

'The concert era' – innovation in Hardanger fiddling around 1900

Håkon Asheim

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Ón gCos go Cluas

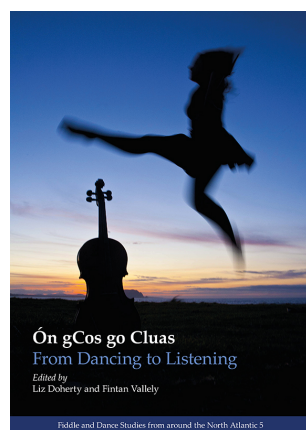
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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‘The concert era’: innovation in Hardanger fiddling around 1900

HÅKON ASHEIM

In pre-industrial rural Norwegian communities, the role of the fiddler or *spelemann* was clearly defined. They would play for dances and festivities, and during summer time many were busy playing for the traditional three-day weddings. Back in 1850 most such *spelemenn* had probably never heard of ‘concerts’, which was then a way of music-making which only existed in cities. But this was about to change in several ways: new music from Europe – the *runddans* (waltz-style) music – was spreading, new social customs were developing, as were pietistic movements which revived the earlier opposition of religion to fiddling and dance culture. As a response to the challenges of new times, Norwegian Hardanger fiddlers developed their own concert culture in the decades around 1900 – a culture with many fascinating features, the impact of which can still be felt today. This period – the ‘concert era’ of Hardanger fiddling – represents a cultural innovation not only in the way in which old music is adapted to a new social situation, but also in that totally new music content was inspired by that situation. Equally interesting is posterity’s reaction to these innovations: part acceptance and part rejection. We who are performers of Norwegian traditional music today need to be aware of this historic background, since it has contributed to the shaping of our repertoire as well as our ways of making music in social contexts.

Fiddlers were not alone in wishing to preserve traditional music and other non-material folk art despite social and cultural modernisation. In the nineteenth century, Norwegian artists and scholars of the National Romantic Movement studied and collected folk poetry and music intensively. The first important collector of folk melodies was Ludvig M. Lindeman (1812–1887), whose work was published from the 1850s onwards; composers like Edvard Grieg based many of their best-known compositions on melodies from Lindeman’s and similar collections. Artists and intellectuals of the Romantic Movement indeed created the very concept of folk music, even though at the same time folk music was still alive in its own environment of *spelemenn*, dancers and singers – a world of ideas and concepts quite remote from the ideals of romantic artists. Nevertheless, the first concerts with genuine Norwegian folk music came about as a result of the meeting of these two worlds.

Beginnings of concert fiddling

The first concerts of Norwegian traditional musicians mainly featured Hardanger fiddle playing, a practice which persisted for a long time, during which the Hardanger fiddle gained recognition as a national symbol. The first musician to use it in a concert was probably the world famous violin virtuoso Ole Bull (1810–1880), in Paris, 1833, and the next may well have been the traditional fiddler Torgeir Augundsson from Telemark, nicknamed 'Myllarguten' (the Miller Boy; 1801–72). This happened in Kristiania (now Oslo) in 1849, at a concert arranged by Ole Bull on the most prestigious concert stage of the city, the Mason's Lodge. According to the advertisement, Ole Bull was to 'assist' Myllarguten,¹ that is, Bull played a separate section. The concert attracted an audience of 1,500, enabling Myllarguten, who at that time was very poor in spite of being the most popular fiddler of a relatively large region, to buy a farm with his fee. At this Kristiania concert, Myllarguten got enthusiastic applause, but his music must have been unfamiliar to the majority of the urban audience. However, an anonymous newspaper review – obviously written by a musically competent person – shows a surprisingly good understanding of the qualities of traditional music:

Extremely peculiar is this '*Vildtspel*', [wild playing]² or his treatment of the four motifs of which the *halling* usually consists. Th. Audunsson dissolves each of these motifs in its constituent parts, in such a way that he takes a single part of one of them and connects it to a single part of the other one and as an ending forces the whole melody to come forth, but always varied both by new harmonic connections and by syncopated or in many other ways nuanced bowings. It is this rich and masterfully executed variation which gives Th. Audunsson's playing a kind of classical touch which all foreign violinists in the world would be at loss to copy.³

The determination of an exact number of motifs (four) in the analysis of the *halling* form is surprising, and probably the only one of its kind, for in the *halling* genre in general, as well as in the short-motif tunes of the *springar* and other Norwegian fiddle genres, the number of motifs vary a lot. Nevertheless, this is one of the earliest known attempts to analyse the short motif and variation form of Hardanger fiddle music.⁴ It also underscores Ole Bull's judgement of the artistic quality of Myllarguten's playing.

The concert era

Myllarguten went on several concert tours after this, including to Sweden and Denmark, and other fiddlers followed his example. Concerts with Hardanger fiddle players became frequent from the 1880s, by which time the traditional use of the Hardanger fiddle in celebrations and dances had begun to fade; wedding traditions changed and became simpler, and by the early 1900s, the accordion had largely replaced the fiddle as the popular dance instrument. Research into the biographies of concert fiddlers shows that their motivation for going on concert tours was centred on the same factors that were important to Myllarguten: earning money and achieving fame, but now in a larger geographical area. The fiddlers' concerts became such a marked phenomenon that folk music historians have named the period from about 1880 to World War II 'the concert era' in Hardanger fiddle history.⁵

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Some of the concert fiddlers (*konsertspelemenn*) became remarkably popular around 1900, even in parts of Norway that did not have strong Hardanger fiddle or other folk music traditions. Sometimes audience numbers exceeded 1,000, especially in America, where several of these fiddlers toured in areas with Scandinavian immigrants. Recordings and accounts of the best of concert fiddlers' playing, show evidence of both the high quality in their music and their creativity.

Perhaps the most famous of all concert fiddlers was Lars Fykerud (1862–1902) from Telemark. His brother, Hans (1860–1942), had actually started to play concerts before him, and his success in the early 1880s inspired the younger brother and several other fiddlers to try concert playing. Both brothers spent several years in America. Lars Fykerud was a brilliant and self-conscious musician, but he wasted the fortune he earned in America, and returned to Norway, sick and ruined. Other important players of this generation were Sjur Helgeland (1858–1924) from Vossestrand, who never went on big tours, but whose playing was acclaimed on concert or competition stages, and Eivind Aakhus from Setesdal (1854–1937), who emigrated to the US in 1878 and had numerous concert tours, one of them with Alexander Bull, Ole Bull's son.⁶ From the 1880s and onwards, some older fiddlers like Leiv Sandsdalen (1825–1896), Ola Mosafinn (1828–1912) and Knut Dahle (1834–1921)⁷ also tried the concert business. They experienced the economic side of it in different ways: Sandsdalen had to compete with the younger Hans Fykerud, so if Fykerud announced a concert in the same city as him, Sandsdalen advertised his own concert anew to a reduced price; Ola Mosafinn, like several other fiddlers, was cheated of his concert income by a 'friend' who was supposed to help him collect it.



Figure 1 Jørn Røn (1843–1911) and Olav Moe on 17 May 1892. The differences between generations are shown in dress fashion, the choice of bow type and the bow and fiddle holds.

Photo in Valdres Folk Music Archive

In the early 1900s, a new generation of fiddlers appeared on the concert stages. Among the most famous were Olav Moe (1872–1967; see Figure 1) from Valdres,⁸ discussed more extensively below; Torkjell Haugerud (1876–1954; see Figure 2),⁹ one of the greatest sources of different Telemark traditions; Arne Bjørndal (1882–1965),¹⁰ Mosafinn's pupil and the founder of the important folk music archive Arne Bjørndals Samling in Bergen; and Halldor Meland (1884–1972),¹¹ whose elaborate versions of many tunes from his native region, Hardanger, are often quite different from the old, short dance tune versions. The first female fiddlers to have considerable success with concert tours were Signe Flatin Neset (1912–1975)¹² and Kristiane Lund (1889–1976),¹³ at a time when the vast majority of both concert and other fiddlers were still men. Sound recordings survive of all of the above mentioned fiddlers, except Myllarguten, the Fykerud brothers and Leiv Sandsdalen.¹⁴

Figure 2 Excerpts from Huldrejenta by Torkjell Haugerud, composed 1897. New ways of using the old *scordatura* (indicated at start): A. Passage to the parallel minor, shifts. B. Arpeggios. Top: *scordatura* notation, below: *in natura*.

While the Hardanger fiddle was rarely played north of Sunnfjord before 1900, its role as a national symbol and the success of its practitioners in concert tours and competitions (see below) may explain the fact that it was adopted by many fiddlers further north from about 1905, especially in the regions of Nordfjord and Møre og Romsdal. Some natives of this part of Norway who started as regular fiddle players became active concert musicians with the Hardanger fiddle: such as Ivar Kjellstad (from Sunnmøre, 1868–1914) and Hallvard Ørsal (Nordmøre, 1875–1943).

Competitions, Swedish parallels

Also starting in the 1880s, competitions were arranged to help keep traditional fiddling alive, and this became an important parallel history to that of folk music concerts.¹⁵ Several of the competitions were arranged in Bergen in the years around 1900 and were forerunners

of the annual national contest (*Landskappleiken*), which was arranged for the first time in 1923 and is still running. The competitions became important gatherings for those interested in traditional music and dance. They took over some of the role of the old markets as opportunities for performers to show their skills, meet other folk musicians, and also for those who couldn't or didn't want to go on concert tours. But the famous concert fiddlers often participated in competitions too and would often get the highest prizes. Indeed, Lars Fykerud won the first local competition in Bø, 1888, Sjur Helgeland, the first larger scale one in Bergen, 1896, and Olav Moe the next there in 1897.

National romanticism, which was strong in Norway, together with Ole Bull's initiatives, may explain the fact that this concert and competition trend started so early in this country. Actually, the fiddlers' concerts played a significant part in an early stage of the history of Norwegian public concerts. In Sweden, which was in union with Norway until 1905, the corresponding trend of *estradspele* (stage playing) didn't start until 1906, the year of the first Swedish folk music competition in Gesunda.¹⁶ Norwegians usually say that 'the Swedes come up with all new things before us', but this case seems to be an exception.

The concert fiddlers' repertoire

A big part of the fiddle music played on Norwegian concert and competition stages from the 1880s (see Figure 3) consisted of traditional tunes: mostly dance tunes, sometimes wedding marches or *lydarslått* (listening tunes).

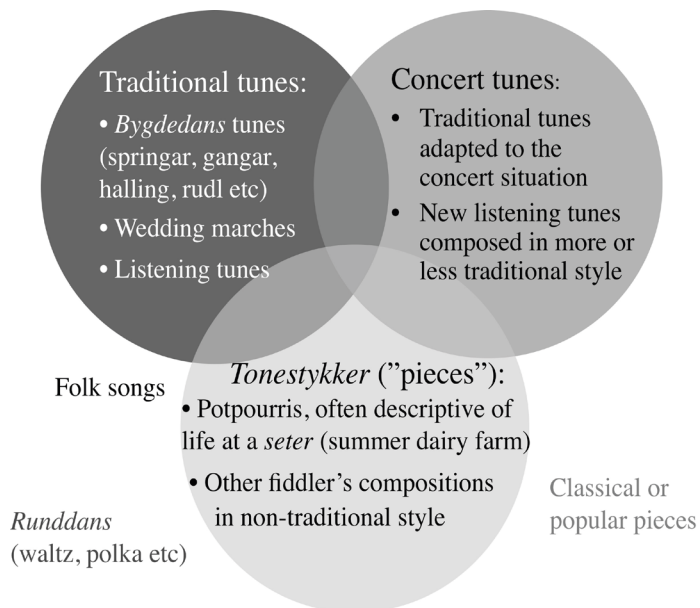


Figure 3 Genre categories in the concert repertoire of *konsertspelemenn*.

It is hardly surprising that the latter category, the 'listening' tunes, was to grow significantly during the 'concert era'. Most concert fiddlers composed pieces that were influenced by

romantic artistic ideals, very often evoking the atmosphere and sounds of the *seter* life – transhumance, summer dairy farming as it was still extensively practised in large parts of Norway and Sweden in the 1800s, and still is in some places. The pieces often had a potpourri form: typical ingredients would be imitations of the cow-calling of dairy maids, cow lows or cuckoo calls, and fragments of fiddle tunes or folk songs. One of the sources of inspiration for such compositions was probably Ole Bull's popular rhapsodic violin piece *Et Sæterbesøg* (Visit to a *Seter*). Most such rhapsodic fiddler compositions did not survive changes in music fashion however, but one exception is Sjur Helgeland's *Budeiene på Vikafjellet* (The Dairy Maids at Vikafjellet).¹⁷ However, some of the more traditionally-sounding listening tunes that were composed, developed or became popular during the concert era are still often played. Among these are *Kivlemøyane* from Telemark, a tune cycle rooted in ancient melodic material and legends,¹⁸ and Sjur Helgeland's version of 'Bygdatrøen' (see Figure 4), in which he used the old *scordatura* to achieve parallel octaves at an impressive speed.

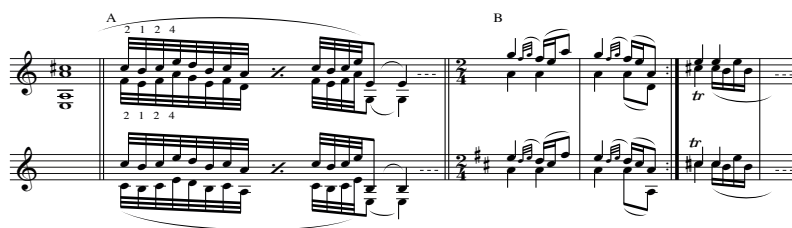


Figure 4 Excerpts from Sjur Helgeland's version of 'Bygdatrøen', listening tune attributed to Nils Mørkve ('Bygdatrøen', 1781–1857). The *scordatura* indicated at start favours parallel octaves (A), and it has the tuning of the two top strings in common with the well-known *scordatura* a-e1-a1-c#2 – parts of the tune are in the style of a *halling* in that tuning (B). Top: *scordatura* notation, below: *in natura*.

An interesting example of the potpourri genre, and one of the pieces that only survives in recordings of the composer's own playing, is *Sæterliv* (Seter Life) by Olav Moe (see Figure 5). Moe was in many ways a typical *konsertspelemann*: his background was that of an ordinary rural *spelemann* from Valdres in eastern Norway, he was very active on the competition and concert stages, starting around 1900 (he toured in the US 1906/1907, see Figure 6), and his political views were nationalistic without being right-wing. His concert repertoire was also typical: tunes from his home district, 'national' repertoire which was common to many concert fiddlers, and self-composed programmatic pieces (e.g., *Sæterliv*). In the concert programme printed on his poster, all three repertoire groups are represented (see Figure 7). Moe's piece *Sæterliv*, starts with a melancholic folk song melody which was popular at that time – *Sjå soli på Anaripigg*. Olav Moe played it with traditional intonation, but sometimes with a violin-like vibrato. The next part is almost identical to the introduction of Sjur Helgeland's *Budeiene på Vikafjellet* – which, in turn, is based on cow calls from western Norway. In the rest of *Sæterliv*, Olav Moe used motifs from two Valdres folk songs, in some places enhancing their dance-like rhythms – especially in the final *springar* part following the cow-low imitation, an illustration of the dairy maid's happy dance when the cow finally answers her calling.¹⁹ Typical of this genre, only a very small part of the melodic

Most of the traditional dance tunes played on stage by *konsertspelemenn* belonged, however, to the oldest dance category, the *bygdedans* tunes (mostly *springar*, *halling*, *gangar* and *rudl*), as the *gamaldans/runddans* category (waltz, polka, mazurka and *reinlender*) was still felt to be too modern to be presented as 'Folk' or 'National' music. But after the concerts, fiddlers would often play this more modern music for social dancing. Classical pieces, popular or salon pieces were rarely played by concert fiddlers, with some exceptions: there is an account of Hans Fykerud playing the well-known song *Brudeferden i Hardanger* (The Wedding Procession in Hardanger, originally for male choir) by romantic composer Halfdan Kjerulf in a concert in Copenhagen – and according to the review, he played it 'with a too high fourth step, like most of the fiddle tunes'.²⁰



Figure 6 Map of Olav Moe's tour in the US autumn 1906 – summer 1907, based on his autobiography (Moe 1969).

The Fykerud brothers also made fiddle versions of traditional song melodies and played them separately in concerts, whereas other concert fiddlers would play song tunes mostly as parts of potpourri pieces.

The fiddle tunes were partly played in the traditional way, without musical changes and with foot-tapping as an important rhythmic accompaniment. But many concert fiddlers were influenced by classical violinists' habits: standing up instead of sitting while playing, holding the instrument under the chin instead of the old position against the chest, and playing without foot-tapping. Tunes were sometimes changed to fit the concert situation, for instance by freeing them from the strict dance tempo and rhythm, or making the tunes longer – instead of repeating them once or several times, as it is common to do when playing to dance. The free short-motif structure typical of the majority of Hardanger fiddle music is well suited for variation,²¹ improvisation and extension of the tunes, and this was done

since the playing of listening tunes already existed as a local entertainment form in Valdres from at least the early 1800s (c.50 of these tunes are preserved in tradition, most of them published in Nyhus, 1996); and some old wedding tunes from other districts – those that were not marches – could also be classified as ‘listening’ tunes.

The historic contributions of the concert era

It is difficult to conclude whether or not the concert activity described here actually made Hardanger fiddling sound different, since there are no sound recordings from before the concert era. But it is possible to sum up the contributions of the concert era to folk music history with reference to fiddling genres and their properties (see Figure 3). One might say that the era changed the genre range of Hardanger fiddling: most noticeably in the period itself, with the folk music-based potpourri as a passing fashion, but also over a longer period, since the listening tunes today still make up a more important and varied category than before the concert era. The heritage left by the concert fiddlers forms an important part of modern fiddlers’ musical and cultural platform; this is mostly thought of as positive. But it is also thought of as negative in the sense of reaction against some of its ingredients, such as the ‘potpourri genre’, too strong a classical influence, or too much emphasis on the ‘national’ element as opposed to local playing style. The concert era was a time of innovations, and these were partly preserved in tradition, and partly rejected by later generations. From a modern perspective, what interests us is how popular the concert fiddlers were in their own time, as well as the variety of their repertoire and its close connection to the historic period, despite the concert situation. This is reflected in the preserved material: brilliant recordings of traditional dance tunes are found alongside potpourri compositions which seem outdated to us in terms of music taste, but which are virtuosic and imaginative in their attempts to adapt to the audience of the time. Some concert fiddlers were among the most important transmitters of tradition to new generations, while at the same time showing a compositional talent which has not always been recognised.

To find an equally creative period in Norwegian traditional music, one has to go to the most recent decades, with their explosion of innovation and professionalism among young folk musicians. But there is one important difference between these two periods: in the first, creativity was displayed in the adoption of the concert stage and the exploration of musical form in solo playing, whereas today, it is mainly shown in ensemble playing and crossover activities.

Notes

¹ *Christiania-Posten* [newspaper], 12 January 1849.

² Literal translation. The word was sometimes used to denote folk music playing in general, or playing without written music; it could also refer to the importance of improvisation and variation in this music.

³ *Morgenbladet* [newspaper], 17 January 1849; author’s translation.

⁴ More recently described by, for example, Tellef Kvifte, *On Variability in the Performance of Hardingfele Tunes – and Paradigms in Ethnomusicological Research* (Oslo: Taragot Sounds, 2007),

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Levy Morten, *The World of Gorrlaus Slåtts* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Kragen, 1989) and briefly by Pandora Hopkins, *Aural Thinking in Norway: Performance and Communication with the Hardingfele* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986), pp. 165–70.

⁵ A. Bjørndal, and B. Alver, *Og Fela Ho Lét*, 2nd edn (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1985), p. 60.

⁶ Many typical concert tunes were published in E. Aakhus, *Gamle og nye Slaattar* (Oslo: Norsk Musikforlag, 1925). See also Eivind Aakhus: 3 tunes recorded on phonograph by O. M. Sandvik in 1931.

⁷ Knut Dahle: Recordings by The Gramophone Record Co. 1910, published by Buen Kulturverkstad 1984 (Gamle spelemenn på 78-plater I), re-issued online in 2012.

⁸ Olav Moe, *Olav Moe – hardingfelespel frå Vestre Slidre*, CD TA1, Talik Records, 2000.

⁹ Torkjell Haugerud: A large selection published by Buen Kulturverkstad in the 1980s–1990s (Torkjell Haugerud – slåtтар, Haugerudspel 1–5), re-issued online in 2012.

¹⁰ Arne Bjørndal: Some tunes on the album *Slåtтар frå Voss, Hardanger og Krødsherad* (NRK/The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation 1974, re-issued as CD by Talik Records, 2009). Another selection published by Buen Kulturverkstad 1990 (Gamle spelemenn på 78-plater V), re-issued online in 2011.

¹¹ Halldor Meland: Recordings in the archive of NRK/The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation.

¹² Signe Flatin Neset, *Signe Flatin Neset*, Talik Records, 2012.

¹³ Kristiane Lund: *Gamle spelemenn på 78-plater III* (Buen Kulturverkstad, 2011; online version 2011).

¹⁴ Sjur Helgeland and Ola Mosafinn: Pathé recordings made by William Farre 1911. All of Mosafinn's recordings were published on cassette by Buen Kulturverkstad 1984 (Gamle spelemenn på 78-plater I), and re-issued online in 2012. One of Helgeland's recordings, *Bygdatrøen* (see Figure 4), was published on the CD *Budeiene på Vikafjellet*, Spelarhaugen Folkemusikk, 2008.

¹⁵ A good account is found in Chris, Goertzen, *Fiddling for Norway: Revival and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 25

¹⁶ Ville Roempke, 'Lyssna til toner från hembygd och fädernesland: Om estradspelets framväxt i svensk spelmanshistoria', in *Sumlen* (1977), 94–124.

¹⁷ Transcriptions in S. Nyhus, *Bruremarsjer og lydarslåtter for hardingfele* (Oslo: Musikk-Husets Forlag, 2003).

¹⁸ Transcriptions in T. Haugerud, *Slåtтар* (Oslo: Noregs Boklag, 1957); and Nyhus, 2003.

¹⁹ Transcriptions of the song tunes 'Liaros' and 'Ro fjorden' appear in Ø. Gaukstad, 'Valdrestonar', in *Valdres Bygdebok VII* (Leira: Valdres Bygdebokforlag, 1973), tune numbers 401 and 612.

²⁰ That is in accordance with traditional Hardanger fiddle intonation, where a high or neutral fourth is common. *Politiken*, citation in T. Trykkerud, 'Hans Hanson Fykerud', in *Årbok for Norsk Folkemusikk* (1994), p. 8.

²¹ Tellef Kvifte, *On variability in the performance of hardingfele tunes – and paradigms in ethnomusicological research* (Oslo: Taragot Sounds, 2007).