

# La Folia

## The Greatest Hit of All Time

By Sarah Kirton

Probably the greatest European music hit of all time started out life as a lively Portuguese peasant dance. It's a tune usually called "La Folia" or "l'Folie d'Espagne." ("Folia" is pronounced "foh-LEE-ah.") The original was a lively fertility dance which seems to have originated on the Iberian peninsula – probably in Portugal – in the late 1400s. The name "Folia" means something like mad, empty-headed, or folly. The melody was later taken up by Italian musicians and composers and its popularity quickly spread from there.

Originally, there was no one form of the melody. In the late 1600s the tune was slowed down, and one particular melody became very popular in higher levels of society. This is now called the "Later" Folia. In 1672 Jean-Baptiste Lully's version became the classical prototype. Since then, at least 150 composers have used it as a basis for compositions and variations. One of the most famous is the Variations on La Folia by Corelli (Op. 5, No. 12), written for violin in 1700. Many violin students, I'm sure, still labor over this.

The basic tune as it stands today is a slow dirge-like melody in 3/4 time. It's little more than a chord progression which outlines a simple melody, one chord (and usually only one note) per measure. Music of this type was (and still is) used as a "ground," that is, as a basis for writing melodies, and sometimes, variations on these melodies. Yeh, I know. It sounds pretty boring. But La Folia is a very mesmerizing piece of music in itself. The possibilities for harmonizing this particular melody framework seem to be particularly rich. And the variations on it can be quite lively, perhaps bringing back the spirit of the original peasant dance, if not the original Iberian rhythms and melody.

So what's this got to do with Scandinavian music and dance, you ask?

There's always been a lot of borrowing back and forth between classical-, dance-, and folk-musicians. There also didn't used to be a clear line between the music and musicians of the upper classes (which developed into what we now think of as classical music and musicians) and the music and musicians of the common people. There was sacred music and dance music, and precious little in between. Concerts had not yet been conceived of. This only began to change in the 1600's. To put this music history into perspective, Corelli lived from 1653 – 1713; Bach, from 1685 – 1750; Handel, from 1685 – 1759; and Mozart, from 1756 – 1791. If Thomas Jefferson (1743 - 1826), who liked to play violin to relax, played any avant-garde music, it might have been Mozart. He would probably have considered Bach and Handel both to be fairly recent. (A quick web search just told me he had sheet music by Mozart in his music library.) So our divisions of music into these categories are pretty recent in terms of history.

Musicians have also always been a pretty mobile group. You got a job where you got hired. You know that song – "Daddy - don't let your baby grow up to marry a guitar player" (or something like that, can't remember the exact title - -)? Well, there's a reason for it. It's the rare musician who has a steady job. Musicians playing for the upper classes moved in and out of Scandinavia, bringing tunes from the continent with them, and they no doubt took tunes along when they moved back to Poland, France, Spain, England, or wherever. As a result there are a great number of tunes that are found (in a number of variations) all over Scandinavia in the folk music tradition, and in the notebooks of village musicians. Some of the same tunes are also preserved in the music notebooks of court and upper-crust musicians playing in Stockholm, Uppsala, Trondheim, and Oslo. The same melodies are found all over Europe. Surely the most famous of these is La Folia. You've probably heard it. It's been used in a number of movies, some of them quite well-known, and in movie trailers even when it isn't used in the actual movie! La Folia can even be downloaded as a cell phone ring tone from several websites!

In Scandinavia, La Folia became very popular as a folk melody, and was used for ballads, folk songs and lullabies. It got another eight measures added to it in Finland and Sweden, and was used as a polska. I even found a reference to its use in Iceland as a drinking song.

In southern Sweden a polska version is known as "Fiol i Spann" ("Violin in a Bucket" – compare to "Folia d'Espagne"). The

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most famous Finnish version is called “Lampaan Polska” (Sheep Polska). You can hear it on the JPP recording “Pirun Polska.” (The English language version is “Devil’s Polska, new Finnish folk fiddling.”)

The most common Swedish ballad version is called “Sinclairsvisan.” The original 90 verse text was written by Anders Odel (1718 – 1773) and describes the 1739 murder of a Swedish diplomat, Malcolm Sinclair, on orders of the Russian government. There are lots of variants on the original text, and many of them are of a political nature. Once you’ve got a good framework (i.e., a well known song) for your message, whatever it is, just change the words to suit current conditions, and publish them. Voila – you have a political protest movement, or at the very least, a satisfying way to gripe or spread political gossip. Most of the texts have stuck with the main theme of Sinclair’s murder, often with disguised political commentary hidden in the text. I imagine that ridiculous or overly serious words sung to such a dirge-like melody could also provide plenty of opportunity for comedy. The beloved Swedish poet Carl Michael Bellman (1740 – 1795) also set words to the La Folia melody, no doubt helping along its spread in Sweden.

In Norway, the La Folia tune is usually called “I Rosenlund i Sagas Hal.” A number of Norwegian songs, ballads, and lullabies are set to this tune. Norway also has a “Sinclair vise” (variously Sinclar or Zinclar), but it’s about a different event, and uses a different melody.

A little closer to home, La Folia seems to have been brought to England by a French (or Italian – there’s some disagreement about this guy) violinist, Michel Farinell (or Farinelli), 1649 – 1726. It was published by Playford in the 17<sup>th</sup> century under the name “Faronell’s Divisions on a Ground,” or “Faronell’s Ground.” The violin version has over 10 divisions (i.e. variations). In England, it’s also called Folies d’Espagne, Joy to Great Caesar, The King’s Health, and The Loyal Health. The English, too, used it as a melody for political songs – “Joy to Great Caesar” is an example.

A Scottish collection dated around 1740 has a tune with variations that seems to be derived from La Folia: “Cumh Easpuic Earra-ghaeidheal” or, in English, “Lament for the Bishop of Argyll.” The tune is thought to be much older than the 1740 date, and contains traditional variants used by Scottish pipers in their piobaireachd sets. But the range is wider than is possible on bagpipe, and it’s been suggested that this was a harp tune. Harpers of the time did have international connections.

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## *Faronelli variations*

The image displays two systems of musical notation for 'Faronelli variations'. Each system consists of three staves. The top staff in each system is a vocal line with lyrics 'Basic' and 'Basic' respectively. The middle and bottom staves are piano accompaniment, with the middle staff labeled 'Faro V. 1' and the bottom staff 'Faro V. 2'. The music is in 3/4 time and features a series of chords: dm, A7, dm, C, F, C, dm, A7 in the first system, and dm, A7, dm, C, F, C, dm A7, dm in the second system. The piano accompaniment includes a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

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Most of these tunes don't change the melody very much from the restrained, dirgey standard.

There are also tunes that are called "La Folia," but aren't really. Whether folks were capitalizing on a popular tune name, really thought their tune was a La Folia tune, or were using one of the earlier versions of La Folia that isn't available to us, we don't always know. Some of the tunes of that era remind one very strongly of the La Folia melody – but they're not. One of these that started haunting my waking and sleeping hours after I began work on this article is the slängpolska "Grannas flickor." I've stuck it into the group of fiddle tunes based on La Folia for your amusement.

La Folia is a minor tune in 3/4 time. In d minor, the most popular key for the melody, the chord progression is:

/dm/A7/dm/C/F/C/dm/A7/  
/dm/A7/dm/C/F/C/dm A7\_ /dm/

Now – about all that music I've included. Most of the tunes have been transposed to d minor – but note that one is in D major. The section marked "Faronelli variations" gives some of the flavor of the "classical" treatment of the tune. There are, first (*Basic*), the bare melody, with the chords used, and a slightly more ornate melody which is usually considered basic. It's this second melody which is used for most of the songs and political parodies. Then (*Faro v.1, Faro v.2*) come two of the variations (often called divisions) for violin published by Playford. The classical treatment is similar to the Playford versions.

Then there are two Swedish lullabies/children's songs. Similar melodies are used in Norway.

The section titled "Fiddle Variants" contains versions for fiddle. First are two of the southern Swedish "Fiol i Spann" variants. I chose the two most different ones I found. "Katamus Polska" is Finnish. The polska marked "M. Blom" is after Mattias Blom from Bjuråker in Hälsingland. Dalakopa, a group from Røros in Norway, recorded Blom's version on their 1988 (vinyl/cassette) album "På Viddene." It's also included on their anthology CD "e' vi alle ihopa." The Cathedral webpage devoted to La Folia (see below) lists this as a false "La Foola," but I think it's real. You just need to know a little about Scandinavian ornamentation and patterns of variation to get there from the original. Last is a version of the aforementioned "Grannas flickor." I doubt it's a La Folia melody, just similar in tone and style.

I did not sit down and go through all my written, printed, and recorded music to find instances of the La Folia melody. I'm sure, however, that there are many more examples of polskor, langdans, etc. based on this tune.

This is meant to be a quick and (very) dirty introduction to a fairly broad subject. Or really three subjects. 1) the La Folia

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## Lullabies

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Tune 4' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Tune 5'. Both are in 3/4 time. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and various rhythmic values including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and accidentals.

Tune 4: "Lille Pelle Spring Kring"

Tune 5: fr. Lena, Ulrika & Svea, CD II, #15 — used for these 4 different lullaby texts:

a) Yx kax kolm nekje; b) Ett två tre fyra; c) Brömsarna sjunga; d) Var inte jag en stackars karl

# Fiddle Variants

Chord progression: Dm A7 Dm C F C Dm A7 Dm

Spann 1  
Spann 2  
Katamus  
M. Blom  
Grannas Flickor

Detailed description: This system contains five staves of music. The top two staves are for 'Spann' (Spann 1 and Spann 2), the next two for 'M. Blom', and the bottom for 'Grannas Flickor'. The music is in 8/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature change to one flat (Bb) after the first measure. The second staff has a treble clef and a key signature change to one sharp (F#) after the first measure. The third, fourth, and fifth staves have treble clefs and a key signature change to one flat (Bb) after the first measure. The music consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets and slurs. Chord symbols are placed above the first staff.

Chord progression: F Edim F Edim Dm A7 Dm

Sp 1  
Sp 5  
Kat.  
M.B.  
Gr. Fl.

Detailed description: This system contains five staves of music. The top two staves are for 'Sp 1' and 'Sp 5', the next two for 'M.B.', and the bottom for 'Gr. Fl.'. The music is in 8/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature change to one flat (Bb) after the first measure. The second staff has a treble clef and a key signature change to one sharp (F#) after the first measure. The third, fourth, and fifth staves have treble clefs and a key signature change to one flat (Bb) after the first measure. The music consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets and slurs. Chord symbols are placed above the first staff.

Sp 5  
Kat.

Detailed description: This system contains two staves of music. The top staff is for 'Sp 5' and the bottom for 'Kat.'. The music is in 8/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Both staves have treble clefs and a key signature change to one flat (Bb) after the first measure. The music consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets and slurs.

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melody; 2) “wandering” melodies – i.e. melodies that pop up all over the place in a variety of guises. La Folia is only one of them, although probably the most famous; and 3) the relationship of folk, dance and classical music and musicians. I’d like to thank Anders Rosén for a series of conversations we had about the two latter subjects many years ago.

If you want to do a web search on La Folia, there’s a little more in the Scandinavian and British/American folk music worlds, and a lot in the worlds of classical and renaissance music. The Musical Cathedral web page referred to below is definitely the place to start.

**Note:** A completely different Folia from the Canary Islands is often used as art-music for guitar.

**A list of the more interesting web pages:**

<<http://members.chello.nl/fofia/>> “La Folia, A Musical Cathedral” is probably the most extensive site. It covers its history and has numerous midi and mp3 files to listen to.

<<http://www.abc.se/~gor/musik/fofia.html>> “Malungs former av La Folia - Sinclairsvisan. "Skinnarbygd" Malungs Hembygdsförenings Årsbok 1953,” by Rudolf Sundqvist. The history of La Folia in Malung, in western Dalarna, Sweden. It’s in Swedish, but many variants are transcribed there. Clicking on a transcription causes a midi version to be played. Some of these are very interesting, and give another look at the directions this tune has taken. It’s interesting listening whether you can read Swedish or not.

<<http://www.folias.nl/html8a.html>> is a sub-page of the Musical Cathedral page above. It has a short discussion of the movies and movie trailers La Folia has been used in. I immediately recognized “Barry Lyndon” (1975) and “Jefferson in Paris” (1995). Perhaps I should recognize “The Alamo” (1960), but...

<<http://www.texaschapbookpress.com/magellanslog25/lafolia/fofiaintro.htm>> Has a couple of nice midi files.

## Announcing The Nancy Linscott Scandia Camp Scholarship for 2005

The Directors of Scandia Camp Mendocino are pleased to announce the availability of the Nancy Linscott Scandia Camp Scholarship for Scandia Camp 2005. This scholarship fund was established by campers and friends to honor Nancy Linscott, the founder of Scandia Camp and its director for twenty years. One scholarship, in the amount of \$250, is awarded annually and is applied directly to the recipient's camp registration fee. Anyone is welcome to apply for this scholarship. Nominations (with the prior permission of the nominee) are also encouraged. The successful applicant will meet at least one of the criteria listed below. A letter requesting consideration for the scholarship should describe the applicant / nominee in relation to the criteria, and should be sent to:

*Scandia Camp Mendocino, Linscott Scholarship*, 1320 Harleyford Road, Woodridge, IL 66517, or  
<[DancingRoo@aol.com](mailto:DancingRoo@aol.com)>. Applications should be emailed

or postmarked no later than April 15, 2005. The successful applicant/nominee will be notified by May 1, 2005.

The recipient of the scholarship is guaranteed a place at camp, regardless of his/her status at the time of applying. Criteria:

- Have successfully encouraged new dancers or musicians to come to camp.
- Have contributed time and effort to the smooth running of the camp
- Have made significant efforts to welcome new people and help them have a good time at camp
- Have made significant contributions to their local Scandinavian dance/music community.
- Have fostered appreciation and understanding of Scandinavian music and dance through lectures, publications or Performance.
- Have successfully worked to bring new and young people into the Scandinavian dance & music community.
- Have been active in the Scandinavian music and dance community, and might not be able to attend camp without financial assistance.

