

GRIEG

Piano Music Vol. 4

Holberg Suite • Slåtter, Op. 72
Six Norwegian Mountain Melodies
Melodies of Norway • Morning Mood

Einar Steen-Nøkleberg, Piano



Edvard Grieg (1843 - 1907)

Piano Music Vol. 4

Edvard Grieg, was born in Bergen, on the west coast of Norway. He showed a strong interest in music at very early age, and after encouragement by violinist and composer, Ole Bull (1810 - 1880), he was sent to the Conservatory in Leipzig at the age of fifteen to receive his music education. At the conservatory he received a fundamental and solid training, and through the city's active musical life, he received impressions, and heard music, which would leave their stamp on him for the rest of his life, for better or for worse. Even though he severely criticized the conservatory, especially towards the end of his life, in reality he was recognised as a great talent, and one sees in his sketchbooks and practices from the Leipzig period that he had the freedom to experiment as well. He had no basis for criticizing the conservatory or his teachers for poor teaching or a lack of understanding.

From Leipzig he travelled to Copenhagen with a solid musical ballast and there he soon became known as a promising young composer. It was not long before he was under the influence of Rikard Nordraak, whose glowing enthusiasm and unshakeable that the key to a successful future for Norwegian music lay in nationalism, in the uniquely Norwegian, the music of the people folk-songs. Nordraak came to play a decisive role for Grieg's development as a composer. Nordraak's influence is most obvious in Grieg's *Humoresker, Opus 6*, considered a breakthrough. In the autumn of 1866, Grieg settled down in Christiania (Oslo). In 1874 Norway's capital city was the centre for his activities. During this time he also created the majority of the works which laid the foundation for his steadily increasing fame.

In spite of his poor health he had had a defective lung ever since childhood Grieg was constantly on concert-tour as pianist or a conductor, always with his own works on the programme. After his last concert-tour 1907, Grieg wrote to his friend Frants Beyer:

"This Tour has been strange. The Audiences have been on my Side. In Germany I have received more acclaim for my ART than ever before. But the Critics both in Munich and in Berlin have let me know in no uncertain terms, that they think I am a dead Man. That is my punishment for my lack of Productivity in these last Years, which my wretched physical condition has caused. It is a hard and undeserved Punishment - but I comfort myself with the thought that it is not the Critics, who govern the world." (Letter to Frants Beyer. 5th March, 1907)

More clearly than anything else, this letter shows a trend which Grieg experienced in his later years in relation to his music. It was also a development which would continue internationally until long after his death. Within the musical "establishment", there was an increasing number of people who gradually became more critical towards Grieg's music as well as his abilities and talent as a composer. In the meantime his popularity among the average music-loving audience increased in inverse proportion. Grieg experienced some of the greatest demonstrations of his general popularity during the last years of his life, when, in spite of his greatly weakened health, he was continually on concert-tour, in popular demand by concert-managers from all over the world. The critics, however, were sceptical and to a point condescending, and there is no doubt that Grieg felt hurt by their attitude:

"I cannot be blamed if my music is played in third-rate hotels and by school-girls. I could not have created my music any other way, even though I did not have my audience in mind at the time. I suppose this popularity is all right, but it is dearly bought. My reputation as a composer is suffering because of it, and the criticism is disparaging"¹.

From early on Grieg was labelled a composer of the small forms. His indisputable lyrical ability and talent were never doubted, but apart from some very few works such as the *Piano Concerto in A minor*, Opus 16, and the *String Quartet in G minor*, Opus 27, *Piano Sonata in E minor*, Opus 7, the three *Violin Sonatas*, Opus 8 in F major, Opus 13 in G major and Opus 45 in C minor, and the *Cello Sonata in A minor*, Opus 36, he was not able, in spite of his many and desperate attempts, to feel at home with the "large form".

He felt that this was a shortcoming, and unfairly blamed his education at the Leipzig Conservatory. Nevertheless, he also showed that he could master these forms when on rare occasions he found raw musical material that could be reworked and treated within the traditional sonata-form. The only problem was that the musical material to which he felt closest and by which he was most fascinated, was of another quality and character.

Grieg's encounter with Norwegian folk-music, and his assimilation of essential features from this music, released certain aspects of his own creativity that soon led to his music being, for many, identical with folk-music. By some, he was considered more or less simply an arranger of folk-music, and that hurt him very deeply:

"In my Op. 17 and 66, I have arranged folk-songs for the piano, in Op. 30, I have freely rendered folk ballads for the male voice. In three or four of my remaining works, I have attempted to use Norwegian songs thematically. And since I have published up to 70 works by now, I should be allowed to say that nothing is more incorrect than the claim from certain German critics that my so-called originality is limited to my borrowing from folk-music. It is quite another thing if a nationalistic spirit, which has been expressed through folk-music since ancient times, hovers over my original creative works. (Letter to Henry T. Finck, 17. 7. 1900)".²

Much of the instrumental Norwegian folk music is built up of small melodic themes, almost units, which are repeated with small variations in appoggiatura and sometimes with rhythmic displacements. Sections are then joined together to form larger units. We seldom find any true development as it is understood in traditional classical music. It gradually became clear to Grieg that he felt the greatest affinity to this music. This becomes especially clear to us through his piano music. That is why it also became so difficult to distinguish between what in Grieg's works came originally from folk-music, and what was his own composition. This must also have been especially difficult for foreign critics and audiences.

In Grieg's music there are two features which particularly attract our attention, rhythm and harmony. In many instances Grieg's rhythm in his piano compositions, is often taken from the folk-dance, as well as from compositions which are not based upon folk-music. He placed great emphasis on the rhythmic, and considered it paramount in the presentation of his works which have dance as the point of departure. He was of the opinion that in order to be able to play one of his compositions, one had to know, and feel, the dance rhythm. Characteristic of the understanding of the rhythmic, is the story about the meeting between Grieg and Ravel in Paris in 1894 at the home of William Molard:

"While the bright-eyed company discussed music, Ravel quietly went over to Molard's piano and began to play one of the master's *Norwegian Dances*. Grieg listened with a smile, but then began to show signs of impatience, suddenly getting up and saying sharply: "No, young man, not like that at all. Much more rhythm. It's a folk-dance, a peasant dance. You should see the peasants at home, with fiddler stamping in time with the music. Play it again! And while Ravel played, the little man jumped up and skipped about the room to the astonishment of the company."³

Harmony is extremely central. Often it is the harmony itself which is the basis for the composition. Grieg pointed this out emphatically in letter to his biographer, Henry T. Finck:

"The realm of harmony, has always been my dream-world, and my relationship, to this harmonious way of feeling and the Norwegian folk-songs, has been a mystery even for me. I have understood that the secret depth one finds in our folk-songs, is basically owing to the richness of their untold harmonic possibilities. In my reworking of the folk-songs Op. 66, but also otherwise, I have attempted to express my interpretation, of the hidden harmonies, in our folk-songs."⁴

Grieg's interest in harmony became obvious to others already during his practice while attending the Conservatory. At that time it was first and foremost a desire to experiment. Later, harmony became his way of bringing forth the very "soul" of the folk-tunes. Among other things, he deliberately used unfamiliar, radical chord progressions in order to suggest the vague tonality (*sotto voce*

semitones, vague thirds) such as one finds in many of the folk-songs, a melodic characteristic which would otherwise be impossible to achieve with an instrument like the piano. His instrument was primarily the piano. From his earliest years to his last concert-tour the year he died, he performed as a pianist with his own compositions. He was not a virtuoso, but his intimate familiarity with the piano allowed him to present his own music in such a way as to leave a deep and lasting impression upon everyone who heard him play. According to contemporary reports he had a marvellous ability to bring out the best, the very essence, of his own piano pieces. When he took his place on the platform, the atmosphere became electric, and the critics emphasized his refined touch, tone quality, and the complete absence of superficial gestures.

Grieg's compositions contributed very modestly to the development of piano technique. Most of his piano pieces are technically speaking within the abilities of competent amateurs. This, together with musical characteristics which seem to have a stimulating and refreshing effect, contributed to the fact that he was one of the most played, and respected composers in Europe, admired if not by the critics, then at least by the majority of those interested in music.

Grieg's compositions occurred simultaneously with the epoch of the piano. Music and piano playing in the average home were at a peak during the last half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of this century. Cyril Ehrlich has calculated that in 1910 alone, more than 600,000 pianos were produced. To know how to play the piano was part of general education in most middle class families, especially for girls. No wonder the music publishing house C. F. Peters "hoisted the flag" in London and Frankfurt every time Grieg delivered a manuscript for a new album of piano pieces. It is also understandable that Grieg sometimes experienced the demand for new piano pieces as a strain. There were also times when he felt that the production of piano pieces was a sort of bribe, or indulgence, to make sure that the publishing house issued his other works as well. In general, however, Grieg had an excellent relationship with his publisher in Leipzig. He was particularly close to Dr. Max Abraham (1831 - 1900), who was promoted to editor in 1863. This is clearly shown by the abundant correspondence that has

been preserved. *Verlagsbuchhandlung C. F. Peters Bureau de Musique*, was the full name of the publishing house that acted as Grieg's exclusive publisher from 1890, agreeing to pay him 4000 Marks every year, a sum which was adjusted to 6000 Marks in 1901. In return, Grieg was to offer Peters all his future compositions with rights for all countries, for a certain fee.

Grieg experienced a great deal of adversity during certain periods of his life, but he also had more success than most other composer colleagues of his time. Nevertheless, he never lost feelings of unrest at not having developed his talent to the full degree, or having left something undone, something unfulfilled inside. Throughout his whole life, Grieg was a restless soul. He never felt completely at peace anywhere. When he was in Bergen, he longed for Kristiania, and when he was there he longed for Copenhagen and the continent. When he was abroad, he longed to be back home, but no sooner had he arrived in Bergen before he felt oppressed and restless and wanted to go off again. There were perhaps only two places where he really felt at home and satisfied: one, on the concert-platform, the other, in the Norwegian mountains, especially Jotunheimen. When he encountered his audience, or the powerful and free nature of the western part of Norway, he felt whole and complete.

¹ "Ja, ja es ist, oder besser, es scheint sehr schön mit dieser Popularität, sie ist aber nicht billig. Mein Renommée als Künstler darunter und die Kritik wird gehässig. Glücklicher die Künstler, die nicht bei Lebzeiten die sogenannte Popularität erhalten. Ich kann doch dafür, daß meine Musik in hotellen dritten Ranges und von den Backfischen gespielt wird. Ich habe meine Musik deshalb doch eben so warm empfunden ohne an Publicum zu denken. Sei froh, Du, der Dich Niemand schutzig machte. Werden deine Werke gespielt, dann werden sie gut vorgeführt! Das ist ein grosser Vorzug. Möchte mir doch die bescheiden sein, wo ich weltvergessen für mich und meine Kunst leben könnte!" Letter to Julius Röntgen, London, 25. 5. 1906. Printed in: Julius Röntgen. Grieg. 's-Gravenhage: Kruseman, page 108

² "In meinen Op. 17 und 66 habe ich Volksweisen für Clavier gesetzt, in Op. 30 dergleichen für Männergesang frei bearbeitet. In drei oder vier meinen übrigen Werke habe ich es versucht, norw. Volksweisen motivisch zu verwenden. Da ich aber bis jetzt 70 veröffentlichte, darf ich wohl sagen, daß Nichts ungerechter ist als die Behauptung gewisser deutscher Kritiker, daß meine sogenannte Originalität sich auf die Verwendung des Volksliedes beschränkt(!). Daß der Geist des Vaterlandes, welcher in den Volksliedern von jeher einen Ausdruck fand, über mein gesamtes schaffen schwebt, ist etwas Anderes."

³ *A Ravel Reader. Correspondence, articles, interviews.* Compiled and edited by Arbie Orenstein. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pg 237; this story comes from: Lionel Carey. *Delius. The Paris Years*, pg.56; see also: Gille Gérard-Arlberg. "No 6 rue Vercingetorix". I: *Konstrevy*. 2 (1958), pg.65.

⁴ "Das Reich der Harmonien war immer meine Traumwelt und das Verhältnis meiner harmonischen Empfindungsweise zu der norwegischen Volksweise war mir selbst ein Mysterium. Ich habe gefunden, daß die dunkle Tiefe unserer Weisen in deren Reichtum an ungeahnten harmonischen Möglichkeiten ihren Grund hat" Letter to H. T. Finck 17. 7. 1900.

From Holberg's Time. Suite in the Olden Style, Op. 40, was written for the 200th Year Anniversary of Ludvig Holberg's birth. Ludvig Holberg (1684 - 1754) was born in Bergen, and became Professor in Metaphysics, Latin, Literature and History, at the University in Copenhagen. But he is most famous, both today and during Grieg's time, for writing Comedy, and he is recognized as one of the most important personalities in the Danish-Norwegian joint Literature. The Suite was finished in August 1884, and the 7th of December it was performed for the very first time in Bergen. Grieg chose the French baroque dance suite as the music base. But he has put his own personal stamp on the separate movements, so there isn't the slightest amount of doubt that this is Grieg, in French seventeenth century costume.

Six Norwegian Mountain Melodies, EG 108 A, is a revised adaptation of six of the arrangements in *Melodies of Norway, EG 108*. In 1874 Grieg was asked by the Danish music publisher, Edvard Wagner, to choose and arrange a selection of Norwegian songs and folk tunes. Grieg accepted, though according to himself, only because of the money, and insisted that his name should not be mentioned in connection with the edition. The collection, a total of 154 pieces, was published in 1875 under the title: *Melodies of Norway*, and is recorded as a whole in this series. Grieg, by the way, acknowledged some of the folk-tune-arrangements in this collection, and in 1886 he published six of those in a slightly revised version at Wilhelm Hansen's publishing house. The folk tunes are effectively arranged, but simpler than his other arrangements of Norwegian folk tunes.

Norwegian Folk Dance Music (Slåtter), Op. 72, contains Grieg's most radical attempt to transform folk dance music for the Hardanger fiddle into piano music. In the Foreword of the first edition which was published by Peters in 1903, Grieg wrote, among other things: "Those who have an Appreciation for this sound, will be entranced by their great Originality, their combination of light, airy, beautiful, enchanting refinements, and bold, audacious power and untamed melodic wildness, especially in the rhythmic. They bear the Mark of a Fantasy that is both daring and bizarre, Remnants from a Time, when the Norwegian Peasant Culture was isolated from the outside world in the remote mountain valleys, thereby

retaining their primitive origin. My Task of Transferring this to the Piano was an attempt to lift these folk tunes up to an artistic level through stylized Harmonics. It is in the nature of the matter, that the piano must disclaim much of the *appoggiatura*, which is an original characteristic of the Hardanger Fiddle, and the peculiarity of its bow strokes. On the other hand, the piano has the Advantage of avoiding Monotony, through dynamic, and rhythmic Manifold, and varying the Harmonics of the parts that Repeat themselves. I have attempted in general to create a structured form, with clear, easy to perceive, Lines." ⁵

It was the well known fiddle player, Knut Johannessen Dale, (1834 - 1921), from Tinn in Telemark, who in 1888, petitioned Grieg to consider the possibility of writing down some of these pieces of folk dance music (*slåtter*). Knut Dale himself had inherited many pieces (*slåtter*), from Myllarguten, Torgeir Augundsson, (1801 - 1872), and Haavard Giboen, (1809 - 1873), two of the most famous and creative musicians in Norway in the last century. Grieg had no doubts about the value of preserving this heritage, but for different reasons it was delayed until 1901, when Grieg's good friend and composer, Johan Halvorsen, (1864 - 1935), accepted the task of writing the notes down on music paper. Johan Halvorsen was an outstanding violinist - who had also learned to play the Hardanger Fiddle - and Knut Dale was very grateful, and full of praise, for the work Halvorsen had done.

Grieg started arranging the pieces (*slåttene*), for piano, with great enthusiasm, but at the same time felt himself resisting the work. In 1902 he wrote to Frants Beyer: "The last fourteen days I have been occupied with Knut Dale's, and Halvorsen's, Folk songs. It is very interesting, but extremely difficult work. Why? Because I have become much more critical in my criteria for a structured style, than I was before. The problems here are quite different than those we encountered with Lindeman's. The decision is actually as major as to what should be kept from the original violin notes of the nonmelodic lower voice."⁶

There were several features in these folk dances that presented problems: The ornamentation, tonality, rhythm, and the polyphony, and last but not least, the repetitive principle that the folk music form is built upon. If he were to get satisfactory piano music out of such material, he would have to radically change

a lot of Halvorsen's memoranda. He was very concerned about keeping a structured style, and well he was, for in the end, that's what made the difference. The folk dances are written and developed for an instrument, the Hardanger Fiddle; and for the most part, functional music to which one should dance. How could one play the same music at a concert where the audience was expected to sit quietly and listen, without the music becoming boring, without losing the soul and atmosphere that such music creates. When one considers the fact that Grieg lacked insight into the fiddle's technical properties, and the rhythmic intricacies, which characterize this folk dance music, the fantastic results he achieved are nothing less than amazing. As was usual with Grieg, when rewriting other's works, he didn't always entirely to the source. He used his poetic license to change the original a little if his artistic sense so dictated. He added preludes, interludes, and epilogues; he shortened, parted, and bended the material, so that the results would survive when transplanted.

Some of the folk dance songs are connected to legends or tales.⁷

Nr. 4, Haugelât-Dance of the Hill: "A Man called Brynjev Olson had lost an ox. He went to the Mountains for Several days to search for it and when he became exhausted and fell Asleep, he Dreamt that he heard a strange Song. Beyond and on a Hill he saw a lovely Girl who she said to him: When you come home to your wife and children, you will play this song on the violin: on the Mountain over yonder, was where I found the Steer that wandered."

Nr. 8, The Wedding March from Myllarguten; "According to an acquaintance, a Fiddle Player from Telemark, this March was composed by 'Myllarguten' when his girlfriend, Kari, betrayed him by marrying Another."

Nos. 16 and 17, The Maidens from Kivledal: "In Seljord, in Telemark, there is a little Valley called Kivledalen, and in the Olden Days there was a tiny little Church there. One Sunday, while the Parish was gathered for Mass, a piercing sound came ringing though the church from high up on the rocky slope above it. It was the Maidens from Kivledal', the last three heathens in the Valley, who herded their goats up there and were blowing a folk dance song on a buck horn (Trillarhorn). The commoners streamed out of the Church to listen to the gripping

tunes as though bewitched. The Priest followed after and shouted to the 'Maidens' to stop blowing the horn, and raising his Hand menacingly, he excommunicated them from the Church, in the name of God, and the Holy Father, the Pope. In the same instant, the Kivle Maidens, and the Entire Flock of Goats, turned to Stone. And till this day, one can still see them, high up, on the stony slope, with Horn to Mouth, and the Goats all around them. This is the *Kivle Maidens' Folk Dance, (Slåt)*, such as the peasants have preserved and still play it, on their Hardanger Fiddle. The following folk dance, (*Slåt*), nr. 17, is also from the same Legend. There are three such songs in all, and only the Fiddler who could play all three was worth his salt."

¹⁶ The foreword is also printed in English, German and French.

¹⁷ Letter to Frants Beyer 2. 9. 1902

¹⁸ One finds All of these stories and legends in print, in English, German and French.

Einar Steen-Nøkleberg

The Norwegian pianist Einar Steen-Nøkleberg, an early winner of the German High School Piano Competition. Other prizes include the Norwegian Piano Competition in 1972, and in 1975 the Norwegian Critics Prize for Best Performance, awarded after a performance of Grieg's Piano Concerto at the Bergen Festival. In 1976 he was honoured for the Norwegian recording of the Year for a recital of music by Norwegian Baroque composers. Other awards include the Grieg Prize in 1985 and in 1992. From 1975 to 1981 Einar Steen-Nøkleberg was professor of piano at the Hanover Musikhochschule and in recent years has enjoyed an international career, with recitals throughout Europe, in the United States of America and in the former Soviet Union. His performances of the piano music of Grieg are regarded as particularly authoritative.