

New directions in contemporary fiddle playing in Norway  
*Gjermund Kolltveit*

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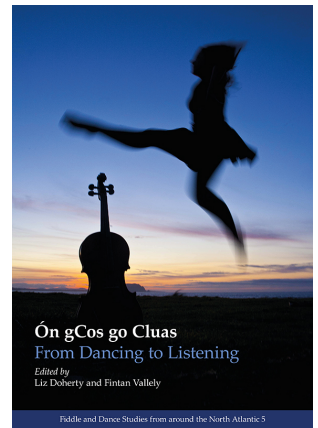
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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## New directions in contemporary fiddle playing in Norway

GJERMUND KOLLTVEIT

A story from the nineteenth century tells about a Hardanger fiddle player who was on the way home after visiting a fellow fiddler on the other side of the mountain, when he suddenly realised that he had forgotten one of the tunes he had learned; in the middle of the mountains, he decided to walk back some fifty kilometres in order to learn and memorise it again. This was more than a century and a half ago, a situation so paradigmatically different to what prevails today as regards mobility and communication: now there is no need to walk at all, and a great variety of tunes and styles is available instantly.

This article discusses some new developments in Norwegian fiddle playing during the last twenty-five years or so. It asks: which trends and developments in fiddle playing in this period are most significant, and how can we understand them? I am interested in style, and the *sound* of music, as well as the structural conditions underlying the choices musicians make. My analysis is based on loose and unsystematic observations, partly as a participant, but mostly as an outsider to the central Norwegian fiddle communities. The new, modern developments of revived folk music might be approached from two directions, either from the organisational and structural framework around the musicians, or from an aesthetic perspective closer to the musicians and their music-making. I will discuss some characteristics of developments from both these directions, using the career and music of the fiddle player Ragnhild Furebotten (b. 1979) from Saltdal in northern Norway, as an example. She is an exemplar of the new, modern or post-modern kind of fiddlers in Norway.

### The 'organisational' perspective

Furebotten plays the standard fiddle in the manner of the tradition in her home place. She has a solo as well as a band career, and her name is closely associated with the popular group Hekla Stålstrenga, which started as a duo with guitarist Tore Bruvoll with whom she recorded the album *Hekla Stålstrenga* in 2008; the band has two albums: *Makramé* (2011) and *Dyrandé* (2013). Prior to this, Furebotten was a member of Majorstuen, a group started at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo. So, this introduces the organisational and structural level, the first significant driving force which is *education*. In Norwegian higher education

at the present time there are folk music programmes in Rauland, Voss and Oslo. In Rauland, the Telemark University College, Department of Folk Culture offers bachelor, masters and PhD degree programmes with a combination of theory and practice, with most weight on the practical. At Voss, the Ole Bull Academy offers a performance Bachelor programme and a masters programme in Nordic Folk Music, in cooperation with the Fyn Conservatory of Music in Odense (Denmark), the Music Academy (Stockholm) and the Sibelius Academy (Helsinki). In Oslo, the folk music programme at the Norwegian Academy of Music offers Bachelor and Masters programmes in performing folk music. Ragnhild Furebotten received her performance education from Rauland (1998–2000) and Oslo (2000–2004).



**Figure 1** Ragnhild Furebotten.

A consequence of education is *professionalisation*. Apart from the Hardanger fiddle players in the concert era from the late nineteenth century and onwards,<sup>1</sup> professional folk musicians are a new phenomenon, as more musicians make a living from their music today than was the case years ago. On the other hand, we should not exaggerate the influence of professionalisation, since for most folk musicians, it is not easy to make a living solely from music. Several performers therefore combine their performance activities with other related occupations, such as teaching and administrative work. Furebotten, however, has made a living totally from her music since she completed her studies in 2004. As a freelance musician, she works with different projects, and she has also a position as a regional musician at the institution Culture in Troms. That she has managed to make a living from her music is probably due mainly to her versatility, and the facts that she is an excellent player, makes good compositions, and represents something fresh and new on the Norwegian music scene. One new arena in Norway that has become a good opportunity for professional folk musicians is the Norwegian Hub for Traditional Music and Dance (*Riksscenen*), opened in

2010, supported by the Norwegian State as part of new thinking which puts folk music on par with other music and art forms.<sup>2</sup>

The great number of festivals and their significance today has been described as a process of *festivalisation*.<sup>3</sup> The large and well-established folk music festivals in Førde and Bø in Telemark, which both started in 1990, now must compete with a number of other and smaller festivals, including the Folk Music Days in Ål, Riddu Riddu in Målselv, Hilmarfestivalen in Steinkjer, and the North Sea Festival in Farsund. Additionally there are several non-folk music festivals and local re-enactment plays where folk music and folk musicians are included.

Ragnhild Furebotten and Hekla Stålstrenga have played at a number of festivals in recent years, at some of which they have been headline acts. For Furebotten, festivals are an important arena: for work, to reach larger and wider audiences, and (for performers and audiences alike) to articulate their music and cultural standpoints; thus these events have become identity markers in the changing world. Today, folk musicians have to relate to a *market*. Folk music is no longer a counter-cultural force connected to nationalism, rural areas, and to the Norwegian language movement, but has become a music genre equal to other music genres. Folk musicians are now a part of the music industry, and fiddle players prefer to be referred to as ‘artists’ rather than ‘fiddlers’. A part of this change is that folk musicians (like those in other genres) build and manage their own image and promote or ‘stage’ themselves, in order to be visible. Norwegian folk music has also got its own industry convention, Folkelarm, which is now also a small, annual festival at which the Norwegian Folk Music Awards have been presented ever since the first Folkelarm in 2005.

An unavoidable category in marketing is the label ‘world music’. This started as a category for cataloguing music albums, but by now it is sometimes seen to stand for the mixture of local styles in a ‘global fusion’ or ‘world beat’;<sup>4</sup> in this sense there is sometimes an ideology of ‘global romanticism’ associated with it.<sup>5</sup> The influence of ‘world music’ in this sense can be seen in Norway, but it has not made any significant impact on the style of Norwegian folk music played on fiddle. Therefore it is still possible to relate to the concept of ‘world music’ solely as a tool – as a means to sell music and reach new audiences without subscribing to any ideology.

The Norwegian state plays a direct role too, through the organisation Music Norway, encouraging and facilitating the export of Norwegian music, including Norwegian folk music; for many artists this gives a chance of reaching audiences and markets abroad. Ragnhild Furebotten is among the folk musicians who have managed to find a place in this new folk music market. She has played several times at Folkelarm, and given concerts internationally for many years.

New *media*, especially the internet, have changed communications significantly. For folk musicians this gives them the opportunity to learn new tunes and songs and for reaching audiences in ways that were previously not possible. Interactive media like Facebook, YouTube and Myspace have also made it possible for musicians to communicate with fellow musicians and audiences, and to manage their own careers.<sup>6</sup> Hekla Stålstrenga, with their base in folk music from Northern Norway, is a good example of this marketing trend. When

they issued their first album as a band in 2011, they set up a poll on Facebook for the album name, resulting in its current title *Makramé*.

Such trends make a more equal and symmetrical relation between performers and audiences, leading to a greater democratisation. Yet traditional channels like the radio still play an important role. This is indeed the case with Hekla Stålstrenga, which have had several of their tunes 'A-listed' on Norwegian broadcasting's largest radio channel. In the beginning it was unusual to hear a folk music band in mainstream radio, but now – after just a few years – it has become natural to hear the sound of Hekla Stålstrenga along with other established mainstream, popular artists.

Finally, the new developments on the folk music and fiddle scene can be seen against a backdrop of *mobility*. This is not new, of course, but the extent has reached a new level. We now travel more than ever – in work, culture and tourism – and societies become increasingly multi-cultural as people move and migrate more and more. This globalisation is also connected to faster *communication media*. Yet the folk music scene of Norway is not fundamentally changed by increased mobility and globalisation however, for, as several authors have pointed out, globalisation does not necessarily make the world more homogenous.<sup>7</sup> Local expressions still live on and flourish, often due to new media like the Internet. In the case of Hekla Stålstrenga, they represent a local style and way of expression from northern Norway. Along with other artists from this part of the country they are 'popular', as a counter culture to the South, which conventionally represents the leading geographical and cultural centre.<sup>8</sup> Neither has immigration led to any visible changes in the folk music or fiddle styles of Norway. Most of the non-European immigrant communities live their own music lives, though we have several examples of collaborative projects between Norwegian and immigrant musicians. What has influenced Norwegian style more, is Irish and 'Celtic' music from the West, and Swedish music from the East. In both cases this is due to travelling and communication by musicians and audiences alike. In the case of Ragnhild Furebotten and her bands, nothing directly connects them and their recorded music to Swedish or Irish influence, but Furebotten has toured Ireland with her guitarist Tore Bruvoll, who, like many other Norwegian musicians knows and plays Irish traditional music.

The organisational and structural tendencies always interact with the music and the musicians, of course, and sometimes it is difficult to separate these levels. Nevertheless, I will now look at some real and potential trends from a perspective closer to the sounding music.

### **The 'aesthetic' perspective**

Firstly, is *virtuosity* relevant to descriptions of new fiddle music in Norway? Although several of the educated and professional players have reached high artistic and technical levels, virtuosity is not the most striking feature of Norwegian fiddling. Some individual musicians and groups are exceptions (such as the Norwegian-Finnish band Frigg), but the overall impression is that traditional musical dialects remain strong, even for musicians of great virtuosity. Ragnhild Furebotten is regarded as being among the latter, one of the best fiddle players in Norway. Some of her tunes are not only impressively fast, but are technically

and rhythmically solid too. One of the features of her style is the use of extremely fast trills, which, along with other ornaments and embellishments are performed with stylistic integrity, without sounding ‘external’ or ‘classical’ and disturbing the interpretation; musicianship dominates virtuosity, an aesthetic which is well received by audiences.

*Perfection* is related to virtuosity, but is not the same. This is also something that often follows professionalisation, and my impression is that there is a clear tendency to perfection among the new generation of fiddle performers. Because of the impact of the long-established competitions (*kappleiks*), we might argue that ‘perfect’ playing has been an ideal for a long time, and therefore is nothing new. But the focus on recordings does now make perfection more relevant than before, so that when musicians record and produce studio albums, only the best and most professional results are accepted. In this respect Ragnhild Furebotten is no exception. Her albums and those of Hekla Stålstrenga are professionally produced, and the musicians themselves meet high standards. Live music is another story, of course, as Hekla Stålstrenga is well known for their live performances, with a high level of spontaneity; in this case, the same kind of perfection is not sought.

Some fiddlers play with a notably *polished sound*, closer to classical ideals. However, this is an individual thing, and it is, perhaps, only a tendency, and only in some areas of local tradition, such as Gudbrandsdal; it is also related to other classical traits such as position playing and the fiddle hold (see Egeland in this volume). In contrast, the music of northern Norway is characterised by a roughness, in expression and sound, a style first made known by Susanne Lundeng (b. 1969); when she first participated in competitions (*kappleiks*) in the late 1980s, her rough and vivid style became a fresh contribution to the Norwegian folk music scene.

Furebotten has something of the same energy and force in her playing, although she does not play as vigorously as Lundeng. She also can play subtly, with a controlled timbre and tone formation. Moreover, the singer in Hekla Stålstrenga, Anne Nymo Trulsen, has a slightly throaty voice which has become a hallmark feature of the band. However, their overall expression could still be described as polished, since their albums are well-produced and ‘clean’ (as described earlier). Both polished sound and perfection might be understood in various ways, according to the underlying musical ideals. If Ragnhild Furebotten plays with a rough tone quality, it is still different to some of the music ideals of the 1970s. One example is the folk rock band Vømmøl Spellmannslag (Vømmøl fiddlers), which was incredibly popular, belonging to the Green and political Left movement of the 1970s. They did indeed not pretend to play authentic or traditional music, but folk music was important to their image, and also to their sound, which was rough and unrefined, definitely not in any sense polished. Their ideal was ‘imperfect amateur musicking’: simple arrangements without counter parts and other elements which have become standard today. The style and sound Vømmøl represents is a threatened species today, however. Most folk musicians do still typically play for the personal pleasure of it, and so there are still amateurs around. But in recordings, the kind of rough, lively, spontaneous and collective playing like the style of the 1970s is rarely heard nowadays.

*Group playing* was not a major feature of folk musics in Scandinavia, and apart from the traditional *spellemannslag*, where a large group of fiddlers play in unison, in Norwegian

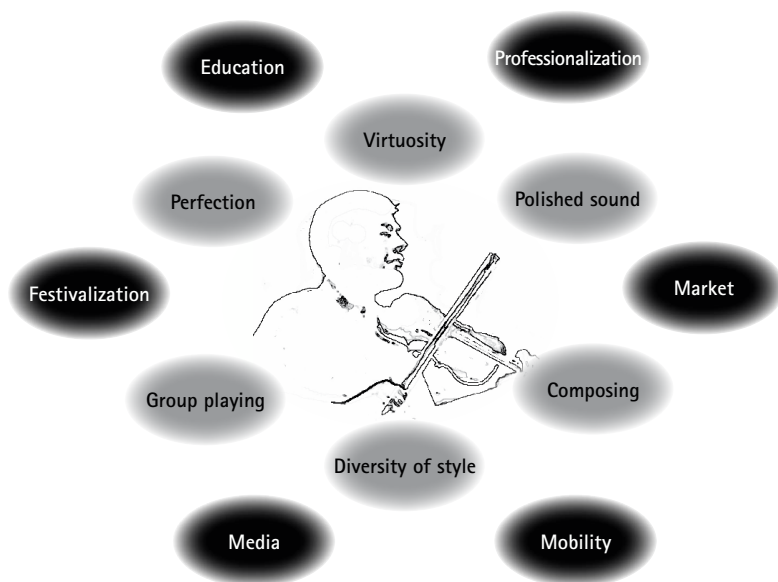
folk music solo-playing traditionally dominated. Today, however, modern 'group' playing has grown hugely over the last 35 years, a new phenomenon. The roots of this shift are in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Scandinavian groups such as *Slinkombas*, *Filarfolket* and *Groupa* started. The latter two were Swedish, and unquestionably had national influence on Norway into the early years of the twenty-first century. Interestingly, the introduction of group playing did not necessarily mean the loss of traditional expressions in the music. Despite some use of non-Scandinavian instruments and rhythmical patterns, these early groups insisted on keeping traditional and also archaic elements such as old tonality in their music. Still, the main tendency among most groups is to stick to traditional styles. Playing in groups does not necessarily mean loss of tradition. Contemporary folk musicians manage group playing in many formats: they know how to arrange their music, and know how they want it performed.<sup>9</sup> But since the musicians playing in ensembles are usually also solo performers, there seems little need to worry about the future of the solo traditions in Norwegian folk music. Indeed, the most popular categories at the Norwegian Traditional Music and Dance Competition (*Landskappleiken*) are still those for solo playing. Ragnhild Furebotten has played in many formats, from duo to larger bands like Majorstuen and Hekla Stålstrenga; symptomatically therefore, her 'solo' album *Never on a Sunday* (2011) was not a typical solo project, but a challenging group-playing one. Furebotten is part of other projects too, a versatility which is typical of the new generation of Norwegian folk fiddlers.

*Composing* is another tendency among modern folk musicians. The background to this is not only artistic, but has also to do with money. It is not easy to make a decent living from folk music performance, as when a purely traditional tune is played in a public performance or is broadcasted, it will not earn any copyright money through the Norwegian Performing Rights Society (TONO). For arranging, some money is awarded even when the piece is unpublished as written music. But actual composed tunes give the highest score and generate most money in this system. Professional folk musicians adjust to this, though some are more concerned about it and compose more than others. Over a period of perhaps ten to fifteen years, we have seen an increase in the output of composed folk music. The band Majorstuen (with which Ragnhild Furebotten played in the 1990s) plays much more composed music on their second album than on their first. Furebotten herself has composed a lot of tunes, and we should, indeed, be careful to appreciate the creativity in such composition despite the issues of money and business. Furebotten's tunes are well constructed, and sometimes she has produced real pearls, such as the Christmas song 'Juledrøm' ['Christmas Dream'] (composed with Jorun Marie Kvernberg) and the slow waltz 'Hjertebank' ['Heartbeat'].

That folk musicians today orient in various directions results in a *diversity of style*. Some fiddlers are able to play different styles, for instance Norwegian traditional, Irish and bluegrass, but they rarely mix them. Others are not afraid of blending styles and adding exotic elements to their folk music. This is, of course, very individual, according to the profile of the musician or group; it is in fact the individual blend and innovation that creates the profile and identity of a band.

Small changes and developments in musical expressions belongs to what might be described as border negotiations. What is considered to be 'Norwegian folk music' today

is not the same as it was in the late 1980s. While people negotiate the border, it moves – slightly and slowly – as traditional music takes in elements from singer-songwriters, rock, improvisation and other styles and genres. The process goes so slowly that the new expressions are not considered to be hybrid. Considering this, and the fact that Ragnhild Furebotten is deeply rooted in the traditional style of playing, I do not characterise her as an ‘experimental’ musician, but she is still open-minded and her musicking is developing. Her band Hekla Stålstrenga seems to have found its music identity, and it will probably not see the point in experimenting too much. If there has been a movement in its career, it must be towards the more *smooth* sound of mainstream popular music, which is not really fusion or hybridity. At the same time, in some tunes, Furebotten does move away from her native music landscape. For instance, the tune ‘Franz Kafka’ (on Hekla Stålstrenga’s 2011 album *Makramé*) gives an impression of Balkan music with a virtuoso touch to it. At the same time, it hints towards *Americana*, since it is played with banjo (the increasing use of which, in Norwegian folk, is also interesting). Her solo *Never on a Sunday* is a cross-over project where her traditional fiddle meets a big band with six musicians, unconventional arrangements, and a playful interaction between the fiddle and the band; it is quite innovative and unconventional, with touches of jazz, *avant garde* and even classical elements.



**Figure 2** Tendencies and developments surrounding contemporary fiddle playing, from an organisational and structural level (outer circle), and from a level closer to the music and musicians (inner circle). *Illustration by Ann-Turi Ford.*

The trends and developments discussed here are not meant to be a complete picture of reality: they are offered as tools for reflection and analysis. The problem with discussions on broad categories is that the limited words may be too simple to put across the enormity of what goes on: in reality, there are many contradictions. The conclusion



is, however, that modern fiddlers do *tend* to move away from tradition and may not be concerned with preserving and transmitting styles and ideas from the previous generation of fiddlers. But at the same time, many of the new ‘educated’ fiddlers are trained to preserve and cherish traditional playing, and indeed – at some educational institutions, for instance the Ole Bull Academy – the students have to visit traditional players, where they learn according to the master-apprentice model. There is, too, great diversity among the fiddlers – according to which institution they are educated at, where they live and work, which kind of arenas they work in, their individuality, personal choice and much more. And, finally, it is important to remark that the amateur-based folk music movement which cherishes solo playing and *spellemannslag* alike continues to flourish, and is now partly integrated with the professionalised ‘great tradition’. This is another reason not to worry that education, professionalisation, adjustment to markets, and other developments will move Norwegian fiddling away from its heritage.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Håkon Asheim, *Fra bruksmusikk til ‘lydarspel’: Konsertradisjonen i hardingfelemusikken med hovedvekt på Valdres-spelemannen Olav Moe (1872–1967)*, (thesis, ‘Utrykt hovedoppgave i musikk’, University of Oslo, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Odd-Are Berkaak, ‘Riksscene for folkemusikk og folkedans’, *En utredning på oppdrag fra Norsk folkemusikk og danselag* (Oslo: NFD, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Dan Lundberg, Krister Malm, and Owe Ronström, *Music, Media, Multiculture: Changing Musicscapes* (Stockholm: Svenskt visarkiv, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Steven Feld, ‘A Sweet Lullaby for World Music’, *Public Culture*, 12, no. 1 (2000), 145–171.

<sup>5</sup> Tellef Kvifte, ‘Hunting for Gold at the End of the Rainbow: Identity and Global Romanticism – On the Roots of Ethnic Music’, *Popular Musicology Online*, 2001, <http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/04/kvifte.html> [accessed June 2015].

<sup>6</sup> Mats Johansson, ‘Nordisk folkmusik som stilkonsept’, *Norsk Folkemusikklags skrift*, 23 (2009), 34–65.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusic of the West* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000); Lundberg, Malm, and Ronström, 2003; Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Globalisation: The Key Concepts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Ove Larsen, ‘Nordområdenes musikk – om folkemusikkens rolle og stilling sett fra nord’, *Musikk og tradisjon*, 25 (2011), 120–147.

<sup>9</sup> Tellef Kvifte, ‘Folkemusikk, samspill og forandring. Mellom tradisjon og fornying’, *Musikk og tradisjon*, 24 (2010), 32–40.