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### **Knut Hamre and Benedicte Maurseth**

*Rosa i Botnen* (CD and DVD)

Heilo ([www.grappa.no](http://www.grappa.no))

Knut Hamre and Benedicte Maurseth are folk fiddlers, masters of an instrument that developed uniquely in Norway. This recording and video are a journey to the soul of the original Hardanger fiddle.

Hamre is one of Norway's most honored Hardanger fiddlers, but also a very modest man. He is a respected educator as well, who has mentored many younger musicians in the tradition he loves. He has also enjoys frequent collaborations with musicians of all styles. His work with Steve Tibbets, an American jazz guitarist, can be heard on their duet recording, *A* (Hannibal Records).

Benedicte Maurseth is part of the younger generation of talented Norwegian fiddlers, still growing along her own traditional paths.

Hamre and Maurseth started the journey that shaped this CD/DVD set after a conversation with Norway's only Baroque violin specialist, Bjarte Eike. Eike questioned why contemporary Hardanger fiddlers play relatively modern instruments, instead of the oldest existing instruments available. European violinists, both Baroque and Romantic style musicians, seek to play on the oldest authentic instruments possible.

Why not? Since there was no easy answer, Hamre and Maurseth solicited responses from museums and private collectors, to learn more about the voices of Norway's oldest folk fiddles.

If you listen to the CD first, the dark, resonant, eerie sound of the old instruments will certainly capture your attention. The unique configuration of the Hardanger fiddle includes a set of drone strings that lie under the fingerboard of the instrument. Unless you examine a Hardanger fiddle closely, the "understrings" are hard to see.

The drone strings are tuned to vibrate sympathetically to the unusual chords and keys of Norwegian mountain music. The sympathetic strings create the effect of a second fiddler is hidden



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inside the fiddle. This unmistakable "Hardanger" sound elicits powerful emotional responses from both the player and the listener. Because of this power, the Hardanger fiddle was considered to be the "Devil's Instrument" in Norway. Well into the 20th century, playing a Hardanger fiddle in a church building was forbidden, although a normal classical violin was allowed into the sacred space.

Because of the association with dark magic, thousands of fiddles were burned or destroyed by religious fanatics throughout the 19th century. This is one of the primary reasons that today's fiddlers have more contemporary instruments. It is also the reason that the few existing old ones are kept in sealed cases, like biological specimens.

Included with the *Rosa i Botnen* set is a 22-minute documentary about the project. It starts as the young fiddler, Benedicte Maurseth goes to the Cultural History Center in Bergen to pick up the oldest Hardanger fiddle in Norway, the Jaastad fiddle from 1651. This fiddle was recently restored to playing condition, but usually resides in a glass case, where it hangs by an invisible thread. The viewer may gasp, as the white-gloved curator snips the thread, then gently places the fiddle Maurseth's bare hands. If this was a Disney film, the instrument would probably turn to dust, or a dozen trolls suddenly appear to steal it back to the magic kingdom. Instead, the Jaastad fiddle is simply packed into a modern case, and carried away. (Insurance agents in the audience might have to leave at this point.)

Next, the video sits in on a meeting with Sigvald Rørlien, an expert on old Hardanger instruments, and Jon Peter Blom, a social anthropologist. At this meeting they examine a few instruments made about 100 years after the Jaastad fiddle. These instruments were made by a father and son from the Hardanger region. Isak Nilsen Botnen (1669-1759), the father, was a professional instrument maker. Although the CD does not make this association, Botnen might be considered the Stradivarius of the Norwegian fiddle. He experimented with many different styles of Hardanger fiddles, and also made fine classical violins.

Isak's son, Trond Isaksen Flatebø, moved from his family farm to another area, and became a famous fiddle-maker in his own time. Rørlien notes that Trond was a more conservative maker than his father, using an older style of small, rounder fiddle. He had a long waiting list for his instruments, selling over 1000 fiddles all over Norway. Trond Flatebø earned so much from his fiddles, that he was one of the richest men in Western Norway when he died.

The documentary shows the details that indicate these instruments were created by great craftsmen, not accidental folk artists.

Blom, a social anthropologist, noted that farmers and craftsmen of the 17th and 18th centuries traveled often, and were connected to the Royal Court musicians in Copenhagen. (Norway was part of the Danish kingdom at the time). Both Botnens also made classical style violins. They were working with a high quality of craftsmanship that matched the standards of the work from European luthiers at the time.

As they produced so many high quality instruments, they must have influenced a growth in the quality and popularity of fiddle music in Norway. Their instruments probably contributed to the preference of fiddle, or violin, to other instruments played in Norway, such as the langeliek, flute, or folk harp.

Before the recording with the borrowed instruments, Hamre and Maurseth visited the historic family farm of Isak Botnen. They carried the Botnen instruments to the home Jan Skår, a distant relative who still lives on the family land. Now an old man himself, Skår was visibly moved by the sight of the two old fiddles his ancestors created. "It's wonderful that they even exist," he sighs.

As Knut Hamre begins to play one of the old fiddles though, Skår's feet tap gently to the beat of the tune, while his left hand fingers move as if he was playing the fiddle himself. Without another word spoken, the music, played on the fiddle at the sight of its origin fills the gap between today, and the days when there were hundreds of fiddlers in every Norwegian valley.

Playing these old instruments required the musicians to adjust to the use of a baroque bow and gut strings. The old style bow curves outward, like a hunting bow, requiring a very different finger pressure than a modern violin bow. Old fiddlers also held the instrument low on their arm, not on their shoulders. This folk style of playing reduces body contact with the instrument body, increasing the area for the fiddle body to vibrate.

On the CD, an alert listener can hear the difference between the three instruments chosen for this audio experiment:

- The Jaastad fiddle, created by Ole Jonsen Jaastad, from 1651 ([Listen](#))
- The "Folkefela" fiddle, by Isak Botnen, from 1720-1750 ([Listen](#))
- The "Loffhusfela" by Trond Isaksen Flatebø, created around 1751 ([Listen](#))

To my ear, the oldest fiddle projected the most unusual sound: deeply resonant and slightly gruff. This instrument has only 2 drone strings, but still creates a sound with depth and color. The younger 18th century instruments have a slightly brighter sound than the Jaastad, and have 4 drone strings each.

Music created on the Hardanger fiddle differs from the music of the baroque and classical period. The Hardanger fiddle is tuned in many different configurations, to create specific chordal effects. The standard violin is always tuned in fifths: with strings for the notes EADG.

For example, the first cut of the CD is tuned to a combination known as "trollstille," or "the Troll Tuning." This combination creates a ghostly polyphony, rumored to wake the dead, or at least the devil. The strings are tuned to A D F# E.

Several tracks of the CD combine the Hardanger fiddles with other instruments that were played in the baroque period. These arrangements of Hardanger fiddle, and viola d'amore, and pipe organ, would not have been possible in the 17th and 18th centuries. The organ, a church instrument, and the Hardanger, the devil's voice, were not allowed to be under the same roof at the time.

The viola d'amore, a 6-stringed baroque instrument with drone strings, may have been played in the Danish and European courts, but probably not in rural Norway. But it is believed to be the instrument that inspired the design of the first Hardanger fiddles. Nils Økland plays the viola d'amore on this recording.

The CD was recorded at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, in Oslo. The museum houses the oldest playable pipe organ in Norway. The organ was originally built for a church in the early 18th century, with one manual and eight stops. It is capable of a very powerful sound, but organist Sigborn Apeland used only the quietest stop to avoid overpowering the old string instruments.

In mysterious fashion, the graphics of this boxed set are dark and understated. The names of the artists have been obscured by the choice of type face. The recording's title, *Rosa i Botnen*, is not on the cover at all. For all its careful research and attention to detail, will the package ensure that the Hardanger fiddle remain a secret a bit longer?

The journey that started with a question ends with this stunning CD/DVD set. It provides the opportunity to take a close look at this branch of the violin family tree. Anyone who loves fiddles, violins, music history, folk music or Nordic history should open this magic boxed set and follow the story through until the last drone of the ancient fiddle fades away. - Patrice George

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