

GRIEG PIANO CONCERTO CONNECTIONS

This paper is a more detailed account of a paper written for the occasion of performances of Grieg's Piano Concerto in A Minor with pianist Leif Ove Andsnes and Ricardo Muti conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at Symphony Hall in Chicago on September 19 and 20, 2019.

By Sylvia Reynolds Eckes

When one of the world's greatest pianists, performs the Grieg Piano Concerto with one of the world's finest conductors and orchestras of our time, it is cause for celebration. The Norwegian pianist, Leif Ove Andsnes, joined the stage with Maestro Ricardo Muti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for their season opener on September 19, 2019. It was also an occasion to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the premiere of Grieg's piano concerto.

One hundred and fifty years is a long time in the life of a beloved concerto that has never ceased to elicit enthusiastic and often overwhelming responses from the public as well as rave reviews from critics around the world.

Homage is paid here to the pianists who first introduced the concerto in Scandinavia, England, and America. Although they did not reach the stature of the most illustrious pianists of that era, these pianists were by all accounts excellent musicians who had brilliant careers in Europe. Their performances received decisive critical acclaim and Grieg's piano concerto quickly became well-known through their performances.

Grieg had spent a great amount of time in Denmark during his younger years before taking up residence in Christiania (Oslo) in 1866 where he earned a living by teaching and forming a new orchestra. In the summer of 1868, the 25-year old Edvard went to Denmark. With the help of three good friends, he settled for the summer in Søllerød, Denmark, about 10 miles north of Copenhagen, where he had peaceful and uninterrupted time to begin work on his piano concerto. Emil Horneman, a Danish composer and a friend from student days in Leipzig, and Edmund Neupert, a Norwegian who was considered the finest pianist in Scandinavia at the time, were at Søllerød that summer. With their gentle encouragement and artistic suggestions, Grieg finished the piano part of his concerto by the time he needed to return to Christiania. He and his friends had hoped the premiere of the concerto would occur around Christmas, but Grieg's day-to-day duties delayed the completion of the orchestration.

A few months later, the premiere was set with Neupert as soloist and Holger Simon Paulii, the conductor of the Royal Theater. The magnificent Casino Concert Hall in Copenhagen was the location. There was great anticipation and even pageantry the evening of April 3, 1869. Notables such as Queen Louise of Denmark and many highly respected musicians, including Anton Rubinstein who was in town, took their seats. The great Russian pianist, Rubinstein, was on tour with his own piano which he graciously lent to Neupert for the occasion. Rumors of the rehearsals had created an air of tremendous expectation. There were even extra rehearsals to

ensure a solid collaboration. The performance was an overwhelming success. The audience was wildly enthusiastic about the concerto and a storm of applause erupted during the performance several times. It occurred not only between movements but also after the cadenza in the first movement.

Grieg was not able to attend the premiere but in just a few days after the premiere, he received many letters. It was perhaps Neupert's letter, dated April 6, 1869, that was the most welcome. He wrote, "On Saturday your divine concerto resounded throughout the Casino's large auditorium. The triumph that I achieved was really tremendous. Already at the conclusion of the cadenza in the first part the audience broke out in a true storm. The three dangerous critics, Gade, Rubinstien, and Hartmann sat up in the loge and applauded with all their might. I am supposed to greet you from Rubinstein and tell you that he is really surprised to have heard such a brilliant composition; he looks forward to making your acquaintance. He spoke very warmly about my piano playing. I had at least two curtain calls and at the end I got a big fanfare from the orchestra.....Gade thought very well of the first and second movements, less about the third. He spoke with genuine warmth, however. Old Hartmann was ecstatic. Feddersen, who sat in the balcony, cried the whole evening...."

Four months later Neupert performed the concerto with the Christiania Theatre Orchestra in Norway. The atmosphere was much different. It was summer and there was only a small audience. The local paper, *Aftenbladet*, gave a short mention of "Grieg's new original and inspired composition." Grieg was in Bergen at the time and thus, did not hear this premiere either.

The following year, Grieg travelled with a new copy of his concerto to Rome at the invitation of Franz Liszt. The following letter to his parents describes the meeting with Liszt where the great pianist and composer sat down and read at sight the entire concerto. Grieg wrote, "And in view of what he now achieved, I must say that it would be impossible to imagine anything of the kind that would be more sublime. Oh yes, he played the first movement somewhat rapidly and the result was that the opening passage sounded rather slapdash, but later on, when I had an opportunity to indicate the tempo, he played as he alone and no one else can. In the Adagio and to a greater extent in the Finale, he reached a peak both in execution and in the praise he gave." Liszt's praise of the concerto had great influence on the European music world and hastened its fame. It was published by 1872.

Grieg never made it to America during his lifetime but his concerto sailed across the Atlantic within a year or two after it was published. On February 23, 1874, there was a review in the *Baltimore Sun* about its premiere at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. Bernhard Courländer, a pianist originally from Copenhagen, was the soloist. He had settled in Baltimore in the 1850s after a brilliant concert career in Europe and touring other parts of the world. He was head of the piano department at Peabody when he performed the new concerto, and subsequently gave numerous performances of the concerto at Peabody, where he taught until his death in 1898.

The premiere at Peabody went apparently undetected in other newspapers. There appears to be no mention of it in the *Chicago Tribune*, which was known for publishing the most comprehensive information on music events in Europe and in America at that time.

The Baltimore performance preceded a London performance by about two months. Billed as the London premiere of the concerto, the concert took place at the Crystal Palace with the superb pianist, Edward Dannreuther, a German pianist who had moved to England. Dannreuther had been a friend of Grieg's during their student years at the Leipzig Conservatory and on Grieg's later visits to London, they often got together. Dannreuther was probably one of the pianists who saw the newly published manuscript of the concerto that had been brought from Denmark by the Hartvigson brothers, both fine pianists and champions of new music. They were admirers of Grieg and helped circulate the concerto. The *London Examiner* mentioned the performer and the concerto in a review on April 25, 1874: "With such men as Grieg and Svendsen in their midst, northern musicians may look forward to a bright future. To Mr. Dannreuther our warmest thanks are due for the introduction of this interesting novelty, which he interpreted with his usual skill and spirit; we particularly admired the infinite tenderness of his touch in the Adagio."

Within three weeks the *Chicago Tribune* picked up the reviews from London newspapers of the premiere and wrote, "The concerto is perhaps the best, and is certainly the most important, of Grieg's productions; in most of which there is a strong individuality and a distinct northern tone, which possesses much charm when contrasted with the imitative conventionalism that characterize so much of the music of the day. Of the work now particularly referred to, we shall doubtless have a future opportunity of speaking more in detail, as the marked impression which it made on Saturday (when it was admirably performed by Mr. Dannreuther) should lead to its repetition at some of our metropolitan concerts."

Several months after the Baltimore performance and the London performance, a brilliant Hungarian pianist, Frederic Boscovitz, premiered the concerto in Boston. The conductor Theodore Thomas engaged Mr. Boscovitz to play it with his highly regarded Theodore Thomas Orchestra on October 28, 1874. Boscovitz was actually a substitute for a pianist who had to cancel due to illness. It is remarkable that he performed a new work with on such short notice.

It is not clear how Boscovitz had obtained the manuscript or knew about it, but he may have brought it from London where he was before his arrival in Boston in 1873. He had an exhausting touring schedule in Europe for many years and was in London just before his departure in 1872 to Canada and America. He was quickly welcomed in Boston in 1873 and was hired to head the piano department at the new Boston Conservatory.

In less than three weeks, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on October 11, 1874: "Mr. Frederick Boscovitz has been engaged by Theodore Thomas for his symphony concerts, to introduce a new concerto by Grieg, the Norwegian composer for piano and orchestra. Mr. Boscovitz will also play with Mr. Thomas at one of the Brooklyn Philharmonic concerts." It is apparent that both the

Boston Globe and the *Chicago Tribune* were unaware of the premiere that had occurred at Peabody earlier that year.

The concerto was a huge success and within weeks was performed in several cities. In spite of the overwhelming response from audiences and critics and the extensive press coverage in the *Chicago Tribune*, the concerto was not performed in Chicago until several years later, when Mr. Boscovitz, who has just spent a couple of years in several parts of the country, including the San Francisco area, moved to Chicago. He was hired to teach at the Hershey School of Music Arts and the Park Institute. He was to appear in a recital in November. Boscovitz had been known through newspaper articles for his numerous concert engagements with the Theodore Thomas Orchestra and for his historical pianoforte recitals, so his name was not completely new to the Chicago musical circles.

The *Tribune* wrote on September 5, 1880 that Boscovitz was staying at the Palmer House and would shortly appear before the Chicago public in a piano recital. He gave a very successful debut recital within a few weeks at Hershey Hall, and after that performance, he established a series.

On November 11, 1880, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that, "Mr. Frederic Boscovitz, the pianist, will give the first piano recital of his series this evening. Among other works he will play the magnificent concerto in A minor by Edvard Grieg, with the orchestral accompaniment upon a second piano by Mr. H. Clarence Eddy. This splendid work, though often given in Europe, has never been played in Chicago hitherto....the concert was to take place in Hershey Hall but it is under renovations so it will take place in the First Methodist Church, corner of Clark and Washington Streets. Boscovitz performed the concerto again on March 26, 1882 at Turner Hall in Chicago. There were subsequent performances of the concerto in Chicago with Boscovitz and other pianists during that era.

The Norwegian pianist, Edmund Neupert, had arrived in America in 1882 and settled in New York. Since the premiere of the concerto in Copenhagen in 1869, Neupert's concert career had taken him to several European cities and to Moscow where the Rubinstein brothers had invited him to teach at their newly founded Moscow Imperial Conservatory. In America, he was well-received and known as a first-rate pianist. Within months of his arrival, the *Boston Globe* wrote, "Edmund Neupert, the eminent Norwegian pianist and composer, makes his first appearance in Boston at Horticultural Hall Tuesday evening next, on which occasion he will play much of his own music. He also appears at the same place Friday evening. The fame which Mr. Neupert has attained will make his appearance here the focus of much curiosity and interest. The programme for the first concert, made up largely of Norwegian music, is as follows: Grieg. Concert(o)....." He performed recitals and the piano concerto in various other cities, including Baltimore at Peabody Conservatory. Thus, the three distinguished pianists, Courländer, Boscovitz, and Neupert who immigrated to America and who introduced the Grieg Piano Concerto had performed the concerto at Peabody within eleven years of its publication.

Neupert arrived in Chicago where he gave two concerts in December 1883. The first one was in the cavernous Central Hall and the other the following day at the intimate Weber Hall. Reviews from both of these performances spoke to the breadth of Neupert's abilities, from the powerful and brilliant to the poetic and subtle, especially remarking about his beautiful tone. The Weber Hall performance included the Grieg Piano Concerto with the orchestra part on the 2nd piano. Neupert had gained the respect and admiration of the most critical of pianists at these concerts, and the Grieg Piano Concerto was once again brought to the Chicago audiences.

Neupert made his home in New York where gave piano lessons to pianists at all levels of advancement at his own "Piano College" on East 72nd Street. He was scheduled to perform the Grieg Piano Concerto at one of the festival concerts of the Music Teachers National Association, but he died just before the event in 1888 at age 46 at his home in New York City. The obituary in the *Chicago Tribune* noted that, "the musical world has lost a noble nature, a truly great and unassuming artist, a personality whose absence will long be felt."

The finale connection to the introduction of the piano concerto in America during the era was with the most celebrated conductor in America. Since the Boston premiere in 1874, when Theodore Thomas engaged Mr. Boscovitz with his orchestra, Thomas had an exhausting schedule of performances throughout the country. His great ambition and tireless determination to maintain the highest standards in orchestral performances landed him the position of music director of the New York Philharmonic in the 1880s. Neither the New York Philharmonic nor his own orchestra had a hall that they could claim as their home, and thus, Thomas continually struggled to find venues for rehearsals and performances. Charles Norman Fay, a Chicago businessman who was an admirer of Thomas, promised him a permanent orchestra in Chicago if he would settle there. He accepted and it proved to be a good move for Mr. Thomas on various fronts. Thomas' first wife had died a year before he came to Chicago. When he arrived in Chicago, he married one of Charles' sisters, Rose, who was involved in the cultural life of the city and was a great support to him.

Thomas came to Chicago in 1890 and became the founder and conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a post he held until he died in January 1905. He was responsible for the planning and completion of a new hall for the orchestra, which is its present one, now called the Chicago Symphony Hall. In preparation for the opening concert of the hall, he became ill from overwork in rehearsals, and passed away of pneumonia within weeks. Chicago felt the profound loss of this music icon who had made its orchestra a first-rate one. He was known for singlehandedly raising the level of musical understanding of audiences across the nation.

Edvard Grieg never made it to America during his lifetime, but he was well aware of the warm and gracious reception of the Americans for his concerto and other works. Much of the credit goes to these four extraordinary musicians; Neupert, Courländer, Boscovitz, and Thomas, who introduced Grieg's concerto to the public early in Grieg's career and thus established his name among the great composers whose music was performed regularly during that period of time in America.

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