



# Strange Fiddle in the Attic Part I

by Karen Torkelson Solgård

Musicians who waded into Scandinavian fiddle traditions don't have to explore the waters too long before they encounter some of the strange, bowed, stringed instruments from these northern-European countries. One such instrument is called Norway's national instrument, the Hardanger fiddle (pronounced har-DONG-er or in Norwegian *hardingfele* HARD-ing-fey-la), which found its way to America with Norwegian immigrants.

The Hardanger fiddle is similar in shape to a violin. Its sound, however, is quite distinctive. The *hardingfele* has four or five additional strings that run beneath its fingerboard. When the fiddle is played, these strings resonate and create a rich "drone" sound. The neck is shorter, allowing for eight or nine pegs in a longer pegbox. The bridge is nearly flat, making it possible, or even necessary, to play two strings at once. These instruments are often elaborately decorated. Human or animal shapes top the pegbox, rather than a scroll. Detailed ink work is painted on the top and back. Bone and mother-of-pearl are inlaid on the fingerboard and tailpiece. In southern Norway, the Hardanger fiddle was at its height of popularity from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the United States, the largest influx of Norwegian immigrants came from 1880-1920 and among them were fiddlers who played *hardingfele*. The tradition didn't pass on to the next generations. Factors included a couple of periods of anti-immigrant sentiment, religious pietism which banned the fiddle and its associated dances, and assimilation into popular American culture. Musical families taught their children the popular music of the day on the instruments of the day, regular fiddle (violin), accordion and piano.

I perform in concerts, school programs and residencies, and give fiddle and dance workshops around the country. After many performances-especially to audiences of Norwegian-Americans-someone has a story about an old uncle or grandpa who used to play, or the family that still has the old Hardanger fiddle they treasure but no one plays. My own family exemplifies that story repeated throughout the Upper Midwest, in the Pacific Northwest, and other large pockets of Norwegian descendants.

I grew up on a farm in northwestern Minnesota and my mother came from the middle of North Dakota, an area settled by her grandparents and relatives from Telemark, Norway. I didn't realize it at the time, but their house was filled with antiques and memorabilia from Norway. We loved going to Grandma and Grandpa's big farmhouse with not one, but two, attics to explore. The little one was all we knew about until we were teenagers. One day of exploration led to the big dark second attic on the big part of the house. In it were many interesting treasures: my grandpa's World War I army uniform, many old leather-bound books printed in old script of a language no one could read, and boxes of sepia-toned photos of harsh looking people from long ago who bore a strange resemblance to us. And, there was an old, tattered violin case. Since I was an aspiring cellist, I brought it downstairs. In it was a broken old, strange looking violin of sorts. It had a dragon head in place of a scroll, and flowers inked on the body. It had no label or date. None of the old people I asked remembered anyone ever playing it.

We got permission from my grandparents to bring it home. We had a luthier put it back together and hung it on our living room wall. We called it that "strange Norwegian violin" and thought they just didn't know much about violin making so decorated it like they did all their furniture, in *rosemaling* (flower painting) and fancy carving.

Our ignorance wasn't because we had forgotten our Norwegian heritage totally. Norwegian folk music has always been part of my family. My mother, aunt and grandmother taught folk songs to my siblings and me which we performed at various events dressed in our Norwegian *bunads* (regional costumes). But our main interests were in church and classical music. Even as I pursued classical music with a passion, I couldn't get that funny family fiddle out of my mind.

In 1979, I did a research project on the Hardanger fiddle as part of my undergraduate studies in music at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. The research didn't lead very far, even at a university placed in

the heart of the largest concentration of Scandinavian-Americans. I never actually heard a Hardanger fiddle played live, and in its traditional way, until 1986 when I traveled to Rauland, Telemark, the birthplace of my great-grandfather. Luckily, I heard one of the finest players in Norway, Knut Buen, and I was able to observe a local fiddle competition, followed by a dance of the old traditional dances. I was smitten by this "strange Norwegian violin."

Around that time, 1984, the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America was founded. (Their website has a wealth of background information and sound samples. [www.hfaa.org](http://www.hfaa.org)) Since then, the instrument has been undergoing a revival in America. I am part of the original core of folks who hope to bring Hardanger fiddle back to American fiddle traditions.

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### **About the Author**

Karen Solgård's Hardanger fiddle performances include centuries-old tunes from rural Norway, more recent "old-time" music popular in Norwegian American communities, and her own compositions and arrangements. Her web site is [http://mnfolkarts.org/karen\\_tork/karen\\_tork.html](http://mnfolkarts.org/karen_tork/karen_tork.html) . See <http://cdbaby.com/all/karensolgard> for her CD's.

