

Why Grieg? A Singer's View

With so many wonderful vocal composers to choose from, why should a singer look at Grieg, a composer from a small country, setting minority languages? I would like to suggest some reasons for adding to your repertoire at least a few songs by this small man (literally small – he was only just over five feet tall) from a country on the northern fringes of Europe. If nothing else the songs are a significant part of his output, for if we exclude his folksong arrangements, Grieg wrote more vocal music (solo and choral) than piano and chamber works together, yet this is still little known outside Scandinavia.

The style of song Grieg composed, the Scandinavian *romanse*, is quite different from the German Lied. It is characterised by an unsophisticated vocal line and a largely supportive accompaniment, and therefore depends very much on the performers to bring out the nuances of the words in its (usually) strophic form. Grieg loved words and wrote articles and speeches, as well as many hundreds of letters and, as he himself put it in a long letter to his American biographer, Henry T. Finck, “For me, it is important when I compose songs, not first and foremost to make music, but above all to give expression to the poet’s innermost intentions.”

Henrik Ibsen’s concept “the claim of the ideal”, by which he meant truth before beauty, is interpreted by Grieg as the truth of communication though accurate declamation of the words he set, above sheer beauty of voice. Thus in Grieg’s songs one will rarely find melismatic treatment, but almost always a syllabic setting, and he decried singers who, rather than conveying the text to the audience, only wanted to show off their voices.

To Henry Finck, Grieg also wrote, “My choice of poet is always connected with what I have experienced”, and because he wrote songs throughout his life, it is possible to follow that life – professional and personal – through the poems he chose to set. Married to a singer, Grieg’s songs must always be associated with Nina, even when not specifically written for her to sing, and in the periods when the relationship between them was strained – once or twice almost to breaking point – Grieg composed no songs.

Against the background of European art-song, how much was Grieg a product of what had gone before and how much an original? Having studied for four years in Leipzig and with Robert Schumann as his idol, Grieg was very well aware of the German Lieder tradition. After its first

major flowering in the songs of Schubert and then Schumann, Lieder began to develop in two fairly distinct directions: the purely musical one, with Brahms, Richard Strauss and the like, and more poetic one of Hugo Wolf. It is this latter direction to which Grieg belongs, a composer who was very much reliant on the quality of the words he set to produce a really good song, and one who was also perceptive enough to see right into the heart of those texts.

It was a happy accident that Grieg's life coincided with a Golden Age of Scandinavian literature, and he set several of the greatest, notably Hans Christian Andersen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Henrik Ibsen, and the dialect writers Aasmund Olafsson Vinje and Arne Garborg. Naturally, after his training at the Leipzig Conservatory, Grieg's first songs were to German texts: Geibel, Chamisso, Uhland, Heine and Goethe amongst others. The first Scandinavian influence came from Danish poetry; again not surprising, as in April 1863, a year after leaving Leipzig, Grieg went to live in Copenhagen, at that time the cultural capital of Scandinavia. His first notable Danish settings are of four poems from a collection by H.C.Andersen called "Melodies of the Heart". The third of these was to become one of Grieg's best known songs, *Jeg elsker Dig* (I love you), and it is hard to believe now that the composer himself had to pay for their publication.

After their marriage in June 1867, Grieg and Nina moved to Christiania, as the Norwegian capital was still called, where Edvard set up as a piano teacher and conductor. However, his earnings were not large and he was disappointed at the poor standard of the orchestra. Nevertheless these mid-1860s saw the birth of the world-famous Piano Concerto, the piano Sonata and the first two Violin Sonatas, and the first volume of *Lyric Pieces*, as well as more Danish songs and pieces for male-voice choir.

In April 1868, Nina gave birth to a daughter, Alexandra, and Grieg made his first setting of a poem by Ibsen: *Margretes Vuggesang* (Margaret's Cradle Song) from the play "The Pretenders", later to be published as the first of the op.15 album. Tragically, little more than a year later, while the Grieg's were staying with Edvard's parents near Bergen, Alexandra died of meningitis. A sad milestone, marked by one of Grieg's first settings of dialect poetry: *Millom rosor* (Amid Roses) to a verse by Kristofer Janson, written after the death of his only child.

During this otherwise disastrous summer, Grieg came across L.M.Lindeman's collection of Norwegian *Fjeldmelodier* (Mountain Melodies) and began to realise the enormous wealth and scope of Norway's folk music. Although he never used a folksong, except in his acknowledged transcriptions and arrangements, Grieg derived inspiration from what he described to Henry Finck

as its “unsuspected harmonic possibilities” and “dark depths”. In particular he was to make use of the sharpened fourth and flattened seventh in a diatonic scale, in imitation of the ancient *lur*; an imaginative use of pedal notes (not restricted to the tonic fifth) suggested by the drone strings of the Hardanger fiddle; and chromatic progressions in the harmony.

While living in Christiania, Grieg met the writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and they became good friends. At the time, Bjørnson was much more famous than Ibsen and regarded as something of a hero for his nationalism and oratory. Grieg’s settings of four songs from Bjørnson’s novel *Fiskerjenten* (The Fisher-Girl) were published in 1873 and are amongst his best and happiest songs.

The friendship was tested a few years later, when, due to Bjørnson’s long delays in producing the libretto for their projected opera, *Olav Trygvason*, Grieg accepted the commission to write incidental music to Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*. Bjørnson thought Grieg was writing an opera with Ibsen and was extremely offended. The *Peer Gynt* music – far more than is contained in the two well-known Suites, of course, and nearly enough for an opera – made Grieg a household name almost worldwide. His grasp of the dramatic possibilities of stage music make it even more sad that a real opera was never to materialise.

However, during what he later called the “dark and melancholy” winter of 1875-76 when he lost both his parents and there were problems within his marriage, it was Ibsen’s concise, almost taciturn verse that inspired Grieg. There is a Norwegian legend that tells of a musician being taught wonderful powers of expression by a water-sprite, only to find himself having to pay with his own happiness – the subject of Ibsen’s *Spillemand* (Minstrels), set by Grieg as the first of the op.25 album. At this time he was very aware of the counter-demands of career and marriage, and obviously saw himself in the same predicament. *En svane* (A Swan), the well known second song of the set, tells of the swan who can only sing as he is dying, a not dissimilar sentiment.

Den Bergtekne (The Mountain Thrall), a setting of some Old Norse verses made in the winter of 1877-78, also echoed Grieg’s frustrations at this time. It tells of a young man who is lured from the forest path by the daughters of the *jotul*, a mountain giant, and who cannot find his way home, and perhaps Grieg shared his desperate cry towards the end: “*alla så heve dei makamann, men ingin så heve eg!*” – “Everything has its mate, but I have no-one!”.

The next great song album, op.33, published in 1881, comprised settings of poems by Aasmund Olafsson Vinje, a poet writing mostly in *landsmål*. *Landsmål*, literally “country language”, was a

literary language based on the dialects of western Norway, which its exponents felt was closer to a true Norwegian than the Dano-Norwegian *bokmål* or *riksmål* (“book” or “state” language) used by Bjørnson and Ibsen. Grieg, who was also striving for a Norwegian “voice”, had a particular empathy with the language and its advocates. The second of the Vinje settings is the immortal *Våren* (The Spring), which has one of his most glorious melodies. The key of F# major, the tessitura of the piano accompaniment (particularly in the middle of the stanza) and the somewhat sparse chords immediately conjure up the high mountains and clear air, all the beauty of the Norwegian landscape of which both poet and composer were so fond.

Grieg’s middle life was one of travelling and only in 1885 at the age of 42 did he achieve his ambition of a permanent home: the villa “Troidhaugen” (Troll Hill), on a headland south of Bergen. He told his Dutch friend Julius Röntgen that he had written an album of songs (op.39), which he hoped would pay for the windows in the basement! He was frequently the soloist in his own Piano Concerto at home and abroad, and although he later found the demands of that too great, he continued to play as partner in his chamber music, as accompanist to Nina, and to conduct.

The travels sometimes interfered with his composing, at other times gave him new energy. His health also prevented him from spending many winters in Norway, and the warmer climes of southern France and of Italy were very attractive. Nowadays, with the ease of air travel instead of his dreaded sea crossings, I am sure he would have loved Florida!

The late 1880s saw another volume of German settings, op.48, and several settings of the Danish poet Holger Drachmann. One of these is of particular interest, illustrating as it does what John Horton called “the subtle and far-reaching cross influences” between Grieg and contemporary French composers. Like Debussy in several of his *Préludes*, Grieg sometimes uses the sustaining pedal to “blur” tonality and to create more complex harmonies. At other times the effects are made by what he does not write as well as by the notes. In *Foraarsregn* (Spring Rain, op.49, no.6), written in 1887, the rests and silences are as important as the blurred harmonies and shifting keys, while the accompaniment figure seems to have been inspired by the “cascade of pearly notes” referred to in the second stanza.

As here, it is often the accompaniments of Grieg’s songs that contain the most interest, conveying not only the mood of the poem, but also underlining and adding to the word-setting with subtle variations of harmony, and the use of dissonance or chromatic movement. Chromaticism may be used to express playfulness, as in, for example, *Med en Primula veris* (With a Primrose) from

op.26; nostalgia, as in the little counter-melody in *Ved Rundarne* (At Rundarne), the ninth of the Vinje album op.33; or deep sorrow as in the middle section of *Zur Rosenzeit* (At Rose-Time), from op.48. In the second song of the *Haugtussa* song-cycle, the strangeness of the heroine, *Veslemøy*, is felt not in the simple vocal melody, but in the chromatic movement of the accompaniment and subtle dissonances that underline words such as “myrk” (dark) or her eyes “djupe og grå” (deep and grey).

If *Foraarsregn* was an example of Grieg’s Impressionism, it becomes even more evident in the fourth of the five settings of Vilhelm Krag, published in 1894 as op.60. This is *Der skreg en fugl* (A bird cried). The opening accompaniment figure is based on a theme from one of Grieg’s notebooks, described as “a seagull’s cry heard in the Hardanger fjord” and harmonised by a single sustained tonic chord.

In 1895 Grieg came across a verse-novel by another great Norwegian author, the *landsmål* writer Arne Garborg. This was *Haugtussa*, the story of a country girl with second-sight, her life as a herd-girl and her unhappy love affair, and it made an immediate impression on Grieg. He had a number of ideas about how he might work with the material, but the eight songs that make up the final song-cycle constitute the greatest achievement of his song-writing career, bringing together all the finest aspects of his art: the chromatic harmony under unsophisticated vocal lines; the use of the sharpened fourth of the scale that lifts a melody out of the ordinary; the folksong and dance rhythms; and lyric melody.

From his letters to the composer, it is clear that Garborg himself saw Grieg’s music as the fulfilment of the poetry, probably the greatest compliment a composer could receive. Everyone who sings this cycle regards it as their own, bringing to it their own knowledge and personal experience and, as with all great music, every performance opens the eyes and ears to something fresh within it.

The principal barrier to the wider dissemination of this repertoire is still the Scandinavian languages and Grieg has not always been well served by translators. The two song volumes now published in paperback by Peters contain 177 of Grieg’s 180 extant songs; they have new English translations, mostly by Professor William Halverson, which go a long way towards rectifying this situation. However, the fresh sound of the Scandinavian languages and the intrinsic melody in the words, particularly in *landsmål*, is so finely complemented in Grieg’s music that no translation can ever completely do justice to the original.

For those who only know *Solveig's Song* and *I love you*, many of Grieg's songs will come as a surprise. From the dramatic *Soldaten* (The Soldier) one of the songs without opus number, through the ecstatic *Det første Møte* (The First Meeting, from op.21) or the playful *Mens jeg venter* (While I wait, from op.60) to the gloriously lyrical *Ved Gjøtlev-Bekken*, the last of the *Haugtussa* cycle, there is material for every voice. If you haven't already done so, I hope you will be inspired to explore, both as performers and listeners, and gain a greater knowledge of this vital part of a great composer's work.

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