Chapter 32

In Tune with Tradition: Wisconsin Instrument Builders

Program 32 Performances

1. Ray Polarski, "Schottische." 2. Andrea Een, "Bruremarj etter Ola Mosafinn." 3. Lou Prohut, "The Boomba Polka." 4. Fred Benjamin, "Moccasin Game Song." 5. TRAILS Drum, "Intertribal." 6. Louis Webster, Medley (loon song, Oneida song, western song). 7. Wang Chou Vang, *Tan blai* [flute] solo. 8. Alfonso Baldoni, "Spring Polka." 9. Jerry Minar and Friends, "Bev's Polka."

One-Man Shops and Woodland Sounds

In 1944 twenty-two-year-old Anton Wolfe, a farmer in Wisconsin's Bayfield County, bought his first concertina. It was a used Wunderlich model manufactured in Germany. And with a war on he was not likely to get a new one (Wolfe 1985 I).

World War II was a hard time for German-Americans, including ethnic musicians. Syl Liebl of LaCrosse changed his band's name from the Jolly Germans to the Jolly Swiss Boys. The militaristically titled Heinie and His Grenadiers dissolved until after the war. Minnesota's "Whoopee John" Wilfahrt was accused of being a Nazi spy. His band's travels, the ridiculous rumor contended, were a front for surveillance of the American war machine; meanwhile his drummer son Pat was alleged to tap out code messages to spies at dance jobs (Rippley 1992). And false gossip concerning Milwaukee's Peters Brothers, players and purveyors of German concertinas, reckoned they were smuggling orders from *der Führer* in their squeezeboxes.

When Anton Wolfe's concertina broke down, he fixed it himself. And when he could not buy a new German model to match the old, he began to make one. Today Wolfe is one of the foremost suppliers of concertinas to Dutchman-style polka bands.

Similar instrument makers abound in one-man shops throughout the Upper Midwest. While a few fashion custom models of commonly available instruments, like guitars or banjos, most are craftsmen of necessity whose products otherwise would not be available. With a few exceptions, their instrument making is linked with an evolving tradition of ethnic music.

Portions of this essay were derived from J. P. Leary, 1990, "Wisconsin Folk Musical Instruments: Objects, Sounds, and Symbols," in In Tune with Tradition, *ed. Robert T. Teske and James P. Leary, 13–28 (Cedarburg, Wis.: Cedarburg Cultural Center). With permission.*

Woodland Indians of the nineteenth century played a narrow array of traditional instruments on ceremonial occasions. Rattles accompanied the songs of medicine men in curing and ritual. Young men courting played love songs on wooden flutes. Water drums were exclusive to the medicine lodge, and hand drums were used for doctoring, gambling, and war.

The large dance drum mainly in use at contemporary powwows emerged in the late nineteenth century in connection with the Grass Dance movement on the Great Plains (Vennum 1982). Today's singers and players of the dance drum, called Drums themselves, travel an annual powwow circuit. Some play modified marching band drums, but many rely on instruments constructed by men like Joseph Ackley—and only handmade drums are ritually invested with a spirit and a name. The demand for traditional drums is paralleled among native peoples by a renewed interest in hand drums, medicine games, and the old courting flute.

Fiddle Makers

While Woodland Indians lacked stringed instruments, European settlers brought them in abundance. The fiddle—important in folk music throughout Europe by the eighteenth century—was the primary traditional instrument made and played in nineteenth-century Wisconsin. Fiddles were especially popular in the lumber camps, where jacks of all backgrounds mingled and were often expected to contribute to a weekend's entertainment. Some loggers carved fiddles from cigar boxes with a jackknife. Others, like Ray Polarski, whittled wooden fiddles as kids but graduated to sophisticated tools and jigs to craft melodious fiddles.

By the latter part of the nineteenth century the accordion and the related German concertina had begun to challenge the fiddle's place as the most prevalent instrument in the Upper Midwest's European-derived folk music. Accordion and concertina importers and builders established stores in Milwaukee and Chicago. Despite ups and downs in popularity, they have been distributing squeezeboxes throughout the region ever since.

Norwegians, however, have remained stubborn holdouts for the fiddle, perhaps a legacy of those immigrants from the districts of western and southern Norway where the *hardingfela*, or Hardanger fiddle, was prominent. From the late nineteenth century through the early 1920s, Norwegian newcomers included virtuoso players and makers of this ornate and difficult eight-stringed instrument. The late twentieth century formation of the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America, based largely in the Upper Midwest, has lent support to a new generation of Hardanger fiddle makers like Ron Poast of Black Earth, Wisconsin.

Innovating Immigrants

The post–World War II era in particular has seen an influx of newcomers seeking work in mostly urban areas of the Upper Midwest: Europeans, Hispanics from the American Southwest, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, southern-born African Americans, and Southeast Asians. Often settling in enclaves, they have established social and cultural institutions that include traditional musical performances and demand specialized instruments.

The Hmong, a mountain people from northern Laos, were allied with the United States during the Viet Nam war and, in the wake of that conflict, were driven by the Pathet Lao to refugee camps in Thailand. Those arriving in Wisconsin, for example, have settled in extended family groups in such medium-sized cities as Appleton, Eau Claire, LaCrosse, Madison, Menomonie, Sheboygan, and Wausau. Immigrant parents have stressed the importance of their children's

Hardanger fiddle components at Ron Poast's shop, Black Earth, 1990
Photo: Jim Leary

William Schwartz and his Stumpf Fiddle, Sheboygan, 1990 **Photo: Jim Leary**

education and "Americanization," but they have also tried to preserve elements of their culture, including music and musical instruments.

Like Anton Wolfe, cut off from the war-torn homeland, they have often lacked appropriate instruments or even the materials to make them. Wang Chou Vang of Menomonie was unable to find bamboo of the sort grown in Laos to make resonators for the two-stringed violins *(ncauj nrog ncas)* he once made and sold to fellow Hmong. He experimented with a metal patio lamp before discovering a gourd that would work. Other Hmong have used Ovaltine tins and coconuts for the sound boxes of their violins.

Just as Vang has had to search for new materials, he has also had to struggle to find new uses for his instrument. In the old country, young men used their violins to court women, a function that has vanished in America. Other instruments and their makers have faced the same dilemma. William Schwartz of Sheboygan has turned the "stumpf fiddle," once a noisemaker reserved for pre-Lenten carnivals, into an all-purpose party instrument. Since young Menominees no longer play love songs outside their sweetheart's wigwams, Louis Webster has incorporated the sound of his courting flutes into rock 'n' roll, while Ojibwa flute maker Frank Montano trills New Age compositions.

As for Vang, he has sometimes played his violin at Hmong New Year's celebrations where he and others offer reenactments of bygone cultural traditions for the edification of their children. Perhaps, with the passing of his generation, such violins will be forgotten. It is a dark thought. But perhaps they will be venerated as important cultural symbols of the past to be displayed prominently in ethnic homes. Or perhaps, most optimistically, the next generation of Hmong will find a way, as other peoples have, to work old instruments and sounds into their new music. If that is so, then surely some younger artisan will make the *ncauj nrog ncas* when Wang Chou Vang is gone.