

Laura Ellestad's Long Road to Norway

Lorraine Mallinder
with Laura Ellestad



Figure 1: Laura Ellestad.

Growing up in Calgary, the only Norwegian music Laura Ellestad had heard of was '80s teen pop group A-ha. These days, however, she is making a name for herself on the blossoming Norwegian folk music scene, with her mesmerising take on the

country's traditional fiddle music.

Hardingfele, or Hardanger fiddle, is undergoing something of a revival in the Land of the Midnight Sun. Darkly magical, it catches the listener unawares with its trance-inducing loops,

interspersed with a twist here, a turn there. It is avant-garde stripped to its bare bones.

The Hardanger fiddle (in Norwegian, *hardingfele*) is often called the national instrument of Norway. It is similar to the violin and each one is a handmade work of art. A typical *hardingfele* is beautifully decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay and black pen-and-ink drawings, called *rosing*. It is topped with a carved head of a maiden (see photo below) or, more frequently, of an animal, usually a lion. Its most distinguishing feature is the four or five sympathetic strings that run underneath the fingerboard and add echoing overtones to the sound. The traditional playing style is heavily polyphonic. A melody voice is accompanied by a moving “drone” voice. Together, the instrument and the playing style create the sound for which the Hardanger fiddle is famous.

The instrument probably originated in the area around the Hardanger fjord of Norway – whence comes the English language name. The oldest known fiddle, the ‘Jaastad Fiddle,’ was made by Olav Jonsson Jaastad from Ullensvang and may date from as early as 1651. By the mid-1700s the Hardanger fiddle had become the dominant folk instrument in much of the inland south-central and western coastal areas of Norway. It is one of the few European folk music traditions that has survived the assaults of cultural change and foreign musical influences to continue nearly unchanged up to the present day.

Researchers in *hardingfele* music have notated over 1,000 distinct tunes, or *slåttar*, for the instrument. Each tune has a history and lineage, transmitted as carefully as the tune itself. The folklore surrounding the music has also been handed down for generations. Stories abound of the prowess of particular fiddlers or dancers, of the connection of fiddling with the supernatural, and of the joys and sorrows of everyday life, all connected with the music of the Hardanger fiddle in a living web.¹

“It has that melancholic, lyrical quality. It’s very rhythmical,” says Ellestad, speaking from her base at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo. Outside, the autumnal trees form a fitting backdrop to her live rendition of the spell-binding sound.

For Ellestad, it all started in Calgary, though, as with many great love affairs, it took a while for her to cotton on. Her father, whose grandparents were Norwegian, had discovered the *hardingfele* while watching the opening ceremony of the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics. So moved was he that he went out and bought one for himself.

But, despite his rhapsodising, Ellestad remained unmoved. A creative writing student, she had been

playing violin in an indie rock band. But a musical career had never been on the cards. “I never felt it was my thing,” she says. All of that changed when Dad bought a *hardingfele* for his daughter, arranging a lesson with Tore Bolstad, one of Norway’s top Hardanger fiddle players, who was visiting Canada. “I fell in love with it on the spot,” she says. “The music really resonated somehow. I understood it. It felt like it had some deep meaning.”

She had been playing for a year when she heard about the Ole Bull scholarship being offered by the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America. Slim though her chances seemed, she applied and won a grant for a trip to the region of Voss, in the heart of Fjord Norway. That was back in 2005. What should have been a one-week stint at the region’s Ole Bull Academy eventually turned into an entire winter, mainly because “I had no other plans”. She had the good fortune to stay with Bolstad, who became her personal tutor.

Bolstad inspired Ellestad to visit Valdres, the highland region of central Norway from which her own ancestors originated – and, an area, it so happened, renowned for its own haunting strain of Hardanger fiddle music. She returned the following winter, working on a Valdres farm, living the life of her great-grandparents, her fascination with the music deepening. After a year back in Canada, Ellestad returned to Ole Bull Academy for a BA in traditional music (in Norwegian, no less, having achieved conversational fluency before her first year was out). This was followed with a master’s degree in Norwegian traditional music performance, and now a PhD in performance practice, at the Norwegian Academy of Music.

Through her studies, Ellestad has become a specialist in Norwegian folk music history, focusing in particular on the migration of Norway’s Hardanger fiddlers to North America over the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a lonely furrow, to be sure, but one that Ellestad ploughs with quiet dedication. Very few Norwegian scholars have done research in this area, and only a handful of American scholars have studied it.

Her research tracks the evolution of Hardanger music in the American Midwest, looking at how the emigrant fiddlers organised themselves, holding events, dances, and fiddling competitions to keep their music – and their communities – alive. For her master’s thesis, Ellestad homed in on five musicians from Valdres, painstakingly recreating their repertoires from transcriptions and archive recordings.

From her work emerged an album, *Valdrespel i Amerika*, an homage to the Valdres five, which has been nominated for a *Folkelarmprisen* (Norwegian folk music) award and a *Spellemannprisen* (the Norwegian equivalent of the Grammy Awards) in the folk music category. A selection of tunes from

the repertoires of five of the most important Valdres fiddlers who emigrated to North America, it is a work whose sparse beauty is illuminated by the lightest of touches.

“It’s very traditional,” she says. “I feel a sense of loyalty. It’s important to be faithful to your source, to have a good knowledge of traditions before playing around with the form.”

Listening to Ellestad play, it is tempting to attribute her evident feel for the music to her ancestry. Is it all in the blood? She pauses, not entirely convinced. Whatever the case, she plans to remain in Norway for the duration. “It’s been an interesting journey, coming over here, feeling like a real oddity,” she laughs. “But, people have been so welcoming.”

Ellestad’s PhD research has her examining the 20th-century evolution of Hardanger music into a distinct Norwegian-American folk genre. She’s investigating Norwegian-American fiddle players and their performances of two distinct genres of Norwegian-rooted traditional music in the American Upper Midwest during the period between 1900 and 1970. These two musical genres, referred to as *bygdedans* music and Norwegian-American old-time music, emerged in Norway in the 16th and 18th centuries, respectively. Using theoretical perspectives of performance theory, diasporic cultural development, and identity theory, the project investigates layers of meaning involved in performances of these musical genres. Upper Midwestern performance contexts for *bygdedans* music included formal concerts, “play parties” (informal gatherings of fiddlers), events coordinated by Norwegian-American social organizations, performances for Norwegian-American folk dance groups, and more. A central performance context for *bygdedans* music – and one of the focal points of this project – was the American *kappleik* (Hardanger fiddle competition), an annual event arranged between 1915 and 1941 by a national organization for Hardanger fiddlers, *Spelemannslaget af Amerika*.

Norwegian-American old-time music – a creolized music tradition with roots in Norwegian *runddans* music – was associated with a wide variety of performances contexts. These include house parties, old-time fiddle contests, live radio broad-casts, commercial old-time dances, and many others. The genre had a strong foothold among Norwegian-Americans during the first decades of the 20th century and has continued to survive, large-ly as a family tradition, to the present day, although its current position is threatened.

If she has her way, Canada may also have a role to play in the future cross-border evolution of the genre: “I’ve mostly been a musician in Norway, but recently I’ve been thinking it would be cool to do something with some Canadian musicians,” she says. She’s been touring Canada as part of the duo

project she’s created with her husband, Magnus Wilk (Ellestad Wiik Duo), and they are planning a short tour for December/January of 2017-18.

The possibilities are intriguing. Centuries after its inception, the hardingfele has lent itself well to the boundary-breaking, genre-defying experimentation that has characterized Norway’s effervescent folk scene of late.

It is within this scene that Ellestad is leaving her own unique mark. Two centuries after the first Hardanger fiddlers left Norwegian shores for an unknown fate in North America, the girl from Calgary has brought them back home to a well-deserved welcome. There’s a sense that one of history’s forgotten loops has finally been closed.

It’s a long way from A-ha.

For samples of Laura Ellestad’s music, visit her webpage at:

<http://www.lauraellestad.com/music.html>.

Notes

¹ Reprinted with permission from the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America website. See <http://www.hfaa.org/Home/about-the-hardanger-fiddle>.

The image shows the cover of 'Penguin Eggs', Canada's Folk, Roots and World Music Magazine. The title is written in a stylized, red, serif font at the top. Below the title is the subtitle 'Canada's Folk, Roots and World Music Magazine'. The central graphic is a large, intricate, black and white illustration of a penguin, where the penguin's body and wings are formed by the lines of a musical instrument, possibly a fiddle or a similar stringed instrument. Below the illustration, there is a 'Subscribe Now!' section with a table of subscription rates for different regions and durations. At the bottom, there is contact information for Penguin Eggs, including an address in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, a telephone number, an email address, and a website URL.

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