



PERFORMER CORNER

Karen Solgård's Life of Musical Transformations

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

Karen Solgård has lived a musical life of transformations. True to that ethic, she even transformed my perspective on classical music the first time I met her! From her south Minneapolis home she introduced me to the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle (called *hardingfele* in Norwegian), a remarkable string instrument, similar in shape to a violin, but with a distinctively different sound. In addition to the strings that are bowed, this instrument has four or five additional strings that run beneath its fingerboard. When the fiddle is played, these strings vibrate sympathetically, creating a thick, misty drone sound. The bridge is nearly flat, making it possible, or even necessary, to play two strings at once. The neck of the instrument is shorter, allowing for eight or nine pegs in a longer peg box, which is generally topped with human or animal shapes instead of a scroll. The top and back are decorated lavishly with intricate ink work, while bone and mother-of-pearl are inlaid on the fingerboard and tailpiece. In southern Norway, the Hardanger fiddle was at the height of popularity from the mid-18th to mid-19th centuries, and on that first visit Karen not only taught me about her instrument, but much about its historical, geographic and cultural context. Karen was clearly a scholar of this instrument, thinking and researching broadly and deeply.

As I gathered my belongings to leave after our first visit she stopped me in my tracks by simply remarking, "Did you know that Edvard Grieg based his tune *Morning Mood* on the drone strings of the Hardanger fiddle?" And with that she reached in to pluck the bottom layer of strings on her beautiful instrument: A-F#-E-D. Suddenly this most popular of classical melodies, this rather hackneyed musical caricature of beautiful spring morn-

ings in many a cartoon and TV commercial, revealed itself in a way I never could have imagined, and suddenly Edvard Grieg, just another romantic composer of pretty tunes from long ago, revealed himself to be a remarkable musical colorist and the creator of masterful structures out of the simplest of musical motifs.

Karen began her musical life in a lively family with five siblings on a farm near Crookston, Minnesota. Her mother's large, extended Norwegian family came from the middle of North Dakota, an area settled by her grandparents and relatives from Telemark, Norway. One of the family's early settlers was a quintessential "Norwegian bachelor farmer" prominent in progressive North



Karen's two fiddles

Dakota politics and, at the same time, a keeper of Norwegian traditions. Little was told about him while Karen was growing up, except that he was the one who gave a violin named the *Olsness fiddle* to her mother. It may have been the same S.A. Olsness' Hardanger fiddle that Karen discovered, broken to bits in an old, tattered violin case in her grandparents' attic in the 1970s. It had a dragon head in place of a scroll, and flowers inked on the body. It had no label or date. Nobody remembered anyone ever playing it. As an aspiring cellist, she was allowed to bring that "strange Norwegian violin" home, where it was reconstructed by a local luthier

and then hung on the living room wall. They thought people from the old country simply didn't know much about violin making so decorated it like they would any piece of furniture, with *rosemaling* (flower painting) and fancy carving.



Karen's family hadn't forgotten their Norwegian heritage. Norwegian folk songs had always been taught by her mother, aunt and grandmother to her generation, and she and her sisters even performed at various events dressed in their Norwegian *bunads* (regional costumes). But the main artistic focus was on

church and classical music. Karen sang with her sisters and she studied piano, cello, French horn, and trumpet, later going on to complete a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in cello performance at the University of Minnesota School of Music in Minneapolis. After college, Karen performed cello in a French string ensemble that toured Europe and Asia, then went on to New York City to study with Juilliard-based cello teacher Harvey Shapiro. Back in Minneapolis, Karen was part of the cello section for the Minneapolis Chamber Symphony, opera and ballet orchestras, and led the Groveland String Quartet. Yet even as she passionately pursued classical music, that funny family fiddle stayed in her thoughts and ultimately led to her first major musical transformation.

Karen heard a Hardanger fiddle played live, in its traditional way, for the first time in 1986 on a trip to Rauland, Telemark, the birthplace of her great-grandfather. By chance she heard one of the finest players in Norway, Knut Buen, observed a local

fiddle competition, which was followed by a dance. She was smitten by this “strange Norwegian violin.” Coincidentally it was at about the same time that the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America was founded, which signaled a revival of this instrument in America. (Their website has a wealth of background information and sound samples: www.hfaa.org.) Karen found herself to be part of the original core of people determined to bring Hardanger fiddle back to American fiddle traditions.

This finally led to her first musical transformation, when she decided to leave the cello and the classical music she had pursued so diligently for so long, to dedicate herself to unraveling this buried musical treasure, the music of Hardanger fiddle. She gradually built a career performing in concerts, creating school programs and residencies, and presenting fiddle and dance workshops across the United States. Her performances include not just tunes on her fiddle, but singing and sharing the old stories that are part of the folk traditions of her ancestors. After many performances—especially to audiences of Norwegian-Americans—someone *always* had a story about an old uncle or grandpa who used to play, or the family still that had an old Hardanger fiddle they treasured but no one played. Karen gradually came to realize that her family exemplified a story repeated throughout the Upper Midwest, in the Pacific Northwest, and other large pockets of Norwegian descendants.

Her growing reputation led her to produce and record three CDs, edit and publish a book of tunes, *Norse Fiddle at*

the Wedding for Hardanger Fiddle or Violin. All under the name “Norse Fiddle,” since the name “Hardanger” isn’t always clear for Americans. She also discovered one of her special gifts to be translating authentic Norwegian musical traditions to classical musicians and teachers, because the classical world was where she was raised as a musician. This included creating residency and performance work with in-school orchestra programs as well as community and professional orchestras. It seemed as if her work to connect the threads of Norwegian cultural treasures to the rich and diverse American tapestry could go on indefinitely. However a new set of circumstances, familiar to each of us these days, intervened to lead Karen to a second major musical transformation.

It started when the price of gasoline was skyrocketing a couple years back, making it hard to predict the future costs for travel, which in turn made Karen hesitate planning the tours which were central to her work. This took place in the wake of diminishing funds and grants available for the arts and artists. But what finally brought the house down was last year’s economic crash. Karen describes most of her audiences and venues as “not your high income folks,” so little by little performance dates grew further and further apart. Out of necessity Karen took on temporary office work, and once that took hold, her availability for performing and teaching diminished mightily.

For an active, professional musician this latest transition might seem tragic. But Karen truly appears at peace with this latest change, and is happy to talk about it, something that we tend not to discuss in

a professional world where achievement is marked by having too many engagements, too many opportunities to work as a musician. As Karen says, “There’s music in my head; I can’t help it; it’s going to be there. So whether I’m performing or not I’m just going to follow my inner voice and ‘let the tunes come to me.’” She speaks of tunes she still really wants to learn, and she continues to gather materials saved over many years to possibly create another publication. But right now for Karen it is less about creating the next thing for her audience, and more about returning back into herself to find what she honestly enjoys and is drawn to musically. She sees working full time at a day job as the right occupation for right now. Karen explains, “There will be another time and place more directly related to music, but at the moment I’m finding it again just for myself.”

In this strange new economy many of us are compelled to rethink what it means to be a musician, and I believe Karen, by describing this as just another major transition in her musical life, opens the way for us as a community of musicians to discuss openly what this strange new world can teach us. You can learn more about Karen and her long, continuously unfolding journey on her website: www.norsefiddle.com.

Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes works extensively with extraordinary musicians outside of the classical music realm. She created Vox Corda (voice of the string) as a way to explore all genres of acoustic string music and to offer another facet of string music advocacy. ♪