high time to establish a folk-performing ensemble at St. Olaf: the Lars Skjervheim Spelemannslag was born. This group plays for the Norwegian Christmas Chapel service, the Syttende Mai breakfast to celebrate Norwegian Constitution Day on May 17<sup>th</sup>, collaborates with Veslica, the ethnic dance ensemble at St. Olaf under the direction of Professor Anne Von Bibra, and plays for International Night. When the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America had its gala Amerikappleik at the college in the summer of 2003, our fiddle group performed and was featured on the commemorative CD along with many famous Norwegian fiddlers.

A highlight for the Spelemannslag was playing for the opening of the Nobel Peace Prize Forum in 2004 at St. Olaf College. Seven fiddlers from our group and the Twin Cities lag processed in to Skoglund Center to a new “Peace March” which I had composed for the occasion. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway and Director of the World Health Organization, was the plenary speaker. She expressed astonishment to see such a thriving tradition at a Norwegian college in America. I told her with pride

that we were the *only* college that offered Hardanger fiddle for credit in the United States.

In recent years, the Carl and Amy Narvestad/Andrea Een Endowment for Folk Music and Folk Dance was established at St. Olaf College by a generous gift from the Narvestads to insure the continuation of this important tradition. Money from the endowment is supporting at least one lesson scholarship for an incoming fiddler each year. It is also funding workshops with leading Norwegian folk musicians like Hauk Buen, Hallgrim Berg, Vidar Lande, Annbjorg Lien and dance workshops to learn the movement traditions that accompany the dance tunes we play. With a growing interest in this instrument at St. Olaf, we need increased funds to support more lesson scholarships and the purchase of more fiddles since we have only three fiddles available for students at St. Olaf to use.

There are many powerful pedagogical areas that are strengthened by the study of Hardanger fiddle. First of all, it is great ear training to play an instrument in which all of the overtones must resonate in tune to achieve the desired sound. Not only must all nine strings be in tune, but also the “Tartini” or combination tones of the all-pervasive double-stops must tune to the overtones of the sympathetic strings. The repertoire is almost exclusively a dance repertoire with a few bridal marches and listening tunes added. It is very powerful to learn pieces that need the kinesthetic participation of the fiddler’s foot tapping as well as the tramping of the dancers. Balancing the fiddle on one’s collarbone brings a sense of freedom for the neck and chin that can be maintained when one returns to violin and viola.

Since the Hardanger style is essentially a Baroque fiddle tradition played on a Baroque fiddle, the performance of Bach and Handel becomes much easier to understand. When I play fiddle, I use a transition bow based on a 1750 Tourte model made by Andrew Dipper in 1994. Ornaments take the place of vibrato and bowing style is determined by the rhythmic content of the tune. The attention to modal inflected “blue” notes in the various fiddle dialects makes it easier to play blues and jazz derived music. The use of scordatura to replace modulation to different keys also expands the ear. We play in at least four different tunings on a regular basis and a few additional ones on occasion. Finally, the use of improvisation is a big step toward mastery for the advanced player who understands the style well. In recent years, I have begun to improvise in concert and to compose new repertoire, both things that were completely foreign to me as a classically trained violinist and violist of the old school.

In summary, I estimate that at about 60 students have studied Hardanger fiddle at St. Olaf since lessons began in 1979. My fiddle class this fall looks as though it may number as many as nine students. My first Hardanger fiddle student, Knut Brakstad, has ascended to high places: he is the chief attendant to King Harald V of Norway.

*Andrea Een, Norwegian-American Hardanger fiddler, received the St. Olav Medal in 2002, given by King Harald V of Norway for her promotion of greater knowledge of Norwegian culture abroad. Andrea has studied the Hardanger fiddle with some of the leading fiddlers in Norway. In 2004 she released her solo CD, From the Valley, which combines her original fiddle solos with traditional dances and tone poems from West Norway. Andrea Een has taught Hardanger fiddle, violin and viola at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN since 1977. ♪*