

Annbjørg Lien: *RETUNE A toolbox for composing – based on Hardanger fiddle music from Setesdal*, PhD, Faculty of Fine Arts, Specialisation in Popular Music Performance, University of Agder, 2019.

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For fiddle players the world over, Norway's Annbjørg Lien needs no introduction. Since recording her first album as a teenager she has developed a stellar reputation for her work celebrating and championing the hardanger fiddle tradition. In particular, she is recognized for relentlessly breaking new ground and exploring the possibilities of Norwegian folk music through collaborations with other folk musicians as well as with others representing different genres and nationalities. From winning multiple awards at the Norwegian National Contest for Traditional Music, to working with Norway's Bukkene Bruse, Ireland's The Chieftains, America's Bruce Molsky, and the international, supergroup, String Sisters, Lien's musical journey has been one characterized by curiosity and courage. It should be no surprise then that this hungry learner would find herself drawn to the burgeoning opportunities for practice-based and practice-led research for folk musicians available within higher education institutions and wanting to pursue her voyage of discovery within the framework of a doctoral programme.

The late Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, Emeritus Professor of Music at the University of Limerick and Founder/Director at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, often drew upon the words of Irish Nobel Poet Laureate Seamus Heaney in referencing the traditional musician-researcher/academic, where "two orders of knowledge" are present within the individual, the "practical" and the "poetic."

I wanted to affirm that within our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge which we might call the practical and the poetic; to affirm also that each form of knowledge redresses the other and that the frontier between them is there for the crossing. (Heaney 1995:203, from Ó Súilleabháin, 2018:2)

This results in what Ó Súilleabháin refers to as “an organic transformative interplay between the imaginative internal experience of practice and the external scientific application of logical thought”. (Ó Súilleabháin, 2018:3) The doctoral thesis, *RETUNE A toolbox for composing – based on Hardanger fiddle music from Setesdal*, by Annbjørg Lien, represents this “interplay”. With no previous background in academia, her choice to step into what, for her, was unfamiliar territory, is a reminder of the artistic courage that has coloured her career to date. The opportunity to deepen her journey into hardanger fiddle music within the context of an academic study is testament to Lien’s passion for lifelong learning.

The thesis constitutes a monograph organized into eight major chapters plus acknowledgements, an abstract, a list of contents, abbreviations, introduction, references, and appendices A-G. Enclosed with the thesis is a CD and DVD of recordings/footage of the music of Setesdal Hardanger fiddle master, Andres Rysstad (1893–1984), the analysis of which forms the basis of this study. Another CD presents a suite of 8 newly composed pieces by Lien, emerging from and testing the findings of this analysis.

The text is divided into two clear sections and explores the core research question – How can characteristics of Hardanger fiddle music from Setesdal be described as compositional tools? The first, ‘scientific’ part, examines and analyses the music of hardanger fiddle music from Setesdal, a region whose traditional music and dance was inscribed on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019. The text offers a short introduction to the region of Setesdal before exploring the hardanger fiddle as an instrument, including its historical development, a comparison between violin and hardanger technique, and a focus on aspects of the music, specifically rhythm and melodic structure. To further interrogate the style, two pieces performed by hardanger fiddle master, Andres Rysstad – *Skjoldmoyslaget* and *Reisaren* – are transcribed and analysed using a multi-method approach (technology, staff notation, tablature, diagrammatic representation, and thick description). This generates a body of evidence-based data that is distilled into a series of eight compositional ‘tools’ identified as: strangle grip, intertwined fingering, rhythmic figures, core unit, skeleton, finger patterns, continuous variability, bow units. The second, ‘artistic’ part

of the thesis illuminates how these specific tools can inform contemporary practice and be harnessed as part of the compositional process. The researcher presents 8 newly composed pieces, each one inspired by, and aligned to, one of these tools. The new works are professionally recorded and presented as part of the final work. The written text concludes with a summary of the work and reflections on the process, the impact of the findings, and the potential for future research in this field.

Lien's doctoral project demonstrates an expert knowledge of the hardanger fiddle, both as a well-known artist and performer, and also as a composer of folk music. It makes a significant contribution to the understanding of hardanger fiddle music, in particular through Lien's efforts to find words for what might often be considered the deep, "wordless" knowledge of the folk musician. In many ways her work might be considered an exercise in "transforming experiential and tacit knowledge into principled explicit knowledge ... for the purpose of improvement" (McAlpine & Weston, 2002, p. 69). Lien set out to interrogate and illuminate the significance of certain elements of hardanger fiddle playing, under the broad labels of rhythm and melodic structure. By drawing on her experience as a practitioner, and mining this to unpack what might previously have been considered tacit knowledge, she has made significant strides in offering new perspectives and insights into this musical style, not least in relation to the possibilities within fingering (which she refers to as "finger talk") and *tak* (which she defines as "a meaningful musical entity related primarily for fingering operations; it does not have to include rhythm. (p. 82)). Furthermore, she highlights how specific elements of traditional fiddle playing, once isolated, identified and explained, can be intentionally used to inform and inspire the composition of new music, both instrumental and vocal. She presents this clearly in a "toolbox" of 8 elements. And she demonstrates how this toolbox can be engaged in practice, testing each individual 'tool' by using it as the basis for a new composition. This body of 8 new works was later released on a commercial CD entitled *Janus*, which appropriately reflects the simultaneous looking back-and-looking forward perspectives encapsulated in her research. By presenting (part) of the outcome of her work in this way, it also serves to close the loop on the performer-researcher-

performer learning journey she has embarked on here and cements the value and the possibility of that “interplay” referred to by Ó Súilleabháin, between practice and science.

The title of this PhD project is *Retune*, meaning to tune (something) again or differently. (p. 7) Lien reflects on how the academic process and environment have impacted her and supported this personal “retuning”:

As an artist ... I often head directly towards what I think is the right way, rather than fully considering the alternatives or listening to the objections of others. Research demands an effort to understand the diversity in a field and receive disagreements and critique without resentment. Such a ‘lifted eye’ can lead to experimentation outside one’s signature method, and even outside one’s artistic comfort zone. This particular process of retuning is healthy for a performer ... (p. 195)

Lien’s contribution offers us new insights and perspectives on the hardanger fiddle tradition; it offers a body of new work and, significantly, a clearly presented “toolbox”, now available to others who may wish to intentionally draw on hardanger fiddle characteristics as part of their own creative, compositional process; it amplifies the value of the performer’s lived experience and perspective when it comes to unpacking and articulating what is generally accepted as tacit knowledge in folk music practice; it reinforces the value and possibility of practice-led and practice-based research in this field; and it reminds us all of the importance of embracing learning for life and of staying alert, curious, open to possibilities ... and of always engaging the “lifted eye.”

References

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