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Scandinavian Fiddling for String Teachers

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Abstract (Abstract): Scandinavian fiddling for string teachers is discussed. Scandinavian music consists of two layers of folk dance music. The older layer, called "bygdedans" (village dance), has the polska as its most common form. This layer of folk dance music was played either solo on fiddle, hardingfele, or nyckelharpa, in duos, or larger ensembles made up entirely of these instruments. The newer layer of folk dance, ironically called "gammeldans" (old dance), can add more contemporary instruments, such as the accordion, clarinet, bass, guitar, or almost any other instrument in addition to fiddles. Classical string players can readily participate in Scandinavian fiddling because it follows similar principles of intonation, rhythm, and tone quality. String teachers can easily adapt Scandinavian fiddling to their teaching.

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Full text: Carl Rahkonen
S candidavia is generally thought of as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, because of their closely related languages. Finland and Iceland are also often included, though, as a group, all five are usually referred to as Nordic countries. Fiddling has been a strong tradition in all the Nordic countries, but the center of Scandinavian fiddling, at least as practiced in the United States, comes from Norway and Sweden. Fewer tunes are played from Denmark, Finland, and Iceland.

The sound of Scandinavian fiddling can be traced to the influence of older instruments in the culture, representing a parallel tradition: In Norway, it is the hardingfele and, in Sweden, the nyckelharpa. Many traditional fiddle players also play these instruments.

The hardingfele is shaped like a regular violin, but is more arched—so much so that looking from the side of the instrument, you can see the soundpost through the F hole. Norwegians call regular violins flat fiddles. The hardingfele is often highly ornamented with etched designs and inlaid mother of pearl. The contemporary version has eight strings, four that are played and four that run under the finger-board and through the middle of the bridge for sympathetic resonance. Every note played on a hardingfele produces a proliferation of resonant sounds. The fingerboard is shorter and flatter, and the bridge is flatter than a regular violin, making it easier to play the multiple lines and double stops continually called for by the music. It is typically tuned at least a half step higher than standard violin tuning, making the sound even brighter.

The nyckelharpa is a keyed fiddle. The body is long and narrow, with a structure closely related to the hurdy-gurdy. The player pushes rows of keys with vertical tangents to stop the stings, so vibrato in the usual sense is impossible. The nyckelharpa is played with a much shorter bow than a regular violin bow. The modern chromatic version has sixteen strings: three melody strings and one drone, plus twelve strings for sympathetic vibration. The sound of a nyckelharpa, like the hardingfele, is very resonant with multiple harmonics. Thus, the overall sound of Scandinavian fiddling favors resonant harmony. A regular fiddle player must learn to use little or no vibrato, play with flawless intonation, and obtain harmony by playing in ensembles with multiple parts (stämma), or with double stops in solo playing. In addition, the music can be highly ornamented.

As with other styles of fiddling, most Scandinavian tunes are for accompanying dance. Some forms, such as the polska, and its relatives the springar or pols in Norway, are unique to Scandinavia. The word “tune” in Sweden is låt (plural låtar), in Norway slått, and in Finland sävel.

Scandinavian music consists of two layers of folk dance music. The older layer, called bygdedans (village dance), has the polska as its most common form. It should not be confused with polka, the fast dance in duple time. The polska is a bit slower and in three beats, with a strong accent on beats one and three. It is believed to have originated in Poland, but found its most popular dissemination in Scandinavia. Many different styles of polskas are generally named after the region where they are played. Different types of polskas have different characteristics. The even polska features even eighth or sixteenth notes; the uneven or triplet polska includes parts with quarter and eighth note triplets. The overall feel of many polskas is that of shifting in and out of hemiola (two against three). In addition to this, in some parts of Scandinavia, the three beats
part of the *speelmanslag* at the 2003 Nordic Fiddles and Feet camp. Our leader, Andrea Hoag, is on the right. Are of differing lengths. That is, the first beat could be short, the second long, and the third as it should be. Polskas are notorious for being rhythmically complex, which is precisely why players and dancers love them! The groove may be hard to find, but finding it is well worth the effort. Other forms of tunes from the older layer have to do with ceremonies, especially weddings—for example, the *gånglåt* (walking tune), *brudmarsch* (bridal march), and *skänklätt* (gift giving tune).

The older layer of folk dance music was played either solo on fiddle, hardingfele, or nyckelharpa, in duos, or larger ensembles made up entirely of these instruments. When additional musicians played, they frequently improvised harmony. Today, such an ensemble, called *speelmanslag* (fiddler's ensemble), can have dozens of fiddlers playing in rich harmonies.

The newer layer of folk dance music, ironically called *gammeldans* (old dance), can add more contemporary instruments, such as the accordion, clarinet, bass, guitar, or almost any other instrument in addition to fiddles. The gammeldans repertoire features newer dance forms from the 19th century, such as the schottische, waltz, polka, and mazurka. Again, the players can all play the tune in unison or octaves, or they may choose to improvise harmony parts.

**Playing Scandinavian Fiddle Music**

Scandinavian fiddle music is great to listen to and even more fun to play. I always enjoyed listening to this music, years before I understood anything about it or how to play it. My initial interest in this music can be traced to the fact that my grandfather in Finland played fiddle. After nearly 30 years of playing classical viola, I took up fiddle playing by learning some of my grandfather's tunes, which were preserved on old reel-to-reel tape recordings. His tunes were from the Finnish gammeldans repertoire and were fairly straightforward and enjoyable to learn. This led me to study other Scandinavian repertoires that were more challenging and exciting.

Classical string players can readily participate in Scandinavian fiddling because it follows similar principles of intonation, rhythm, and tone quality. But, to become a good Scandinavian player, the classical player must study the style of playing, not just the tunes. The best way to learn about this music is to hook up with a good Scandinavian player in your area. You may study in a formal context, such as taking private lessons, or you may learn simply by playing with a good player or ensemble. If you can't conveniently find players in your area, then you should listen to good Scandinavian players on recordings, which today are easily available through many sites on the World Wide Web. (See the inset on page 68.) You should augment your personal study by attending one of the major Scandinavian music and dance camps in the United States: *Scandia* in Mendocino, California, and *Nordic Fiddles and Feet* in Buffalo Gap, West Virginia. They always bring outstanding instructors from Norway and Sweden, as well as many of the best players in the United States, most of whom have studied in Scandinavia.

Once players are familiar with the overall sound and style of Scandinavian fiddle music and know the various types of forms in the tradition, either from actual players or from sound recordings, they can then study new
tunes from transcriptions. Scandinavia has a long tradition of published transcriptions of fiddle tunes. The Swedes have an encyclopedic set of tunes from the 19th century, titled Svenska låtar. The Norwegians have similarly large sets of tune books for the hardingfele. Many other regional and local collections of transcribed tunes exist, some considered as a bible for that repertoire. Today, numerous transcriptions of Scandinavian tunes are available on the web. (See the inset on page 68.) Almost all the Scandinavian players I know are able to read music, but they also universally acknowledge that the best way to learn tunes is by ear in the traditional way. Transcriptions can never fully capture the style of playing and are used simply as reference tools. They should be set aside for actual performance—for example, when playing for dancers.

TEACHING SCANDINAVIAN FIDDLING
String teachers can easily adapt Scandinavian fiddling to their teaching. The oldest tradition in Scandinavia was to play unaccompanied, and many great solo players are still around today. This playing sounds similar to unaccompanied Bach, with many double stops and rhythmic variety. When additional fiddle players were available, they would play the same repertoire in ensembles, everything from duets up to large groups. Additional players who were gifted and familiar enough with the music would improvise harmony. Many contemporary transcriptions of Scandinavian tunes have harmony parts included. Classical players can join right in with the spelmanslag, and their sound will blend in well, but they should eventually develop a Scandinavian sound through listening and participation with good players. A school string orchestra can readily play as a spelmanslag.

Some Scandinavian tunes can be learned quickly, such as the gånglåtar (walking tunes). I successfully taught the Äpplebo gånglåt to a group of elementary school string students this past summer. (See Lennart Sohlin's “Six Easy Pieces” website.) Next, the gammeldans repertoire is most accessible to the novice Scandinavian player. Finally, the older polska and related tunes are the most difficult to learn, but they are also the most rewarding.

LET YOUR IMAGINATION BE YOUR GUIDE
Scandinavian fiddling is appreciated in a wide variety of contexts. The music is very interesting and entirely appropriate for multicultural folk festivals, where far less Scandinavian fiddle music than Old Time or Celtic music is played. Such music is always welcome at Scandinavian gatherings, which can be found in almost any part of the county. It is a popular music with international folk dancers due to its rhythmic complexity and unique sound.

Many of those who today are passionate about Scandinavian music and dance were introduced to it through international folk dancing. I also have seen Scandinavian tunes used successfully at contra dances. After dancing all evening to Anglo-Irish repertoire, the dancers welcomed the variety. Let your imagination be your guide! Scandinavian fiddling is well worth the effort to learn, and it will be greatly appreciated.
Carl Rahkonen is a music librarian and professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. With academic training in folklore and ethnomusicology, he recently completed a sabbatical to study American fiddling styles.

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