



FJØRDE FESTIVAL, NORWAY

Simon Broughton discovers folk music among the fjords of western Norway

It's about midnight on a dark rainy night and I'm following a trail of lanterns along stone-paved paths winding between turf-roofed wooden cottages. The rain brings out a strong smell of vegetation and seasoned wood. It evokes dark, mysterious, childhood images of troll country. I open a door into one of the cottages and am greeted by an air of cosy conviviality and the dancing sound of an accordion. It's a well-to-do farmer's home with a clay stove and painted pottery on the mantelpiece. On a chair sits Mario Salvi playing *tarantellas* from the south of Italy, tapping his foot on the wooden floor. No mics, no speakers and a lovely wooden acoustic. About 30 people have packed themselves in, sitting on chairs, benches and the tiled slabs round the stove.

We're in the Jølster Museum, one of those re-created villages of traditional houses, and it's a magical location for intimate, acoustic concerts. In one house there are duets on Hardanger fiddles, Norway's special violin, in another the Sámi singer Ailu Gaup, elsewhere the rustic Mexican trio Los Camperos de Valles and we've already met Mario Salvi and his *organetto*. Audience and performers move from cottage to cottage and over the course of a couple of hours you can sample them all in cosy settings as the rain patters down outside. The next day you wonder if perhaps it was all a dream.

Fjorde is a regional capital in the spectacular coastal region of

western Norway, a couple of fjords north of Bergen. It has to be said that the weather in these parts is more often rainy than it is sunny – even in summer. But at least it tends to change quickly and actually the rain brought a magical atmosphere to the late-night sessions in Jølster.

All the Nordic countries have a major folk festival – Fjorde in Norway, Falun in Sweden and Kaustinen in Finland, which was, the organisers are willing to admit, the original inspiration. Hilde Bjørkum has been artistic director of Fjorde since the beginning in 1990: "We're in quite an active folk music environment here, but in the beginning many were not convinced by the idea because traditional music didn't have a very high status. But, due to the success of the festival, that's changed now and over the past 15 years the attitude to folk music in Norway has improved dramatically as well." From this year Fjorde has become one of just five nationally supported festivals in Norway, which means increased and secure funding.

The town of Fjorde was largely built in the 70s and isn't exactly picturesque. But the surrounding area is glorious and the organisers are inventive at bringing music and location together – as at the Jølster Museum. The main festival venue is the Fjordehuset, an arts centre with little in the way of atmosphere but a great variety of venues including a huge sports hall, a cinema which makes an excellent



MAIN PICTURE: *Breakfast on the bridge in Førde*
 THIS PICTURE: *Procession in front of the Førdhuset (Simon Broughton)*
 RIGHT: *Helekins Følgje performing at Rytne farm (Simon Broughton)*
 BOTTOM: *Festival procession through Førde (Simon Broughton)*

while the rest largely come from the Järvelä family, mainstays of JPP, the supergroup from Kaustinen in Finland. Heard in an old wooden music hall, the seven-piece band brings a dynamism and bite to their music. There's a group of four violins, guitar, mandolin, Estonian bagpipes and bass. Frigg, with their searing musicality, is a band to watch. My hot tip for 2005 is the Hardanger fiddle duo Spindel.

One of the initiatives with a long-term significance is the Førde Talent Project which, with the help of the ministry of foreign affairs and Rikskonsertene, brings talented young musicians from developing countries to work in Førde for a week during the festival and then again six months later. Journalists from the countries involved are also invited to write about their musicians. "In many countries traditional culture is struggling," explains Bjørkum, "and this is a way to show that there is an interest and future in traditional music. It's part of our ideology." This has already helped Zimbabwean singer Chiwoniso Maraire, now a star at home, and Cuban singer David Echevarria who first came to



FACT BOX

- › This year's festival takes place July 7-10 2005
- › There are flights to Førde from Bergen (30 mins) and Oslo (1 hour) and direct flights to Bergen from London Stansted. Overland to Førde from Bergen takes about 3.5 hours, but the most pleasant way to travel is the ferryboat from Bergen up the Sognefjord to see a couple of Norway's best wooden stave churches (Urnes and Borgund) before heading to Førde on a spectacular road under the Jostedalsglacier.
- › www.fordefestival.no

concert setting, and smaller spaces for late-night dances and so on. Other concerts are held in clubs and other venues, including the striking church on a hill overlooking the town. There are some 30,000 tickets sold over the festival weekend.

Each year the festival has a particular theme. Last year it was the Caribbean with performers from Cuba, Dominican Republic, Trinidad, Mexico and Colombia. This year it's countries around the Caspian Sea plus other international artists including Nahawa Doumbia and the Kharkov Klezmer Band. "We think very

carefully about the balance between Norwegian and international artists," explains Bjørkum. "But wherever they're from, our main basis is the acoustic tradition." The audience is predominantly Norwegian, with almost half visiting from other parts of the country and a small smattering of international visitors.

Last year the standout local band was unquestionably Frigg, named after the wife of Odin and goddess of fertility and love in Norse mythology. Actually it's only a half-local band comprising Norwegian and Finnish musicians from illustrious musical families. The Norwegian fiddlers Gjermund and Einar Olav Larsen from Verdalen (near Trondheim) are sons of acclaimed traditional fiddler Geir Egil Larsen,

Førde as a Talent musician and is now back as vocalist with the headlining band Asere.

Some of the best festival experiences come from the combination of location and music. On the last afternoon of the Førde Festival this magic took place in a sylvan birch grove at the 17th century Rytne farm, halfway up Kvamshesten, a dramatic rocky peak overlooking the Førdefjord. The sun was finally shining and against a background of rocks and waterfalls, the group Helekins Følgje performed a cycle of songs and instrumental pieces. The fresh air and panoramic view were spectacular and the music with plangent voices and ringing violins truly made it an enchanted location. ■