



**Sons of Norway**  
**HERITAGE PROGRAMS**



## MiniPresentation#42

**THE HARDANGER FIDDLE**

## THE HARDANGER FIDDLE

For a lot of people, the Norwegian Hardanger (Hahr'DAHNG'ehr) fiddle or Hardingfele (HAHR 'ding 'feh'leh) as it is called, has become Norway's first and foremost folk instrument. Based on the Italian violins that emerged in the 1450s, the Hardanger fiddle usually is a little smaller than a regular violin. It is often **beautifully decorated**. Some fiddles are rose-painted, some have intricate inlaid patterns of mother-of-pearl and ivory, some have carvings or geometric patterns burnt into the wood, while a good number of fiddles are plain, after all, it is the sound that counts.

What makes the Hardanger fiddle different from the regular violin is first and foremost that it has resonance strings underlying the top strings. Those underlying strings ring along when the top strings are played, thus creating the characteristic Hardanger fiddle sound. Usually there are four such strings, but from two up to six strings have been used. There were several types of string instruments with underlying strings used in Europe in the **1400s** as well as in the **1600s**, and we can assume that the special stringing of the Hardanger fiddle was modeled after those.

The oldest existing Hardanger fiddle was made in 1621 by **Ole Jonsen Jaastad** (Yaw'stah) from Ullensvang in Hardanger, and can now be seen at the University of Bergen. Most townships in western Norway and Telemark had a fiddle-maker or two. Like the fiddlers who had a special tune associated with them, the fiddle-makers also left certain characteristic marks on their instruments. It might be a certain quality of sound, a special rounding of the bow, a special shaping of the scroll at the end of the fingerboard.

The Hardanger fiddle is tuned one to one-and-a-half tones higher than the regular concert pitch. The fiddlers often change the tuning of their instrument for certain types or pieces of music. One of the well-known Hardanger fiddlers had **24 different ways** of tuning his fiddle. One can do a lot with four strings.

The Hardanger fiddle is often played for dancing—a wealth of dance music like springars, hallings and reels is preserved and passed on by dedicated folk musicians. But there are also a number of pieces composed for listening. They are often descriptive—painting a musical picture of a certain happening, a certain part of nature, a sentiment or a person. Ceremonial music was used for almost all festive and solemn occasions. A number of **wedding marches** are known—even in funerals the fiddle might be heard, although the more pessimistic among the townspeople thought the fiddle too sinful an instrument to be used for such occasions.

As pietism gained a foothold in Norway, the perception grew that the fiddle was an advocate of sin. It was used on festive occasions and thus connected with drinking, card-playing, dancing and flirting. Many fiddlers put away their instruments, vowing never to touch them again. But the fiddling represented a **good income** that many would not give up. Also, there was the process of making music in itself, providing many a gifted person with a much-needed channel for artistic expression. There were—and still are—many gifted fiddlers in Norway.

One of the best known was Myllarguten (MIH'lahr'guh'tehn) from Telemark. He could make magic with his fiddle and make people both laugh and cry. Another one was Ola Mosafinn (Oh'lah 'MOH'sah'finn) from Voss. Both of these musicians have been honored with a **memorial** at the place of their birth. But the best memorial for them and other country fiddlers is the musical legacy that they left behind for us to admire and enjoy.