

EDVARD HAGERUP GRIEG
A Brief Account of his Life
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Edvard Grieg (1843 - 1907) was the first Norwegian composer to achieve international stature. A consummate master of both melody and harmony, intimately familiar with the idiosyncrasies of Norwegian folk music, he created works that struck his hearers as fresh, charming, even exotic, music that was strangely and interestingly different from anything they had heard before.

The conditions in Norway at the time of Grieg's birth were not greatly conducive to the nurturing of a major composer. The country was very poor at that time, unable to provide much financial support for art and artists. Bergen, the city of Grieg's birth, did indeed have a small symphony orchestra, but its members were all amateurs for whom music was merely an avocation. Thus Grieg had no opportunity to hear first-rate performances of classical music during his formative years. His achievement is all the more remarkable when viewed against this background.

Childhood in Bergen

Grieg had the good fortune to have a mother who was by all accounts the best pianist in Bergen at that time. The daughter of moderately wealthy parents, as a young woman she had studied voice, piano and music theory in Hamburg and upon returning to Bergen had become a leading figure in local musical circles. She was the accompanist of choice when visiting artists performed in Bergen. Even as a young boy, therefore, Grieg had many opportunities to hear the piano music of the masters played exceedingly well.

In a brief autobiographical essay written in 1903 Grieg gives a touching account of a boyhood musical experience that affected him profoundly:

Why not begin by remembering the strangely mystical satisfaction of stretching my arms over the piano keyboard and bringing forth—not a melody. Far from it! No, it had to be a harmony. First a third, then a triad, then a seventh chord. And finally, both hands helping—O joy!—a ninth chord, with five tones. When I had discovered this, my rapture knew no bounds. That was a success! No later success has been able to enrapture me like this. At that time I was about five years old.

Edvard began taking lessons from his mother at the age of six. Despite his preference for "musical reveries" when he was supposed to be practicing, his mother (who gave him "stones for bread," as he later phrased it) required him to master the scales and arpeggios and fingering exercises required of all piano students. No doubt she also taught him some music theory along the way. Thus a firm foundation was laid for his future professional studies.

Study at the Leipzig Conservatory

In 1858 Grieg enrolled at the famous Leipzig Conservatory, where the aura of Bach, Mendelssohn and Schumann hovered like a ghostly presence over that famous "city of music." Though he later had mainly negative things to say about the training he received in Leipzig, the truth appears to be that in most respects it was just what he needed at this stage of his development. The Leipzig curriculum required that he study harmony, counterpoint, score reading and composition. After a slow start he made rapid progress as a conservatory student and earned the praise of his instructors.

Grieg also became a competent pianist during his conservatory years. He was especially taken with the works of Schumann and remained an admirer of the great German master the rest of his life. A few years later his A-minor *Piano Concerto* would be modelled after Schumann's concerto in the same key. He considered himself fortunate to have as his principal piano teacher Ernst Ferdinand Wenzel, who had been a close friend of Robert Schumann.

In Leipzig Grieg also had an opportunity to hear world-class performances of symphonic, chamber and opera music as well as performances by some of the leading instrumental and vocal artists of the day, and he took liberal advantage of that opportunity. The famous Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra showed him what a truly outstanding orchestra should sound like and helped to shape the ideals that he would later bring to his work as a conductor.

Grieg's graduation from the conservatory was delayed for a year by a serious lung ailment that required him to interrupt his studies for a time. He had composed several piano pieces during his years at the Conservatory, however, and he played some of these at his senior recital. The piano would remain at the center of his work as a composer for the rest of his life.

The Copenhagen Years

In 1863, after a period of indecision about what to do next, Grieg went to Copenhagen hoping to find inspiration in the rich music life of that city. There he made the acquaintance of Danish composers J. P. E. Hartmann and Nils Gade, the latter of whom served as a mentor for a time. At Gade's urging he wrote a symphony that, for reasons known only to himself, he insisted must never be performed. Despite that proscription, however, the symphony has been performed many times in recent years and is generally regarded as a competent early work.

It was also in Copenhagen that Grieg met Rikard Nordraak—a young firebrand of a composer, Norwegian to the core, whose best-known composition is "Ja vi elsker dette landet" ("Yes, we love this land"), the song that later became the Norwegian national anthem. Tragically, Nordraak died of tuberculosis at the age of 27, but he is revered in Norway not least as the man whose words and example somehow inspired Grieg to tap into his own creative resources. In later years Grieg often acknowledged Nordraak's important role in helping him find his voice as a composer.

Another important influence on Grieg during these years was the Norwegian virtuoso violinist Ole Bull, who deepened his younger colleague's appreciation of Norwegian folk music. Grieg had, of course, heard Norwegian folk songs from time to time during his boyhood years but had never thought of them as having any relation to art music. During a visit to Norway in the summer of 1864, Grieg spent several days with Bull at his home in Valestrand (near Bergen). Bull played many of the lively folk dance tunes for Grieg, introduced him to several local fiddlers, and encouraged him to use such tunes as inspiration for his own compositions. Many years later Grieg reported, "It was Ole Bull who first awakened in me the resolution to compose characteristically Norwegian music. . . He was my rescuer. He opened my eyes to the beauty and originality in Norwegian music. Through him I became acquainted with many forgotten folk songs, and above all with my own nature."

It was in Denmark that Grieg began to write the kind of music that most music-lovers associate with his name. It was there, during the years 1864-65, that he wrote "Jeg elsker deg" ("I Love But Thee," one of four songs to texts by Hans Christian Andersen published in 1864 as Op. 5), *Humoresques*, Op. 6, *Piano Sonata in E Minor*, Op. 7, and *Violin Sonata in F major*, Op. 8. Just a few years later—during the summer of 1868—Grieg would return to Copenhagen to write his famous *Piano Concerto in A Minor*, Op. 16.

It was also in Copenhagen that Grieg began composing his so-called Lyric Pieces. The first of ten volumes of these delightful pieces for piano was published in 1867 (Op. 12), the last in 1901 (Op. 71). Collectively they provide an interesting account of Grieg's journey as a composer during the intervening years.

Difficult Years in Christiania (Oslo)

In October of 1866 Grieg moved to Christiania, which was to be his home for over a decade. He earned a scant living there primarily by giving piano lessons. He supplemented this meagre source of income conducting concerts by the local Philharmonic Orchestra. When that ensemble disbanded he enlisted the help of some of the local cultural leaders in establishing a "Music Association"—modeled, presumably, after the Music Society "Harmonien" in Bergen—with its own symphony orchestra. Having heard some of the great orchestras on the continent, however, Grieg was extremely disappointed in the quality of this orchestra and incurred the hostility of its members by telling them what he thought of their playing. He often complained in letters to friends about the deplorable state of music in Norway's capital city and about the hostility of the local press toward him and toward every effort he made to improve it. In Christiania he was regarded as an outsider, a cocky young man from Bergen who didn't really belong there.

Despite these counter-currents, Grieg doggedly persisted in his efforts to raise the musical standards of the city in which he had chosen to work. In 1867, in collaboration with fellow musician Otto Winter-Hjelm, he established a Music Academy modeled after the Leipzig

Conservatory. He and Winter-Hjelm were the only teachers, however, and the Academy ceased operation after just two seasons.

One happy exception to the dismal circumstances of his life in Christiania was his marriage to his first cousin, Nina Hagerup, on June 11, 1867. He also experienced the joy of fatherhood upon the birth of his daughter Alexandra in April of 1868. Sadly, Alexandra died the following year and the couple never had another child.

Grieg sought refuge from his tribulations in Christiania by taking trips abroad whenever possible. He spent the summer of 1868 in Copenhagen, which remained his "cultural home town" for the rest of his life. He also made professional trips to Leipzig, Rome and Bayreuth and trips to visit his family in Bergen. On a four-month trip to Rome in 1869-70 he was thrilled to meet Franz Liszt, who did not hesitate to sight read the entire score of Grieg's *Piano Concerto*. Grieg was greatly encouraged when, upon completing it, Liszt said to him, "Hold to your course You have the talent for it, and—don't get scared off!"

It was also during the Christiania years that Grieg first made the acquaintance of two great Norwegian men of letters: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Henrik Ibsen. Many of Grieg's best-known compositions were inspired by the writings of these two authors.

Grieg realized, however, that he could not thrive in the depressing atmosphere that surrounded him in Christiania, and in June of 1877 he left for good. He would return there to give concerts from time to time but would never again live in the capital city.

A Peripatetic Life

During the years 1877-85 Grieg lived a peripatetic life, rarely staying in the same place for more than a few months.

He first went to Hardanger, a region in western Norway that features some of the most beautiful landscape in the world: a deep fjord that juts over a hundred miles into the mainland, lofty glacier-topped mountains, charming valleys and a wild variety of flora and fauna. The Griegs lived in Hardanger for over a year on this first visit, but they returned there for two months-long visits later.

In September 1878 Grieg began a six-month visit to Germany, then spent a month in Copenhagen before returning to Hardanger for four months. October and November of 1879 found him back in Germany, then it was back to Copenhagen (December 1879 to February 1880), Christiania (March-April), and once again Hardanger (April-September).

In 1880 Grieg was appointed conductor of the Bergen Music Society Orchestra ("Harmonien"), a position that he would hold for two years. Like the orchestras he had conducted in Christiania, however, the musicians were amateurs and Grieg was rarely pleased with their performance. After two difficult and often contentious years he was glad to end this chapter of his life.

In July 1883 Grieg went to Germany (without Nina, from whom he was estranged at this time) to prepare for a long concert tour in the course of which he gave a total of sixteen concerts in Germany and Holland. The Griegs reconciled in January 1884 and spent four months together in Rome, then returned to Hardanger for the summer.

Troldhaugen

On March 1, 1884, Grieg wrote to his friend Frants Beyer, "I am tired of the sort of home that is intended to last just a year or two and then be broken up. Admittedly, traveling still has its attractions, but not a vagrant existence as such. And as for setting up a permanent home outside of Norway, I don't think I could stand that for long. I would be consumed with longing."

The concrete result of Grieg's desire for a permanent home in Norway was a stately villa on the outskirts of Bergen to which he gave the name "Troldhaugen." He and Nina spent the winter of 1884–85 in Bergen in order to monitor the construction of their future home. Though Grieg would still make many concert tours abroad—to Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland and Czechoslovakia—and would often spend the winter months in Copenhagen, Troldhaugen remained his principal home for the rest of his life. After his death it became the property of the city of Bergen and is now visited by thousands of tourists every year.

Grieg enjoyed being lord of the manor and often invited fellow musicians and other friends from abroad to visit him at Troldhaugen. Among his distinguished visitors were Dutch composer Julius Röntgen, Hungarian composer Béla Bartók and Australian-American composer and pianist Percy Grainger. In a letter dated April 1, 1896, he also invited Johannes Brahms to visit him at Troldhaugen, promising to show him "the secret place where the treasure—your fifth Symphony—lies hidden!" Brahms replied, "Your tempting description makes me look with genuine longing toward your beautiful homeland," but the visit never occurred.

Concertizing and Composing

Though Troldhaugen was a great source of joy to Edvard and Nina, its construction and maintenance also created a heavy financial burden. Grieg had just two sources of income at this time: fees received from his publisher for new compositions and honoraria for giving public concerts. (Composers did not receive royalties on compositions at this time. They received a one-time payment from the publisher upon acceptance of a new work for publication. The size of the payment depended to some extent on the reputation of the composer and the publisher's estimate of the number of copies likely to sell, but if a composition became highly successful that success did not translate into increased compensation for the composer.) The financial burden weighed heavily on Grieg and required him to give many more concerts than he really wanted to. In a letter dated February 12, 1886, to his German publisher Max Abraham, he wrote: "Believe me, to be obliged to give concerts in order to exist when one isn't well—

that's not an especially pleasant life. You will no doubt reply that I don't really have to give concerts unless I want to, because I can take care of myself best by writing music. But a person can't compose all the time—I can't, in any case!"

The result was that Grieg maintained a heavy schedule of public concerts for the rest of his life. We know from public records that Grieg gave no less than 164 public concerts during the years 1886–1907. The peak year for concertizing was 1889, when he gave a total of 20 concerts in Germany, England, Denmark, Belgium and Paris. His last public concert was in Kiel, Germany, on April 26, 1907.

There is an inverse relationship between the number of concerts given by Grieg year by year and his productivity as a composer. In 1889, for example, his output consisted of only a few songs. In 1897, when he gave a total of 17 concerts in Austria, The Netherlands and England, his only known composition was his arrangements of the 19 Norwegian folk songs in Op. 66. By contrast, in 1895—when he wrote the *Haugtussa* songs of Op. 67 and EG 152 as well as Vol. VII of his *Lyric Pieces* (Op. 62), *Six Songs with Orchestra* (EG 177) and several other works, he gave just three public concerts. Lovers of Grieg's music cannot help but wish he had spent less time giving concerts and more time composing.

Illness Takes its Toll

Grieg never was a man of robust health. The illness during his Conservatory years referred to earlier left him with just one functioning lung, as a result of which he experienced shortness of breath whenever he engaged in even moderately strenuous activity. He loved excursions to the beautiful mountains of Western Norway, for example, but he often went by horseback for at least a portion of the trip because mountain climbing was too strenuous for him. Even conducting a concert often left him bathed in sweat and gasping for breath.

Despite this difficulty, Grieg often went to the mountains to find inspiration for his work as a composer. He often mentions these visits in his letters and gives eloquent descriptions of the beauty that he experienced and of the power of the mountains to rejuvenate his spirits. After one such visit in 1891, for example, he wrote to Max Abraham, "I am like a new and better man . . . yes, ten years younger."

As Grieg aged, however, his pulmonary deficiency became more and more pronounced. In May of 1893 he had planned to give some concerts in London and then to go on to Cambridge to receive an honorary doctorate, but he had to cancel the trip because of illness. In June he wrote despairingly from a health spa in Christiania to his friend Frants Beyer, "I'm going to turn fifty up here. . . I think some miracle or other has got to occur during these fourteen days. The weather here is as beautiful as can be, and if my health doesn't improve here then it's never going to improve." Similar comments about his declining health are sprinkled throughout his letters during the last twenty years or so of his life.

Grieg kept a diary during the last two years of his life, giving us a vivid account of the pain and hallucinations that were his daily companions as his life ebbed out. Typical of these passages are entries such as the following:

June 5, 1906: "Another bad night with difficulty in breathing. . . If the doctors really think this is going to end in death, then they can just tell me that. But here I go around thinking that it is just my bad luck that I can't find the right man to help me, and this depresses me, angers me, and makes me sicker than necessary."

February 18, 1907: "Sleepless night. Difficulty in breathing. Good Lord, what is going to come of it? I certainly can't give concerts abroad feeling like this. I hope a change of climate will help."

August 31, 1907: "Today, the 31st, I am not good for anything, as Isopral didn't help at all, so I lay awake virtually the entire time. The whole situation is most depressing. Nonetheless, we ought to prepare for the trip overland [to Christiania] on the 3rd. I've got to get away from this climate, though the trip to England at this time appears to me more than doubtful."

The "trip to England" to which Grieg alludes in this, his last diary entry, was to be for the purpose of participating in a music festival in Leeds in which he was to conduct a performance of his *Piano Concerto in A Minor* with his esteemed friend Percy Grainger as soloist. He started out on the trip but was not able to complete it. He was hospitalized in Bergen, and during the wee hours of the morning of September 5 he died. The music performed at his funeral included orchestral versions of his beautiful "Last Spring" and his youthful "Funeral March for Rikard Nordraak."

Grieg's friend Frants Beyer made the necessary arrangements for his ashes to be placed in a grotto in the cliff on the grounds of his beloved Trolldhaugen. After this had been accomplished, Beyer wrote to Nina in a letter dated April 7, 1908:

"Now Edvard's ashes have come to their final resting place. . . I placed the urn in the grotto, and then the stone was placed in front of it. A blackbird was singing in the spruce trees overhead. The sun was setting behind gold-rimmed clouds, casting its last beams across the water and upon Edvard's name."