

HARALD HAUGAARD

Music Without Borders

by Kerry Dexter



Liève Boussauw

Consider the map of Denmark for a moment. “We are almost completely surrounded by water,” said fiddler and composer Harald Haugaard. “Really, we have been a harbor for all kinds of musical influences from all over northern Europe.” Out of that, over centuries the Danish people have created a folk music all their own, reflecting their own landscape, character, and interests. Taking the story of Danish music to the world, and building on and extending its traditions, are the things Haugaard has chosen as his life’s work.

That’s been a clear path for Haugaard, although not at first a direct one. He began playing the violin as a child, taught by the local organist in Funen, where he grew up. “If you take violin in Denmark, it’s hard to get rid of classical music!” he said, laughing. “I think it’s just a part you have to go through. I wasn’t scared or afraid of classical music at all, and I was brought up with normal violin teaching and played classical music.

“At the same time, my grandfather was an accordion player, and my mother was a dance caller. So for me, for the first five years or 10

years I was playing, there were no borders between classical music and folk music. It was just music, to me. And in folk music, I started to earn money — I played for dances. In classical music you just learn to rehearse all the time, and practice. But I used what was inside me, stories I wanted to tell. It didn’t matter to me what kind of music it was,” he said. He formed several bands and tried out different kinds of music, from hard rock to Renaissance, and briefly spent time playing other instruments, including drums and bass. He came back to the violin, though, and was



accepted into the prestigious Carl Nielsen Academy in a course of study to become a music teacher. The course work focused on classical music.

“The older I got, and the more knowledge I got about it after studying two years in classical music at the Academy, I saw that it’s probably not my way to go, this classical way,” he said. “All my spare time I played folk music and was building up a career already with bands playing folk music. So my *heart* belonged to folk music, and I knew that the money I was going to earn was in folk music, as well. So that was a clear choice for me.”

A clear choice it might have been, but the academic path wasn’t so clear. At that time there was nowhere at the Carl Nielsen Academy, or in Denmark for that matter, to study folk music at a university level. Haugaard decided to see if he could make a change. “I went to the head of the Academy and said, ‘Could we do an experiment?’ because there had never been folk music in Carl Nielsen Academy before. And he said yes. He was ready for an experiment. So we did it.

“I went to the old fiddlers and sat in the kitchens with them, with coffee and music, aquavit and music, and learned even more of the tradition that I knew from my grandfather.” Some of the fiddlers Haugaard has learned from include his grandfather, Johannes Kristensen; Hans Jørgen Christensen; Poul Lendal; Peter Uhrbrand; and Hans Peter Solemark. He also studied with classical violinists Børge Mortensen (from Denmark) and Alexander Fischer (from Russia).

“Asking to do that was a turning point in my career,” Haugaard said. “You have to

make your choices in life, and that was one of the choices I had to make that was clear. And later on at the Carl Nielsen Academy, we got the folk music bachelor’s and master’s degree, and I was hired as a teacher there.” He continued to teach at the Academy and became head of the folk music department until the time came when his touring schedule became too demanding to mesh with his teaching duties.

That touring included being part the progressive Danish folk music band, Dug; working with Sorten Muld, a techno folk group; Serras, a fusion-rock outfit; and school concerts of traditional music with Lakkelej. By far his best known and longest lasting musical partnership to date, though, has been with the guitarist Morten Alfred Høirup as the duo Haugaard & Høirup. Together and individually, the pair have won just about every category of the Danish Music Awards [the Danish equivalent of the Grammys]. The violinist and guitar player first met in a one-off pairing put together by a conference organizer, and at the time neither was too thrilled. However, they soon found they shared common interests in the past, present, and future of Danish folk music, a music they would take through Europe, Canada, the United States, and Japan in more than a thousand concerts over a 10-year span.

You’d figure it has to be pretty compelling, an instrumental music that can reach across cultures and attract lasting fans around the world. But what exactly is Danish folk music? That’s a question, Haugaard said, that comes up often. The analogy of his country as a harbor, holding influences from many currents of music and transforming them into something unique and ever-evolving, is one

that works for Haugaard, who both plays traditional material and composes his own works drawing on the varied ideas of Danish folk tradition. “It’s very hard to generalize about this music,” he said, “and it always depends on who is asking the question; what is the background of the person asking the question?”

“But I would describe Danish music as very light, but bittersweet. It has a sense of humor, and a sense of melancholy. It’s very lyric, very poetic.

“The instrumental music in Danish music, as in many other countries, is dance music. We also have a huge vocals tradition as well, with hymns and ballads and songs, and there are a lot of sailing songs, sea songs, as we are almost completely surrounded by the sea,” he continued. “In the old days, it was much easier to travel on water than on land, so we have got a lot of influences from all over Europe — visual influences, and architecture, and poetry, and music, and dance — so we are a harbor in northern Europe for traditional culture. When you look back, you can see that we have German melodies and polkas, and Scottish jigs and reels for inspiration, but when you play a Danish jig or reel it sounds different from a Scottish one, and a Danish polska is different from a German or Swedish one.

“You could say the music had been traveling until this point, until it got to Denmark, and then it’s been changed and modified to the country and the landscape and the people who live here.”

Haugaard has played his own part in those changes, both in how he plays music of the tradition and in the music he composes. “I always have the idea that if you want to work with tradition, you have to consider tradition something that is alive, that is not dead at all. A tradition dies when you don’t renew it or give it some new influences. I think it’s important to challenge tradition, in a very humble way, of course, and see what comes of that,” he said. “Even though I am playing a tune from, let’s say, the 18th century, it’s very very important for me to play it like I want to play it here at this moment, to update, to make it alive nowadays.

“You have to do that in a humble way,” he explained. “I mean, I studied the tradition and I know the tradition quite well, but as soon as you have studied it and are there, you can develop it and discover it and explore it.” That is an approach he took into account in one of his recent commissions, composing music and working as artistic director for the opening concert at the world music expo WOMEX, which was held this autumn in Copenhagen. “It’s called Great Nordic Night,” he said, “and we took music from all the Nordic traditions, using a lot

of traditional material but arranging it in a contemporary way.”

Composing is one of the things Haugaard had in mind when he and Høirup decided to end their duo work. “He’s a great friend, and it was fun, but we’d done it a *lot*,” Haugaard said. He quickly filled up his time not only with composing, but with working in a small ensemble with his wife, folksinger Helene Blum. The two of them also put together a sort of big band, with seven musicians, with whom they are starting to tour. “Helene and I also started our own record company, which sounds crazy,” he said, “but these days most of the CDs you sell are at concerts.” One of those CDs is Haugaard’s first solo CD, *Burning Fields*. “I decided [that] since I had never done such a thing, to do my first solo album,” he said.

It’s not that Haugaard was new to the studio. He had recorded with just about all the bands he’d been in, won many awards for his recordings with Høirup, and produced the work of other artists, including fiddle players and singers. “I like the idea of working in the studio. I like the idea of recording music — I think there are so many great possibilities,” he said. “When you’re in the studio, best case, you’re escaping from the world, you’re hiding in the studio, creating a universe away from the considerations of the world. You concentrate, and you focus 120% on what you’re doing right now.”

There’s another side to this concentration, though. “You are in many cases confronted with yourself in another way than you are used to. It’s only yourself and the music. The big challenge is not to be afraid, not to be scared, and to overcome the challenge of that. There’s only the music, and yourself, and right now.

“It’s a big thing, and I love it, I love the challenge of getting through it,” Haugaard said. Even though he’d been at that place many times with other artists, when he came to do his solo work, it was different. “I’d been doing so many things, playing in so many bands and constellations and having a good time with that, and getting far with all that — but then sitting there at 35 years old having to record a solo album for the first time — it was like standing up on a mountain or a big tall bridge, and you have to jump out — and then you can hope that it’s a soft landing, or that you learn to fly!”

Jump out he did, creating a 15-track recording that features his fiddle in varied combinations on mostly original music. It draws from Danish folk and classical traditions. “I had some good friends to help me,” he said. “And now that I have been touring with music for a few months, I am happy that it’s getting a good reaction.”



Anders Brohus

Another thing Haugaard did for the first time in the last year was to start a fiddle school. “We don’t have fiddle schools so much in Europe. That’s really a North American thing, or a United Kingdom thing,” he said. He enjoys teaching, though; he has been an instructor at Alasdair Fraser’s renowned fiddle camps and taught workshops elsewhere.

For the first year, Haugaard and award-winning, Boston-based fiddle player Hanneke Cassel were among the instructors. “It’s a big venture, something like that: The finances, the instructors, will it be good? Will anybody come? It has to take off — it has to be magic!” he said, laughing. “I think the fiddle school will be a main focus for the next several years.” Indeed, plans for the summer of 2010 are underway, with Cassel and Haugaard returning, along with Haugaard’s sister, Kirstene Sand, who is accomplished in Danish Shetland fiddling, Annti Järvelä from Finland, Kevin Henderson from Scotland’s Fiddler’s Bid, and Helene Blum teaching a singing workshop, as well.

Haugaard has plans for writing more music, even in the midst of his other work. “I know for some musicians, they say they have to have quiet and not be stressed at all, and then for others like myself, it’s much better to have a deadline coming up. I’m much better at coming up with something when I have to come up with something *right now!*” he said. However, this process is not quite as off-the-cuff as that might sound. “Creativity, for me, is not something you can sit down and wait for. It’s something that’s going on all the time, just getting small pieces and phrases and melodies and tunes in your

head, and then you write it down. I write in my little book all the time! And then when you really have to create, you have a basis, you have a lot of things to take from. And,” he added, “some days that goes very slowly or doesn’t work at all, and other days, you’re just flying.”

He and Blum are planning on the airplane sort of flying, too, booking gigs with their trio, quartet, and big band at European summer festivals. “I’d really like to come back to the United States and Canada, too. We’ve played some really good concerts there,” he said. Economic considerations mean that likely won’t be in the immediate future, but it is something the couple is considering.

Blum has several holiday albums out. haugaard was looking forward to Christmas concerts with her at the time of this conversation. “Lots of people say folk music is outdated and cheesy and so on. But for me, if you look at the Danish population, there are some Christmas songs that everybody, I mean *everybody* knows. That *is* folk music. And when you take them, and maybe do them a little other way than people are used to, they come up ask, ‘Why did you do it that way?’ or they say, ‘That’s lovely, that’s different.’ That actually shows that people do have a folk music tradition!” Haugaard said. He plans to keep carrying that tradition forward and bringing the story of Danish folk music to listeners around the world.



Selected Discography

Solo

Burning Fields

Pile House Records (2009)

with Haugaard & Høirup

Rejsesedage/Travelling

GO’ Danish Folk Music (2008)

Gaestebud/Feast

GO’ Danish Folk Music (2005)

Om Sommern

GO’ Danish Folk Music (2003)

with Serras

Ø

GO’ Danish Folk Music (2008)

as producer

with Helene Blum

En Gang Og Altid

Pile House Records (2008)

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