



Dan Trueman: Norwegian Folk Fiddler and Electronic Music Radical

By Dan Chandler

It's not often I come across someone who totally confounds all my preconceptions about music and musicians. Dan Trueman wrote a piece about the Hardanger fiddle for the Hardanger Fiddle Association newsletter recently (the Norwegian folk fiddle pictured with Dan and his wife Monica to the left). In the article he talked about composing music in a style that draws from the Hardanger (hardingfele in Norwegian) tradition. Dan mentioned a web site, so I looked it up. It is amazing, opening up all sorts of vistas in modern electronic music and instruments (violins of course). I thought it might be interesting if I used some of Dan's words to "answer" questions that I had about his work (with his permission).

DC: You teach music at Columbia and have a classical background in playing the violin. What got you interested in the Hardanger fiddle?

DT: I still remember when I first heard a recording of the hardingfele. As a composer, I've listened to and studied a wide range of music, from the very old to the very new and the very distant to local. Not all of it has had the same impact or attraction, and I'm often at a loss to explain why one particular kind of music knocks me out and another bores me. My first experience hearing the hardingfele (it was a tape of Anund Roheim) was memorable because it was an immediate knockout, and I'm still coming to grips with why.

DC: Do you just use the hardingfele for composing your own works or do you play traditional Norwegian music too?

DT: My obsession has become so strong that I have become a true student of the tradition; learning the tunes, playing for dancing, and enjoying the community has become an activity in its own right that I treasure. I find myself only becoming more involved with the tradition. I am particularly struck by the off-kilter, asymmetrical phrases which seem to dissolve into one another, by the careful use of register, by the complicated, uneven rhythms which are somehow so danceable, by the ear-bending microtuning, and the facile ornamentation. I try to absorb these things the old fashioned way—by learning and playing lots of tunes—and their effects keep bubbling up in my new tunes.

DC: Can you say something about how you compose for the hardingfele (and the six string electric violin you use as well)? You noted in your article that you feel your method is similar to that of Emile Benoit, the prolific Newfoundland fiddler Colin Quigby wrote about in *Music From the Heart* (see my column two issues ago).

DT: Yes, it is very similar. I improvise and listen. I record licks that sound interesting to me (for whatever reason), and gradually, perhaps in a month, perhaps in an afternoon, a “tune” emerges. I specifically avoid notation. I don’t hesitate to change, expand, reduce, or ornament, and I like to be able to improvise to some extent. After a tune “gets off the ground,” Monica (my wife, a classical and steel string guitar player) and I work out a part for her, without notation, going through a similar process. We then play the tune as often as possible until we feel comfortable enough to perform it. All of our tunes change the more we play them.

DC: I’ve heard quite a few of your tunes now—from your CD called *Hot Dang’r*—and sometimes it’s hard for me to tell whether you are playing the six string electric violin or the hardingfele—which has a set of “sympathetic” strings running under the fingerboard.

DT: Yes, the electric violin sounds much like hardingfele music—double stop textures predominate—and I avoid fancy effects and distortion. The ease with which I can retune the electric fiddle (it uses guitar machinery, not pegs) has encouraged me to explore different traditional tunings [hardingfele music uses over 20 different tunings, though most tunes are in one of two main tunings]. The two extra low strings greatly increase the already innumerable possibilities. I have tried dozens of combinations, and I feel I’ve only scratched the surface.

DC: The electric fiddle leads into one of your other passions, totally electronic violin music. What are some of the directions you have explored in that realm?

DT: My dissertation at Princeton was called *Reinventing the Violin*. In it I discuss how the violin has been continually reinvented throughout its history, reflecting the efforts of its players and makers to adjust its expressive capabilities to suit their needs. Electrifying the violin seems a drastic reinvention of a tradition-laden, highly refined instrument. I develop the notion of the violin as *meta-instrument*, one that is defined most generally by only the physical “pose” required to play it. Electrifying the violin alters the player-instrument feedback loop. In particular, amplification creates a sense of *detachment* and, paradoxically, allows the violinist to play softer.

DC: I was intrigued by the notion of the violin being reduced to the “pose” involved in playing it—partly because the pose classical musicians use seems so different from that of many folk fiddlers. Just think of the dance that the bow hand of a good bluegrass fiddler goes through.

DT: Well, I have abstracted all that to what I call the “virtual violin,” which is a collection of data derived from the physical process of playing the violin. A colorful example is given by Laurie Anderson. In the late 1970s, she developed a violin fitted with audio tape recorder heads and a bow with magnetic tape instead of horse hair. She played the violin by drawing the tape through the tape heads which then transmitted the prerecorded material on the tape to an amplifier. In this case the audio signal reflects the physical motions of the bowing, slowing down and speeding up with bow changes, but the resulting sound is not in any way acoustically derived

from the violin. Again, a significant portion of the output is arbitrary—the prerecorded tape material and the mechanism for mapping this to sound—but the physical process of playing the violin is essential. Another example is the “Hypercello” that Yo Yo Ma has recorded on.

DC: What specific direction did you take the “virtual violin”?

DT: I have developed the electronic “R-bow” among other things. If I choose bow position to control pitch, it is possible to play the bow without the violin; my shoulder makes a convenient surface for bowing. Like Laurie Anderson's magnetic-tape bow, the R-Bow capitalizes on both the physical and visual aspects of traditional violin technique. Learning to play the R-Bow (an ongoing process) also reminded me of the experience I went through learning the Hardanger fiddle. With the hardingfele, my body adjusted to the different weight and bow speed requirements, and to the left hand requirements, of the smaller, lighter fiddle; I feel and look different playing the hardingfele than I do playing the electric or "Classical" violins. Similarly, I have learned a variety of gestures that are meaningless without the sensor data. For one, I can simply press down with varying degrees of weight and play a virtual instrument without pulling the bow across a string—the grit of the bowed-string relationship is non-existent. Secondly, I can move the bow, or shake the bow, and depending on the kind of gesture, play a virtual shaker or adjust a signal processing parameter. Again, the bowed-string is irrelevant. In fact, the violin itself is irrelevant. By combining these new gestures with the familiar ones available, I have an entirely new way of playing the violin—it is an instrument with a unique, and only partially explored, expressive potential.

DC: I know that there's a lot more to it and that you present the detail with sound clips and pictures on your website. If people wanted to check you out further how would they do so, and is your *Hot Dang'r* album available?

DT: *Hot Dang'r*, and a bunch of other musical examples, is available free for downloading in *mp3* and *realaudio* formats at: <http://www.music.princeton.edu/~dan/hotdangr/>
This is impractical for most people, I realize, and I can press the CD's one at a time at home, so if you are really interested, you can send me a check for \$15 and I will mail you a one-off CD. Send to: 39 Main St/P.O. Box 135/ Kingston, NJ 08528-0135.

DC: I for one would like to encourage people to both take a look (and listen) at the website and download or buy some of your music. I think it's great!

Dan Chandler will be playing all of the Hot Dang'r CD on the radio show, In The Tradition, on Monday June 5th, 3p.m. on KHSU 90.5 FM.