



How to Begin Fiddling Scandinavian Style

by Carl Rahkonen

Any fiddler would benefit from learning a few Scandinavian tunes in their proper style. As with all other styles of fiddling, this music is learned best "by ear." Classical players can join right in, since there are similar principles of intonation, rhythm and tone quality, and the classical sound blends well in a Scandinavian fiddle group, the *spellmanslag*. Scottish fiddling, especially that from the North, has many characteristics in common with Scandinavian playing. For example, the so-called "snap" (sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth), is common in both styles. Irish and American Old-Time styles are more distantly related, but there are Scandinavian fiddlers who also play well in these styles. No matter what type of music you play now, to become a good Scandinavian player fiddlers must study the *style* of playing, not just the tunes.

Scandinavian fiddling is appreciated in a wide variety of contexts. The music is entirely appropriate for multicultural folk festivals, where one hears far less Scandinavian fiddle music than Old Time or Celtic. 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 have also seen Scandinavian tunes used successfully at contra dances. After dancing all evening to Anglo-Celtic repertory, the dancers welcomed the variety. Scandinavian fiddling is well worth the effort to learn and will be greatly appreciated.

So how do you begin fiddling Scandinavian style? The three simple steps below will get you there:

1. Listen to Scandinavian fiddling. A famous Scottish fiddler once said to me in a clinic, "Ah, you're a Scandinavian fiddler. All that music sounds the same!" Certainly to anyone beginning to learn a style, the pieces will sound the same. You may have heard this same comment made about Irish, Scottish or Old Time music. But if you continue to listen, soon each piece will sound unique. Many Scandinavian tunes are *very interesting*, showing rhythmic complexity, stark beauty like the Scandinavian landscape, and sounding as exotic as any music found on the planet. You really have to listen to this music to appreciate it, and if you listen it will open up new musical worlds.
2. Hook up with Scandinavian fiddlers in your area. Once you've been bitten by the Scandinavian bug, you need to join with like minded fiddlers. One important aspect of Scandinavian fiddling is that it is frequently done *as a group*. At the end of some Old Time fiddle competitions, I have seen a group of contestants get on the stage and play the same tune (like the "Orange Blossom Special") in unison as a group, but that is certainly not the norm! In Scandinavian fiddling it is far more common. Many Scandinavian tunes can be played solo, but they are even better with a second fiddle, and still better with a group of fiddlers. This music is not really *accompanied* (with guitar, banjo or piano) in the traditional sense. The tunes could be played all in unison, or some of the more skilled players may improvise harmony parts. Playing this way is a powerful experience! These fiddle *spellmanslags*, and they can be found in many parts of the country, especially in urban areas or places where Scandinavian-Americans have settled. Most of these groups play on a regular basis for the Scandinavian dancers in their area. A listing of some of these groups may be found on my [web-site](#).

In addition to these "local" *spellmanslags*, there are several excellent music and dance camps that feature Scandinavian fiddling: the [Ashokan Northern Week](#) in New York, the [Nordic Fiddles and Feet](#) camp in Buffalo Gap, West Virginia and the [Scandia Camp](#) in Mendocino, California. They always bring outstanding instructors from overseas, as well as many of the best players in the United States, most of who have studied in Scandinavia. There are a plethora of Scandinavian festivals that feature fiddling. Two examples are the [Nisswa-stämmän](#) in Minnesota, the [Scandinavian Folk Festival](#) in Jamestown, New York.

3. After you have learned the style, then build your repertory. There is a truly amazing number of Scandinavian fiddle music resources on the web. If you can read music, there are literally hundreds of transcribed tunes in all Scandinavian genres. There are also sites with free audio downloads of tunes played locally in Scandinavia. You can build your repertory wherever you happen to live. I have listed many of these resources on my [web-site](#).

So there you have it. I hope some day soon to hear *you* fiddling Scandinavian style!

About the author

Carl Rahkonen is a Music Librarian and Professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. In 2001-02 he held a sabbatical to study American fiddling styles, including Scandinavian, Scottish, Irish, and old-time styles, primarily in Western Pennsylvania and West Virginia.