

EDVARD GRIEG

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

When Edvard Grieg grew up; Bergen was a small and busy European town. With strong links to the Hanseatic cities, Bergen had established a net of connections that made it the only continental Norwegian city. The main business was the trade with fish and other products typical for the coast. There was a close contact with the rest of Europe, a fact that is easily retraced in the origin of the Bergener. Most of the families within the city limits had ancestors in Denmark, Germany, Scotland, England, the Netherlands and other European nations. Bergen was also a melting pot for the population along the Norwegian coast. Edvard Grieg's family was a typical Bergen-family: His great grandfather Alexander Greig (later changed to Grieg) came to the city from Cairnbulg close to Aberdeen in Scotland in the 1770s. He founded the family business, which was trade with dried fish and lobster across the North Sea. The raising of a child in a bourgeois family in the 19th century Norway often included teaching of music or other forms of art. Edvard Grieg's grandparents were active in the society of music «Musikkselskabet Harmonien», one of the worlds oldest orchestras, founded in 1765. Edvard Grieg was also so lucky to have the best piano teacher in Bergen as a mother. Gesine Hagerup had studied at the music conservatory in Hamburg, Germany, an education that usually was offered only to men. She played with «Harmonien» and at chamber music concerts in Bergen.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Edvard Grieg was born in Bergen 15th of June 1843, in the family's house in Strandgaten 152. He grew up in a successful merchant family, together with his brother John (born 1840) and his sisters Maren (born 1837), Ingeborg Benedicte (born 1838) and Elisabeth (born 1845). Very early he showed a strong interest in music and for the piano as instrument. He could sit at the piano for hours, exploring all kinds of tunes on his own.

Grieg recalls this when he says:

Why not begin by remembering the wonderful, mystical satisfaction of stretching one's arms up to the piano and bringing forth - not a melody. Far from it! No, it had to be a chord. First a third, then a fifth, then a seventh. And finally, both hands helping - Oh joy! - A ninth, the dominant ninth chord. When I had discovered this my rapture knew no bounds. That was a success! Nothing since has been able to elate me so profoundly as this.

That a child with such a talent as Edvard Grieg's had a mother like Gesine Hagerup Grieg and a father who could support economically, had to give great results. Since he wasn't the oldest son, Edvard didn't have to take an education that could make him capable of taking over the family business; this was instead his big-brother John's destiny. With loving, but firm guidance, his mother led Edvard forward into the wonder of music.

Edvard wasn't the most disciplined pupil. He preferred to discover the music himself. In stead of the compulsory etudes he preferred to improvise and play and finding new tunes and melodies. However, despite the certain amount of reluctance, his love for music grew into what was to become, in his innermost spirit, the right thing to do in life; to be an artist.

His quest, however, was not to be achieved freely. As a member of a highly respected family in Bergen, Edvard Grieg became a pupil at Tank's school when he was ten years old. He seems to have had a deep-seated dislike of the strict demands set by the school. Matters were made no better by the fact that the family spent their summers at Landås Estate, at that time

far out into the countryside. His way to school was long, and very often wet, a fact that Edvard used in his attempts to shirk school. He had observed that the pupils that met wet to class, was dismissed in order for them to go home and change to dry clothes. And since Edvard lived so far away from the school, it meant a day off, if he could only be sent home to change clothes. Thus Edvard Grieg sought every opportunity to get wet on his way to school. The most effective trick was to stand under the gutter, so that he became wet in a short time. This practice had an end when he met soaking wet to class on a day with hardly any rain at all. The teacher then understood why one of the pupils always was more wet than the others.

His marks were quite bad, and give a good account of his deepest interests. His interest lay in music. A nickname he got at school was Mosak, because he had answered Mozart when the teacher had asked which composer had composed a work called *Requiem*. The other pupils had not heard about Mozart, or other composers, and found it strange that Edvard, who didn't contribute much in class, could answer on this question.

The hero in the young Edvard Grieg's dreams was the «fairytale-uncle» - the famous violin virtuoso Ole Bull. Ole Bull's brother was married to Edvard's aunt, but it was first of all through the musical environment in Bergen that Ole Bull and Grieg's parents got to know each other. In the summer of 1858 Ole Bull came on a visit to Alexander and Gesine Grieg at Landås Estate. The event became, according to Grieg, the most important single event in his life. Edvard Grieg had to play for the world-famous violinist, and after he had heard him playing some of his own small compositions, Ole Bull became very serious and spoke slowly with Grieg's parents. After that he came over to Edvard and said: «*You are going to Leipzig to become an artist!*»

From his childhood and onwards, Ole Bull's summer sojourns in the countryside had brought him in contact with the Norwegian folk music. His dream was to show the treasures of the Norwegian folklore to other countries, but also to the city dwellers in Norway. He founded the first Norwegian theatre in Bergen, where the motto was: *Norwegian pieces, Norwegian actors and Norwegian ballet*. He made the Hardanger fiddle music known in Norway by inviting famous fiddlers to cities like Bergen and Oslo. The most famous of these fiddlers was Torgeir Audunsøn, known as «Myllarguten» (The Millers lad). Ole Bull was going to be a good friend and source for inspiration for Edvard Grieg until 1880, when Ole Bull died.

STUDIES IN LEIPZIG

Edvard Grieg ended his education in Norway and went to the music conservatory in Leipzig, Germany. This conservatory was founded in 1843 by Felix Mendelsohn, and was reckoned to be the best and most modern conservatory in Europe. Even though Edvard Grieg had dreamed his whole youth to become an artist, it was a strange experience to come from a small city like Bergen to a European metropolis with narrow streets, tall buildings and crowds of people. The first time was a time with homesickness and language-problems, but shortly he started to feel at home. As teachers in Leipzig he had some of the best pedagogues in Europe: Ignaz Moscheles in piano, Carl Reinecke in composition and Moritz Hauptmann, whom Edvard Grieg had the greatest respect for. During his stay in Leipzig Edvard Grieg came in contact with the European music-tradition, first of all he studied the works of Mozart and Beethoven, but also the compositions of more modern composers like Mendelsohn, Schumann and Wagner. Unfortunately he got pleuritt, a kind of tuberculosis, which marked him for the rest of his life. His left lung collapsed and made his back bend; this greatly reduced his lung-capacity. Nevertheless he graduated from the conservatory with excellent marks in 1862.

THE FIRST YEARS AS A COMPOSER IN COPENHAGEN

He gave his first concert 18th of August 1861 in the Swedish city of Karlshamn. His debut in his hometown came the year after. Among other works at this concert, the string-quartet in d-minor was performed, a work that has disappeared without a trace. Edvard Grieg's goal was to compose Norwegian music, but as a realist he knew that he had to go abroad to get in contact with an environment that could offer him a development as a composer. Thus Grieg went to Copenhagen, the only Scandinavian city with a rich cultural life on an international level. In Copenhagen there lived other composers like Niels W. Gade, Emil Hornemann, Winding and Mathison-Hansen. Especially Gade had a prominent position as the most important composer in Scandinavia, and was Grieg's first great idol. After having composed his only piano-sonata and his first violin-sonata he took them to Gade to have his opinion. One said that when Gade was really inspired he drank great amounts of water. That day the old maestro emptied four huge decanters.

In Copenhagen Edvard Grieg met another Norwegian composer, who should have a great impact on Grieg's evolution towards becoming a composer of Norwegian music, namely Rikard Nordraak. Nordraak's enthusiasm for everything Norwegian was transferred to Edvard Grieg. Even though Grieg was the one with the most solid background from a conservatory, he looked upon Nordraak as his idol. Grieg later said this about Nordraak: *«He opened my eyes for the important in music that isn't music»*.

The time in Denmark was a happy time for Edvard Grieg. He met several persons that should become lifelong friends of him, the most important was his cousin Nina Hagerup. They had grown up together in Bergen, but Nina moved with her family to Copenhagen when she was eight years. Nina was an excellent pianist, but first of all it was her beautiful voice that fascinated Grieg. Grieg was so charmed by his cousin, that they were secretly engaged in 1864. Nina's mother was an instructor at the theatre and maybe that is one of the reasons why Nina was to become famous for the interpretation and performance of a text, instead of the pure technical. The engagement was not well received by the two families. Grieg's father warned his son against the commitments by starting a family. He meant that he couldn't support a wife and a family when his income came from conducting, piano-playing and composing. Nina's mothers criticism was much harsher. She said about her coming son-in-law: *«He has nothing, he cannot do anything, and he makes music nobody cares to listen to»*. In the spring of 1865 they made their engagement known, and Grieg gave a present for the occasion to Nina, in the form of four songs with texts by their good friend, Hans Christian Andersen (Melodies of the Heart, op. 5). In spite of the true love between Edvard and Nina, none of their parents were present at the couple's wedding on the 11th June 1867.

THE KRISTIANIA YEARS

The Griegs went from Copenhagen to Kristiania (Oslo) in order to participate in the building of a Norwegian environment for music in the Norwegian capital. It became a period of hard labour, both concerning the establishing of a Norwegian musical-life and concerning their daily income. The family's income came from the various jobs Edvard took as a conductor and piano-teacher. Their daughter Alexandra was born on the 10th April 1868. The same year Edvard Grieg composed his brilliant piano-concerto in a-minor, during a stay at Sjøllerød in Denmark. This masterpiece became his final breakthrough as a composer, and after this he was reckoned as one of the greatest composers in his time. The concert was first performed in Copenhagen on the 3rd April 1869, with Edmund Neupert as pianist and Holger Simon Pauli as conductor.

The joy of the success as a composer was to be short; on the 21st May 1869 their daughter

Alexandra dies from meningitis while visiting their family in Bergen. The fact that they didn't have a child was maybe the main reason why Edvard and Nina didn't become a normal couple, but ended up as a two artists that travelled around in Europe without proper roots. This situation became clearer in 1875 when Grieg's parents died. Now they didn't have a home in Bergen to come home to. In addition to this, Edvard Grieg felt that he had stagnated artistically. The situation reached a critical point in 1883 when Edvard left Nina. The intervening force that rescued their marriage was Grieg's incomparable friend Frants Beyer. He persuaded Grieg to reconcile with Nina, and they went to Rome in order to start the reconciling process.

Frants Beyer also convinced Grieg that he needed a proper home, something to come home to after long tours abroad. Beyer helped Grieg to buy a place at Hop, in the outskirts of his hometown Bergen, and in 1885 Edvard and Nina Grieg could move into their villa at Troidhaugen.

GRIEG AND THE GREAT NORWEGIAN AUTHORS

On the beginning of the 1870's Edvard Grieg co-operated extensively with the Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, which led to Grieg composing music to Bjørnson's poems. In addition to the songs came the music for the melodrama *Bergljot*, the choral-work *Landkjenning (Land-Sighting)* and the music for the play *Sigurd Jorsalfar* from this period. Grieg and Bjørnson's most ambitious project was a national opera based on the history of the Norwegian king Olav Trygvason. In the beginning the work went forward quickly, but after a while they both lost some of the inspiration and a conflict raised between the two. The conflict concerned what had to be done first; the music or the libretto. When there came to a halt in the work with the opera, Grieg found time to compose music for the Norwegian playwright and poet Henrik Ibsen's dramatic poem *Peer Gynt*. To work with Ibsen, before the opera was finished, made Bjørnson so dissatisfied that a conflict raised between Grieg and Bjørnson, a conflict lasting for almost 16 years.

Edvard Grieg met Henrik Ibsen for the first time in Rome in 1866. Ibsen immediately felt that Edvard Grieg was an artist with unusual musical and intellectual capacities. He and Grieg had the same views on Ibsen's famous drama *Brand*. This is one of the reasons why Edvard Grieg was chosen when Ibsen in 1874 planned a staging of *Peer Gynt* with music. Grieg accepted the task, and started immediately with the greatest enthusiasm. But setting music to *Peer Gynt* wasn't as easy as he had thought it would be, but on the 24th February 1876, the play was performed for the first time on Christiania Theater in Oslo, and was an immediate success. Alongside the work with *Peer Gynt*, Grieg also set music to six poems by Ibsen (op. 25). In 1888 and in 1893 Grieg published respectively the *Peer Gynt Suite I and II*, which contained the most popular melodies from the play *Peer Gynt*. These two suites are among the most played orchestral pieces in our time.

LIFE AS AN ESTABLISHED COMPOSER

As a composer Edvard Grieg was fortunate to be a success while still alive. First of all it was because of his piano-concerto in a-minor and the music for *Peer Gynt*, but also as a composer of romances and of small piano-pieces Grieg became famous and relatively wealthy. He spent much time on travels, and received impressions from the big musical metropolis like Leipzig, Prague, Berlin, London and Paris, as well as the Norwegian mountains. He found new ways of approach to the Norwegian folk music, with the result that in the late 19th century France they spoke about two main styles in music; the Russian school and the Norwegian School. On his many journeys in Europe he met, and became a good friend of, other composers like Peter

Tchaikovsky, Johannes Brahms, Franz Liszt, Frederic Delius, Camille Saint-Saens, Julius Röntgen, Edward MacDowell and more. He influenced other composers, first of all Bela Bartók, but also Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy are influenced by Edvard Grieg.

Even though Edvard Grieg was well paid by Peters Verlag in Leipzig for his compositions, it was said that they flagged at the publishers every time they received a new collection of *Lyric Pieces*, it was through his tours that Grieg received his main income. He was indefatigable on his concert tours. With only one lung working it is astounding that he managed to cope with the life on tour. Luckily he was able to return to Norway and Troldhaugen for the summers, and through walks in the nature get his energy back before he left for Europe in the autumn. The extensive touring with innumerable concerts, combined with a weak health condition was to put an end to his life. His body couldn't take more, even though his will to continue absolutely was present. In September 1907 he and Nina planned to participate on the music-festival in Leeds, England. They had left Troldhaugen for the season and lodged at Hotel Norge in Bergen, waiting for the boat that should take them to England via the continent. Grieg became seriously ill and was hospitalized in Bergen, where he died on September 4th 1907 of chronic exhaustion.

© Erling Dahl 2004