

Grieg's Compositions for Male Voice Choir and the European National Movement

The significance that male choir organizations had during the 19th century has long been underestimated. With their recent research efforts, Friedhelm Brusniak and Dietmar Klenke have presented a long overdue survey that puts the historical impact of organized singing associations in Germany into perspective. Male voice choir associations sprouted up after 1800 and became known as *Liedertafel* or *Liederkrantz* in German-speaking regions. These organizations can in fact be regarded as the societal foundation of bourgeois music culture as it developed during the 18th century.

With the rise of the nation's middle-class, this movement spread throughout Europe. However, the movement's revolutionary spirit lost its glory during the 20th century, which saw the decline of male voice choir associations, their entanglement with totalitarian systems, and the driving ideas of the *Projekt der Moderne* (project of modernity) along with its art-as-religion demands. With the *Deutscher Sängerbund*, the movement gained a strong umbrella organization in 1862. Unsurprisingly, the principles of liberty and patriotism have shaped the male choir repertory. Despite the original revolutionary intent of protesting aristocratic despotism, these ideals rely on the basic concepts of an enlightened society and self-determination of man, whose dignity is founded on labor and accomplishment.

Just as bourgeois associations and societies were originally conceived to overcome class-system restrictions, the efficiency-oriented nation state provided the organizational basis for the rising upper middle class society. Consequently, the state's continued success was one of the most pressing societal concerns throughout Europe; so pressing indeed that its implementation warranted the use of warfare alongside artistic means. Norway's quest for cultural identity presents an excellent example: Until today, Edvard Grieg is regarded as the embodiment of the Norwegian composer – a creator of “specifically Norwegian” music. Given that Grieg's reputation as a national composer has remained untainted, Norway presents a stark contrast to German-speaking countries, in which nationalistic enthusiasm has – understandably – been met with suspicion since 1945. However, the importance of compositions for male voice choir in the national context has largely been forgotten. In fact, the composition *Landkjending* Op. 30 for baritone, male voice choir and piano or harmonium, which is based on a poem by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, is the only example that found its way into the male chorus repertory. The hero of the piece is Olav Tryggvason, a Norwegian king who ruled during the Late Viking Age (995-1000 AD) and was regarded as Norway's first Christian ruler. Unsurprisingly, the legend-inspiring king was an ideal model for the romantic nationalist movement in Norway.

After the dissolution of Norway's 400-year union with Denmark (1380-1814) in 1814, the country entered a brief period of independence, followed by a personal union with Sweden that lasted until 1905. This propelled the process of “nation building” – known as *nasjonsbygging* in Norway – which manifested itself mainly in the arts. Friedrich August Reißiger's (1809-1883) 1864 opera *Olaf Trygvason* was a substantial contribution to Norwegian national culture. The youngest brother of Dresden's Court Music Director Carl Gottlieb Reißiger (1798-1859) had been the music director of the Christiana Theatre in Christiania (re-named Oslo in 1924) since 1840 and remained active as a composer, conductor, and organist until his death. In spite – or perhaps, because – of Reißiger's *Olaf Trygvason*, Grieg began to dedicate himself to transforming the subject into an ambitious national opera after he had finished *Landkjending*. However, his librettist Bjørnson failed him and Grieg managed to publish only fragments of the opera *Olaf Trygvason* as his opus 50.

From the very beginning of his musical career, Edvard Grieg had identified himself with the Norwegian national movement. His studies at the Leipzig Conservatory, where he had enrolled himself following the recommendation of his uncle Ole Bull, clearly served to foster and develop his distinctively Norwegian musical talent. Being one of the so-called European “model cases”¹, the ideals and objectives of Norway’s bourgeois national society were propagated by male voice choirs. The first Norwegian male choir – *Den norske Studentersangforening* – was founded in 1845. In 1872, four years before *Landkjending*, Grieg had already composed a male chorus with instrumental accompaniment for a patriotic occasion: the unveiling of a monument for Wilhelm Frimann Koren Christie in Bergen, which took place on May 17, 1868. The Christie Cantata for male choir and military band (EG 158) honors one of the most important politicians of the year 1814 in connection with Norway’s independence and constitution. The text was written by Andreas Munch (1811-1884), one of literature’s proponents of the “national re-birth” of Norway (who was distantly related to the painter Edvard Munch). Most of Grieg’s choir compositions were written for a capella male chorus, but there are also six works for mixed a capella chorus and one for female choir a capella. The compositions for male a capella choir were composed between 1863 and 1901 – spanning most of Grieg’s compositional career.

The texts for Grieg’s choir compositions were composed by thirteen different authors, who (except for Bishop Johan Brun) were all born during the first half of the 19th century in Norway (except for Christian Richardt from Denmark). Johan Brun (1745-1816) was still part of the 18th century tradition that poet Ludvig Baron Holberg (1684-1754) helped shape. Holberg – one of Bach’s contemporaries – was born in Bergen. The national movement proclaimed him a “historic Norwegian”; Grieg dedicated his Suite in olden style “From Holberg’s time” Op. 40 (*Fra Holbergs tid – Suite i gammel stil*) to him. Holberg was succeeded by Johan Sebastian Welhaven (1807-1873), a poet, literature critic, philosopher, and scandinavist; and later, by Welhaven’s rival Henrik Wergeland (1808-1845), a nationalist and radical republican. The aforementioned Andreas Munch (1811-1884) was succeeded by Jørgen Moe (1813-1882), a Lutheran author and collector of fairy tales. The list continues in chronological order: Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906); Christian Richardt (1831–1892), a Danish poet and preacher; Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), the first Norwegian Nobel Prize in Literature winner; Jonas Lie (1833-1908), author and playwright; Sigvald Skavlan (1839-1912), a priest, educator, and hymn composer; Olav Lofthus (1847-1894), a teacher, journalist, poet, and liberal (founder of the left-oriented political organization in Bergen); Nordahl Rolfsen (1848-1928), educator and author of the popular elementary school reader *Lesebok für Folkeskolen*; and, finally, Jonas Dahl (1849-1919), author of sacred literature and hymn composer.

This list of authors spans the entire political spectrum of the Norwegian national movement. The famous name Henrik Ibsen only appears once in the list of Grieg’s arrangements: his *Peer Gynt* was to serve Grieg’s incidental music Op. 23 – the piece that later became one of the most successful Norwegian national works. Although Grieg used several of Ibsen’s texts for his songs and shared the poet’s initial romantic nationalist outlook, he apparently did not follow Ibsen’s developmental path toward the naturalist social drama. In any case, not many of Ibsen’s texts fit with the national exuberance displayed by the male voice choir movement.

¹ Peter Brandt, Nationalrepräsentation und Demokratisierung: Norwegen als europäischer „Musterfall“, in: Demokratiekultur in Europa. Politische Repräsentation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, edited by Detlef Lehnert, Cologne et.al. 2011, p. 209-226.

Grieg seems to have been especially fond of Norwegian poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, as he set *Landkjending* and six other of Bjørnson's works to music. Bjørnson's impact on the national movement became apparent during the opening festivity performances at the *Nationaltheatret* in Kristiania between September 1 and 3, 1899. On opening night, excerpts from two comedies by Ludvig Holberg were performed; on the second evening, Henrik Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*, and on the third, Bjørnson's saga drama *Sigurd Jorsalfar* with Grieg's incidental music was conducted by the composer himself. At this time, Bjørnson was regarded as one of the most important Norwegian poets. He was also an active publicist and politician, penned the Norwegian national anthem *Ja, vi elsker dette landet* ("Yes, we love this country") and founded *Riksmålsforbundet*, a society for the preservation of the Norwegian language. Dedicated to the ideas of Pan-Germanism and bourgeois society, Bjørnson believed that the Scandinavian countries shared a close ethnical connection with Germanic Central Europe. Grieg admired Bjørnson as a "Nordic master", whom he also considered a close friend.

Furthermore, Grieg's musical settings include four works by folklorist Jørgen Moe, who collected and published folk songs and folk poetry as a national treasure, and three works by Andreas Munch, who considered himself an "aesthetic Lutheran" and was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. Texts by cultural educator Nordahl Rolfsen were used by Grieg for male voice choir arrangements on three occasions, while those by Danish pastor Christian Richardt found their way into two of Grieg's pieces. The other authors each had one of their texts set to music. The following list includes all of Grieg's compositions for a capella male voice choir (in chronological order):

EG 160, Fire Sange for Mandstemmer [Four Songs for Male Chorus] (1863), 4 pages
 No. 1 Norsk Krigssang [Norwegian War Song] (Henrik Wergeland)
 No. 2 Fredriksborg (Christian Richardt)
 No. 3 Studereliv [Student Life] (Christian Richardt)
 No. 4 Den sildige Rose [The Late Rose] (A. Munch)

EG 162, To sanger for mannskor [Two Songs for male Chorus] (1867)
 No. 1, Aftenstemning [Evening Mood] (Jørgen Moe)
 No. 2, Bjørneskytteren [The Bear Hunter] (Jørgen Moe)

Arrangement of Op.12, Lyric Pieces for piano (1868), No. 8: Faedrelandssang [National Song] (Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson) (1869)

Serenade til Welhaven [Serenade for Welhaven] (Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson) (1869), arranged as No. 9 in Opus 18, Nine Songs for mezzo-soprano /baritone and piano (1865-1869)

EG 163, Sjømandssang [Norwegian Sailor's Song] (Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson) (1869-1870)

EG 165, Ved Welhavens Grav [At Welhaven's Grave] (Jørgen Moe) (1873)

EG 166, Oppsang for frihedsfolket i norden [Chorus for the Supporters of Freedom in Scandinavia] (Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson) (1874)

EG 167, Ved Halfdan Kjerulf minnestøtte [At the Halfdan Kjerulf Statue], for tenor and male chorus (Andreas Munch) (1874)

Opus 30, Album for Mandssang [Album for Male Voices], 12 arrangements for baritone, tenor and male chorus (1877-1878)

No. 1 Jeg lagde mig så sildig [I Lay Down So Late]

No. 2 Bådnlát [Children's Song]

No. 3 Torø liti [Little Torø]

No. 4 Kvålines Halling

No. 5 Dæ æ den største Dåleheit [It is the Greatest Foolishness]

No. 6 Sprindans [Springar]

No. 7 Han Ole [Young Ole]

No. 8 Halling

No. 9 Dejligste blandt Kvinder [Fairest Among Women]

No. 10 Den store, hvide Flok [The Great White Host]

No. 11 Fantegutten [The Gypsy Lad]

No. 12 Røtnams-Knut

Arrangement of Opus 15, Romances for voice and piano (1864-1868), No. 1: Margretes Vuggesang [Margaret's Cradle Song] [fra "Kongsemnerne"] (Ibsen) (1881)

EG 169, To mannskorsanger [Two Songs for male chorus] (Olav Lofthus) (1881),

No. 1 Min dejligste Tanke [My Finest Thought]

No. 2 Vort Losen [Our Watchword]

EG 170, Sangerhilsen [A Greeting to the Singers] (Sigvald Skavlan) (1883)

EG 171, Holberg Cantata (Nordahl Rolfsen) for baritone and male chorus (1884), 12 pages

EG 149, Valgsang [Election Song] (Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson) (1893)

EG 172, Flagvise [Song of the Flag] (Johan Brun) (1893)

EG 173, Kristianiensernes Sangerhilsen [Singers' Greeting from Christiania] (Jonas Lie) for baritone and male chorus (1895), 5 pages

EG 174, Jædervise [Western Wind] (Jonas Dahl) (1896)

EG 175, Impromptu [til "Griegs Mandskor i Fort Dodge, Iowa"] (Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson) (1896)

EG 176, Til Ole Bull [To Ole Bull] (Johan Sebastian Welhaven) (1901)

EG 168, Inga Litamor [Little Inga] (1901) for baritone and male chorus (melody from Nordhordland) (1901)

The cantata *Ved Halfdan Kjerulf minnestøtte* [At the Halfdan Kjerulf Statue] for tenor and male chorus EG 167 is especially interesting, as the piece was written for the unveiling of the statue for Halfdan Kjerulf in Christiania, which took place on September 23, 1874. Halfdan Kjerulf (1815-1868) was a Norwegian composer from the generation before Grieg. He had studied in Copenhagen with Niels Wilhelm Gade, and later in Leipzig, and was thus strongly influenced by German Romanticism. Kjerulf had a special fondness of male singing, which he expressed in his own male voice quartet (with doubled parts) *Kjerulf's Kvartet* and the collection *Album for Mandssang. 45 Sange komponerede eller arrangerede af Halfdan*

Kjerulf for hans Kvartet. Den norske Studentersangforenings Forlag i Kommission hos Warmuth's Musikforlag Kristiania. Etabl. 1843. Incidentally, Michael Haydn, another proponent of the male voice choir movement, was honored in 1821 – only 15 years after his death – with a monument at St Peter's Abbey in Salzburg. On December 3, 1684, ten years after the Kjerulf statue, a monument for Ludvig Holberg was unveiled in Bergen on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Holberg's birth. Grieg once again contributed a cantata (EG 171) in commemoration of the poet. Statues and monuments honoring artists were a typical manifestation of the bourgeois movement with roots extending back into 18th-century England. While these monuments marked the elevated position of the artist in society, the surrounding festivities also served as a kind of self-adulation – the artist proclaimed himself to be a self-determined leading mind, a genius fit to guide society and a shining example of the liberal, politically mature citizen.

At the young age of twenty, Grieg moved to Copenhagen and composed four songs for male chorus (EG 160), which praise the ideal characteristics of the self-determined man. The *Norwegian War Song* (written by radical republican Henrik Wergeland) expresses the ability to self-defend and self-protect, while national pride is the subject of Christian Richardt's song to the Danish King's Castle Frederiksborg in Hillerød (the text dates back to 1859, a time when the ancient castle was in ruins; it was re-opened as a national historic museum in 1878). Richardt's description of the joys of student life is focused not on wine, women and song, but rather, on earnest academic study as a way to seek the truth. His image of enlightenment sought to conquer the darkness of ignorance. The fourth song, *The Late Rose*, is a tune about the joy and sorrow of human destiny. All four songs have Danish texts, as Danish was the written language of the urban upper middle class in Norway.

While the two songs of EG 162 from 1867 contain folklore descriptions of nature and nature-centered life, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's *Patriotic Song* is rather martial in character: the call "Onward!" sounds over and over again to lead Norway into the battle for liberty and Scandinavian patriotism. Grieg set these words to the music of No. 8 of his *Lyric Pieces* for piano Op. 12 in 1869. In 1869, he composed the *Serenade for Welhaven* for solo baritone and male voice quartet. An arrangement of this piece was adopted as the last number of the *9 Songs* for mezzo-soprano/baritone and piano, Op. 18 (contrary to some descriptions, the male chorus version was indeed the original one). The text was written by Bjørnson in Bokmål, the official "book language" of Norway which, while being closely related to Danish, seemed appropriate for a proponent of the independent Norwegian literature movement. Just as Bjørnson, Grieg took Welhaven's side against Wergeland. After the 1869 *Serenade*, he composed another male chorus, *At Welhaven's Grave* EG 165 with a text by Jørgen Moe.

Apart from his first piece for male choir in 1863, Grieg did not set any other texts of Wergeland to music. This clearly shows the political orientation of Norway's male voice choir movement, which rejected radicalism in favor of a liberalist approach. Popular themes were either patriotic, such as the *Norwegian Sailor's Song* (EG 163, 1869/70) or freedom-oriented, such as the *Chorus for the Supporters of Freedom in Scandinavia* (EG 166, 1873). Both song texts were written by Bjørnson. Folklore was considered a national treasure and found its way into Grieg's *Album for Males Voices* Op. 30: 12 arrangements based on Norwegian folk tunes for baritone, tenor and male chorus, composed in 1877/78.

Grieg's compositional style of the first two songs of the *Album for Males Voices* Op. 30 deserves a closer look: The first song, *I Lay Down so Late*, starts out rather harmless and sorrow-free, only to reveal the catastrophe of love the very next morning. To fit the sudden change of mood, it is through-composed: The first part, written predominantly in B minor, ends in the much brighter parallel key of D major. The closing line ("I never loved another")

builds on F sharp and G to a dissonant seventh chord (on the major seventh of G major), finishing with a sigh and a general pause, the tmesis of separation, which is then repeated. The final section is quite dissonant as well: after another general pause, one more sigh finishes the piece in the gloomy key of B minor. In this example, Grieg's compositional technique clearly shows strong rhetoric influences.

The second song, *Allegretto scherzando* for solo voices and chorus, is a Humoresque – a children's song about cats in G minor and $\frac{3}{4}$ time. In addition to a solo baritone, Grieg designated the second tenor as a solo part – with the primary task of articulating a heartfelt “meow”. A four-measure drone in open fifths – alternating between tenors and basses – leads into three stanzas. Each stanza starts with a four-measure drone in fifth (quarter and half notes in the basses), which is then joined by baritone and tenor I with the main theme – an eight-measure melody in periods. Drone and “meow” sound for another three measures and then subside. The final section in G Major is faster in tempo; the triad-based melody is subdivided into 2-measure segments, which are – offset by one measure – juxtaposed by tenors and basses. After seven measures, each part takes a one-measure pause before continuing on to the eighth measure (again, the voices alternate). Following a general pause, each stanza is concluded with a homophonic, two-measure declaration of the chorus starting on the dominant D major and moving to the tonic G major. While the ostensible “meow” is certainly humorous, the actual wit of the piece lies in the play, order and – ultimately – the deconstruction of the meter. A reference in the text can only be found in the first stanza: The cat is beating the drum.

These two arrangements of Norwegian folk tunes already give us some idea of the extensive compositional range of Grieg's works for male voice choir. This is a worthwhile subject for further discussion, as part writing for male chorus is usually considered to be somewhat limited in terms of musical expression. Supposedly, many composers have decried the “accursed *Liedertafel*”, but quite possibly, these statements were intentionally defamatory. In any case, Grieg is not known to have made such accusations. On the contrary: he masterfully recreated the localization of specific genres to their respective social surroundings. During the 19th century, a focus on “progress” and “eternal values” gave way to the notion of absolute music, in which absolute freedom was a pre-requisite for the creation of great art. Music history, however, tells a different story, as great art was often created out of constraint and adversity. In principle, this should also be applicable to male voice choirs. A first survey of Grieg's compositions for male chorus reveals a strong tendency toward homophonic structures and stanza form. The addition of a solo voice expands the palette of musical expression within the part writing, while the choir texture remains mostly homophonic. However, the relationship between text and music and other musical parameters in Grieg's compositions for male voice choir suggest an entirely unique artistic profile.

As an instrument of upper middle class society, male choir organizations had national and freedom-seeking/ liberal aims – the same can be said for Grieg's compositions for male chorus. Sacred texts, such as in No. 9 from Op. 30 *Dejligste blandt Kvinder* (Fairest Among Women) are the exception. Sacred choir music was mostly composed for mixed choir: while Grieg had already written a *Dona nobis pacem* for mixed choir (EG 159) in 1862, the remainder of his sacred pieces were composed much later: In 1898, he composed *Ave maris stella* (Thor Lange) for mixed choir (EG 150), and in 1906, he wrote *Fire salmer* (Four Psalms) for baritone and mixed choir (Op. 74), an arrangement of old Norwegian hymns. The 1901 *Fædrelandssalme* (Fatherland Hymn) by Nordahl Rolfsen, an arrangement of the last of 7 children's songs (Nordahl Rolfsen) Op. 61 from 1894, mixes national and religious themes. In the printed edition, the majority of the male voice parts has been edited exclusively in the national language, while the sacred choruses have been edited in two languages: The national

exclusiveness of male voice choirs is juxtaposed with a broader, European reception of the sacred works.

The main demand of the national-romantic movement – a sovereign nation state – was realized peacefully with Norway's 1905 Karlstad Treaty. Two years before his death, Grieg was able to experience the victory of the national movement; a victory that he had contributed to with many efforts, among them his compositions for male voice choir. As he was spared the experience of the imminent world war between the nation states, Grieg was able to believe that his protest against the despotism of foreign aristocracy and the subsequent building of a national bourgeois society aided in the realization of a new, liberal order and a better future.