

Arts Midwest: Folkefest Evaluation



Authors: Ryan Evans, Julia Miller



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451 Lexington Parkway North | Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

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Introduction

From 2020-2021, Wilder Research partnered with Arts Midwest to evaluate the impact of their Folkefest program. Arts Midwest is one of six U.S. Regional Arts Organizations. In partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts, state arts agencies, and other private and public funders, Regional Arts Organizations strengthen and support arts, culture, and creativity in their respective regions and across the nation.

Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest serves nine states—Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin—and beyond. For more than 35 years, they have developed and delivered programs that promote creativity, nurture cultural leadership, and engage people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people’s lives.

About the Folkefest evaluation

From 2017-2021, Folkefest brought musicians from Finland and Sweden to communities in the Midwest for weeklong residencies that featured public performances and educational activities designed for all ages and levels of musical experience. The program visited small and mid-sized communities in six Midwestern states—North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan—all of which experienced a significant influx of Scandinavian immigrants during the 1800s and 1900s. Based on Arts Midwest’s internal data tracking, nearly 19,000 students (unduplicated) and nearly 5,000 adults (unduplicated) across six communities experienced Folkefest.

Wilder partnered with Arts Midwest to measure the impact of Folkefest. We did this by conducting in-depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders who have been involved with Folkefest over the program's lifespan, including resident artists, community organization representatives, teachers and school staff, and community residents. Aiming for a diversity of perspectives and experiences, Arts Midwest connected us to 32 stakeholders who said they were open to doing an interview with us. Of these potential interviewees, we interviewed 29 stakeholders from various communities and years of programming, including:

- 4 resident artist ensemble representatives
- 7 community organization representatives
- 11 teachers and school staff
- 7 community residents

Four communities are represented in the interviews—New York Mills, Minnesota (11 interviews); Marquette, Michigan (6 interviews); Devil's Lake, North Dakota (4 interviews); and Aberdeen, South Dakota (4 interviews). In addition, the three resident artist ensembles we interviewed included Kardemimmit (Finland), the Emilia Amper Band (Sweden), and Yamma (Israel). The interview with Yamma included two of the ensemble's members.

It should be noted that Yamma participated in Arts Midwest's WorldFest program, which is similar to Folkefest. Rather than Scandinavian music, WorldFest highlights music from around the world in weeklong residencies that take place in Midwestern communities. Many of the communities that participated in Folkefest also participated in WorldFest. As such, some interview respondents mentioned impacts of both Folkefest and WorldFest during our interviews with them. We decided to include Yamma as an interview respondent to help contextualize the stories we heard about WorldFest. The impacts of both programs, according to our analysis, are overall very similar.

Most interviews were 30-60 minutes in duration. We developed the interview questions in partnership with Arts Midwest. We asked respondents a variety of questions, centering on the impacts they observed from Folkefest and whether they observed these impacts at the personal, organizational, or community level. This interviewing approach allowed us to identify the types and scales of impact that Folkefest helped to bring about.

To make meaning of the interview data, we developed a codebook with which to label and categorize the types and scales of impact mentioned by respondents. We then identified the types of impact that occurred at which scales—that is, what impacts were most often observed at the individual, organizational, and community levels. This analytical approach helped us to produce a holistic view of the impact of Folkefest for community members, community organizations, and communities overall.

Measuring the impact of Arts Midwest

While preparing for the Folkefest evaluation, we partnered with Arts Midwest to develop a theory of change for the organization as a whole. We developed this theory of change by gathering impact stories from Arts Midwest’s internal and external stakeholders through conversations with their staff, board, and partners.

This theory of change guided the Folkefest evaluation by providing discrete and tangible impacts that Arts Midwest expects from their work. Please see Figure 1 for a crosswalk of the impacts identified by the Folkefest evaluation and their corresponding measures in the theory of change. You can view the theory of change in Figure 2 on the next page.

1. Folkefest impacts by theory of change measures crosswalk

Folkefest impacts	Theory of change measures
Increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Increased opportunities for all community members to experience each other’s creativity and culture
Increased appreciation for or engagement in arts and culture experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Increased instances of sharing art, stories, and perspectives
Increased knowledge, skills, or capacity gained from attending or hosting arts and culture activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Increased knowledge, skills, and confidence to accomplish goalsIncreased capacity and sustainability for creative, community-driven work
Increased relationships or connections between resident artists, community residents, and community organization representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">More and stronger connections to others with shared values
Increased credibility or “reach” for resident artists and community organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Increased audiences, visibility, and credibility

The impact of Folkefest

Our interviews showcased Folkefest’s impacts for individuals, organizations, and communities. Because we interviewed a relatively small group of people who have engaged with Folkefest, we do not present these impacts as necessarily comprehensive. Rather, we present them as a first step in demonstrating the value of the Folkefest program. We expect that, with subsequent evaluations, we may be able to identify additional types of impacts or additional nuances to the impacts described below.

Based on the interviews we conducted as part of this evaluation, we identified five main impacts of Folkefest for the communities where the residencies took place:

- Increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices
- Increased appreciation for or engagement in arts and culture experiences
- Increased knowledge, skills, or capacity gained from attending or hosting arts and culture activities
- Increased relationships or connections between resident artists, community residents, and community organization representatives
- Increased credibility or “reach” for resident artists and community organizations

Please see Figure 3 for an overview of when respondents mentioned these impacts as occurring at one of three scales—individual, organizational, and community level. The darker blue cells refer to primary impacts at each scale (that is, mentioned most often) and the lighter blue cells refer to secondary impacts (that is, mentioned less often, but still often enough to merit acknowledgement as an impact at that scale).

3. Folkefest impacts: type of impact by scale of impact

Impacts	Scale of impact		
	Individual	Organizational	Community
Increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices	48 mentions ^a	8 mentions	53 mentions
Increased appreciation for or engagement in arts and culture experiences	44 mentions	5 mentions	22 mentions
Increased knowledge, skills, or capacity gained from attending or hosting arts and culture activities	45 mentions	22 mentions	24 mentions
Increased relationships or connections between resident artists, community residents, and community organization representatives	34 mentions	31 mentions	23 mentions
Increased credibility or “reach” for resident artists and community organizations	3 mentions	27 mentions	6 mentions

^a “Mentions” refer to the number of times that interview respondents mentioned a particular impact as occurring at one of the three scales. For instance, respondents mentioned “Increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices” as an individual level impact 48 times and as a community level impact 53 times.



Impacts for individuals

Our interviews suggested that Folkefest had a significant impact for the people who experienced workshops and performances. This includes impacts for community residents and students at local schools. It also includes personal level impacts for resident artists, teachers and school staff, and community organization representatives (that is, impacts not related directly to their professional roles, which we considered an organizational level impact for this evaluation and will address further in the “Impacts for organizations” section of this report).

Increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices was the most commonly mentioned impact at the both individual and community level. While many respondents mentioned this impact at the individual level, they often alluded to the community level impact that occurs when, for example, a large number of individuals in a community have access to programming like Folkefest. Because of this, we decided to report on this impact—increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices—in the “Impacts for communities” section of this report.

The second-most common impact at the individual level was an increase in knowledge, skills, or capacity. Respondents said that through Folkefest they learned about Scandinavian culture and shared their cultural heritage with resident artists and others in their community. Resident artists likewise noted that this cultural learning went both ways, as they had a chance to experience American culture and connect with American Finnish residents. For community residents—adults and students—Folkefest was a chance to learn about types of music and instruments different from those they typically encounter. Particularly, many people mentioned learning about the kantele, which is a Finnish instrument showcased by the group Kardemimmit. Similarly, in New York Mills the making of a Finnish bread was incorporated into the residency, through which students learned about bread-making skills in general as well as about Finnish culture.

“3rd graders up through 10th graders attended it [the performance]. Right after, I went into a 3rd grade classroom and said, ‘Give me some feedback. What do you think? What did you learn? What was fun?’ They were just enthralled with Finland, their accents, their instruments, and stuff that they’d never seen before. They wanted to learn how to sing like that and learn more about the instrument [the kantele]. One little boy wanted to go to Finland.” – School representative

“You must come [as a resident artist with Folkefest] wanting to know about other cultures. They [the communities] are inviting you to share your culture, but you must want to know about theirs as well... You are allowing people to discover these new things. If I come with guitar and a drum set—okay [alluding to community residents’ familiarity with these instruments]. But when you bring the essence of your culture, it is much more interesting.” – Resident artist

Related to this increase in knowledge, skills, and capacity, community residents said that their appreciation for and engagement in arts and culture activities increased because of Folkefest. For example, residents had a chance to engage in Scandinavian culture, music, history, and foodways. In particular, students experienced Scandinavian music and culture in hands-on, personalized ways, such as trying the kantele and talking with resident artists about their music, lives, and culture. Similarly, for adult residents in the communities and surrounding towns, Folkefest was an opportunity to connect or reconnect with their cultural heritage through music.

Respondents also mentioned seeing more and stronger relationships and connections because of Folkefest. This impact appeared in multiple ways. Resident artists made connections with community residents through performances and workshops, which often included intentional time for questions and conversation, but also through less formal means. Some community residents hosted resident artists for dinners or jam sessions. A few respondents also noted impromptu connections being made by nature of having the resident artists in their community for a week, where they visited local restaurants, attended community events, and so on.



Lastly, some community residents mentioned building and strengthening relationships with other people who live in their community through attending a Folkefest workshop or performance.

“After the meet-and-greets [with the resident artists], we’ve since talked to more of the folks that we’ve run into [at events like the meet-and-greets]. I think it makes you see that there are other folks [in our community] with some of those interests, cultural backgrounds. ... It gives you a basis for communicating with them in the future.”

– Community resident

“It was wonderful to see different parts of the U.S. that we wouldn’t have seen otherwise—not the places you usually pass through. It was very beautiful to go out to some place that I don’t know. Then to—‘Boom!’—fall down in this town and meet people and spend enough time in each place to be able to really feel the place and see the place and meet the people properly—meet a lot of children, hear people talk about, ‘Oh yeah, you’re the [musicians]—I heard my grandson talk about you playing for them!’ Usually when you’re touring, you think you’ll see a lot, but you don’t really have time to talk to people and see a place. Emotionally and socially, that was beautiful [to have that opportunity with Folkefest].”

– Resident artist

Impacts for organizations

This evaluation identified a number of impacts for organizations that were involved in Folkefest. For the evaluation, we considered organizations to be schools, organizations in the communities visited by resident artists, and the resident artists and their ensembles.

Respondents indicated that Folkefest had an impact on strengthening relationships or connections between and within organizations. For example, residencies often helped to strengthen connections between the host organization and local schools and other community organizations, as well as between community organizations and Arts Midwest. Additionally, the residency often helped to strengthen connections among different levels of educators at schools who collaborated to bring Folkefest programming to their students. Resident artists also noted strengthened relationships within their own ensembles, with community organizations, and with Arts Midwest.

“For us, it allowed us the opportunity to connect to all sorts of people that we normally wouldn’t—schools, community groups—to create new sorts of collaborations.”

– Community organization representative

“The band developed musically and socially [throughout Folkefest]. We played so many concerts. Our dynamics as a group changed. Only all of those concerts in a row can do that.”

– Resident artist

Organizational respondents also noted an increase in credibility and audience reach. For community organizations that helped to host resident artists, providing Folkefest programming was an opportunity to gain more credibility within their community, particularly with local schools and with organizations in neighboring communities. Likewise, resident artists said that being a resident artist with Folkefest gave them more credibility internationally and within their home countries.

“It’s funny that these bigger tours in the U.S. give us more publicity in [home country], too. They think, ‘Oh, they toured in America, they must be good!’ The venues and festivals trust us here.”
– Resident artist

“Having the opportunity to bring a performer of this caliber and put on a public performance in the community was invaluable to us—to make those connections and engage in our community, and having the community know what we do. That was big. Being able to connect with the schools in a meaningful way was important, too.”
– Community organization representative

To a lesser extent, another impact mentioned at the organizational level was an increase in knowledge, skills, or capacity. A few community organizations representatives indicated having increased confidence or capacity to host similar events or residencies in the future. Teachers appreciated receiving lesson plans and materials to prepare students for the resident artist performances, and a few said that these items would be useful for creating new lesson plans and materials to introduce their students to different arts and culture experiences. Similarly, resident artists noted that they were able to develop skills related to engaging a wide variety of audiences, such as young children and older adults.

“We hosted other residencies after Folkefest. Folkefest showed us that we could do something like this in the community. Beforehand, I would have been like, ‘Okay, how do I do this?’ Arts Midwest made it easy to figure that out. They showed us all the things that need to be done to make it possible.”
– Community organization representative

“Definitely our art skills developed so much. We met so many different audiences. Also, our confidence grew at the same time. You can never have the experience, skills, and knowledge of playing for all these different audiences and people until after you have them. We learned so much; it was so varied. I have never played concert after concert after concert for hundreds of kids in a gym. I have a talent for it—to keep their attention. We learned the dynamics of doing that.”
– Resident artist

Impacts for communities

Respondents mentioned increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices as the primary impact for communities visited by resident artists. While some respondents noted other impacts at this level, these have already been described in detail. This section describes how communities that participated in Folkefest experienced increased access to and awareness of Scandinavian music and culture.

Many respondents mentioned appreciating the opportunity for people in their communities to gain awareness of different kinds of music and musical instruments through Folkefest. In particular, teachers and school staff mentioned that Folkefest allowed their students to experience music and instruments that are different from what they are used to. Additionally, some respondents noted that due to their rural location very few bands or music ensembles visit them to begin with, much less a professional Scandinavian music ensemble.

“I mean it’s crazy that you even ask what kind of impact it [Folkefest] has because it’s a no-brainer. It is so important for students to get out of their books and to see that there are other people on the planet—making music, doing this or that. It’s so uplifting. They see these new instruments—not just the guitar or the drums or the violin. They’re like, ‘Okay, there’s these other people on the planet and they’re playing these other instruments.’ We’re so isolated here, and can be just so narrow-minded. So when they [resident artists] go out into the schools, I think that really opens kids’ eyes and they start looking at other music and getting excited about that. Of course, it brings them and their families to the concerts, too. It just raises the vibration of everybody.” – School representative

“I love that they [the students] get to hear different kinds of music, that it isn’t just country and the stuff that they hear on the radio. They get exposed to that. I know our music teachers really appreciate it because you can show them [the students] pictures, you can play those songs in the classroom, and you can show them videos, but nothing is like watching a live performance. They’re exposed to all this different kind of music [through Folkefest]. We as teachers like it because then we will always take that information that they send out ahead of time and we can do a little research, or we can give them a sneak preview of what is coming, or just connect it to something that’s going on in social studies class. Because it makes a lot more sense to them if they can connect it.” – School representative



Some respondents talked about impacts that were more in-depth than access to Scandinavian music and culture, saying that Folkefest presented to their communities new or different ideas about the role and function of music. For the most part, these ideas centered on folk music being a “music of the people.” These respondents said that this impact came through in hearing resident artists talk about the cultural and historical significance of their music.

“It was interesting to hear the band’s philosophy about why they do what they do, how they take these older songs that have been around for generations and perform them with such great enthusiasm. It was good for the students to see that music doesn’t have to be the latest, greatest thing that is being marketed to people. It can be preserved for generations.”
– School representative

“I think sometimes this community can get really stuck in just historical Finland. Finland is constantly evolving and changing. That is a zone that I play forwardly, but carefully. People love to be honored for what they know; all people do. So I sometimes have to figure out the balance of when to share those ideas [of contemporary Finnish culture]. Folkefest is one of those ways. Showing new music, not just the classics. We can love that, but we can also love this. All music was once new.”
– Community organization representative

Many respondents also highlighted having access to high quality international ensembles as a benefit for their communities. Without Folkefest, they said, they likely would not have been able to afford these ensembles or coordinate the logistics of bringing an international ensemble to visit their communities. As one respondent commented, “[Folkefest] is really the only affordable way that a lot of communities can be exposed to different culture.”

“The impact is small town communities being able to have huge events brought in at a relatively low cost. It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for these communities. We will never be able to afford something like that, considering everything that we would need to go through to bring them over—the cost, the visas, and everything that goes along with that is just mind boggling.”
– Community organization representative

“I teach graduate courses at [university] and I talked with other music educators there about Folkefest. It’s amazing—all of the different experiences that Folkefest offers. My students take that for granted, but other schools don’t have that! Even for me, it reminded me that our kids are very fortunate to have this opportunity to meet with world-renowned artists.”
– School representative

Similar impacts from virtual and in-person residencies

From 2017-2019, the Folkefest program took place in person. Due to COVID-19, Arts Midwest chose to postpone the 2020 residency and host a virtual residency instead, which took place in 2021. Our analysis identified no major differences between the impacts from the virtual residency (New York Mills) and the impacts from the in-person residencies (Aberdeen, Devil’s Lake, Marquette). It should be noted, however, that the New York Mills residency included in-person activities when possible, such as Finnish bread-making taught by a local community member with expertise in Finnish culture.



Further, our analysis showed more positive perceptions of the virtual residency than negative (29 positive mentions compared to 11 negative mentions). While many respondents noted negative aspects of the virtual approach (e.g., there was something “missing” from the virtual residency when compared to in-person performances and workshops), most respondents also said that the residency was as good as it could have been considering the limitations on in-person gatherings during COVID-19.

“I thought it [the virtual performance] was cool. I went in the auditorium, and it was just like they were here. We have a great auditorium with a big screen, so that helps. It felt like they were right there. It was facilitated, so we had the kids come up and ask their questions on the microphone. We didn’t have any trouble at all hearing. The ladies [Kardemimmit] were awesome and answered every question. It was a virtual performance, but it was like they were here.”

– New York Mills respondent

“I think that overall things went well and the kids seemed very engaged, though it [the virtual performance] was missing some of that connection of being able to meet face-to-face. [Interviewer: What could have been done about that?] Honestly, I think they did a really nice job with it. ... It was run really well. They really did it as smoothly as possible. It was as good as it could have been with a virtual residency.”

– New York Mills respondent



Respondents offered positive observations of the virtual residency in regards to two impacts in particular—increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices, and increased appreciation for or engagement in arts and culture experiences. Respondents appreciated having the opportunity to engage with Kardemimmit and Finnish music even though COVID-19 made it difficult to have experiences outside of their immediate social network. Other respondents said that the virtual approach allowed more people to engage with the residency than if Kardemimmit had visited in person.

“I would say that we were able to reach a wider audience through having it virtual. We were able to share out streaming links, recordings. We were able to involve a lot more students and community members than if it was just an in-person event that not everyone could have attended.”
— New York Mills respondent

“Everyone enjoyed it. We all learned a lot during that COVID period—even though we can’t bring them [Kardemimmit] in in-person, we can do it this way [virtually]. It’s not impossible to watch people in Finland or wherever when we’re here in America. You would think that it would have a negative impact—the virtual approach. We were worried about that. But it really didn’t hinder the experience.”
— New York Mills respondent

Lastly, some respondents mentioned that the virtual residency allowed them to get a better sense of Finnish life and culture. For instance, one respondent mentioned that their students gained an appreciation of the time difference between Minnesota and Finland. Another respondent said that they enjoyed seeing what Kardemimmit’s living and rehearsal space looked like via video calls.

“One of the things that was kind of cool was that it was the middle of the night there when we were talking to them, and it was the middle of the day for us. That made it fun for the kids.”
– New York Mills respondent

“With the virtual residency, they [Kardemimmit] could show their setting in a really transparent way, instead of just transplanting their music here. They could show their homes, what they do every day—a slice of their life.”
– New York Mills respondent

Summary and moving forward

This evaluation found that Folkefest brought about a number of impacts for the individuals, organizations, and communities that participated in the residencies. These impacts include:

- Increased access to or awareness of cultural art forms and practices
- Increased appreciation for or engagement in arts and culture experiences
- Increased knowledge, skills, or capacity gained from attending or hosting arts and culture activities
- Increased relationships or connections between resident artists, community residents, and community organization representatives
- Increased credibility or “reach” for resident artists and community organizations

Many of the impacts described in this report stemmed from connections and cultural exchange among the resident artists and the communities they visited. Numerous respondents suggested Arts Midwest or host community organizations do more to encourage relationships and build on the impacts of the residency after it is finished—because they wanted to continue engaging in those kinds of activities.

Wilder offers the following suggestions for Arts Midwest to consider for future rounds of Folkefest or programs similar to Folkefest:

- **Encourage relationships.** This refers to planning for resident artists to spend time getting to know community residents, and for community residents to visit with each other and discuss the performance or workshop they attended. Many respondents talked about relationships and connections as being instrumental for bringing about the various impacts described in this report. We expect that encouraging relationships even more may result in deeper impacts for everyone involved.

- **Foster mutual cultural sharing.** This refers to offering opportunities for sharing cultural customs, traditions, or observations—from the resident artists to people who live in the host communities, as well as from community residents to the visiting artists. Many respondents from host communities mentioned learning about Scandinavian culture from the resident artists, but few said that they shared parts of their own culture in return. The resident artists, on the other hand, noted that they shared their culture and learned about American culture. Arts Midwest might consider planning for and providing opportunities for community organizations and residents to share parts of their culture as well, such as making time for this at performances or workshops. We expect that doing so may result in community residents feeling a deeper connection to their own culture.
- **Continue the experience.** This refers to Arts Midwest or host community organizations continuing to engage community residents around Scandinavian music and culture after the residency is finished. Many respondents enjoyed the residency and wanted more engagement around the topics of Scandinavian music and culture. Arts Midwest and host community organizations might consider preparing “after the residency” activities and materials, or perhaps partnering with local Scandinavian music and culture organizations to continue engaging community residents in similar activities after the residency.

Lastly, this evaluation produced insights about the benefits and drawbacks of in-person and virtual approaches to arts residencies. While respondents from Marquette, Aberdeen, and Devil’s Lake (in-person residencies) identified similar impacts to those from New York Mills (virtual residency), many New York Mills respondents said that they did not experience the same level of excitement or engagement from the virtual performances and workshops as compared to when they attend in-person events. That being said, these same respondents said that they greatly appreciated the opportunity to engage with Folkefest, especially when their access to arts and culture experiences was limited due to COVID-19.

The main takeaway is that the mostly virtual approach to Folkefest in New York Mills was an effective and safe response to restrictions imposed by COVID-19. In future iterations, Arts Midwest could explore hybrid approaches to achieve some of the benefits of virtual residencies, while still maintaining the original goal of programs like Folkefest—bringing meaningful arts and culture experiences to Midwest communities.

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The following Wilder Research staff contributed to this report:

Anna Alba
Phil Cooper
Alice Lubeck
Nicole MartinRogers
Dan Swanson

Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

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One of six nonprofit United States Regional Arts Organizations, Arts Midwest grows, gathers, and invests in creative organizations and communities throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin, and beyond.

