

The great divide: recent trends in the technical approach to the fiddle in Norway

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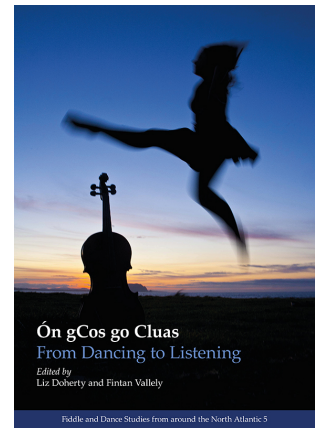
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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Fiddling with style: recent trends in the approach to the fiddle in Norway

ÅNON EGELAND

My first dedicated involvement with Hardanger fiddle playing began in my late teens. Unlike the majority of my schoolmates with far more mainstream tastes, I quite rapidly found myself in the lucky position where my musical heroes were also my teachers. All were men, well-respected players and traditional stylists, born between 1893 and 1927, and mostly from the Agder region of southern Norway. All shared an archaic approach to the fiddle, in terms of technique as well as style and repertoire. I employed the same technique as them as a matter of course, and never questioned its validity. So, like them, I held the fiddle against my chest, with the heel of my left hand supporting it. I didn't encounter any resistance to this approach until, after a few years of apprenticeship, I made a half-hearted attempt to take part in the competition system of Norway's traditional music scene. I had chosen two of my best tunes and managed to render them in an acceptable fashion. The result was far from disastrous, but the response from the judges was discouraging – especially the written comment, which boldly stated: 'Somewhat toothless. Must hold the fiddle under chin'. Of course, there were probably sound reasons to criticise the performance of my twenty-year-old self, so the judges may well have been right in their evaluation of the music. But even now, nearly four decades later, I am not willing to accept that my fiddle hold was to blame for the poor results. I am still puzzled by the attitude of the judges in this regard. All were players of repute, including the great Kjetil Løndal (1907–1987) whose father and mentor, Svein Løndal (1864–1949), ironically, appeared to have used exactly the same fiddle-hold as myself. So how was it that these adjudicators had come to reject their own background and advocate instead the adoption of a technique influenced by the classical violin?

Two fiddle types, one hold

Two different varieties of the fiddle are used in Norway: the regular fiddle and the Hardanger fiddle (*hardingfele*). The former is physically identical to the violin. Although the earliest known specimens of the latter (the oldest dates back to circa 1651) are roughly the size of a modern 3/4 violin, since the 1860s Hardanger fiddles have been built in more or less the same mould as modern violins. The most notable ways in which they differ from the violin

are the slightly shorter neck (resulting in a resonating string length that is roughly 25mm shorter), the considerably more curved top – the inner edge of the sound holes is on a higher plane than the outer – and the 4–5 sympathetic strings that run underneath the relatively flat bridge and fingerboard. In the paper that follows, I use the term ‘fiddle’ when referring to the violin’s use in a traditional music context and ‘violin’ when referring to its use in a modern art music context.

It is important to bear in mind that despite the differences in appearance, both forms of Norwegian fiddle have historically shared the same basic technical and stylistic approach, and in that way can be considered the same instrument. It is also worth noting that there have always been differences of opinion about the technical approach to the instrument, irrespective of genre and style. Reflecting the view of Norway’s musical elite, or *stadsmusikant*,¹ Lorents Nicolaj Berg states in his tutor book of 1782 that ‘every violinist insists that his manner [of holding the instrument] is the most comfortable: Some hold it under the chin, others on the chin, others against their breast ...’²

The hold that was common among most older players in the early 1970s when I started playing – what I refer to in this paper as the ‘traditional’ hold – can be described as follows: the tail-piece of the instrument is held against the neck, or lower down, against the collar bone or the chest. Most importantly, it is never supported by the chin. The left hand is bent inwards, often with its heel touching the edge of the bottom of the instrument. The Hardanger fiddle is always held with the left hand touching the instrument in this way, providing the support that a modern violinist gets by clamping the fiddle with the chin. In the generation born around the turn of the last century, this left-hand position was still fairly common among regular fiddle players too. Typically, the player will be seated. This is more relaxed, and enables the player to provide the foot percussion essential to the style. The fiddle is held with the peg box tilting slightly forwards and with the top at an angle of 45–60 degrees to the floor. The arms are close to the body, causing the bowing hand to move more vertically than horizontally. A quick investigation outside Norway rapidly reveals that this technical approach has historically been close to universal, and used by fiddlers not only in Norway, but all over the Western world. The sheer number of players who have approached their instruments in this way – and across such a vast area – is astonishing.

Most researchers of violin history agree that for the first century of its existence the violin was primarily used to provide music for dancing and lighter entertainment, performed by the lower strata of the hierarchy of professional musicians.³ The violin made its first recorded appearance on the concert music scene of the social elite only in the late 1620s, and it was not until several decades later that it acquired the prestige it enjoys to this day. It is likely that the traditional fiddle hold – along with several other characteristics of fiddle style and technique – predates the use of the violin in art music, and thus forms part of an alternative approach, rather than being a substandard and distorted version of art music violin technique. Notably, even when the violin was eventually accepted in art music, the same hold was used at least until the end of the eighteenth century, when the size of both orchestras and concert halls spurred a quest for more volume from the violin, eventually leading to changes in the construction of the instrument and the techniques used to play it.



Figure 1 Hardanger fiddle players from Kroken, Drangedal, Telemark County, mid-twentieth century: Johan Oskarsen, Lars Eikhaugen, Anders Sørter, Olav G. Aakre, Gunnar Brødsjø. *Private photo.*

Despite the changes in the art music world, fiddle (as opposed to violin) technique in Norway underwent relatively little change until the 1960s. The majority of fiddlers – players of the regular as well as the Hardanger variety – would still approach their instruments pretty much in the same way as their forebears three centuries earlier. The 1970s, with its astonishing resurgence of interest in traditional music, may have marked the start of a growing polarisation between the two fiddle varieties with regard to the way they are approached, but even in the 1990s a fair number of older players of the regular fiddle still stuck to the traditional technique. In present-day Norway, however, this approach has become rarer and, as I experienced in my youth, there is a growing tendency to reject the traditional fiddle hold, which is somewhat paradoxical considering the cultural conservatism typical of traditional players and audiences. This is certainly not a uniquely Norwegian trend, but one that is happening – or has long since happened – in most fiddling traditions of the Western world. During the quarter of a century in which I have been teaching traditional music on a full-time professional basis, I have seen a notable increase in the number of students with a markedly ‘violinistic’ approach to their instrument – the most visible sign of this being the use of a shoulder rest. Curiously, although it seems to be the rule rather than the exception for regular fiddlers to use this device these days, the number of players who insist on using it on the Hardanger fiddle can be counted on one hand. Typically these exceptions are regular fiddle players or violinists who happen also to play the Hardanger fiddle. But how did this change come about?

The shift

On 15 January, 1849 the internationally acclaimed violin virtuoso Ole Bull (1810–1880) gave a concert in Christiania, now Oslo. He had invited a special guest, Torgeir Augundsson (a.k.a. Myllarguten, 1801–1872), the most prolific Hardanger fiddle player at the time, to perform seven tunes. This was the first time a fiddler had ever performed for the bourgeoisie and the concert therefore marks a shift. Art music, through Ole Bull, endorsed the fiddler and his music; the music of the peasant fiddler suddenly became ‘national’.

No doubt this was important for the self-esteem of the fiddlers, and it was certainly instrumental in spurring ‘stage’ fiddling as an alternative to playing for dances. Touring fiddlers would often include programmatic pieces in the vein of Ole Bull, a genre that by then was already a bit out of fashion in the classical world, with its imitations of cattle calls, warbling birds, cuckoos, etc. It is important to keep in mind that although Ole Bull was highly regarded by fiddlers, both as a spokesman for their art and as a performer, he didn’t influence most of them directly. His indirect impact should not be underestimated, however, and even well into the twentieth century the name of Ole Bull had a special ring for fiddlers.

I believe a direct line can be drawn from the ideals of this era, through the so-called concert fiddlers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the 1960s and the years that followed when fiddlers’ associations in many places in Norway started to arrange workshops focusing on ‘proper’ technique. Typically, the workshop teachers were well-known and admired players who came from strong traditional backgrounds, but had subsequently had a thorough classical training, thereby aligning themselves with the dominant culture. The first to tour Norway with this vision of a classical fiddle style was a great admirer of Ole Bull: the iconic Hardanger fiddler and classically trained violinist, Sigbjørn Bernhoft Osa (1910–1990). Although he was instrumental in popularising the Hardanger fiddle, he was typically inclined to a more violinistic technical approach. He viewed the traditional fiddle hold – particularly the variant with the instrument held against the chest – with derision. Later Sven Nyhus (b. 1932), the renowned regular fiddle player, orchestral viola player and collector, and Norway’s first professor of traditional music, made an impact, particularly in the regular fiddle circles of Eastern Norway. Despite showing a greater understanding of the uniqueness of the traditional style than Osa, he still advocated a classically tinged technique; his approach is still used at the Academy of Music in Oslo. Some of his former students have even reportedly encouraged the use of shoulder rests on the Hardanger fiddle.

Although many fiddlers attending the workshops of these instructors may not have changed their own playing habits, the experience certainly led to a shift in their attitudes about what was deemed to be acceptable technique. And since many of them were judges in fiddle competitions, these views gradually gained a foothold throughout the broader fiddling community. Therefore, the impact of the workshops should not be underestimated. For me, the workshops are a classic example of how a dominated culture tries to upgrade its own value by adopting the ways of the dominant culture, or how traditional, rural Norwegian society tries to gain acceptance by adopting the aesthetics of the country’s small urban elite.⁴

Today, other practical issues pose a challenge to the old style of fiddling, such as the development of municipal culture schools over the last three decades or so, where many

regular fiddle players of the younger generation have had their first basic training. Although these schools do, generally speaking, support traditional music and often employ musically non-literate, traditional players, there are unfortunate cases where they are obliged to rationalise by employing just one bowed-instrument teacher, and will typically opt for a ‘neutral’ violin method which, needless to say, will tend to consider the technical needs of budding violinists rather than future fiddlers. It is little wonder, then, that the pupils of these schools acquire habits and attitudes that are hard to change later in life – if, indeed, changing them is an issue at all.

Hardanger fiddle versus regular fiddle today

Interestingly, the Hardanger fiddle wasn’t affected in the same radical way as the regular fiddle. This is largely attributable to cultural legacy of the work of researchers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who went to great lengths to prove the ‘Norwegian-ness’ of the Hardanger fiddle, in the most extreme cases claiming that it had nothing whatsoever to do with the European violin. Consequently, modern violin technique was to a certain extent considered irrelevant. It was, moreover, declared the ‘national’ instrument of Norway – even though it is traditionally used only in parts of the south, more precisely in the central, mountainous valleys and along the fjords of central Western Norway. This feeling of ‘otherness’ and the ‘national’ label have, no doubt, prevented the Hardanger fiddle (and its players) from being as exposed to violinistic influences as the regular fiddle. For the reasons stated above, the fiddle-against-the-chest hold has admittedly become rarer, although it is still used by several younger players. The standard these days seems to be to hold the fiddle between the neck and the heel of the left hand. Chin rests have now become the norm on Hardanger fiddles as well, although they serve mostly to protect the varnish against wear, rather than to provide actual support.

‘Otherness’ is harder to claim for regular fiddle players: their instrument is, after all, physically exactly the same as the violin. It is understandable, then, that many find it difficult to reject the teachings of the experts, whether good violin makers or virtuoso violinists. So, although many will nominally embrace older traditional players and their style and repertoire, in reality, they discard many of the technical, stylistic and aesthetic values of their musical heroes and substitute them – possibly unconsciously – with a smoother and more ‘seamless’ violinistic approach. To me this is a huge paradox, bordering on arrogance. That said, there are a few within the regular fiddle community who try to emulate the expressive qualities of the older generations of players. But while many succeed in this – for instance a number of players from the Røros region – it is still not unusual to see some of these young fiddlers using shoulder rests – even though they are, paradoxically, holding the fiddle against their chest. Curiously, while regular fiddlers are tending to embrace what they think of as the latest in technical achievement on their instruments, over in the world of art music something quite different is happening. The Early Music movement assigns central importance to the connection between technique and style, while several high-profile and highly respected modern violin teachers and performers – such as Yehudi Menuhin (1916–1999), Yascha Heifetz (1901–1987), Itzhak Perlman (b. 1945), Nigel Kennedy (b. 1956), and Anne-Sophie Mutter (b. 1963), to mention but a few – do not use shoulder rests. Although

some Hardanger fiddle players have, over recent years, expressed growing interest in the older, considerably smaller Hardanger fiddle models and have experimented with historical bows, it is a huge irony that this connection appears to have escaped most regular fiddle players, who seem unable to see beyond the most visible of the many modern schools of violin playing.



Figure 2 Itinerant dance musician and seasonal worker, Jakob 'Treskar' Eilevsen (c. 1911), Agder region, Norway, playing the regular fiddle. *Private photo.*

So what?

But why is it so important to focus on these technical changes? Aren't they simply part of a natural development, a shift in taste; are they not, in other words, at the heart of what tradition is all about: change? I am well aware that an attempt to revitalise the old ways may, rightly perhaps, be seen as meddling with the tradition. On the other hand, one might argue that the same could be said of the fiddling proponents of modern violin technique and shoulder rests. Moreover, the traditional way of holding the fiddle is, after all, alive and in reasonable health for now, and is therefore a voice that has a right to be heard. There is little doubt that many of the reasons for the current shift in the technical approach to the fiddle

have nothing to do with the music as such. Standard justifications from the proponents of the modern violin-tinged style include the impossibility of playing above the first position using the traditional hold or the ‘fact’ that it is harmful from an ergonomic point of view. Suffice it to say that although the vast majority of traditional fiddle tunes stay firmly within the first position, it is perfectly possible – as demonstrated by many older fiddlers – to play in higher positions using the traditional hold. As for the risk of repetitive stress injuries, generations of both professional and amateur fiddlers throughout the western world have used this hold for 300–400 years without any apparent signs of harm. Moreover, the traditional hold, in which the instrument is held at a greater distance from the ear, is much less damaging to the player’s hearing than any modern violin hold. I like to see the traditional hold as the result of ample accumulated knowledge – acquired in the course of prolonged and strenuous playing sessions – of how to avoid repetitive stress injury.

Above all, I believe the newly-adopted techniques are primarily visual signals of modernity and compliance with ‘learned’ ways. For me, therefore, one important reason for addressing the rapid and dramatic change in fiddle technique lies in revealing the mechanisms and ideas that have led to the adoption of a technical and stylistic approach that cannot be said to benefit the music, certainly not if measured against the aesthetic values of the icons and masters of today’s young players. That paradox alone ought to be ample justification for placing the issue of fiddle technique on the agenda. Ultimately, this paper is simply a contribution to the kind of discourse that has always been a vital part of the music scene, whether traditional or not.

Conclusion

I see this article as a means of encouraging a stronger focus not only on the technique/style issue, but also on the intriguing double standards of the traditional music milieu. My own experience with traditional instruction included topics such as technique that were part of the tacit knowledge conveyed by the master. It was taken for granted that you would absorb not only the style of your master but also his technique. Today, bombarded by vastly more musical impulses than ever before, it is obvious to me that this tacit knowledge needs to be formally articulated. The educational institutions that offer traditional music courses, whether at university level or lower, should be among the first to take up this challenge since they now fulfil the role previously played by older, established fiddlers. They need to question their own aesthetic standards and be extremely aware of the importance of their role – not least their ability to radically change the profile of a music genre.

There is, in fact, scope for much vital research here: the ergonomics of the traditional fiddle hold, its history, and the connection between technique and the musical outcome. A major issue in this context is the link between technique and style – the music aesthetics – Is it possible to do justice to all the elements of a music tradition without adhering to the technique employed by the majority of the iconic players who have set the standards for repertoire and style?

From a traditional music perspective, I would tend to answer in the negative, although admittedly the audible differences between one hold and the other may at times be hard to discern. It is true that, from an art music perspective, a number of modern violin techniques

would be very hard to employ using the traditional hold (such as a constant vibrato). On the other hand, the traditional hold lends itself naturally to a variety of bowing techniques that would be very hard to perform properly using a modern violin hold (for instance, the underlying rhythmic pulsation acquired by a constant increase-decrease of bow pressure). Even if it could be proven that the audible difference between the fiddle holds discussed here is at best very subtle, it is hard to deny that the fiddle hold provides a very potent visual signal of who you are and where you belong. And if the traditional hold works perfectly well for traditional styles, why change it? To put it bluntly: we have the choice between looking – and sounding – like second-class violinists, and standing out as first-class fiddlers.

One last point to make is about attitude. When I embarked on my fiddling career in the early 1970s, using the same technique as my masters was the given and was the obvious means of achieving my goal in music: to recreate the musical expression – the style – that first inspired me to play the fiddle. Ultimately, I think it is crucial to acknowledge traditional music as a self-contained, complete system, as a way of showing respect, loyalty and a dash of humility to the earlier generations of players who made it possible for people to play this music. The odds of becoming a successful performer with a positive attitude like this are probably far better than if players start out by making objections to the core technical, stylistic and aesthetic aspects of the music they want to learn.

I am not claiming that the traditional approach is the only valid way to play this music. I am simply saying that it strikes me as absurd that the traditional music world – with some of the educational institutions at the vanguard – should be ruling out playing techniques that have served its purposes perfectly well for hundreds of years. We should be offering more, not fewer, options to our young players, the future tradition-bearers. We are the stewards of a rare and fragile music species, and owe it to future generations to give them the opportunity to enjoy the same multitude of sounds and expressive possibilities as we do now, with every aspect of their uniqueness. By providing them with the tools of the trade – including the traditional technique as a very obvious starting point – we can ensure that tomorrow's players will be able to do justice to their forebears and fiddle with style.

Notes

¹ Musicians who had been awarded a license to perform for monetary gain by royal decree – a status of privilege and power.

² Author's translation. Lorents Nicolai Berg: 'Den første Prøve for Begyndere udi Instrumental-Kunsten, eller Kort og tydelig underretning om de første Noder at lære ...' (1782).

³ David Dodge Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761 and its Relationship to the Violin and Violin Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Brigitte Geiser, *Studien zur Frühgeschichte der Violine* (Bern/Stuttgart: Haupt, 1974); Peter Holman, *Four and Twenty Fiddlers: The Violin at the English Court, 1540–1690* (London: Music Library Association, 1995); Olav Sæta, 'Om felestillere i feleverket', *Norsk Folkemusikklags skrifter*, 20 (2006), 89ff.

⁴ There are several examples of how the same phenomenon has affected fiddle music, such as the virtual ban by the folk music department of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation on the foot stomping that is so essential to the traditional fiddle style. This persisted well into the 1970s.