



Vol. 20 No. 2 2022



# Traditional Tunes Today

# The Hardanger Fiddle: A Tour of the Instrument and its Traditions

Eden Ehm

## The National Folk Instrument of Norway

Encapsulating many treasured elements of Norwegian culture in one instrument, the Hardanger fiddle is rightfully known as the national folk instrument of Norway. Recognized for its music, the "hardingfele" tradition also preserves and promotes folk art, dance, folklore, and regional traditions. But before beginning to appreciate the depth and breadth of its significance in the Norwegian culture, it's important to start at the very beginning by understanding the instrument itself.

The Hardanger fiddle got its name from the Hardanger Fjord area where it originated. It is traditional only to the southern and western parts of Norway; the "flatfele" or flat fiddle of a classical violin is common elsewhere in the country. The oldest known Hardanger fiddle dates back to 1651 and was made by Ole Johnson Jaastad. Experts disagree about whether the Hardanger fiddle evolved from the violin or medieval stringed instruments.

Hardanger fiddles are eye-catching because they are so decorative. In making a Hardanger fiddle, a luthier must be skilled in many folk arts: instrument making, carving, inlay, rosing, and design. As a folk instrument, many different types of wood are used to make the body of the instrument, but native spruce and maple are preferable due to their acoustic properties. Hardanger fiddles also include carving of the instrument and its decorative scroll; the black ink designs called rosing; and inlay on the fingerboard, tailpiece, and pegs.

## The Sound

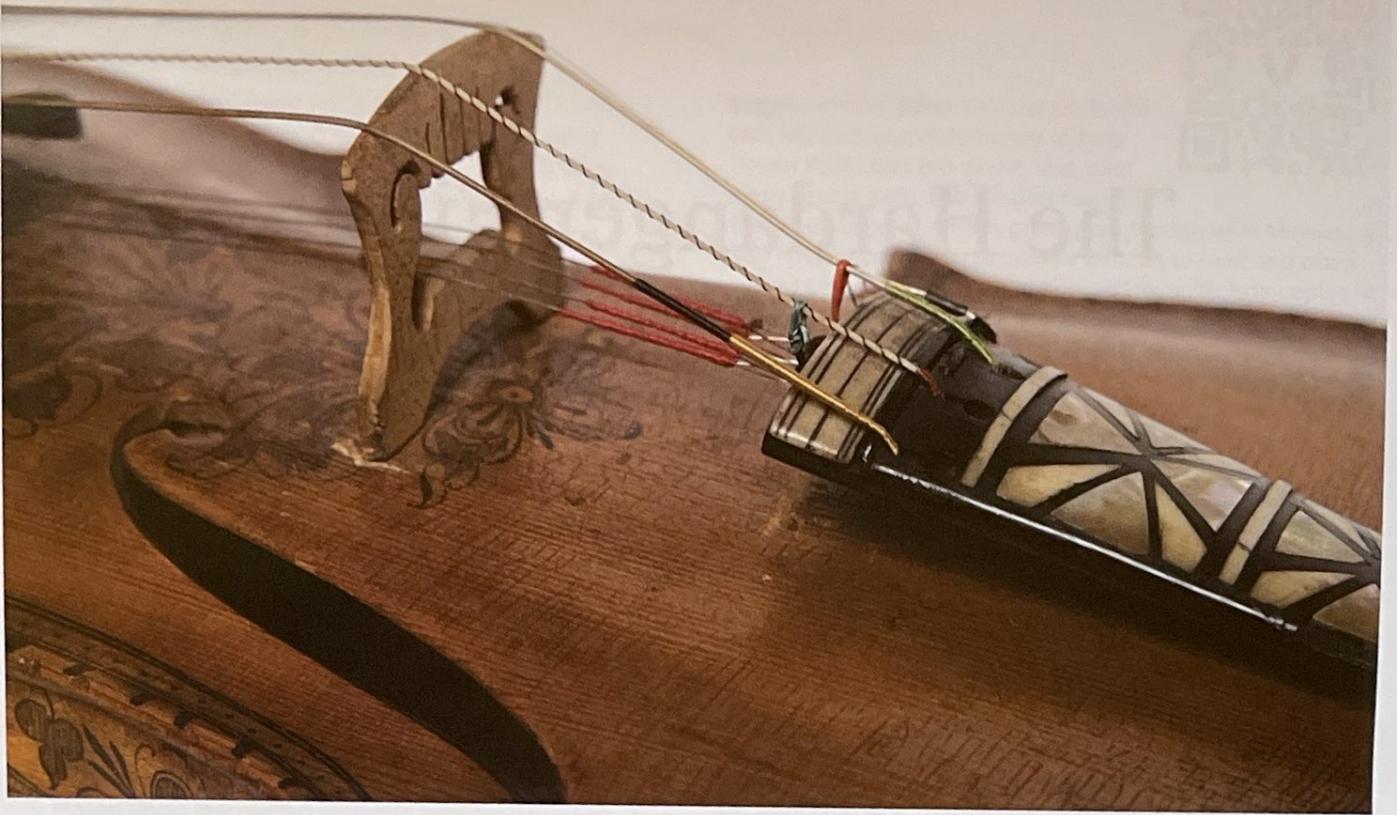
The distinct polyphonic sound of the Hardanger fiddle is attributed to the instrument's extra strings. Polyphony is

the combination of two or more tones or melodies at once. On a Hardanger fiddle, this is made possible by the four to five thin strings stacked underneath the four expected top strings. These "under strings" are sympathetic strings: you never touch them while playing, but when tuned in combination with the rest of the strings they create beautiful over and undertones that produce the instrument's unique and haunting sound. Very old fiddles have fewer sympathetic strings. Every century or so a string is added, and modern-day Hardanger fiddles have five sympathetic strings.

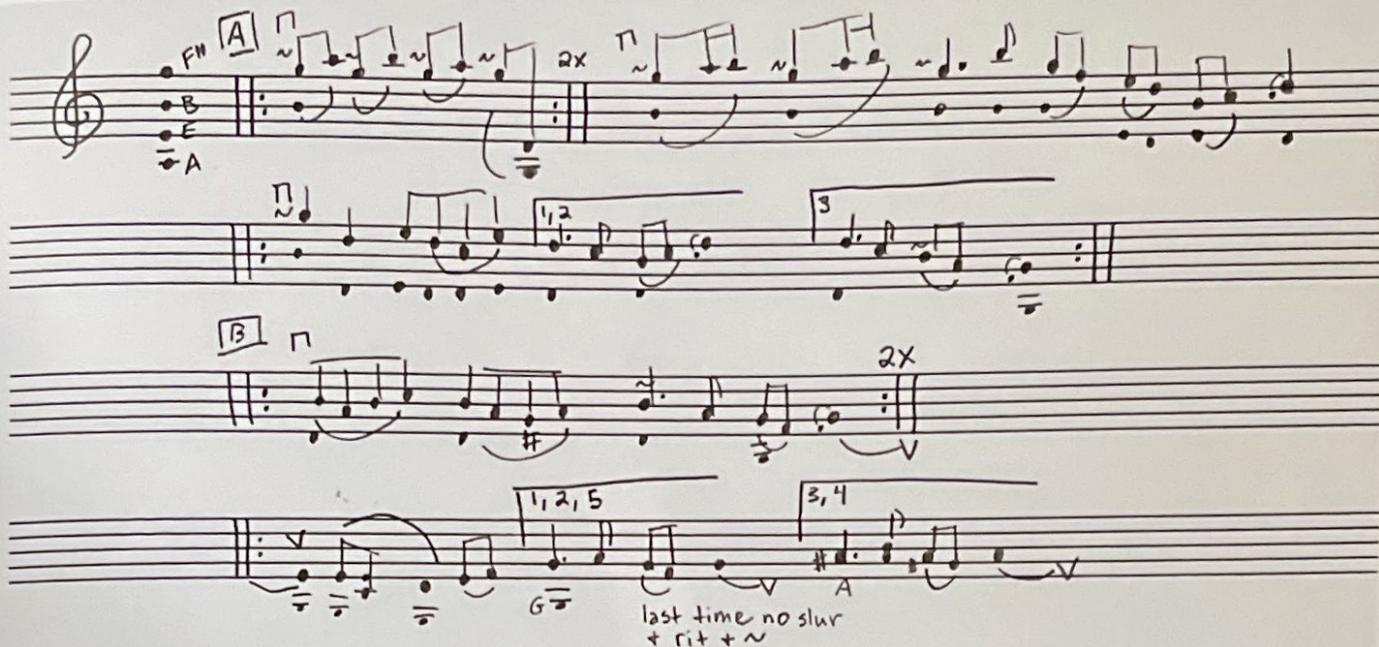
There are four strings on top that the player interacts with, using their left hand to create pitches and their right hand to draw out the sound using the bow. Historically, these strings would have been "gut" strings made out of the intestines of a farm animal. Today, modern advancements in strings give players the option of gut strings, wound silver or aluminum around a gut core, or fully steel strings.

The dimensions of a Hardanger fiddle are different from a classical violin due to the additional sympathetic strings. The body is shorter, thicker, and rounder, with f-holes that are flared open to allow the resonance of the additional sympathetic strings to ring out. Since players do not need to reach high notes, the neck is shorter. Watching fiddlers perform, you will notice that they play with a relaxed posture, often resting the neck of the instrument on their forearm. When playing for hours at a dance party, this relaxed posture is paramount.

The addition of droning notes is made possible by the Hardanger fiddle's unique bridge. A violin's bridge is very curved because you typically only need to play on one string at a time. The Hardanger fiddle, in contrast, has a very



Detail of a Hardanger fiddle from the tail piece to the fingerboard with four thin strings stacked underneath (through the bridge) and the four expected strings on top.  
 Hardanger fiddle made by Knut or Gunnar Helland, Cameron, Wisconsin, 1906.  
 1981.090.001 - Gift of Rev. Christian Hovde.



Traditional gangar after Anders Kjerland. As learned by Eden Ehm from Knut Hamre in 2018. Transcribed by Eden Ehm.

flat bridge that makes it easy to play on multiple strings at once. The Hardanger fiddle bridge also has a hole cut in the middle for the sympathetic strings to pass through on their journey. Starting at the tailpiece, they pass through the bridge, under the fingerboard, over the nut, and end at the scroll, where they wrap around the pegs.

The sheer volume of pegs is eye-catching and, as you can imagine, they are critical to the very difficult-to-tune Hardanger fiddle. There are over 29 established tunings for all of the strings. The most common is, in order from the lowest string to the highest string, B-E-B-F# for the top strings and C#-E-F#-G-B for the sympathetic strings. The strings are wound around the pegs, which serve both a functional and decorative purpose.

### No Two Fiddlers Play the Same

The fingerboard is where the magic happens! The left hand creates the melody. Hardanger fiddle music is taught aurally (by ear) with a teacher breaking a tune into small pieces and demonstrating for the student. The student learns the tune bit by bit, until they can put all of the pieces together and have mastered the entire tune. Then they work on getting the tune up to tempo and adding their own ornamental flair. This teaching tradition creates a unique musical family tree where certain players might play the same tune slightly differently depending from whom they learned it. The melody is a rough outline of the music. It is up to the player to add their own unique and improvisational ornamentation to the melody line. Examples are added trills, drones, grace notes, or variations. A folk tune has been created! No two fiddlers play the same tune alike.

Today, the majority of the Hardanger fiddle repertoire has been recorded in print and audio files as a means to preserve and share the tradition. However, it is still preferable

to be taught via the traditional aural process, earning the sheet music only after you've mastered the tune. The sheet music serves as an outline, and there are many nuances of rhythm, tempo, and ornamentation that cannot be notated musically and can only be learned by listening to another fiddler.

Hardanger fiddle music is written with what is called a scordatura. This means that the music is notated in one key, but the sound coming out of the instrument is in a different key. While this may seem very confusing, it simplifies the body of written music so that a written note always corresponds to the same combination of string and finger no matter the key. All the player has to do is tune their instrument to the correct tuning before they play. The intense student-teacher interaction not only fosters learning, but also expands and connects musicians into a tightknit community of fiddlers in Norway, the United States, and elsewhere in the world.

### Decoration

No detail on a Hardanger fiddle is left without ornamentation, so even the pegs are an opportunity for decoration. The inlay on the pegs, fingerboard, tailpiece, and body is done with mother-of-pearl, bone, and horn. Historically, the mother of pearl would be harvested from shellfish and the bone and horn would be from a farm animal, but today modern makers source the needed materials from all over the world.

The black ink designs tattooed on the Hardanger fiddle are called rosing. Covering the top, back, sides, and scroll, each of these designs is hand-inked by the fiddle maker and sealed inside of the instrument's varnish. It is most often done in black ink, but other colors are sometimes used. Many fiddle makers used the same general rosing designs,

Detail of rosin design. Hardanger fiddle made between 1750 and 1850 as a copy of an older one made by Isak Nielsen (Skaar) Botnen (1663-1759). Botnen was the first known fiddle maker in Norway. LC6958 - Luther College Collection.



yet each instrument is totally unique. Looking closely at the rosing, it becomes clear that the fiddle maker must have a steady hand to ink so many designs with such precision and detail. Rosing most commonly includes a border around the edge of the instrument, a central design on the instrument's top, back, and sides, and decoration on the scroll.

The outstanding decorative element of the Hardanger fiddle is the scroll. It is certainly a conversation piece for any fiddle. The scroll is much longer than that of a violin because of the space needed for the additional sympathetic strings. This extra canvas is put to excellent use with unique designs carved into or drawn onto the wood. The most common and traditional scroll designs are a lion, maiden, or dragon, but anything goes. From crowns to teeth to mustaches, no two scrolls are alike and are an opportunity for the maker to show off their skills and add some artistic flair.

### Fiddle Makers

Fiddle makers are proud of their work. After the time and talent needed to create a Hardanger fiddle, many makers left their mark on the instrument. This is typically done by printing their name inside the instrument. Some used a paper or cloth label, a stamp, or a signature. Yet, a high volume of older instruments are by unknown makers; their label lost to time, removed during repairs, or never labeled initially. However, because of the unique fingerprint each maker leaves on their instruments through their designs, many makers can be reasonably inferred through common patterns found on the rosing or inlay. Identifying a fiddle's maker is most easily done with good-quality fiddles made by well-known luthiers, which was a trade that was often passed down through families. The Steintjønndalen and Helland families made up the best-known fiddle-making dynasty from the late 1700s through the 1970s, with the Helland Brothers continuing the fiddle-making tradition in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. We can also infer information from unknown fiddles by novice makers through the materials, design, and craftsmanship.

Knowing what makes a great sound, many of the best fiddle makers were also players themselves. My personal instrument was made by a famous fiddler known as Ole Skogly (1866-1939). He changed his name at least three times as he moved to different locations and farms in Norway, so his instruments are signed with several different names. Ole regularly entered his instruments into folk-art exhibitions and contests. My fiddle won an award at a competition in Drammen, Norway, in 1901. As was customary, after the award was won, a stamp denoting the win was added inside the instrument. My Hardanger fiddle made its way from Norway to Wisconsin, where I was lucky to find and purchase it. Even though it is not a family heirloom, it is a precious keepsake of mine that I treasure every time I play. I enjoy the ongoing challenge of researching its history.

Aside from the maker, many instruments have interesting information stored inside. This ranges from practical facts, such as repair names and dates, to whimsical additions, such as poems. One instrument in Vesterheim's collection has its entire interior back and sides covered with a beautiful handwritten poem. While it is hard to read from outside the



Example of a lion head scroll – this one with teeth! Hardanger fiddle, maker and date unknown. LCO990 - Luther College Collection.

instrument, the few lines that can be seen paint a beautiful picture of the fjords of Norway.

... and from the fjords  
... and bleached by the mountain sun  
I would vibrate with the thunder of the hills  
And the singing falls above me.  
Birds warbled from my branches,  
And creatures of the forest sought my cooling  
and restful shade.

### The Soundtrack to Important Moments

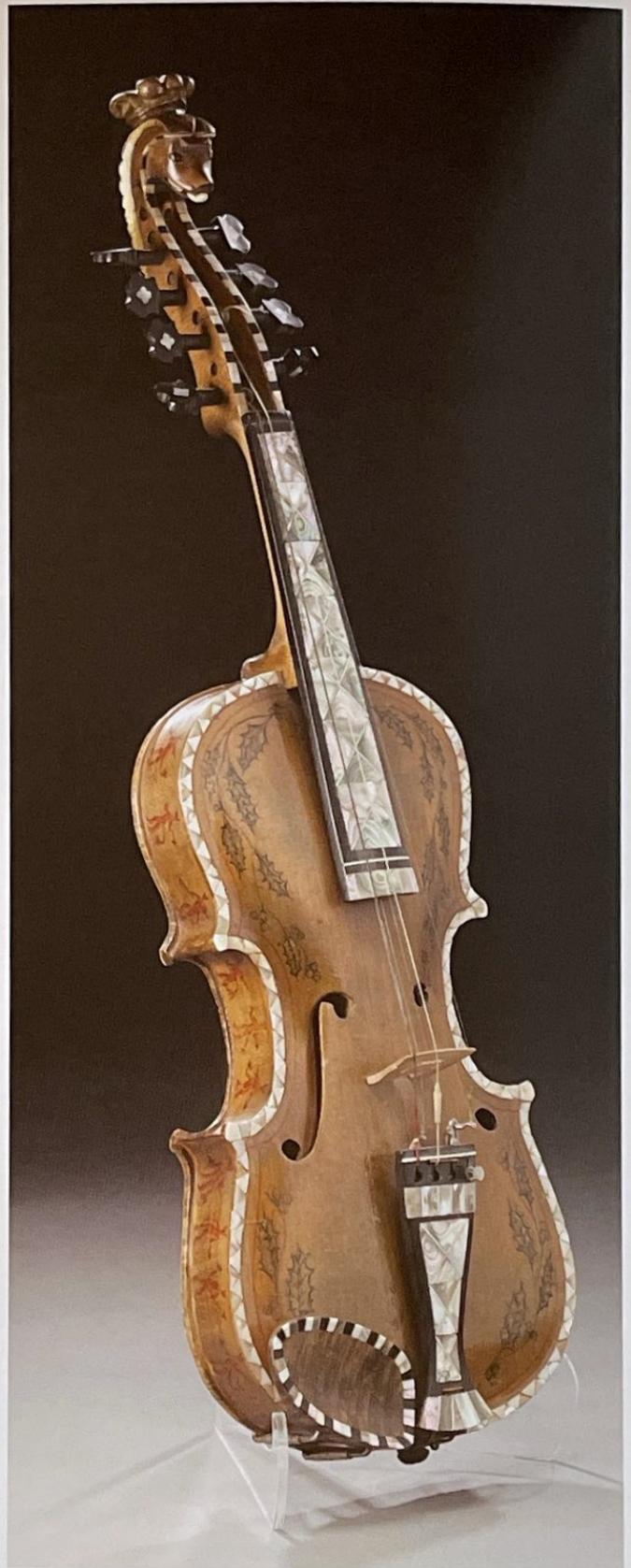
Experience playing a bowed stringed instrument is an advantage when learning the Hardanger fiddle, but does not guarantee success. There are a few important differences in technique between the classical stringed instruments and the Hardanger fiddle that are noteworthy. When bowing a Hardanger fiddle, players must use a lighter and more connected stroke to keep the sympathetic strings resonating to produce a good sound. Additionally, the left hand is much more complicated since you are always playing on



In Norway, it was traditional for the the fiddler to lead the wedding processional to the church. Stereo Card, Norwegian Wedding Party, Hardanger, Norway, Keystone View Company, c. 1903, Vesterheim Archives.



Many fiddlers adopted a very relaxed posture to rest their arm during long hours of playing. Photographic Print, Knut Dahle, Hardanger Fiddler, c. 1890s, Herbjørn Gausta Collection, Vesterheim Archives.



Detail of devils painted on a Hardanger fiddle made by Otto Rindlisbacher in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, in the mid-1900s. Rindlisbacher was Swiss American, but made and restored Hardanger fiddles and violins as a hobby. He knew and was influenced by the Norwegian-immigrant Helland brothers of nearby Cameron.  
1976.036.001 - Gift of Lois Rindlisbacher Albrecht.

multiple strings at once and creating the ornaments that are characteristic of the tunes. Mastering Hardanger fiddle music and traditions is much different from mastering a classical stringed instrument because from the very beginning, the performance intent is different.

The Hardanger fiddle provides the soundtrack to important moments. Traditionally, it was played for social dancing and milestone moments like weddings. The Hardanger fiddler was the most important guest at the party, fiddling for hours on end while the fun continued late into the night. This is the reason many fiddlers adopted a very relaxed posture while playing. Being a great dance fiddler takes skill. Not only must fiddlers master the tunes, but they must also be able to play them at dance tempo consistently for many repetitions. Stomping the foot loudly to the beat, called "tramping," is an important part of the performance. Great dance fiddlers also interact with the dancers, picking up on and giving cues. This interplay between the fiddler and the dancers often makes for fun moments.

There are two categories of dances and their associated fiddle tunes. First is the *byggdedans* or "village dance." *Byggdedans* are old dances that are very regional in music and dance style. An excellent example of a regional *byggdedans* tune is a *springar*. This is a lively dance in an uneven time signature. Danced in couples, the man is given the opportunity to improvise. A tradition of Telemark and Setesdal only, a *gangar* is a walking *byggdedans* in 2/4 or 6/8 time. The *gangar* evolved into a very iconic Norwegian *byggdedans* – the *halling*. In this lively dance, the men try to show off by kicking a hat off of a high beam in the roof or a broom handle held up high. It is an extremely athletic dance and the music matches that energy.

Second is the *gammeldans* or "old dances." They were and remain popular among Norwegian immigrant communities and are played on both Hardanger fiddle and flat fiddle. You might recognize and know how to dance these dances like a *pol*s or a waltz, a dance in 3/4 time that is a very popular couples dance across many cultures.

Another traditional use of Hardanger fiddle in Norwegian culture, and a big genre of regional tunes, is wedding marches. The fiddler led the wedding procession to the church. However, the fiddler was not allowed into the church during the 19th century religious revival. The fiddle was considered the Devil's instrument, especially because it was played for the aforementioned dance parties where there were lots of drinking and shenanigans.

## Living Tradition

While the dance traditions originated in the past, they are definitely alive and kicking up their dancing feet today! Everything about the Hardanger fiddle is a living tradition. From modern makers studying historic instruments and creating new and unique designs to fiddlers composing new tunes to dance, march, and listen to, the tradition continues to evolve. The Hardanger fiddle has even snuck its way into pop culture, appearing on the soundtracks to popular movies like *Lord of the Rings*, *Fargo*, and *How to Train Your Dragon*. The "Hardanger fiddle" concept has expanded to include fractional-sized instruments for young players,

experiments with Hardanger violas and cellos, and 5 x 5 instruments with a total of ten strings.

Almost 400 years after the first Hardanger fiddle was created in Norway, the instrument continues to enchant all who hear its music. Reminiscent of a simpler era, its time-honored traditional uses cement its place in Norwegian culture. Known for its unique look just as much as its intriguing sound, it continues to draw in curious listeners from across the world as it shares Norway's musical heritage far and wide. A Hardanger fiddle is amazing in that it showcases many Norwegian folk arts – carving, rosing, storytelling, dance, and music – in and through just one representative object. Each instrument, and its story, is audibly and visually stunning and completely one of a kind. From the instrument, to its music, to the dances, every part of the Hardanger fiddle is rich with tradition, history, art, and culture. A beloved symbol of the past, the Hardanger fiddle will undoubtedly remain a prominent cultural symbol into the future.

## About the Author

Eden Ehm is a Hardanger fiddle player, performer, lecturer, and teacher from Decorah, Iowa. She has been studying the Hardanger fiddle for over a decade and enjoys sharing its unique beauty, sound, and traditions with others. Find out more about Eden at [edenehmmusic.com](http://edenehmmusic.com).



Eden Ehm with her Hardanger fiddle.