

Asbjørn Ø. Eriksen:

Edvard Grieg's Song Cycles *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord* (Op. 44) and *Elegiske Digte* (Op. 59). Attempt at a revaluation.

Edvard Grieg's *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord* [Reminiscences from Mountain and Fjord] Op. 44 set to texts by Holger Drachmann was written in 1886 – the same year as the successful third album *Lyric Pieces* Op. 43 and the brilliant Third Violin Sonata. *Elegiske Digte* [Elegiac Songs] Op. 59 – settings of six poems by John Paulsen – were realized in 1893/94, at the same time as the highly esteemed Krag Songs Op. 60. We may then assume that Grieg wrote these songs in periods of creative inspiration. However, leading Norwegian Grieg specialists Monrad Johansen, Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe have regarded *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord* and *Elegiske Digte* as two of the weakest works by Grieg within the song genre. An opinion also shared, seemingly, by Beryl Foster and Sandra Jarrett in their books on Grieg's songs. Russian musicologists and Grieg specialists have presented quite different views on these songs: Boris Asafev, Olga Levasheva and Ruth Leytes regard *Elegiske Digte* as outstanding, and Asafev and Leytes also praise *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord*.

In my paper I shall point out some qualities in *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord* and *Elegiske Digte* which have escaped the attention of most critics, and discuss a few of the songs more thoroughly. Moreover, I will suggest possible reasons for the striking discrepancy between the Norwegian and Russian evaluation of these two works.

In the summer of 1886 Grieg and the Danish poet Holger Drachmann (1846-1908) made a tour in Hardanger and the Jotunheimen mountains. Drachmann wrote poems, describing the nature and people they met – more precisely beautiful women. Grieg's *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord* consists of settings of six of Drachmann's poems. The four songs devoted to women are framed by a prologue and epilogue, worshipping the beautiful and majestic mountain nature. It is sometimes claimed that *Haugtussa* is Grieg's only song cycle in the sense that the succession of the poems constitute a narrative thread. However, also *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord* evokes narrativity, the text of the Prologue clearly describing the beginning of the tour while the Epilogue bids farewell to the mountains. Moreover, these two songs are musically connected, being written in recitative style and concluding with the same striking modal cadenza. Although the four central songs are purely lyrical utterances, creating no impression of passing time, these six songs are also

united by another structural trait: The tonic is *C* in the first and last songs, *E* in no. 2 and 5, and *F* in No. 3 and 4. In other words, the tonalities of the songs are arranged symmetrically:

1. Prologue (modally coloured *C* major)
2. Johanne (*E* minor – *E* major)
3. Ragnhild (*F* major)
4. Ingebjørg (*F* minor – *F* major)
5. Ragna (*E* major)
6. Epilogue (modally coloured *C* major)

This feature has been pointed out by Russian musicologist Ruth Leytes, who probably was the first to author an entire book on Grieg's songs, published in 1967. All things considered, *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord* has a thoroughly worked through overall structure and must be regarded as a small song cycle. This lends the work a weight which seems to have been overlooked by Western authors.

Drachmann's poems are undoubtedly enthusiastic, but his metaphors appear strange, sometimes even unintentionally comical to modern readers. I quote two extracts from the poem "Ingebjørg": "Your hand is callous'd Ingebjørg,/ from sun and wind burnt red;/ it kneads the dough together/ and forms it into bread". Descriptions of baking bread appear somewhat inappropriate in an elevated homage to a beautiful woman. And here an extract with an erotic subtext: "Your breast is domed, Ingebjørg,/ like the glacier's high snow,/ but no mountain-climber/ may the wonder behold". Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe assert that as a result of Drachmann's weak poems "Grieg's inspiration completely failed" (1988: 273). But do good songs on the whole presuppose good poems? I will soon return to this rather complex question. Nevertheless it should not be concealed that most of these songs do not belong to Grieg's strongest within the genre, whatever the reason for their uneven quality. "Ragnhild" has a certain freshness, and "Ragna" contains harmonic subtleties, especially in the concluding bars. But generally the melodic inventiveness appears to be weak and hardly striking.

However, the Prologue has many attractive and original features, as pointed out by the Russian authors as well as by Beryl Foster. In fact, the composer himself regarded it as one of his best songs, according to a letter to Henry Finck (July 17, 1900). The song is written in a varied strophic form, the setting of the third stanza of the poem being almost identical with the first. See *Ex. 1*, pp. 3-6. The recitative style of the voice part calls to mind "Spillemenn", the first of the Ibsen songs Op. 25. In Grieg's setting of the first stanza the prolonged dominant harmony of the piano part effectively supports the poem's

Ex. I. "Prologue", Op. 44 No. 1

"Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord" af Holger Drachmann

„Erinnerungen von Berg und Fjord“ - "Reminiscences from Mountain and Fjord"

von Holger Drachmann

by Holger Drachmann

(Üb.: H. Schmidt)

(Tr.: W. H. Halverson)

1. Prolog

(På Skineggen, ind mod Jotunheim)

Prolog - Prologue

Andante molto M.M. ♩ = 69

ritard. Opus 44 Nr. 1

5

a tempo

pp

dolcissimo

Jeg ved ej hvad der rø - rer sig så sæl-somt i mit Bryst;
 Ich weiß nicht, was die See - le mir so selt-sam froh be - wegt;
 I won-der what is stir-ring now so strange-ly in my breast;

8

mon Kvin-den, som sig ven - ter, sit - trer i sam-me Lyst:
 daß hoch hin- auf ge - wal - tig das Herz in Won-ne schlägt:
 does she whom I am seek-ing trem-ble to greet her guest?

“Prologue” (cont.)

11

en A-nel-ser-nes Gy-sen med stil-le Brand i Kind,
 ein wun-der-ba-res Ah-nen so freu-dig mich durch-dringt,
 A vague an-ti-ci-pa-tion is burn-ing deep with-in;

14

og så med Et, så skjø-rer Lykken som en Ju-bel ind.
 und jauchzend laut aus vol-ler Brust mir hel-ler Ju-bel kling.
 then all at once the ju-bi-la-tion, like a shout, breaks in.

17

Jeg ved ej hvad der fø-rer mig
 Was führ-te nur hier-her mich
 I know not what is call-ing me

21

i dis-se Verd-ner ind;
 in die-se Welt von Stein?
 these snow-y peaks to climb;

hvad har jeg vel til-føel-ses
 Was hab' mit Ber-ges-zin-nen,
 my soul is not ac-cus-tom'd

“Prologue” (cont.)

25 *poco a poco cresc.*

med Sne - - fon og med Tind: _____ Jo, jo,
mit Glet - - schern ich ge - mein? Doch ja!
to vis - - ions so su - blime. _____ And yet

poco a poco cresc.

28 *più cresc.*

mit e - get lil - le fast u - se - li - ge Jeg, _____ o Fjel- de-skjød
Ich kenn' das Seh-nen: ich selbst, ich woll- te hier, _____ o Fel- sen-schoß
I hear them call-ing as high a - bove they loom: _____ "You are of us;

più cresc.

32 *f rit.*

vil ind og bli - ve Fo - ster hos dig, _____
mich wan - deln auf's Neu' zum Kind in dir! _____
come in and be re - born in our womb! _____

36 *a tempo p*

Og når dit Hjer - te rø - rer sig, så slår det i mit Bryst,
Schon spür' ich neu - es Le - - ben, das heim-lich in mir schafft,
Ah, then your heart-beat day by day would be my heart-beat too;

“Prologue” (cont.)

39

vi To, som sam-me Verd-ner sit-trer i sam-me Lyst.
 durch mei-ne A- dern rin- nen die Strö- me dei-ner Kraft:
 my wea-ry soul would quick-en, tremb-ling with life a- new.

42

poco meno p

En Strøm af Ren-hed strø-ber op højt o-ver Brø og Tind,
 mit dei-nen Gi- pfeln fühl' ich mich wach-sen him-mel-wärts,
 A-round your peaks a riv-er flows, a stream of pur-i-ty;

poco meno p

45

f *fff*

og gien-nem El- vens Hul-ken som en Fød-sels-ju-bel
 ich flieg' dem Licht ent-ge-gen "neu-ge-bo-ren" jauchzt mein
 it-an-swers ev-ry long-ing with a shout of ju-bi-

48

rit.

ind.
 Herz.
 lee.

p

C phrygian: III II vii⁶ I (b3)

description of trembling anticipation. However, the climactic D⁷ chord in bar 15 unexpectedly resolves into a minor subdominant in the next bar, a kind of “deceptive” cadenza effectively postponing the establishment of the tonic. The setting of the second stanza in bar 19-34 is rather unusual in Grieg. The harmony consists almost exclusively of sustained major and minor triads without strong functional affinity, somewhat reminiscent of certain passages in Wagner, e.g. in the prelude to *Lohengrin*. In this way Grieg succeeds in giving the music a majestic and hymnic character, in accordance with the poem’s Romantic worship of the divine nature. The piano postlude with its distinctive modal cadenza has a similar character (*Ex. 1*, last three bars).

Boris Asafev characterizes the Prologue as one of the elevated passages among Grieg’s songs (1992: 41). On the other hand, in his influential Grieg biography from the 1930s David Monrad Johansen is deeply disappointed with this song: “Here we might have expected a series of nature impressions”, [...] we are put off instead with Italian opera style and false Wagnerian pathos” (Monrad Johansen 1938: 277).

I will now go on to discuss the *Elegiske Digte*, Op. 59. Among Norwegian musicologists these settings of six poems by John Paulsen have hardly fared better than *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og Fjord*. Monrad Johansen asserts that *Elegiske Digte* Op. 59 and the Paulsen settings Op. 58 “are among Grieg’s weakest, which is not to be wondered at when one reads the generally unimportant, often utterly flat verses which could not possibly engage the deeper powers of Grieg” (ibid. 318). Half a century later Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe wrote: “Unfortunately, the Five Songs, Opus 58, and Six Elegiac Songs Opus 59 – both with texts by John Paulsen – are among his weakest. It is surprising that these banal rhymes, which are almost totally devoid of artistic feeling, could give him such enthusiasm for work” (Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe 1988: 323).

These authors seem to assign to the music the task of *heightening* the effect of the poem. The poem is considered the leading element of the song, and the music has a kind of *mimetic* function. This is a widespread view. However, alternative views have been proposed regarding the relation between text and music. Susanne Langer asserts: “When words and music come together in song, music swallows words; not only mere words and literal sentences, but even literary word-structures, poetry. [...] When a composer puts a poem to music, he annihilates the poem and makes a song” (Langer 1953: 152-53). For Langer, then, the quality of the poem has no decisive importance. Edward Cone emphasises that any reading of a poem is an interpretation: “[...] a composer cannot ‘set’ a

poem directly, for in this sense there is no such thing as ‘the poem’: what he uses is one reading of the poem – that is to say, a specific performance, for even a silent reading is a kind of performance. He must consider all aspects of the poem that are not realizable in this performance as irrelevant” (Cone 1974: 19). I think Cone’s considerations are relevant when discussing Grieg’s Paulsen songs Op. 59. Differently from in *Reiseminder fra Fjeld og fjord* Grieg here chose his poems freely: from Paulsen’s extensive book of poems *Nye melodier* [New Melodies] Grieg picked six, labeling them *Elegiske Digte*. Why did he choose exactly these six poems? They all deal with sorrow – the sorrow of life’s transitoriness, the sorrow of parting. In his personal reading of the poems Grieg seems to focus on just these aspects, apparently ignoring the mediocre quality of the poems. When he was writing these songs Grieg had recently turned 50. Russian musicologist Olga Levasheva suggests an autobiographical element in the work, namely that Grieg’s selection of poems reflected his feelings of approaching old age (Levasheva 1962: 633-34).

According to Asafev *Elegiske Digte* is “a very important work, filled with deep, concentrated emotion and humanity” (Asafev 1992: 73, my translation), while Levasheva states that all the songs “make a strong impression with their consistent intention, their unified character and their psychological depth” (Levasheva 1962: 634, my translation). Levasheva stresses the work’s coherent quality. And *Elegiske Digte* is indeed a small *song cycle*. Grieg has organized the poems in such a way that their content forms an arch, resembling the structure of *Haugtussa*:

1. “Når jeg vil dø” [Autumn Farewell]
2. “På Norges nøgne fjelde” [The Pine Three]
3. “Til Én”: “Du er den unge vår ...” [To Her: You are eternal spring ...]
4. “Til Én”: “Hvorfor svømmer dit øie ...” [To Her: O my love, why the teardrops ...]
5. “Farvel” [Farewell]
6. “Nu hviler du” [Your Eyes Are Closed forever]

The first and last poems deal with death, the second and fifth utilize images of nature as metaphors for longing, and the two central poems are more intimate love poems. Moreover, the piano part of the first and last songs differs somewhat from the others by being dominated by pianistically idiomatic arpeggio figurations, while the piano parts of the remaining songs are less fluent. See *Ex. 2*, p. 9.

The third and fifth songs of the cycle are especially impressive, with convincing compression and laconism. In “Farvel”, which is the only one of the songs written in a simple strophic form, the swan flying away seems to symbolize the loss of the beloved.

Ex. 2. "Når jeg vil dø", Op. 59 No. 1, b. 1-20

Elegiske Digte af John Paulsen

Sechs Elegische Lieder von John Paulsen - Six Elegiac Songs by John Paulsen

1. Når jeg vil dø

Herbststimmung - Autumn Farewell

(Üb: Unbekannt)

(Tr: W. H. Halverson)

Opus 59 Nr. 1

Molto andante *p*

Når lø - vet fal - der træ - fra sko - gens
 Wenn mü - de in - des Wal - des dunk - ler
 When yel - low leaves on wi - ther'd grass are

5 *mf*
 kro - ner, hen - o - ver jor - den stum og kold og
 Hal - le sacht auf den Grund die Blät - ter nie - der -
 fall - ing, cov - 'ring the earth once warm'd by sum - mer's

9 *mf*
 grå, når so - len syn - ker lavt
 weh'n, wenn tief die Son - ne sinkt,
 sun; when oth - er, bright - er climes

13 *dim.* *poco* *poco rit.*
 og far - ver, to - ner dør sag - te hen, da vil og jeg for -
 die Far - ben al - le matt ster - ben hin, dann will auch ich ver -
 the birds are call - ing, when snow - flakes fall, then will my course be

19
 gå, geh'n.
 run.

See *Ex. 3*, p. 11. In the first eight bars Grieg captures the purity of the swan by a pronounced diatonic melody and harmony. When the text describes the departure – “Med den fløj drømmevrimlen, ‘Elskte, farvel!’ ” – the music is darkening, but only gradually: The half diminished seventh chord in bar 9, which in its structure is identical to the Tristan chord, is the first sign of the change. In bars 10-15 the musical texture moves downwards, and Grieg introduces Wagnerian chromatic harmony in the piano part. In the light of the subject matter of the poem this is fitting. As Grieg mostly avoids chords that are strongly dissonant, we nevertheless do not experience a marked stylistic break with bars 1 to 8. The clearly most dissonant chord is found in bar 15: a dominant ninth chord in A major with minor ninth and minor thirteenth as an *appoggiatura* – the culmination of the emotional intensification. In the piano postlude Grieg postpones the establishment of the tonic in A major by inserting a series of modal turns, which in the context of 19th century major-minor tonality may also be interpreted as chromatic alterations. The ascending figure in bars 16 to 17, which very likely is intended as a representation of the swan vanishing out of sight, contains the note *g*, the mixolydian seventh. In the late nineteenth century the lowered seventh was sometimes included in musical representations of nature, most likely because it corresponds to the seventh tone of the overtone series. Furthermore, bars 17 to 18 suggests A aeolian, and the song concludes with a similar cadenza in bars 18 to 19 to which the *b flat* adds a phrygian colour. Here the tonic, of course, has a *picardy* third. Grieg discreetly utilizes a multitude of stylistic means in this song.

In my paper I have cited Norwegian and Russian musicologists, who evaluate these songs quite differently. The discrepancy within the evaluation seems to originate in different views on the following aspects: 1) *The texts*. Norwegian authors assert that it was impossible for Grieg to be inspired by Drachmann’s and Paulsen’s weak poems. The Russians scarcely discuss the quality of the poems at all; instead they focus on the character of the music in relation to the overall message of the texts. 2) *The cyclic character*. The Russian authors seem to be more attentive to the cyclic element in these two works than the Norwegians. 3) *The musical style*. Monrad Johansen seems to regret the Central European influence in both these song cycles, and especially the influence of Wagner. Generally speaking, Monrad Johansen’s opinions are ideologically coloured in the sense that he consistently favours works by Grieg that expose a so-called *Norwegian* tone. “The Norwegian tone” is difficult to find in these two works. Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe find the Paulsen songs “stylistically vacillating” (1988: 323). The three

Ex. 3. "Farvel", Op. 59 No. 5

5. Farvel

Abschied - Goodbye

(Üb.: Unbekannt) (Tr.: W. H. Halverson)

Opus 59 Nr. 5

Poco andante *p*

1. En sva - ne strøg mod syd, hvad
 2. Så ren som sne på fjeld, du
 1. Nach Sü - den zog ein Schwan, es
 2. So rein wie Ber - ges - schnee glänzt,
 1. Red glow - ing eve - ning sun, a
 2. Thou art as gleam - ing white as

glans - fuldt punkt mod him - len i høst - ens kvæld! Med den fløj drøm - me - vrim - len,
 sjæl med vin - ger hvi - de! i høst - ens kvæld nu vis - ne løv blot gli - de,
 glänzt sein weiß' Ge - fie - der in luft - ger Höh'. Mit ihm floh'n al - le Lie - der,
 See - le, dein Ge - fie - der! Wo - hin ich seh', fällt wel - kes Laub her - nie - der,
 swan se - rene - ly fly - ing through au - tumn sky; my cher - ish'd fan - cies dy - ing.
 snow on moun - tains ly - ing; through au - tumn sky but wi - ther'd leaves are fly - ing.

cresc.

„Elsk - te, far - vel! — Elsk - te, far - vel! —
 Lieb - chen, a - de! — Lieb - chen, a - de! —
 Dar - ling, good - bye! — Dar - ling, good - bye! —

dim. ten. rit. a tempo

dim. pp

ppp

Russian authors, on the other hand, seem to regard the stylistic diversity of the songs more as a means to enhance the musical expression.

As you may have deduced from my discussion, I first and foremost agree with the Russians. However, I do not esteem these two opuses equally. As a whole, *Rejseminder fra fjeld og fjord* is not a very attractive work, in spite of the interesting cyclic design and the original first song. It will probably only infrequently be performed also in the future. However, *Elegiske Digte* obviously deserves to be heard more often. Based on his personal reading of Paulsen's poems Grieg has created a consistent work with several beautiful and impressive details.

References

- Asafev, Boris 1992 [1942]: *Grieg* (transl. from the Russian into Norwegian by Asbjørn Ø. Eriksen). Oslo: Solum.
- Benestad, Finn and Schjelderup-Ebbe, Dag 1988: *Edvard Grieg. The Man and the Artist* (transl. by William H. Halverson and Leland B. Sateren). University of Nebraska Press.
- Cone, Edward T. 1974: *The Composer's Voice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Enge, Håvard 2008: "Close Reading/Close Singing. Poetry, Music and Voice in the Art Song." Paper delivered at *15th Nordic Congress of Musicology*, Oslo 2008.
- Eriksen, Asbjørn Ø. 1998: "Edvard Griegs Paulsen-sanger op. 59 (*Elegiske Digte*) – kunstnerisk ubetydelige eller ufortjent undervurderte?", in *Studia Musicologica Norvegica* 24, 105-121.
- Foster, Beryl 2007 [1990]: *The Songs of Edvard Grieg*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
- Jarrett, Sandra 2003: *Edvard Grieg and his Songs*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Johansen, David Monrad- 1938: *Edvard Grieg* (transl. by Madge Robertson). New York: Princeton University Press.
- Langer, Susanne K. 1953: *Feeling and Form*. New York: Charles Scribner.
- Levasheva, Olga 1962: *Edvard Grieg. Ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* [Edvard Grieg. Life and Work]. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe muzykalnoe izdatelstvo.
- Leytes, Ruth 1967: *Pesni Griga* [Grieg's Songs]. Moscow: Muzyka.