

# How Old Is a Tune?

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## Introduction

“This is an old *slått*” is a common saying amongst Norwegian fiddlers (*slått* means instrumental tune). The *halling*-, *gangar*-, *springar*-, and *pols*-tune varieties in Norway are considered to be the oldest types of tunes in Norwegian fiddle traditions. These types were the common music and dances among the rural population until waltz, polka etc. took over during the 19th century. With support from ethnochoreologists, we have reason to believe that these types of tunes date back to the 16th century (Aksdal 1993:130). I perform and practice this music myself along with fellow fiddlers in Telemark; the discussion about repertoire and age seems to be rather important. The concept of a tune’s age, regarding the connection of the past to the present, adds a certain level of value to the music (Blom 1993:14), which may also explain a rather conservative approach to the music among some players and listeners. In this article I will have a critical view on the question of age and simply ask: can we actually determine the age of a traditional tune? Considering the fact that a great majority of the tunes are of anonymous origin and have been passed on orally through many generations, is it possible to draw a direct line from a specific tune back to a certain historic period?

Norwegian old-time fiddling has been of interest to archivists and researchers in the field of music for over 100 years. As a result of their work, diverse theories have resulted about the tunes themselves, their scales, their rhythms, the dances they are connected to, their origins and so forth. Still, the music has a life of it’s own outside the archives and independent of the collections. It certainly is a living tradition, transmitted orally via face-to-face learning techniques. This oral tradition of learning-by-doing is still probably the most common way of learning. Therefore, from my perspective, I think it is right to regard the fiddle music as orally transmitted material, as immaterial culture, even when I refer to written music in this article.

How then can these tunes eventually be reliable historical sources? In some cases, the statement “this is an old...” can be based on concrete knowledge about

sources and transmission of a specific tune. It could, for example, have a known traceable lineage that goes back many generations. Conversely, the tune could simply have been labelled as old and assumed to be so without any reference to particular stylistic or structural features in the music; it's just a saying connected to the tune. But what can the tune itself tell us? Are the features and elements that we are able to focus on useful in determining age? Some of the features we can articulate and study are considered by scholars to be signs of older age. Formal, tonal and rhythmic elements are believed to reflect possible historical layers in the material (Bakka, Aksdal & Flem 1992:23).

But, can specific tunes be connected to certain periods in music history on the basis of these features? The answer is no. The tunes are not like pieces of handcraft, wooden bowls, clothing, instruments and other material objects, where age can be quite accurately determined by the C-14 method, among others. Actually, my conclusion is that a single tune, or more precisely, a single performance of a tune, has no potential at all as a reliable historical document, and I will try to explain why.

### **Old and Younger Features (?)**

In this section I will focus on some of these assumedly “old” features. The first one is the formal construction of the tunes, including both the quality of the motifs and the way the motifs are put together. Of the two most common forms found in this genre, the additive type, what I call the small motif form as seen in Musical Example 1, is regarded as the older of the two. The type is common in south west in the Hardanger fiddle repertoire and especially in the gangar / halling tunes. This type consists of short motifs (normally two-bar motifs) which is repeated ad lib, but normally once or twice.

In the transition between motifs, there is often a musical overlapping from one motif to the next that can sometimes be rather sophisticated. This overlapping of motifs can lead to uncertainty as to where one musical sentence ends and the next begins. In its pure form, small-motif-form represents a polarity, a sharp contrast to the other well-known form, often known as regular two part form or two part song form, characteristic of popular dance music of the 18-hundreds, as waltz, polka etc. but also from classical music in the 18th century. The melody in this form is usually comprised of two parts, although there may also be three or more. Each part consists of two four-bar motifs with half and full cadences or an eight-bar motif or period. Musical Example 2 is from Heidal, Gudbrandsdalen, and the tune is played on the ordinary fiddle.

## BESTELANDEN

Etter Vidar Lande, Bygland, Setesdal. (N)

The musical score for 'Bestelanden' is presented in five systems. It begins with a tempo marking 'M.M. ♩ = 96' and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes a variety of rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are several dynamic markings such as 'f' and 'p', and articulation marks like 'acc' and 'v'. A 'Coda' section is indicated in the fourth system, with a note 'Dal 3<sup>e</sup> e Dal 3<sup>e</sup> al 4<sup>e</sup> e coda' below it. The score concludes with a final cadence.

Mus. Ex. 1: The gangar “Bestelanden” transcribed from a recording of Vidar Lande, Bygland, by Sven Nyhus (Sevåg, Blom & Nyhus 1981:208)

## Garmostræ’in

Peder Skavrusten, Heidal

The musical score for 'Garmostræ'in' is presented in two systems. It starts with a tempo marking 'M.M. ♩ = 120' and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. There are dynamic markings like 'f' and 'p', and articulation marks such as 'acc' and 'v'. The score includes first and second endings, labeled '1.3.' and '2.4.' respectively. It concludes with a 'Fine' marking.

Mus. Ex. 2: The springleik “Garmostræ’in” transcribed from a recording of Peder Skavrusten, Heidal, by Olav Sæta (Sevåg & Sæta 1992:111)

The fact that regular two part form is very common in popular dance music in northern Europe in the 18th and 19th century is probably the reason that it is considered younger than the small-motif form. However, with the small-motif form, in its pure and thorough form, it is not as easy to find clear parallels in music history.

Tonal features are also relevant in this discussion. The Swedish scholar Sven Ahlbäck notes a difference between *harmonic tonality* and *modality* (Jernberg & Ahlbäck 1986:53f.). With harmonic tonality, the melody line is based on, or in accordance with, “modern” harmonic progressions and/or chords. In contrast, the term modality may be used to describe a melody which relates to a drone or a single tonal centre and where chords, in the normal sense, have no relevance. Melodies characterized by harmonic tonality, with an apparently modern harmonic progression, are often believed to be younger than modal melodies. Another related and well-known theme amongst scholars and musicians in Norway, as well as in Sweden, is the phenomenon sometimes called “old tonality”. Old tonality includes intonation and intervals outside the normal scale system of equal-tempered semitones. In old tonality we find, for example, neutral thirds, fourths and sevenths. It is possible that collectors regarded this sound as strange and exotic and thus regarded it as “old-agey”, as a heritage passed from some older tonal system.

Rhythmic features should also be mentioned. Most springar-tunes are in triple-time, normally written in a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -time signature. However, particularly on the west coast, we find springar melodies with another pattern, which is referred to as simple springar rhythm or even springar. The dancers relate to a row of equal beats (1–1–1–1) rather than a three-beat pattern. According to Bjørn Aksdal, the even springar represents an old layer in the tradition (Aksdal 1993:131).

Rhythmic subdivision is also an element connected to the discussion about age. The triplets in the springar / pols tunes are of particular interest. Bjørn Aksdal refers particularly to descriptions of the rhythmic motifs in Polish and Swedish material, where certain patterns can be connected to certain époques (Aksdal 1991:291). The triplets can be seen as typical elements in European music fashion as in, for example, the polonaise-style from 1700–1735 (Koudal 2003:36), and also in minuets of the 18th century (Hernes 1952:327ff., Aksdal 1993:159). Tunes containing a great number of triplets are therefore considered to be representative of the younger style.

## **Transformations**

Can we then say that a tune featuring one, or several, of these assumed signs of old age is actually old? The answer is no, and the reason is simple: There is no doubt that the tunes can, and very often will, go through changes, including tonal, rhythmic and formal changes, in the process of oral transmission. This means that melodies can appear in many different formal, tonal and rhythmic

shapes, but still be recognized as the same tune. It is commonly understood, as with many immaterial human forms of expression, that a melody or tune can appear in different shapes and in a multiple number of variants. We can speak of regional, local and personal versions of tunes, versions that can be quite similar or quite different. Morten Levy uses the terms “shimmering field” when describing the problems of defining a tune when the same tune may have many local and personal appearances, many possible ways of realization (Levy 1989). To me, it seems that a tune has a kind of life of its own, an identity, some essential qualities, a core, one or several formulas and musical ideas, one or several melodic-rhythmic gestalts that are possible to identify and transmit further. This essential quality can be disconnected from and experienced as something else above and beyond the elements we can isolate one by one or the elements that we use for the determination of age.

The following examples and discussion will hopefully clarify my point. Tunes that belong to the extremes of the two form types described earlier probably will not change over night. However, there is no doubt that representative tunes of one formal style have been influenced by the other. As an example, we have good reason to believe that some springar (pols / polish dance) tunes with the regular two-part form have spread from the central part of eastern Norway where this principle has an overall dominance, towards the west and into regions such as Telemark. Here, the tunes were adapted into the repertoire of fiddlers who were familiar with the additive small motif form. The longer melodic lines (four bar motifs) of the two-part forms were cut in half, and possibly combined with new musical material. In this process, they were transformed from the principle that is considered to be young (regular two-part form) towards the principle that is considered to be old (small-motif form). The process may have gone the other way as well. Let us look at a springar tune; one version from Telemark and one from further east, from Krødsherad in Buskerud county, both played on the Hardanger fiddle.

The version from Krødsherad (Musical Example 3) has what we call regular two-part form even though the melody consists of three parts, which is very common. The principle of four-bar motifs with half and full cadences appears consistently throughout the tune.

In a version of the same tune from Telemark (Musical Example 4), the influence of the small-motif form is obvious in regards to the repeated phrases on the second line and also in various other places throughout the tune where the four-bar motifs are halved and repeated. It is likely that the Telemark version was developed from a more symmetrical version of the tune that was similar, if

## KLEVSPRINGAR

Etter Truls Ørpen, Krødsherad. (Ø)

Mus. Ex.3: Springar from Krødsherad, transcribed by Truls Ørpen (Sevåg, Blom & Nyhus 1981:33)

not exactly like, the Krødsherad version. If this is the case, the younger version of the tune exhibits an older style of construction.

When it comes to tonality, I focus on the terms *harmonic tonality* and *modality* in a historical context. Hearing a tune played, we can easily get a feeling for whether the tune is based on chords or is a product of a modal style. However, this feeling does not carry much weight when attempting to determine the history of that tune. Let us imagine a melody being composed a few hundred years ago by a “harmonic thinking” musician. Then, the melody is picked up by a fiddler who has no knowledge of harmony or chords. My claim is that there is a possibility that the melody quickly, if not immediately, may sound modal when coming from the fingers of a “modal” fiddler and his usage of non-diatonic intervals and dissonance drones. He re-interprets the tune from another sense of musical reality. Accordingly, I will also claim that a modal melody, perhaps from a “pre-harmonic” period, can quickly sound harmonic in the hands of a “chord thinking” fiddler. The influence of harmonic tonality is actually easy to document. When comparing recordings of traditional fiddle music, it is easy to see how irregular intervals and loose strings as drones can be replaced with double-stops and a more or less conscious approach towards diatonic intervals. Recently,

## DEN BLÅRANDUTE

Etter Johannes Dahle, Tinn, Telemark. (G)

Mus. Ex. 4: Springar from Telemark transcribed from a recording of Johannes Dahle, Tinn (Sevåg, Blom & Nyhus 1981:32)

younger fiddlers have been more and more conscious about the use of the assumed old tonality, not necessarily because they want to sound old, but because they want to extend their expressive repertoire. It is clear that their inclusion of old tonality in their playing is a conscious choice. They are aware that alternative intervals and alternative scales exist and their choices regarding it are matters of personal style. As a consequence, melodies that are not necessarily very old (this also goes for recently composed melodies), can be played in a very “old-agey” style. My purpose with this example is to demonstrate how the old tonality can

be disconnected from the tune itself. This particular tonal element is connected to personal style and to style confidence, not to specific tunes.

Last, rhythmical features: The examples here concerns springar from the west coast of southern Norway. It is possible to contrast the triple-time springar with the assumed older simple springar by looking into different traits and features. In Nordfjord (a district in the northern part of the fjord-dominated landscape on the west coast) a distinct difference between the two springar types can be clearly observed. Here, where an older simple springar type is still kept alive, the arrival of the “newer” springar in triple-time can be dated back to the early 19th century (Sæta 1995:68ff.). We can examine formal, tonal and rhythmic elements that differentiate the two types. The knowledge of these two historical layers by the scholars has probably been important when establishing the simple springar pattern as a sign of high age. Further south on the west coast, in Hordaland, the tunes differ quite a bit from the old springar further north in Nordfjord, and they are not characterised as especially old-fashioned in regard to other features. Though, the dancers’ steps show that they interpret the music as the simple rhythm; there is assumedly no triple-time thinking in conjunction with the fiddler’s music and dancers’ movements, even if the music often is possible to transcribe as triple time. When comparing the triple-time tunes and the even tunes in Hordaland, it is difficult to find musical features that distinguish the two types. I do not seem significant to categorize them as two types, except that some of the tunes fit into a triple-time pattern, and some tunes do not. It is therefore difficult to accept that the simple rhythm pattern alone can be used as an indication of old(er) repertoire. The trait itself might be old, but again, disconnected from the tunes.

The same thing applies for the assumedly “modern” triplets. As mentioned above, one could argue that sequences of triplets in springar and pols are the result of influences from European musical fashion such as, for example, minuet-style in the 18th century. One traditional fiddler in particular is mentioned as an innovator, namely Jørn Hilme (1778–1854) from Valdres, situated in the central valleys of southern Norway. He was famous among fiddlers for his bowing technique, which was based on the so-called *ristetak*, a fiddlers’ term for a triplet played with a divided stroke. The technique was without doubt popular; many other fiddlers travelled to Valdres to learn his style (Bjørndal & Alver 1985). Other famous fiddlers from the 19th century including Myllarguten (“The Miller’s boy”, Tarjei Augundson (1801–72) from Telemark), are also well-known for the same technique. Ola Mosafinn (1828–1912) from Voss, Hordland met Hilme’s son Nils at a market place in Lærdal in 1850 and he learned some Hilme-tunes,

including springar with the *ristetak*-technique (Bjørndal 1922:28). We know that both Mosafinn and Myllarguten strongly influenced the playing style in Hordaland. Today, it is striking to see how the extended triplet-technique in the springar material in Hordaland differs from neighbour districts in which the triplets are not at all common. In light of this information, it is reasonable to describe *ristetak* and triplets as an innovative element, spread by experts and partly by new repertoire, but definitively also as an detached element of new style put into older tunes.

## Conclusion

The main point in this article is to show how our efforts to decide age in the fiddle music refer to features that seem to live a life of their own, disconnected from a certain repertoire. As we understand, the tunes can be realized in different ways, and will maintain their identity even if they go through changes, and therefore, it's almost impossible to talk about age by referring to single tunes or single performances if we don't have specified knowledge about origin (like a composer). Instead we have to refer to the features/the elements, and such an acknowledgement underlines that the music must be studied at a macro level in order to try to determine age or historical layers. It is first when we can document a correlation between different features in a large material that we have a more solid basis for pointing out such layers. And, our ambition should maybe not be the seeking of evidence, but to show probability. Still, I am not afraid of speculations and the formulating of hypothesis or making assumptions of possible historical processes. The uncertainty about the basis for asking questions must not be an obstacle for asking.

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