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Grieg the Dramatist

“I have become more capable, have acquired more sense of the dramatic.” So wrote Edvard Grieg to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson from Leipzig on 14 May 1875, in the midst of trying to get Bjørnson to deliver the rest of the libretto for their proposed opera, *Olav Trygvason*. What did he mean by “dramatic”? I chose the subject for this paper as a way of taking not just an overview of Grieg’s vocal music, much of which will be examined closely during this conference, but also to look at some of the subtleties in his stage works, and in his songs and choral music, for Grieg’s genius for the dramatic is frequently to be found in the detail rather than the general.

It was not surprising that, during the early 1870s, Grieg should be particularly taken up with writing music for the stage. In the early part of the nineteenth century, music was an important part of Norwegian theatre, the traditional Scandinavian ballad-opera being especially popular, and each theatre had its own orchestra, although the standard could be somewhat variable. Grieg’s first foray into incidental music was as a young man in Copenhagen in 1864, with Benjamin Feddersen’s *Frieriet på Helgoland* (The Courtship on Heligoland), an adaptation of a German farce. However, only the little *Claras Sang*, EG 124, remains.

The first incidental music to any of Bjørnson’s dramas was written by his cousin, Rikard Nordraak, whose espousal of all things Norwegian had a tremendous influence on Grieg. As Bjørnson had been one of Grieg’s staunch supporters during what the composer called his “musically empty years” (1868-72) in the Norwegian capital, it was perhaps not unnatural that after Nordraak’s untimely death at the age of 24, Bjørnson’s next collaboration should be with Grieg. One or two early attempts were apparently made, about which, tantalisingly, we have no details. According to Halfdan Kjerulf’s diary entry for 29 March 1867, Grieg contributed the final chorus to Bjørnson’s *Maria Stuart*, which otherwise had incidental music by Nordraak, but there are no references to it in Grieg’s extant correspondence. In November 1870, Bjørnson wrote to the wife of a Danish friend, “I am now busy writing a new *sangspil* ... with music by Grieg”.¹ However, this work, *Klokker-*

¹ Letter to Margrethe Rode, quoted in Benestad & Schjelderup-Ebbe: *Edvard Grieg, mennesket og kunstneren*, p.131

familien (The Sexton's Family), was not completed and no further mention of Grieg's music has been found.

Grieg and Bjørnson had ambitions to produce a Norwegian opera, but the history of their collaboration is long and involved and almost worthy of an opera libretto in itself. Grieg had already provided incidental music for the play *Sigurd Jorsalfar* (Sigurd the Crusader). The orchestral suite from the work has remained popular; unfortunately the two choral movements, *Norrønafolket* (The Norse People) and *Kongekvadet* (The King's Song), are largely unknown outside Scandinavia. Bjørnson had long considered writing a drama based on the story of Olav Trygvason and in 1872, to raise money for the restoration of Nidaros cathedral in Trondheim, had, with Grieg, produced the cantata *Landkjenning* (Sighting of Land), originally scored for baritone soloist, male-voice choir, organ and four trombones. As the king, approaching his new land, hears organs and bells, the end of the fourth stanza is subtly altered to give a liturgical flavour to the chorus parts.

In spite of his eminently singable poetry, Bjørnson did not seem to have much conception of the creative process when it came to music composition. He sent Grieg the first three scenes of *Olav Trygvason* on 10 July 1873 with a request that the whole opera should be finished by October, and although he had promised the rest of the libretto "very soon", nothing was forthcoming. He visited Grieg in Bergen in August, but without bringing any further text, was then planning to go to Austria and Italy, and almost a year later Grieg was still trying to enthruse him.

The story of the planned opera was intended to carry on from the scene depicted in *Landkjenning*, that is from the arrival in Norway of Olav Trygvason, "this violent importer of Christianity" as Grieg called him to Frederick Delius.² The action in the three existing scenes revolves around the ritual and sacrifice in the pagan temple in Trønderlag, the area around Trondheim, which was the only place where Olav met any resistance.

So, how to create drama in music without it becoming, as Wagner said of Meyerbeer, a case of "effects without causes"?³ Beyond the stirring marches, a manifest use of the brass and soaring strings on the broader canvas, Grieg also makes use of contrasts between and within scenes by using vocal and orchestral colour. Moreover, he is the master of chromatic movement and subtle

² Letter from Bergen, 9 December 1888

³ Wagner: *Oper und Drama*, part 1, 1851.

dissonance, in particular the use of a tritone – the interval of the augmented fourth or diminished fifth – that “diabolus in musica”, long associated with evil and dark forces.

The first scene in *Olav Trygvason* opens with an ominous, not un-Verdian theme in the lower woodwind and strings, made darker by the addition of trombones, instruments traditionally associated with ritual. The augmented fourth, also played by muted horns, features in the incantation of the High Priest:

“Hidden in the many magic names, giver of runes and charms!
You, who came from the beginning of the world;
you, who see life from Livskalv.”

And the chorus intones “Hear us!”. (Ex. Bars 1-26)

The tritone is a feature of Norwegian folk music, where the sharpened fourth in a diatonic scale occurs frequently, and Grieg may also have had that in mind in trying to give a flavour of old Norway.

Still without Bjørnson’s opera libretto, in 1874 Grieg accepted Henrik Ibsen’s invitation to write the incidental music to *Peer Gynt*. Here this “devilish” interval makes several appearances, again depicting the forces of evil. Until comparatively recently Grieg’s music to *Peer Gynt* was known largely only through the eight pieces contained in the two orchestral suites. The final score contained 26 musical numbers, although Grieg never heard all of them in context, the movements being changed or discarded – not always by the composer – for various performances.

Fortunately in recent years the complete *Peer Gynt* music has been recorded and concert performances have been given of all the music, together with enough of the drama to give an overall impression of the whole piece, and at last it is possible to realise the full scale and quality of the music and the sure grasp that Grieg had on the drama. Ibsen himself must have been convinced that Grieg could provide suitable music, as he approached the composer before he suggested the project to the authorities at the theatre. He also acknowledged that the success of the first production was due in no small measure to Grieg’s music, writing to him on 30 March 1876, “Allow me to bring you my most sincere and friendly thanks for all the share you have had in the success of my piece on the stage at home!”

Already regarded as a young rogue, perhaps it is no surprise when Peer kidnaps the village girl Ingrid from her wedding and flees with her into the mountains. After abandoning her, he encounters a Woman in Green and accompanies her to the home of her father, the Old Man of Dovre, or the Mountain King as he is more generally known in the English-speaking world.

The music for *I Dovregubbens Hall* (In the Hall of the Mountain King) must be one of the most easily recognisable pieces of music in the world. In a long letter written in December 1875 to Johan Hennem, capellmeister of the Christiania Theatre, Grieg gave strict instructions that the music for this scene “must start quietly and steadily become more agitated...so that the theme is considerably faster when the curtain is raised. At that point the stage should be swarming with people”.

Theatrically this is extremely effective, warning the audience musically, as it were, to expect something frightening and then confronting them with the full horror of the hall and its inhabitants.

After watching the Old Man’s daughter perform an ungainly dance, Peer changes his mind about marrying her, is condemned to death for the insult and chased by the young trolls. The music here is a variation of *I Dovregubbenshall*, now in 3/8 rather than 2/4. As Peer calls out, “Help me, mother, I’m dying!” a bell is heard in the distance. Grieg particularly requested that it should be “tuned to D, so that it can make a diminished 5th with the tremolo in the basses on G sharp. That will really give a frightening effect”, once again employing the tritone associated with diablerie and with Norwegian folk music. The bell signals the cows belonging to “the black cassock”, that is the priest, and the trolls flee. Ibsen writes that here “the Hall caves in and everything disappears” and Grieg hoped that “the theatre possesses a tamtam (gong) ... for the single stroke it has must sound as if heaven and earth were about to perish”.

I shall return to this scene later.

We know from his diaries and letters that Grieg went to a number of operatic performances on his travels: Wagner in Leipzig, Bellini in Rome, Verdi in Copenhagen, amongst others, and it is self-evident that he absorbed ideas from them. While he was a student in Leipzig, he records that he saw fourteen performances of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* and later the whole *Ring*-cycle in Bayreuth. He “laughed himself to death” over Bjørnson’s description of *Tristan und Isolde* as “sea-sick music”,⁴ and while admiring Wagner’s achievements, nonetheless disliked his treatment of the voice.

⁴ Letter to Edvard Grieg, 17 September 1874

In an article on Verdi, written for the Danish journal *Verdens Gang* at the beginning of 1901⁵, shortly after the composer's death, Grieg goes into some detail about the atmospheric “night-time scene by the Nile” at the beginning of the second act of *Aida* (although he actually says “3rd act”), describing the cellos' and double basses' harmonics, the violas' pizzicato and the violins' tremolos which accompany the eerie flute melody. *Aida* was first performed in 1871, but I can find no reference to tell when Grieg first saw it.

He was to do something similar himself, however, in the *Nattscene* (Night Scene) towards the end of *Peer Gynt*. Here the short ascending and descending chromatic phrases in the lower strings perfectly capture the eerie scene on the heath with stumps of pine trees, burned by a forest fire, and the mist wafting around. The tumbleweeds begin the list of Peer's faults.

A chromatic phrase, however, is not necessary; a single semitone will suffice. Verdi well knew the ominous feeling that can be engendered by ascending and descending semitones. There are many instances in his operas; I have just chosen a well-known passage from *Don Carlos*. In modern times we might think of the effect made by the opening music to the film *Jaws*.

Grieg also made use of the descending semitone for dramatic effect. We might consider, for example, the positive but nonetheless startling alteration to G-natural from G-sharp at the end of the Piano Concerto, that magical moment that so entranced Liszt. And the long-held E-flat at the end of the final variation in the *Ballade*, which then slides down to D, the dominant of the tonic G minor, to introduce the final reiteration of the theme.

However, there can be few more terrifying uses of a descending semitone than in this excerpt from *Peer Gynt*, starting from the middle of the movement “Peer Gynt hunted by trolls”: the young trolls are shouting, “Go for his eyes! Slash him!” and we hear Peer's cry, “Help, mother...”, the bell in the distance (making the tritone with the double basses) already referred to, and the terror of the Hall's inhabitants reflected in the descending and ascending chromatic passages, before the whole scene dissolves and Peer encounters the mysterious Bøyg, which he describes as “Not dead! Not alive. Slime; mist. No shape either”. (Ex. Scene 10, bar 172-end)

⁵ Reprinted in *Artikler og Taler*, ed. Gaukstad. Gyldendal, Oslo 1957

After watching the reported 14 performances of *Tannhäuser*, perhaps Grieg was influenced by Wagner's use of *leitmotiv*. As he was to illustrate time and again in his solo songs, it is possible to suggest a situation or a character, and to underline principal concepts in the text within a few bars of music.

In *Peer Gynt*, each of the main characters has his or her own theme. So in the overture, we are introduced to Peer's vigorous character and Solveig's more lyrical one, and later to Ingrid in her *Lament*, and not least to Peer's mother Åse in the moving music as she dies. After Anitra has robbed and left him in the African desert, Peer is planning further voyages when Solveig appears, almost as a vision, and we hear her – now well-known – song. Towards the end of the *Night Scene* in Act 5, when Peer is being accused of his shortcomings, a ghostly version of *Åses Død* is heard, as if to remind him – and us – of her influence for good.

In regard to Grieg's songs, I have often quoted the great German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who described Lieder as “opera in miniature” – and Grieg was nothing if not the master of the miniature. It was with justification that Georges Loiseau described him in *Le Figaro* in 1894 as “music's Heinrich Heine”;⁶ both were able to create vivid impressions with great simplicity, but attention to detail.

As in the opening bars of *Olav Trygvason*, so the opening of *Den Bergtekne* (The Mountain Thrall), op.32, immediately suggests the sinister atmosphere. The story is of a young man lured into the mountains and teased by the daughters of the *jotul* or giant, although he cannot see them. The tonic key is not reached until the third bar. The scoring for strings with horns is also interesting: horns give the effect of distance and are also associated with hunting. (Ex. Bars 1-14)

The increasing hysteria of the young man who cannot find the path is conveyed, not just in the rising tessitura, but in the brilliant stroke of a *false alto* high G. I am sure this was not just Grieg being kind to baritones! His feeling for the protagonist's anguished “But I have no-one!” here, is as palpable as Veslemøy's “Have you ever seen anyone as lonely as I am?” in the last song of the *Haugtussa*-cycle. (Ex. Bars 93-104)

⁶ *Le Figaro*, 21 April 1894; quoted in Herresthal and Reznicek, *Rhapsodie Norvégienne*, p.180.

There are a number of obviously dramatic songs in Grieg's output. Amongst others one might mention the vividly descriptive *Efteraarsstormen* (Autumn Storm), op.18, no.4; the terrifying *Spillemand* (Minstrels) from the Ibsen settings, with which Grieg closely associated and which he later used as a basis for his string quartet; the almost Wagnerian *Eros* from op.70, and the unique use of a piano introduction and postlude to depict the sea-bird's cry in *Der skreg en fugl* from the Krag songs, op.60.

The early song, *Das alte Lied* (The Old Song), from op.4, tells the story of an old king married to a young woman. The opening chords suggest C major, but the apparent dominant chord in fact leads into A minor. The first vocal phrase is simple enough: "Es war ein alter König" (There was an old king), but listen to the accompaniment figure immediately afterwards. (Ex. bars 1-6).

Does this sound as if it will be a happy story? Of course it is not: the young queen is in love with a handsome page and the consequences are tragic: "Sie mußten beide sterben.." (They both had to die..)

Sometimes the drama is on an even smaller scale and it is what is not written that is important. For example, in *Stambogsrim* (Album Lines) from the Ibsen settings op.25, the poet's dead beloved is described as a "messenger of happiness that went – went out" and Grieg places a semiquaver rest to point the second half of the phrase. Unfortunately, this rest has been overridden in all the translations and even in the Norwegian in the Peters edition taken from the Grieg Gesamt-Ausgabe!

In *Dulgt Kjærlighet* (Secret Love) from op.39, a young man and a girl are in love with one another, but neither knows. He goes away, she waits and by the time he returns, she is dead. Each stanza ends with the words, "But there was no-one who knew", with again a telling rest between "But" and "there was...". Is this just good word painting, or a feeling for the dramatic, on however small a scale? Grieg would never allow anything as banal as a sob, but perhaps an intake of breath...?

In *Borte!* (Departed or Gone) again from the Ibsen settings, we hear of a female guest leaving a party: "She was just a guest – and now she has gone", but the final word, "borte" (gone), is set to a rising third, echoed by the piano. (Ex. Bars 9-13).

Has she gone for ever or will she return? The whole question is open and left for us to guess and so the story doesn't end.

A rest, or rather a fermata over the barline, in *En svane* (A Swan) again from the op.25, also creates drama. After a *sempre crescendo* as, nearing death, the swan begins to sing, there is a silence before the *pianissimo* chords of the opening are heard again and the stillness of the beginning is restored. A triumph out of tragedy, as one might see it.

Having studied in Leipzig, Grieg cannot have failed to know many of Schubert's songs. Did he have *Der Erlkönig* subconsciously in mind when, in May 1865, he set Hans Christian Andersen's *Soldaten* (The Soldier), or was the use of recitative for the most tragic part of the song a coincidence? The poem is said to be based on an actual event in Andersen's youth. It describes a firing squad, one of whose members is the only friend of the condemned man. The rest of the party, their hands shaking with grief, miss their mark; only the friend shoots him straight in the heart. Grieg's use of partial recitative is much more dramatic than any melody could have been. (Ex. Bars 33-end).

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The middle decades of the 19th century were also a golden age for Norwegian choral music, particularly that for male-voice choirs, and the tradition was gradually established of the *sangerfest*: a kind of choir rally, where groups from all over the country – and later from further afield – would come to sing together and separately, with some element of competition. Much of Grieg's choral music is still unknown outside Scandinavia, due in no small part to the lack of translations – a great pity, as there is some wonderful material here.

Even in his early choral works, Grieg uses unusual key changes, harmony and chromaticism, including augmented fourths between parts, to emphasise words and moods. For example, *Norsk Krigsang* and *Studereliv* (Norwegian Warsong and Student Life) from the songs written for the Students' Choral Society in Copenhagen in 1864, or *Aftenstemning* and *Bjørneskytten* (Evening Mood and The Bear-Hunter) three years later. In the well-known *Album for Mandssang* (Album for Male Voices), op.30, published in 1878, Grieg elevates the folksongs *Torø liti* (Little Torø) and *Dæ æ den største Dårleheit* (It is the greatest foolishness) to miniature dramas.

Both are tales of unhappy love: Little Torø cannot go with her beloved, as she is promised to the king of England's son. In the other, the poet warns us that it is the greatest foolishness to give away your love to the one you cannot have. As elsewhere in the *Album*, Grieg uses the chromaticism and dissonance he felt was endemic to Norwegian folk music, particularly in the second half of the latter song, with the false relations between the baritone soloist and second tenor line.

Jædervise (A Song of Jæren), sometimes known as “Vestanvejr” (Western Wind), is a picture of various scenes and the unpredictable weather conditions in Jæren, a coastal area of Western Norway, the home of Arne Garborg amongst others. It does not appear to have been written for any particular choir or occasion, but the book by Jonas Anton Dahl of “Christmas Stories and Jæder Life” from which the poem comes was published early in 1896, so only months after Grieg had been working on Garborg's *Haugtussa*. The augmented 2nds and 4ths in the angular lines depict the rugged terrain, but Grieg does not begin, as might be expected, with the first line of the first stanza, but with the shout of triumph – or perhaps anxiety – that also ends each strophe.

(Ex. Bars 1-26) Perhaps a little cruel to have the tenors start on a top A!

Grieg's last major work was the reworking of four songs to religious texts taken from Lindeman's great folksong collection. These he “freely arranged” for four-part mixed choir and baritone soloist, as the *Fire Salmer* (Four Psalms – or more correctly, Four Hymns), op.74 in 1906. One of the most arresting features is the bitonality in the second hymn, where the middle stanza, “Now I am in God's power despite a thousand serpents”, is scored for male voices only. The quartet sings in the tonic B-flat minor, while the soloist remains in the B-flat major, leading to some wonderful dissonances and false relations. We know that Grieg's religious beliefs were far from conventional, but perhaps here, frail and unwell, he identified himself with the soloist against the forces trying to destroy him.

The chromaticism Grieg found in Norwegian folk music is also in evident in the last Psalm, *I Himmelen* (In heaven above), where the choral “echo” of the baritone soloist's melody ends on the last inversion of the subdominant seventh, giving a wonderful clash of D-sharp in the bass against the sopranos' E. The text is, “There forever we shall see God in radiance, as he is”.

(Ex. Bars 14-21)

In a letter from Christiania, 15 October 1889, Grieg again asserted to Bjørnson, “I am not without dramatic [talent]. ‘Olav T.’ is proof of that”. I believe we can have no doubt of that, either. I lived very closely with the music to *Peer Gynt* when I was working on the English translation in 2010, and I want to end with what I consider Grieg’s greatest dramatic stroke of all and one that never fails to send a shiver down my spine and bring a tear to my eyes. This is right at the end, where he interpolates the separate phrases of the *Whitsun Hymn*, sung by the chorus back stage, into Solveig’s *Cradle Song*.

It has been said that there is no justification for this in the play itself, but Grieg may have taken the idea from Ibsen’s first letter to him about the work, written in January 1874: “Solveig’s song will end the piece, after which the curtain will fall as the hymn sounds again nearer and stronger”. The chromatic movement in the orchestral accompaniment implies that the tension is not quite resolved until the very end, but this is a most moving and profound conclusion to a very complicated tale, finally bringing together the elements of Peer’s salvation: his faithful Solveig and Christianity. (Ex. Scene 26, bars 37-end)