

Folk Music Instruments

‘Normal’ fiddle (violin)



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What we call the fiddle or ‘normal’ fiddle in folk music circles is the same as the violin in a symphony orchestra. Nevertheless, many players think that some violins suit folk music better than others. It has to do with the sound folk musicians prefer and how the instrument is to play on.

The violin became widespread in the towns of Norway in the last half of the 1600s, but there are indications that it was played in the countryside far earlier. Could the violin have come from, for example, Germany, directly to the Norwegian countryside – without having been in the towns? In the early 1600s, Norwegians often took part in wars in continental Europe, and the soldiers could have taken violins home with them to Norway. Given that the instrument so quickly became popular in rural areas, it must be seen in the context that there was already a tradition of string instruments. Sources from the 1500s cite the *fidla* and *gigja*, which were Norwegian variants of the mediaeval instruments, *fidel*, *rebekk* and *the bowed lyre*. Evidence suggests that the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle developed in parallel with the development of the European violin.

In large sections of the country, it was the ‘normal’ fiddle that became dominant. This can also be connected to the use of the fiddle in Sweden, or *fiol* as they say there. Fiddle playing in the East Norwegian valleys and Trøndelag is clearly related to Swedish music.

The bridge on a violin, which the strings go over, is quite curved. That makes it easy to play on one string at a time without touching the others, at the same time as getting a good, strong tone. But nonetheless, when playing tunes on the ‘normal’ fiddle, two strings are often played together at the same time. It is also normal that two or more players play together. Then, one fiddler plays the melody line, whilst the others play bass notes or lower voices, thus creating harmonies.

There was a strong revival in folk fiddle playing in the 1800s, especially for dancing. We could perhaps call this the fiddle’s golden era. Many made their living from

playing the fiddle at weddings and dances. Religious *folk songs* and *visetoner* could also be played. But the many religious movements at the end of the century, which labelled fiddle playing and dance as sinful, put an end to the playing of the fiddle in many rural areas.

There are big differences between folk tunes and classical violin playing. Vibrato is seldom used in Norwegian folk music, and the bow is mostly in contact with the string, as opposed to with classical bow technique. The tonality in folk music also differs from the tempered tonality, which developed in Europe from the 1600s. Folk music retains the older scale-types which are based on the harmonic series, which results in certain intervals being lower than those of the tempered scale. (See the chapter about tonality on page 60.)

The bowing is closely related to the dance rhythm. The ornamentation can be related to the baroque trills and melodic “decoration”, but with a distinctive Norwegian folk music character.



The fiddlemaker's work is based on old traditions. Sigvald Rørlien in activity.