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*Ragnhild Knudsen*

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Ón gCos go Cluas

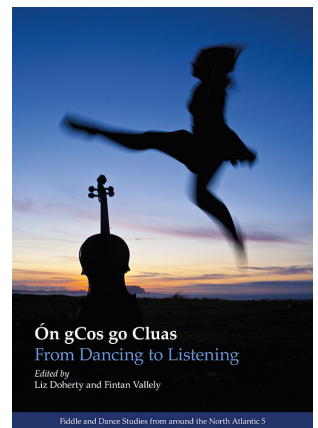
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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## Arranging traditional Norwegian Hardanger fiddle tunes

RAGNHILD KNUDSEN



**Figure 1** Glima – Ragnhild Knudsen, Torunn R. Rue, Helene Waage. *Photo by Anders K. Rue.*

In this paper I will present some aspects of arranging traditional Norwegian Hardanger fiddle dance tunes for other instruments, as exemplified by my arrangements for the Glima string trio, a folk music group formed of three musicians living in Telemark, who play Hardanger fiddle tunes on our instruments: Hardanger fiddle, viola and cello. For the past fourteen years we have been working with this music and giving concerts in the local community as well as elsewhere in Norway and abroad. This has raised such questions as: will the tunes, when arranged for our trio, still be understood to be the same music as the original Hardanger fiddle pieces? What parameters will they be judged on? What are the requisites for them to be accepted as traditional dance music?

### **The trio**

All three members have long been involved with the traditional music of Norway, performing on our instruments and also engaging in the local folk music environment in several ways.

I myself work with folk/traditional music education in Rauland, at Telemark University College [since 2018, the Institute for Traditional Art and Folk Music in Rauland, part of the University of South-Eastern Norway], and also teach Hardanger fiddle and violin in the municipal music school in Seljord, a small town in rural Telemark. I trained as a violin teacher at the conservatory in Bergen, and I also have a master's degree in musicology from the University of Oslo, in the thesis for which I compared violin teaching with Hardanger fiddle teaching. I have been playing the Hardanger fiddle myself since 1992, although in the Glima trio, set up in 1999, I mostly play the viola. We play Hardanger fiddle tunes arranged mostly by me. Our cellist is also a traditional singer, and our Hardanger fiddle player has performed traditional music since she was young. In fact, she is often called upon to be a judge at various competitions for traditional Hardanger fiddle playing. The repertoire is based on tunes that we have picked up from our various activities, and either I or the other fiddle player are often familiar with them through having played them on Hardanger fiddle. Typically, we arrange, learn and try out the different parts orally, without writing the arrangements down.

### **The tradition**

Traditional Hardanger fiddle music in Norway is a widespread and still a living solo tradition, in which person-to-person teaching without written music is perceived as the traditionally correct way of teaching and learning the tunes (although many tunes are also written down). During the 1900s it became popular to play in fiddlers' groups known as *spelemannslag*, and by the 1970s these were well organised throughout the country. In such groups the tradition is to play the tunes in unison, without accompaniment. Both groups and soloists compete in the annual national competition for national traditional music (*Landskapleiken*).

### **The tunes**

One of the characteristics of the Hardanger fiddle dance-tunes played today is the use of two-string playing and double stops. Traditionally played without accompaniment, the dance tunes are perceived as musically complete in their own right. A common feature of the tunes is what one might call their 'small motif structure', whereby small motifs are repeated and varied as the player wishes. Variations can relate not only to how the ornaments are made, but also to which other notes are chosen to accompany the melody – whether open strings or double stops. Moreover, different bowing can be chosen to vary the phrasing of the melody, and the structure or form itself can vary – for example how many times, and in what order, the small motifs are played.<sup>1</sup> These structural variations must be kept within a certain framework in order for the piece to be heard as the same tune. As the tunes also exist in many versions, one might say that the improvisation occurs at the micro level. Variations in structure and in the decoration of the melody are the parameters where you can find both differences between the players' personal style, as well as differences within the playing of a single performer.

### **Approaches to arranging**

When these tunes are arranged, there are several choices to be made. One can, variously:

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- let the Hardanger fiddle play as if it was a solo instrument, and surround it with accompaniment;
- let the other instruments take over some of the motifs from the original tune;
- let the Hardanger fiddle play other (composed) parts;
- adopt a mixture of all three approaches.

One can also divide the tune into sections and mix them in new ways – although in this paper, I have opted to focus on arranging in ways that leave the melody line recognisable. Both what you choose to add and how the added elements are played will make a great difference, and your choices in this respect will emphasise different aspects of the music. If, for instance, you add a rhythmic pattern on the cello, this can underline the rhythmic aspect of the original tune. But if, on the other hand, you add long notes on the cello, this can make the Hardanger fiddle stand out in a different way while also highlighting the rhythms of the traditional tune through the contrast that is created. Several important parameters can change when this music is arranged for trio.

### **Form**

It can be difficult to change the form intuitively during a performance in a trio; we have to have a fixed form/structure, or at least have reached a clear agreement about the possibility of variations. Individual improvisation at the level of form is difficult in a trio setting.

### **Notes and harmonies**

One might argue that these tunes are not made for harmonising via the addition of chords; if we add chords, or notes that do not occur in the original tune, this can push it into a different kind of tonal landscape. It is important to be aware of this when choosing additional notes. One way to go about arranging traditional music is to use a modal rather than a harmonic approach (Sven Ahlbäck);<sup>2</sup> for instance, the Hardanger fiddle player and composer Eivind Groven did not use any notes in his arrangements of traditional fiddle tunes other than those that he found in the melodic material.

### **Sound or timbre**

The instruments you add will alter the overall sound and also make the Hardanger fiddle sound different. It will not sound the same way alone as it does when the other instruments are heard at the same time; the spectrum of sounds will alter the way the instruments are heard, just as the addition of a different colour in a painting will change the viewer's impression of the colour beside it. Moreover, the cello and viola have different connotations for the listener: they may evoke ideas from another music landscape and experiences with other musical cultures in the listener's mind and change their perception of the music.

### **Intonation**

'Old tonality' – or non-tempered intervals – is still used by some Hardanger fiddle players. This can be difficult to adapt both for the musicians and for listeners who are not accustomed to this tonality. It is not impossible to use it in the trio setting, but demands some work and careful thinking about how it will be received when used on different instruments, and

especially in harmonies. Which notes/intervals are expected – or accepted – when a tune is played on a cello? This can be different from what is acceptable when the same tune is played on a Hardanger fiddle or is sung. Sometimes when quarter notes or micro tonality have been used on the cello we have had reactions such as: ‘She was suddenly really out of tune’ although when they are used in singing or on the fiddle, they pass as part of the style. This has to do with the listeners’ expectations and experiences with the genre in question – and also their degree of openness to surprises.

### **Rhythm**

On the whole, this is not as flexible or open to small nuances as when performed by a solo fiddler, since three people have to agree on it. Details in the groove may also be experienced differently when played with a different sound. When the instrumentation is changed, the way the instruments respond – according to the differing size of their bows and resonance boxes, as well as the differing structure of their strings – leads to changes in the length of the notes and the friction in the attack; this can alter the groove.

### **The visual aspect**

A trio looks different to a solo fiddler, and observation of the movements and the communication between the players will influence the overall listening experience. What you see as the sounds that are being produced affects your perception of what you hear.

### **Insider versus outsider perception**

Will the music still be understood as a dance tune by the local folk/traditional musicians and dancers? Our experience is that some people who are very much ‘insiders’ tend to comment on the way the tune can be danced to: they may perceive it as too slow or too heavy, or, comparing it to the version they know, may say that the ornamentation or the version itself are not correct. Comments tend to relate to the ‘groove’ in the music, and this is experienced differently when the beats are played on a cello or viola. The core response here is often: ‘It’s not what I’m used to hearing’, and the opinions expressed about the much-loved music when played on other instruments show that the melodies and rhythms played are far from the only things that matter. Interestingly, such attitudes are also common when people compare different solo players on the Hardanger fiddle: there, too, debate arises about how the tune should be played. This raises the question of what the tune ‘is’: can you separate it from the instrument it is played on, or the player who performs it? What must be present for it to be accepted as the same tune? What does it mean to be ‘true to the tune’ – or to the style? What defines the style: instrument, form, playing style or context? And what if we believe that one of the criteria of defining it as folk/traditional music is that it is constantly changing? How slowly must things change to still be accepted as part of the tradition? What changes are accepted and by whom? These questions also reflect the conflict often seen in traditional music. What must remain the same if it is to be accepted as forming part of a given tradition, and what can be altered, if change is part of what defines it as traditional music?

In their article ‘Musikk, identitet og musikkformidling’ (Music, identity and music presentation) Even Ruud and Tellef Kvifte discuss topics related to how people can hear

the same music differently: ‘It is impossible for us to hear the music “as it actually is”. The sounds or the music we hear will always be experienced in some context’.<sup>3</sup>

How will people who are unused to Hardanger fiddle music hear our trio’s performance? We have got comments which suggest that the music can be ‘opened up’ for the listeners: the rhythm is more clearly indicated and the music can be easier to understand than in its solo form. Arranged for a trio, it becomes more similar to the music with which they are familiar. We once heard the following comment when performing with Glima: ‘It is so nice with the cello underneath; the music becomes “grounded” for me. The solo Hardanger fiddle music is so thin and high’. Another time, when I played some solo Hardanger fiddle tunes for a friend who has played in a professional symphony orchestra for twenty years, he complained: ‘The music has no handles, I can’t grab it!’ The new instruments in themselves give new associations or connotations. What is heard as the melody – or as fore, or background – can change. Our experience has clearly shown us that using instruments other than the Hardanger fiddle can make the music more accessible to those unused to it, by making it more recognisable: they find ‘hooks’ to hang their listening on, so to speak. The arrangement can become the ‘handles’ my friend was looking for.

### **Conclusion**

Whether or not it can be heard as the same music will depend on who is listening, what are seen as the markers of the style, as well as what criteria are used to measure sameness. As I have noted, what seems central in the music can vary because it can be heard in so many ways. In Norway today there are several groups that arrange fiddle tunes, but at the same time the focus on solo playing persists, and you can find the same people doing both: good solo players in the traditional style also play in groups. So even though people do play in groups, many players – including young performers – cultivate the traditional solo playing style. These two trends are both active and run parallel in Norway. Some things are lost when a tune is transferred from a solo to a group setting, but new things are also gained; and it is my belief that this music has many qualities that can only be shown – or may even only exist – when other instruments are introduced. A totally new expression can appear when the melody ‘made for’ – or most usually heard on – the Hardanger fiddle is played in a trio, or solo on the cello or viola. Likewise, the sound register of the Hardanger fiddle can be experienced in a new and different way when it is surrounded by – or heard alongside – other instruments. The sounds can stand in contrast to that of the Hardanger fiddle, or may underline sounds that are heard differently when the instrument is played solo. Different aspects of the music come in focus, and the experience changes. The way in which music is heard will always depend on the listeners’ preconceptions and previous experience. The tunes cannot be totally separated from the instrument on which they are performed; the sound is part of the tune. We don’t hear music as notes with different frequencies in isolation from the actual timbre or colour of the sound; these two aspects are intimately linked.

In this paper I have discussed some aspects of arranging traditional Hardanger fiddle tunes for a string trio. Arranging music that you know for ‘new’ instruments, using it and experimenting with it is a sign of interest in the music. I will end by quoting a

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Norwegian composer who, among other things, has arranged avant-garde rock music songs for symphony orchestras. When asked about the give and take in this process he said:

Arrangement adds a dimension, and I think it is important to be aware of which dimension. To take a song to a place where it has never been before can also be to take the song seriously.<sup>4</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tellef Kvifte, *Om variabilitet i fremføring av hardingfeleslåtter og paradigmer i folkemusikkforskningen* (Oslo: Universitetet I Oslo, Institutt for musikk og teater, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Sven Ahlbäck, *Melody beyond Notes: A Study of Melody Cognition* (doctoral thesis, University of Gothenburg, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Even Ruud og Tellef Kvifte, *Musikk, identitet og musikkformidling* (Oslo: Institutt for musikkvitenskap, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Jon Øyvind Næss, interview, 2012.