

Grieg's Untold Triumph: The Piano Concerto, Gustav Mahler,  
and a New Approach to the Sonata Aesthetic

by

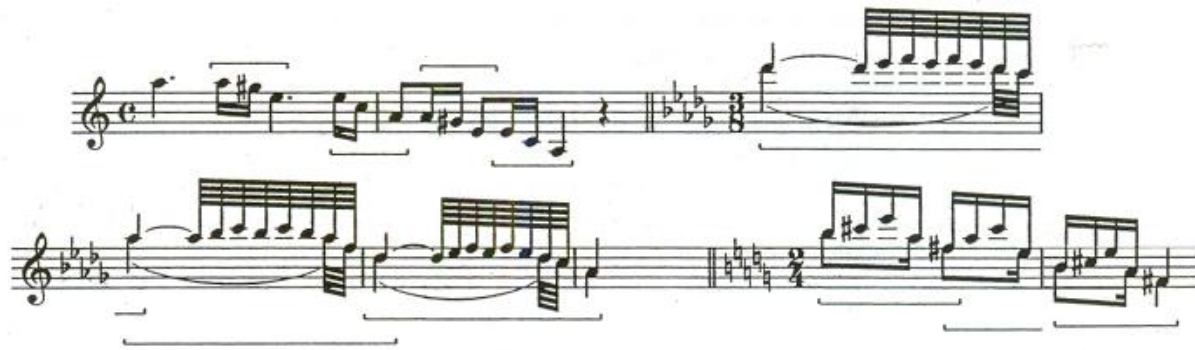
Gregory Martin

There's no time for elaborate introductions today, but I'd like to start with a (very) brief survey of the way in which the concerto, especially the piano concerto, developed from the three separate and independent movement-structure of, say, Mozart to a more unified conception during the course of the 19th-century. Through the early canonic examples of Beethoven (nos. 4 and 5), which elide movements two and three, and the Weber *Konzertstücke*, we arrive at the Mendelssohn concerti – works that solved the tonal dilemma of the double-exposition model while simultaneously eliding all three movements. The Schumann concerto – the example which has earned the greatest number of comparisons with Grieg's effort – replaces a true slow middle movement with an intermezzo (and in so doing strikes a resemblance with Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata); there are other concertino works by Schumann which further contribute to the progression toward a more unified design. And if the first movement of his piano concerto had not been originally conceived as an independent fantasy, perhaps the final product would have been a different thing altogether. The Liszt concerti likewise decay the double-bar as barrier. The *attacca* into the finale notwithstanding, the Grieg concerto, with its full stop at the end of each movement, hardly seems to contribute much to this process. It is my intention, however, to propose a new way of listening to this warhorse, and a new, commensurate way of interpreting the sonata aesthetic within it.

I have long felt that in his concerto – as well as in the three violin sonatas – Grieg's efforts to build a large structure take on the shape of that most Griegian of designs: ternary form. In other words, these 3-movement pieces are macrocosmic representatives of his approach to ABA layout. He was obviously very comfortable in this form, and it will be argued that the structural choices he made when working in this capacity had greater implications when he turned to multi-movement composition. That is, the first and third movements act as something of parallel statements, contrasted by the second movement's affective differences, though while often utilizing aspects of the outer movements' materials. This is not too unlike the manner in which Liszt extended a broad sonata design across the different movements of his B minor sonata (and indeed, given the nature of Grieg's relationship with Liszt it is not too much to suppose that this hadn't occurred to Grieg himself).

Let's first briefly examine the relationship between the outer movements and the second movement.

The piano enters in the outer two almost immediately with bravura cadenza-like passages, while in the middle movement the orchestra is given the entire exposition. When the piano does enter, though, it is with a descending cascade and a consequent ecstatic motion upward designed to echo the traversal of the keyboard demonstrated in the piano entrance of the outer movements. The link is strengthened when the melodic and harmonic parallels are laid bare, as in Ex. 1:



The Grieg motive – or derivations from it, for remember that Grieg came from a time before gestural shape had been robbed of its motivic significance – in the pianistic flourishes of all three movements further tie the overall structure together, as does the use of dance topics. While both of the outer movements demonstrate the use of folk dances, the middle movement signals a topical union in its sarabande quality. It is so rarely played like one, but the slightest study indicates the dominance of beat two within its slow triple meter and the hemiola implications at its cadence points. Furthermore, the chromatic mediant restatement of the piano entrance at m. 39 (F-flat major in the key of D-flat major) mirrors the D-flat major tonality of the second movement in the global landscape of A minor. And the harp-like piano arpeggios in the middle section parallel those in the development of the first movement as well as those that occupy the more developmental passages in the finale; at each instant, the development consists primarily of sequential reiterations of the main thematic material. Again, such use of gesture (the harp) is vital in Grieg's music, and it is significant to note that this figure and sound occurs at the same formal juncture in each movement, and that it is in tandem with sustained or tremolo strings and the flute taking a leading melodic role in each case. Such relationships contribute greatly to the sense of overall identity.

For the remainder of our discussion on the broad ternary design on display in the concerto, we will concentrate on the parallels between the first and third movements. While they do not appear to use the same thematic material (other than the Grieg motive in the piano passages noted before), there is an aspect of thematic transformation across them that ties the two movements together: the melodic fragment that closes the first theme – marked by the introduction of the triplet figure into the context of a thus far purely duple music – evolves via the lyric interlude between the first movement’s primary and secondary themes to become the lyrical F major episode of the finale, Ex. 2:



When we examine aspects of form, structure, topic, and affect, the similarities between the outer movements become rather uncanny. Both begin with an opening flourish that spans the entire compass of the piano, and then initiate the movement proper with two theme-groups in the tonic of A minor. In each movement, the first theme evinces folk-like rhythms in duple meter and is replete with thirds in the melody, while the second primary theme (also folk-like) is of a more scherzando quality, with the primary accent on the off-beat. In both movements, it is this second of the primary themes

that is charged with moving the tonality from the tonic to the new key area (C major both times).

Each movement introduces the Mixolydian flat-seventh scale-degree in the second theme as a device to mark its more lyrical nature; it was, of course, this characteristic's incarnation in the coda of the finale that so caught Liszt's imagination during his first read-through of the concerto in Rome, at which point he jumped up and exclaimed "G-natural, G-natural not G-sharp!"

There is a common sense of ratio between the two outer movements, with the finale's large bi-partite coda balancing the cadenza of the opening movement. The F major theme in the finale is proportionally equivalent to the development section in a sonata design; its closed and self-contained nature, redolent of the Romantic character piece, suggests a kinship with the "Im Legendenton" section of Schumann's Fantasy, Op. 17. The outer movements also bring a mutual approach to framing. In the first movement, the opening flourish returns at the end, while in the finale the introductory arpeggio/scale figure is given an heroic, valedictory persona in the last pages of the work.

This sectional parallelism between the first and third movements necessitates a certain kind of layout, one that would allow more deliberate formal demarcation, especially vis-à-vis the sonata form of the first movement. The aesthetic decision that accompanied this was absolutely a conscious one: indeed, it was something Grieg acknowledged importing into the G minor string quartet in a letter to Frants Beyer in 1884:

You know that in my larger works – in order to enhance the architectonic effect and to emphasize the contrast of the themes – I have the habit or weakness or whatever I should call it of

concluding in the home key before the second theme is introduced rather than, like most composers, using a transitional passage that leads imperceptibly to that theme. The same pattern occurs again after the return of the first theme following the development section. (*Letters*, 38)

In other words, why – when the principal governing agent of the sonata design is the dynamic or tension created by the opposition of tonalities and themes – would one mollify those so-important contrasts by composing transitions that ease one aspect into the other? This approach of course answers a number of criticisms leveled at Grieg's handling of larger forms, but – more importantly – I think that Grieg may have found such full stops to signify a markedly Nordic element, a notion supported by a look at the three violin sonatas, their compositional contexts, and Grieg's descriptions of them.

The first sonata was written during his residency in Denmark during the mid-1860s, of which he wrote:

Then came the Copenhagen period, when I – in association with Nordic art and Nordic artists, in the process of studying Nordic sagas and Nordic folk life – began to understand and to find myself. ...

...This was in 1864-65. There in Copenhagen, in daily association with Nordraak and other young people who were enthusiastic about everything Scandinavian, in a short time I wrote many songs, *Humoresques* op. 6, *Sonata* op. 7, and *Sonata* op. 8. (*Letters*, 305-6)

As with the last movement of the Op. 7 piano sonata<sup>1</sup>, both sonata-design movements of Op. 8 firmly articulate the end of the first theme, cadencing in the tonic of F major, and then initiating the secondary theme in A minor:



Ex 3a: Sonata in F, Op. 8, Movement 1 exposition, end of first theme into secondary theme



Ex 3b: Sonata in F, Op. 8, Movement 3 exposition, end of first theme into secondary theme

The Finale also displays noteworthy early examples of typically Norwegian patterns and textures that were to figure prominently in Grieg's later work, particularly the scherzando passage that anticipates the "March of the Dwarves" and the open fifth drones with Lydian-inflected grace notes that would

<sup>1</sup> The first movement has a clear half-cadence.

later make a more confident appearance in *Pictures of Folk-life*, Op. 19. Of this Grieg later wrote: “this use of G# in the key of D – was the thing that drove me wild ... The augmented fourth also occurs in peasant folk songs. It is a holdover from one or another of the old scales. But which one?” (*Letters*, 349)

Despite such obvious Norwegian inspirations in Op. 8, it was Op. 13 that Grieg described as having “nationalist tendencies.” He surely meant this to apply to structural aspects as well as thematic ones; again, we notice distinct cadences between themes:



Ex 4: Sonata in G, Op. 13, Movement 1 recapitulation, end of first theme into secondary theme

By contrast, the C minor sonata and its “wider horizons” – written two years before the so-called ‘Cosmopolitan Credo’ of 1889 – uses a shared accompanimental figure to bridge the themes:



Ex 5: Sonata in Cm, Op. 45, Movement 1, primary theme into secondary theme

Furthermore, in both of the first two sonatas, the end of the Exposition is marked by a definitive cadence, while in Op. 45 the transition into the development is done without formal demarcation:

Ex 6: Sonata in Cm, Op. 45, Movement 1, transition from Exposition into Development

Ex 6: Sonata in Cm, Op. 45, Movement 1, transition from Exposition into Development

Grieg noted a parallel between such sudden juxtapositions (as opposed to smooth transitions) and the Norwegian character in his famous letter-insert to Henry Finck, writing to the American musicologist that

the folksong is a musical reflection of the innermost soul of the people. . . . The basic feature of the Norwegian folk song . . . is a deep sense of melancholy that can suddenly change into wild, unbridled humor. Mysterious gloom and unrestrained wildness — these are the contrasting elements in the Norwegian folk song (*Letters*, 231)

In his discussion of the E minor piano sonata's second movement, David Monrad Johansen found such an approach to form to be reflective of Norwegian landscape:

The principle of form, the chief features of which are precisely surprise, alternation, rapidly changing pictures which yet are held together and comprehended in one general aspect, shows the extreme closeness with which Grieg's art is bound to the scenes and spirit of his homeland, to the mountains and fjords of the Westland. (72)

Indeed, the relationship between this quality and the Norwegian landscape was something Grieg himself hinted at in the previously-cited letter to Beyer regarding the quartet performance in Rome: "One's own inner life of the soul expressed in the natural scenery of Hardanger." (*Letters*, 39) The concerto was not written in Hardanger, however, but – like those pieces written during his artistic

awakening as discussed earlier – in Denmark, and in its sonata approach may be found the influence of a particularly noteworthy mentor from that period: Hans Christian Andersen.

“When I went to Copenhagen in 1863,” Grieg wrote, “I began to breathe Nordic air and got in contact with Danish poets, both personally and musically. This group also included Hans Christian Andersen, the writer of fairytales.” (*Letters*, 230) Writing on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Andersen’s birth, he opined that a “longing for the child – the lost child! – in ourselves is the hidden spring in Andersen’s works, for the sound of which we and the whole world are constantly listening.” (*Letters*, 163) Grieg’s diaries are dotted with quotes and exclamations from Andersen, he repeatedly compared the reception of Mozart with Andersen’s *Snow Queen*, and in 1889 he told an English newspaper that “one of the first who understood how to estimate his work was the great Danish poet.” (Monrad Johansen, 55) A year before he composed the Concerto, Edvard and Nina Hagerup were married; among the items Grieg requested his mother to send to their new home in Christiania (Oslo) was Andersen’s works in twelve volumes; the composer later maintained that “many will do as I intend to do: we will read these books more than once.” (*Letters*, 163) There can be little argument, then, that Andersen was an important source of encouragement for Grieg during the 1860s, the time when he was surrounding himself with fellow Scandinavians in search of an authentic voice. Given Grieg’s sensitivity to language and literature, as captured in his later correspondences with writers like Ibsen, Bjørnson, and Garborg, as well as his affinity to Robert Schumann – a composer who took profound inspiration from literary models, and about whom Grieg wrote a remarkably insightful article for *The*

*Century Monthly Illustrated Magazine* in 1893<sup>2</sup> – it seems unlikely that his compositions would not be affected by aspects, particularly structural ones, of the literature he loved. On such grounds, I'd like to propose that during those crucial formative years in Copenhagen, surrounded by his Nordic brethren of which Andersen was so obviously a focal point, Grieg may have found in the montage-like manner of the Danish master's writings – a literary parallel to the author's passion for collage creation – a decidedly Nordic formal construct, a model for his emerging musical voice and one redolent, perhaps, as Monrad Johansen observed, of the landscape he loved so much (Ex. 7). In his biography of Hans Christian Andersen, Jens Andersen – no relation to the author – writes: "Andersen was amazingly clever at cutting and pasting, not only with scissors and glue pot but also with his pen. We find literary montages everywhere in his novels, plays, poems, and fairy tales." (501) This manner of sudden movement from one perspective, narrative, or authorial voice into another without transition is exactly the kind of musical construction we have observed in the music most marked by Grieg as having been composed in a way reflective of his Norwegian identity. When the young composer brought his highly demarcated *Humoresques* to Neils Gade, the elder master asked "Tell me Grieg, is this stuff supposed to be Norwegian?" The young composer replied "Yes, Herr Professor, it is." (*Letters*, 416)

In the concerto, particularly the sonata design first movement, this technique is perfected into the side-by-side placement of "theme blocks." In this schema, the second primary theme is charged

---

<sup>2</sup> Grieg's closeness to Schumann's music is expressed in no uncertain terms in his concert programs in these important years: a recital in Karlshamn, Sweden towards the end of his time at Leipzig included *Kreisleriana*, and in his first recital in Bergen after graduating from the conservatory (21 May 1862), he played the piano in the Quartet, Op. 47.

with moving to the new key, rather than a transitional passage using pre-established motivic material.

When mapped out, the exposition looks something like Ex. 8:

Opening	First Primary	Second Primary	Lyric Interlude	Secondary
Flourish	Theme (Am)	Theme (Am)	(V7/C major)	Theme (C)
mm. 1-6	mm. 7-30	mm. 31-42	mm. 43-48	mm. 49-72

This arrangement allows Grieg to construct outer movements which bear the markedly similar structural delineations mentioned previously, parallels that become especially obvious when placed side by side, as in Ex. 9:

Movement 1:

Opening flourish  
 Primary Theme 1 (Am)  
 Primary Theme 2 (Am→C)  
 Secondary Theme (flat seventh)

Ritornello

Development

Primary Theme 1 (Am)  
 Primary Theme 2 (Am→A)  
 Secondary Theme (flat seventh)

Ritornello link to cadenza

Cadenza and coda

Movement 3:

Opening flourish  
 Primary Theme 1 (Am)  
 Primary Theme 2 (Am→C)

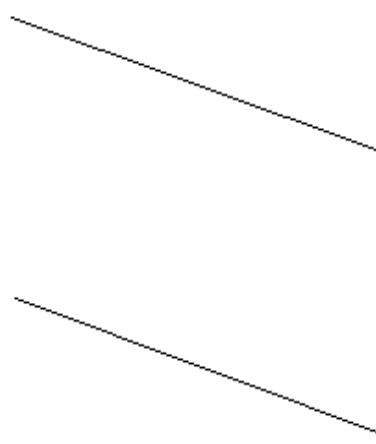
Ritornello (Rondo theme statement)

Secondary Theme/B section (flat seventh)

Primary Theme 1 (Am)  
 Primary theme 2 (Am→A)

Ritornello link to cadenza

Cadenza and coda  
 (with secondary theme/flat seventh)



Such a layout leads our attention to a subtle, more subcutaneous aspect of Grieg's global ABA plan: the use of common accompanimental or tail figures. Even if Grieg had truly never learned a thing at that "damned Leipzig conservatory" (a sentiment that is obviously suspect), when he returned to Bergen in 1862 and initiated his private course of study in the classical masters – a practice begun in Germany: "What Reinecke failed to teach me I tried to pick up from Mozart and Beethoven, whose quartets I diligently studied on my own initiative" (*Diaries*, 83) – he would likely have found, as Czerny noted in his study on the Beethoven piano works, that "in Beethoven's works [and we could easily insert any number of other composers here, not least of which Haydn] we often find that he grounds the structure of his pieces on single and apparently unimportant notes." This is exactly what Grieg does to link and unify his theme blocks across the first and third movements, and this may be the most significant – because most fundamental to the structure – of the parallelism joining the outer movements.

For example, joining the two primary themes are the half-cadential gestures in the first and third movements, respectively (Ex. 10):

The image displays two musical excerpts, labeled Ex. 10, illustrating half-cadential gestures. The first excerpt on the left is in G major and features a piano (*p*) dynamic. It shows a half-cadential gesture in the first movement, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The second excerpt on the right is in G minor and features a forte (*f*) dynamic. It shows a half-cadential gesture in the third movement, also with a treble clef and a bass clef. Both excerpts consist of two staves each, with a brace on the left side. The first excerpt has a treble clef on the top staff and a bass clef on the bottom staff. The second excerpt has a treble clef on the top staff and a bass clef on the bottom staff. The first excerpt is in G major (one sharp) and the second is in G minor (two flats).

In both of these movements, the contrasting secondary theme is introduced by a tag idea in which the new material is lead into by a scalar descent in the bass (Ex. 11):

Example 11 shows two musical excerpts. The first excerpt is in piano (*p*) and marked *molto rit.* (ratto). It features a treble staff with a whole rest and a bass staff with a scalar descent of quarter notes. The second excerpt shows a treble staff with a series of chords and a bass staff with a scalar descent of quarter notes, both connected by a slur.

Within the opening movement's second theme, phrases are punctuated and joined by a figure derived from the tag that had been used to link the two primary themes (Ex 12),

Example 12 shows two musical excerpts. The first excerpt is in piano (*p*) and features a treble staff with a series of chords and a bass staff with a series of chords, both connected by a slur. The second excerpt shows a treble staff with a series of chords and a bass staff with a series of chords, both connected by a slur.

while the two principal themes of the finale are unified by a common bass gesture (Ex. 13):

Example 13 shows two musical excerpts. The first excerpt features a treble staff with a series of chords and a bass staff with a series of chords, both connected by a slur. The second excerpt features a treble staff with a series of chords and a bass staff with a series of chords, both connected by a slur. The bass staff in the second excerpt is marked *fz* (forzando).

If Grieg found in such a design replete with formal demarcations a distinctly Nordic voice, it must be admitted that the next outstanding exponent of this expression – Jean Sibelius – turned instead to the gradual development of thematic material as a musical representation of great distance and glacial movement, the vast reaches of the Finnish topography. Rather ironically, the architectural aesthetic espoused by Grieg turned out to be one adopted in the later 19<sup>th</sup>-century by German composers. A particularly recognizable example occurs in the opening sonata-form movement of Gustav Mahler's sixth symphony.

As in Grieg's concerto, the first theme group is in A minor and is responsible for negotiating the arrival of the secondary theme, though on its own terms and without a true modulation. At the end of this passage (m. 76, Ex. 14), the global dominant serves as a point of departure into the new theme (in F major) without ever really transitioning at all. This layout is, of course, analogous to the technique which Grieg uses in his concerto. The size of the theme blocks in Mahler's work are necessarily bigger and the number of them fewer because of the notably different scope with which the two men were working, but the philosophy is consistent: the arrival of themes without having been guided there by the hand of already familiar material.

“Artists like Bach and Beethoven erected churches and temples on the heights,” Grieg wrote, “I only wanted ... to build dwellings for men in which they might feel happy and at home.” Edvard Grieg's dwellings are houses with room leading into room, houses without than the long, elaborate hallways of Beethoven and Brahms. In the piano concerto, a large scale application of the rhetoric he employed so



brilliantly in his most intimate confessions – the ternary form – is employed to construct a work of palatial proportions. With this majestic utterance, Grieg built not only a timeless masterpiece, but a very fine mansion, indeed.