

Hot Dang'r:

New (American) Music for the Hardanger Fiddle

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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 often I'm 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.

One of the ways composers come to grip with music that is meaningful to them is to listen, learn, and then compose new music that reflects their experiences. Debussy, Stravinsky, Bartók, Miles Davis, Steve Reich and the guitarist Bill Frisell are all musicians/composers who have explicitly gone through this process (I also count them among my greatest influences). I am in the midst of this process with the music of the hardingfele, but my obsession has become so strong that I have also 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 (this is different than, for example, Bartók's experience with the hardingfele—he never, to my knowledge, immersed himself in the music and culture for an extended period). This wasn't my original intention—I simply wanted to learn more about the music—but that first listening experience was many years ago, and I find myself only becoming more involved with the tradition.

I have composed a growing collection of tunes that come directly from my experiences with the hardingfele. Some of the tunes are for hardingfele, others for the 6-string electric violin, and a few are duos that I perform with my wife, guitarist Monica Muga. The collection, titled *Hot Dang'r!*, currently includes approximately 20 tunes, 14 of which are recorded—more are in progress.

I recently read a wonderful book by Colin Quigley—titled *Music From The Heart*—about the late Newfoundland fiddler Emile Benoit. Emile was a composing fiddler, an "undisputed representative of the tradition" but also "a self-conscious creator and innovator whose music 'comes from the heart.'" Quigley's descriptions of Emile's compositional process sounded remarkably familiar to me: "his fingers roamed over the instrument almost at random, attentive to pleasing combinations." He worked with a tape recorder and without notation, and his "composing process may be envisioned as an intimate pairing of musical experimentation and evaluation. Ongoing modification and eventual selection were based on his aesthetic values."

My process can be similarly described. 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—Western music notation has built in biases and the simple process of visualizing the music in that way focuses the attention differently. Notation also tends to "fix" tunes, whereas I prefer to think of the tunes as always evolving—I don't hesitate to change, expand, reduce, or ornament, and I like to be able to improvise to some extent, similar to the way I hear a great fiddler like Hauk Buen improvise. After a tune "gets off the ground," Monica 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; when we listen to recordings we made just a year ago, we frequently are surprised by how different the tunes feel now. In a sense then, *Hot Dang'r*, as a tune collection, is also continually in progress.

Unlike Emile, however, I am not an undisputed representative of "the tradition," (meaning, in my case, any of the traditions of the hardingfele) and I never will be. Nor is it my goal. This offers a certain freedom; I don't feel like I need to *avoid* influences that are clearly outside the tradition—I can experiment and select without constraining my "aesthetic values" to a particular subset of my musical experiences. As an example, consider the tune *Gooseberry* (a transcription is included with this issue). The opening descending phrase was initially inspired by the traditional tune *Helene Bø*, which I learned from Hauk at Buffalo Gap in 1997. But, also being deeply influenced by the music of Bartók and Stravinsky, I couldn't help but hear the high (written) A# over the low open A—an interval unheard of in the tradition—and rather than being ruled out, it became the "signature sound" for the tune.

This inevitable mixing of influences occurs with each compositional decision I make, whether consciously or unconsciously—how could it be otherwise? But, the starting point has remained, thus far, the beautiful music of the hardingfele. I am particularly struck by the off-kilter, asymmetrical phrases which seem to dissolve into one another (Knut Buen's *Nordfjorden* comes to mind), by the careful use of register, where a tune will gently move from low strings to high strings and back (*Gro Fossekåsi*, which I learned from Loretta Kelley, is a good example), by the complicated, uneven rhythms which are somehow so danceable, by the ear-bending microtuning (this is something that is just beginning to be heard in my own tunes), and the facile ornamentation. I continue to 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.

Many of the tunes in *Hot Dang'r* are for 6-string electric fiddle, not hardingfele. In spite of this, the music sounds much like hardingfele music—double-stop textures predominate—and I avoid fancy effects and distortion (with this music, anyhow). The ease with which I can retune the electric fiddle (it uses guitar machinery, not pegs) has encouraged me to explore different traditional tunings, and the two extra strings (both lower than traditional violin strings) greatly increases the already innumerable possibilities. One of my favorite examples of this is *Ghostwalk*, which starts with *trollstilt* (C#-A-E-A, from top down) and adds C# and E below that (the low E is just above the low C-string on the cello—very low!). I have tried dozens of other combinations, and I feel I've only scratched the surface.

For the past year, Monica and I have been performing tunes from *Hot Dang'r* frequently, and we are planning more shows for the upcoming winter and spring. Eventually, I would like to expand our "band" to include an acoustic bass player and percussionist (inspired by the sound of the Swedish band (gasp!) *Våsen*), though I don't want to overwhelm the sound of our duo—Monica's detailed guitar playing (she comes from a primarily "Classical" guitar background) can easily get buried. We're also hoping to bring the tunes back to Norway someday and see how the true "representatives of the tradition" respond—I'm sure it will be interesting!

My experiences with the traditional Norwegian music and these original tunes has also had a significant impact on my activities as a "Classical" composer. The impact has recently become quite direct; I am currently composing a work for full orchestra that is based on a new (as yet unrecorded) hardingfele/guitar duo titled *Roulette*—I am hoping that some of resonance and sheer beauty of the hardingfele will translate to the orchestra. But, ultimately, my interest in the instrument and its traditions is not such that it will serve as a resource for the lofty notions of "art music" (this approach that composers have often had to so-called "folk" musics is difficult for me to accept). Rather, I am still reeling from my first experience listening to Anund Roheim, and I don't see myself recovering any time soon. My greatest—and rather optimistic—hope is that somehow this new music will find a place in our country, that fiddlers will learn these tunes from recordings (or over the internet!), dancers will learn to dance to them, and a new tradition of music for the hardingfele will take hold.