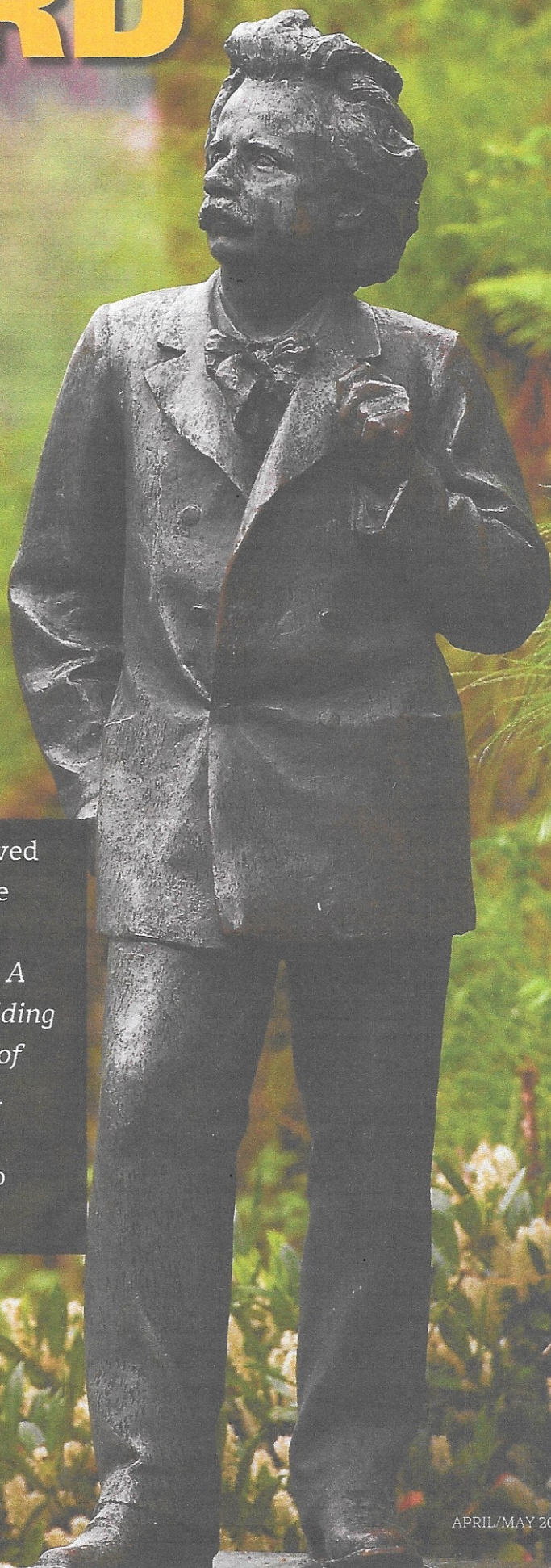


EDVARD GRIEG

The Unexpected Pedagogue

By Gloria Cook

Edvard Grieg, Norway's beloved composer, wrote some of the most notable works for the piano. His *Piano Concerto in A Minor*, *Peer Gynt Suite*, *Wedding Day at Troldhaugen*, *March of the Trolls* and *Elfn Dance* have long been favorite teaching pieces for many piano teachers and also popular works at piano competitions all over the world.



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As teachers, we all use etudes and repertoire to teach technique. As I began to introduce Grieg's works to expand my students' repertoire, I discovered his pieces also served as my go-to technical studies. They allow my students not only to develop new technical approaches and secure complex rhythmic skills, but also to experience unique harmony and expressive melodies that burst with both romantic and impressionistic traits.

What makes Grieg's piano compositions so ideal for teaching? Several outstanding features come to mind. First, as a miniaturist, Grieg's piano works such as his 10 opuses of *Lyric Pieces*, are made up as a series of short pieces with very attractive titles. The brevity of the pieces, with short dance-like motives most often repeated in sequences, allow us to teach more specific technical and expressive skills without overwhelming our students with too many details and demands that stray from the main task. Furthermore, his works vary considerably in level of difficulty, making them appropriate for students with different degrees of training.

Grieg knew how to put his Norwegian dance steps into his piano music. The spirit of the *springers*, *halling*, *gangar* and wedding marches come alive with his highly irregular and complex rhythms. Since the Hardanger fiddle played a big part in his musical inspiration, Grieg's dances, especially the *gangar*, tend to imitate the fiddle sound with the sympathetic strings, challenging the pianist to play fast complex rhythms and sustained notes, all with one hand. His dances are mostly very spirited, demanding the performers to maintain a constant rhythmic energy throughout, making his trademark jumps in the left hand even more difficult.

Inspired by the Norwegian landscape and folk tunes, Grieg tone-painted his music, one picture at a time, with spontaneity and sincerity. He gave our students opportunities to experience the expressive dimensions of music. Many of his pieces are also packed with bold harmonies that expand our students' understanding of tonal harmony and more importantly, extended tonal harmony, modal harmony and chromaticism.

I believe starting students early with Grieg's piano works prepares them well for much of the romantic repertoire, including his own concerto. At some point in their learning process, all of my students inevitably express their wish to perform the Grieg concerto. Who wouldn't? It is flashy and brilliantly written. When it

is played well, it is a crowd pleaser, and it certainly explains why it is one of most performed concerti on stage. When learning this concerto, students need to acquire the ability to execute clean trills, rapid scales, arpeggios, powerful octaves and fast leaps in addition to producing beautiful tone even in a pianissimo chord. Why shouldn't we give them a good foundation to learn these skills?

It is impossible to name all the suitable, valuable technical exercises one can find in Grieg's writing because there are so many. It is my hope that the few examples given here can demonstrate the value of having our students learn Grieg's works and understand how the techniques acquired by studying them serve as a foundation for lyrical and poetic expression in so much of the repertoire in the romantic era.

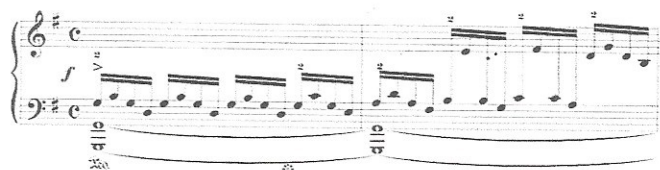
Arpeggios

Arpeggios are one of the most noticeable features in Grieg's writing. They were all written for the practice of smooth and even playing with a clear sense of melodic direction.



Four Pieces (Vier Stücke) Op. 1, No. 1.

One can see his fondness for arpeggios in this very early work. Grieg was very specific in how these arpeggios should be played with his indications of phrasing, accents, dynamics, crescendo and decrescendo, all in the first four phrases of the piece.



Praeludium from Holberg's Time, Op. 40.

Grieg modelled *From the Holberg Time* after a baroque suite to commemorate the bicentenary birth of the Norwegian playwright Ludvig Holberg. The tempo indi-

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cation of $\text{♩} = 92$ certainly points to a lightning speed. Right from the start, the cascade of arpeggios provides pianists with a good workout that continues throughout the entire piece.

Embellishments

Grieg's writing is full of embellishments. Learning how to execute them properly helps develop finger independence, speed, accuracy and above all, the understanding of how these embellishments serve to heighten the expressive quality of his music.

For evenness and speed, I always use pieces that have trills, such as *The Little Bird* No. 4 from *Six Lyric Pieces*, Op. 43.



Allegro leggiero. (M.M. $\text{♩}=88$.)

The Little Bird needs perfect execution and evenness for a flawless performance. Grieg suggested the use of the damper pedal to contrast with the pureness of the trills. Here, he certainly provided a wonderful opportunity for students to practice using different fingerings on the trills and quarter pedaling that can provide a glittering sound at the end of each trill!

Trills are abundant in Grieg's writing. Learning to trill cleanly and precisely can prepare pianists to master some of the ornamentations in Grieg's dances such as the *Leaping Dance (Springdans)* from Op. 12.



Leaping Dance (Springdans) Op. 12, No. 5, measures 19–20.

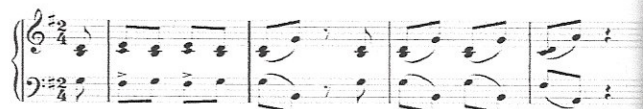


Myllarguten's Ganger from *Slåtter* (Norwegian Peasant Dances) Op. 72.

The trills shown in both examples above are intended to be played with the 4th and 5th fingers because of the sustaining notes written below. This is the character of Hardanger fiddle music with the stress placed on the off-beat. The syncopation further develops the independence of the fingers.

Slurs

Grieg is fond of using two-note slurs, many times they appear as slurred thirds, or any combination of double notes. This is suggestive of the *halling*, a very fast and energetic Norwegian dance.



Femårsdagen (The Fifth Anniversary) from *9 Pieces for Children* EG 103.

Another opus that one should never miss is *Twenty-Five Northern Dances and Folk-Tunes*, Op. 17. These miniatures, many of them 8–20 measures long, are invaluable for young pianists as they seek to understand the simplicity and the eloquence of Grieg's language and technique. This opus is Grieg's version of *Album for the Young*. Here, Grieg introduced his signature slurs in *The Last Saturday Night*, No. 15.



The Last Saturday Night, No. 15.

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For a more dance-like character piece to practice clean execution of slurs, *Sylph*, No. 1 or *She Dances*, No. 5, also from Op. 67 are ideal pieces to develop fast, clear execution of slurs.

The *Ballade*, Op. 24, is considered to be one of Grieg's most important piano works. Set in a variation form, it requires brilliant technical execution and great depth of understanding. Each variation is a character miniature in itself. My approach to teaching the *Ballade* is to assign the variations one at a time, considering each as a short study. The abundant opportunities to develop skills in these variations will also teach the more advanced students how to experience Grieg's most intimate and intuitive manner of writing for the piano. At a later stage, when the students are musically ready for the entire *Ballade*, it will be much easier to focus on the interpretative aspect of the piece instead of struggling with its technical demands.



Ballade, Op. 24

Partial Pedal

The lyrical quality of Grieg's music can give our students wonderful opportunities to practice the use of quarter or half pedal, as demonstrated in the *Little Bird*. The composer often wrote very detailed instructions on pedalling in his works.

Melody from Lyric Pieces, Op. 47 clearly shows his intentions for the use of partial pedal.



Melody from Lyric Pieces, Op. 47

Clearly a fully depressed pedal would be too blurry here. The use of quarter pedal should allow the student to project the legato melody without gathering too much sound.

There are countless other pieces I have used with great success. The *Lyric Pieces* have always been my first source of inspiration.

As the students begin to grasp the concept of the clear and crisp sound of Grieg, they can also venture into works such as:

- *Moods*, Op. 73, which contains his only piece titled Study (Hommage à Chopin)
- *Slätter*, Op. 72
- *Ballade*, Op. 24 as mentioned above should be reserved for the most advanced students.

We are fortunate to have access to the writing of experts on the works of Grieg such as Einart Steen-Nøkleberg, whose book *Onstage with Grieg: Interpreting His Piano Music* (translated by William H. Halverson) gives much insight into the interpretation of his piano music.

I hope this has sparked or rekindled your interest in this Norwegian composer. Edvard Grieg, knowingly or unknowingly, has given us a large volume of piano works that are so important, and have such great potential as study pieces for the development of a solid foundation in piano technique. There are many technique books in sets easily available to our students and there are also many traditional ones that we teachers have used for decades. Maybe it is time to try something new in addition to the old standbys. Next time when you are looking for an etude or a study for your student, I encourage you to explore and try some of the lesser known piano works of Edvard Grieg. You will be pleasantly surprised by the unexpected results!

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Gloria Cook is professor of piano at Rollins College. She holds a doctor of musical arts degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music and is a board member of the Edvard Grieg Society of America.

