Chapter 2.

A nation sings

During the annual Kaustinen Folk Festival, this small Finnish village of 4,300 souls hosts more than 40,000 guests for a week of music and dancing. Performers include fiddlers from the area, as well as a diverse array of other musicians: singers of Eastern Finnish *runo* song; adapters of American country, rockabilly, honky-tonk, blues, bluegrass, and folk rock; international ensembles from Belgium, Brazil, Iceland, Ireland, Mauritius, Norway, Romania, and Scotland; and players of a wide array of instruments, including fiddle, guitar, mandolin, kantele, bagpipes, bass fiddle, drums, Hardanger fiddle, and different varieties of accordion. Each year the festival honors four Finnish musicians, singers, or dancers, who are recognized for their contributions to Finnish folk music.

The varied musical offerings at Kaustinen all belong to the category of music-making called "folk music" – the traditional music of ordinary people, learned informally within one's community and passed on from generation to generation, sometimes over many centuries. The collection, publication, and celebration of folk music was central to the building of national identities in all of the Nordic countries and regions. During the twentieth century, folk music moved from village homes to professional stages,

Sounding the horn for Norway
Norwegian Olav Snortheim plays a birchbark horn (lur) at the Kaustinen Folk Music Festival, 1969. Photo by Rafael Olin. © Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland

transforming its modes of transmission and consumption. When, in 2021, Finland nominated "Kaustinen Fiddle Playing and Related Practices" for inscription in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2021), the nomination dossier described not only informal performance and transmission of folk music – something that has gone on in Kaustinen for at least four hundred years – but also modern-day school programs for teaching the music traditions to local children, adaptations of the music by professional musicians, and the massive international folk festival that takes place in the village each July. Folk music remains a key element of a multicultural, globalized Nordic region, providing people with a sense of connection to the past that informs their attitudes and imaginings.

Nordic fascination with folk music began as early as the 1500s, when Danish aristocratic men and women began to write down songs called *viser* (ballads) that were regularly performed in streets and parlors throughout Denmark. In form, *viser* were stanzaic with a regular meter and end rhyme. Their words told of medieval heroes, star-crossed romances, betrayals, the supernatural, and much else. In 1591, the reverend Anders Sørensen Vedel (1542-1616) compiled various notations of such songs into an anthology entitled *Hundredvisebog* (book of one hundred ballads). Where prior collectors wrote down *viser* in order to have them handy for singing, Vedel had a more ambitious goal: to demonstrate Danish historical greatness. Vedel had already translated *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus's thirteenth-century Latin history that draws on Danish songs, legends, and poetry to paint a portrait of Denmark's history, and with these ballads as further evidence Vedel hoped to create his own updated and definitive history of Denmark.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Vedel's work inspired similar efforts elsewhere, leading to works such as James Macpherson's Scottish *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Thomas Percy's English *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, and Johann Gottfried von Herder's pan-European *Volkslieder: Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (folk songs: the voices of nations in songs). Each of these influential works asserted that humble, illiterate peasants preserved in oral tradition fragments of their nation's shining past and enduring identity. They inspired further collectors – aristocrats, ministers, schoolteachers, students, local scholars – to document the folk music of their locales. In the Grand Duchy of Finland, district physician Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884) combed the countryside of northern and eastern Finland, as well as parts of Russian Karelia, in order to collect the alliterative *runo* songs he edited and assembled into his literary epic *Kalevala*,

which was published in 1835-1836. Drawing on narrative songs, songs about feelings and emotions (lyric songs), incantations used in conjunction with healing and magic (discussed in Chapter 3 below), and songs sung to accompany various work tasks, Lönnrot created a composite text that would become important to Finnish identity and instrumental in the establishment of Finland as an independent nation-state in 1917. Nordic folk song anthologies include Erik Gustaf Geijer and Arvid August Afzelius's *Svenska folk-visor från forntiden* (Swedish folk songs from the ancient past), published 1814–1817; Sophus Bugge's Norwegian *Gamle norske Folkeviser* (ancient Norwegian folk songs) from 1858; and Svend Grundtvig's twelve-volume *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* (the ancient folk songs of Denmark), which appeared between 1858 and 1976. In Iceland, collectors focused on an alliterative narrative song genre known as *rímur* (Glauser 1990; 1994), while in the Faroes, they documented a prodigious array of rhymed stanzaic narrative songs called *kvæði* (Conroy 1980: 46). Such collections and publications pointed to the distinctive musical traditions of various Nordic cultures, becoming emblems of national identity.

The nineteenth-century assumption that folk songs were relics of a medieval "Age of Chivalry" or some other, earlier era in antiquity proved naive. In the case of the ballad genre, verifiably ancient songs stand alongside ones of more recent vintage, created by composers employing the ballad's characteristic meter, rhyme, and stylistic norms. One such medieval-sounding ballad, "Alonzo den tappre och skön Imogine" (Alonzo the brave and fair Imogine) was published in Nyköping, Sweden, in the early 1800s. Despite its medieval setting and tone, however, it was actually a newly translated version of a song that had appeared in an English novel in 1796 (Ramsted 2015). Contemporary events and news items were also memorialized in ballads that were printed and sold as *skillingsviser*

(in Danish, shilling ballads) or *skillingtryck* (in Swedish, shilling publications), known in English as "broadsides" or "chapbooks" (Piø 1985: 60–61). When, in 1844, the soldier-fiddler Johan Palm was accidentally shot in the face while playing at a wedding in Falun, Sweden, a printed ballad was soon produced providing the sensational details to all who wished to purchase it (Strand 2015: 194). In the migration of Finns to North America at the end of the nineteenth century, published broadsides related the ideals and experiences of Finnish emigrants embarking on their journey to a new life and provided practical details and encouragement for would-be emigrants engaged in a strikingly modern and future-oriented enterprise (DuBois & Cederström 2019: 8–55).

Where early collectors focused primarily on song texts – often describing the material as "folk poetry" rather than folk *song* – they also began to take note of melodies and instrumental styles which were key to the performance of folk music, especially when used in conjunction with dance. The very term "ballad" derives from the medieval Latin *ballare*, to dance, a social pastime that became central to courtship and festivities in medieval southern France and Catalonia before spreading widely throughout the continent. In addition to vocal singing, instruments like drums, harps, dulcimers, and reed instruments resembling the modern clarinet and bagpipes became important accompaniments of medieval ring and line dances. Bowed instruments, which originated in the Middle East and Mediterranean, also diffused into the Nordic region, and instruments like the Swedish keyed fiddle, the *nyckelharpa*, are depicted in Swedish church paintings of the fifteenth century (Ling 1980: 14).

The violin/fiddle developed from Mediterranean antecedents in sixteenth-century Italy and reached the Nordic region by the middle of the seventeenth century as a high-culture import. There it soon superseded earlier in-

struments, with distinctive Nordic playing styles developing that imitated the drone sounds of earlier instruments as well as the emotive ornaments and colorings of the human voice. In southern Norway, a distinctive variation of the fiddle developed – the *hardingfele* or Hardanger fiddle, equipped with a set of sympathetic strings placed below the main strings to provide a characteristic echoing tone (Goertzen 1997: 14). The fiddle became the trademark instrument of the semi-professional Nordic musician known in Danish as *spillemand*, Swedish as *spelman*, and Finnish as *pelimanni*. These performers often supplemented an income based on farm work or trade labor by playing for dances at local events, particularly markets and weddings. The *spillemand* performed musical genres emanating from abroad, including the march, polka, mazurka, schottische, and waltz, but inevitably in ways that demonstrated local adaptations and localizations. Reports of itinerant fiddle-playing musicians begin to appear in Swedish records in the 1600s, where *spelman* activities occasionally attracted the disapproval of civil authorities and clergymen, who noted a frequent association with drinking, courtship, and other forms of "devilry". At the same time, fiddle music came to shape and punctuate Nordic social life, helping to mark holidays, providing occasions for relaxation at the end of a long day, and offering a welcome diversion from everyday life in an era before records, radio, or television. Fiddlers in turn became the subjects of local accounts – legends – with their artistry extolled, and their antics or oddities enthusiastically recounted.

While folk music collectors of the nineteenth century imagined traditions that had remained static and unchanged for centuries, perhaps even millennia, Nordic folk music, like all culture, was actually constantly evolving. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the loud and versatile accordion was rapidly replacing instruments like the fiddle, which, of course, had replaced earlier instruments.

Invented in Germany in 1822, the concertina/accordion – at first a simple instrument with only one or two rows of buttons; later, a larger instrument that mirrored the range and playing mechanisms of the piano – offered distinct advantages to the new player. It required (or permitted) little tuning, and a single player could easily provide accompaniment to a melody by playing chords. Already in the 1830s, itinerant accordionists from Prussia and Italy were performing in Finland, bringing with them new melodies and styles which soon became adopted and adapted into local tradition (Asplund 1981: 134-135).

In 1881, the Norwegian Tourist Board and Norwegian Youth Organization organized a contest for players of the medieval trumpet-like wooden *lur* (whose name echoes that of the long, curved horns of the Bronze Age) in the mountainous province of Telemark (Goertzen 1997: 25). The purpose of the contest was to attract attention to an instrument that was in fast decline, and to help develop domestic cultural tourism. This contest had parallels in other parts of northern Europe: a competition for players of bagpipes had been held in Scotland as early as 1781, and one for players of the Irish harp in Belfast in 1792 (Ternhag 2010: 21). Fiddling contests had also become common in the United States, the new home of many Norwegian and Swedish emigrants (Goertzen 1997: 26). The first competition for players of the Hardanger fiddle was held in Bø, Telemark, in 1888, and another in the more cosmopolitan port city of Bergen in 1896. The latter contest, organized by a newly formed fiddle club, attracted a wide audience and was praised as a much-needed antidote to the now ubiquitous accordion. One attendee declared: "the contest ... marked the beginning of a new era for national fiddling. In many villages the [Hardanger] fiddle had mostly gone out of use, replaced by the accordion. But now the musicians will redeem their [Hardanger] fiddles from the neglect into which they had fallen. And the young will sit