

*The following paper is based on a similar presentation at CHARM (AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music) Symposium 6, held at Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham 11-13 September 2008. Although there is some material in common there is also a considerable amount of new material here and the two papers can be considered as complimentary. For those that are interested the CHARM paper can be found at:*

[http://www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/about/symposia/p7\\_12.html](http://www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/about/symposia/p7_12.html)

## **Being The Go-Between<sup>1</sup>: Recreating Grieg's 1903 Paris recordings**

**'To perform in public is the most frightening thing I know. And yet to hear my works brought to life in a wonderful performance in accordance with my intentions – that I cannot resist.'**<sup>2</sup>

There has always seemed to us to exist a curious anomaly between the way most performing musicians and musicologists approach the available written and aural source material of a work they are studying. Something has always seemed a little out of step here. Certainly in our time we tend to approach any written material, particularly the musical notation contained in the score, with a veneration often bordering on the biblical. A new manuscript or a new reading of a well-studied one, often yields changes that make existing published editions largely unusable even though the new discoveries may be relatively minor. We all (and I include ourselves in this) bow long and low to the god of the ur-text.

On the other hand we are surprisingly cavalier when it comes to approaching what is the real reason for all these dots and dashes; music as sound when it is created by the composers themselves.

I doubt any of us would disagree that in the mind of the great composer a piece is first born as imagined sound (or actual sound if they compose on the piano) and that this evolving sound image is then given some form of permanence in the very imperfect recipe we call 'the score' ('more or less inadequately' to quote Bartok<sup>3</sup>). But when the score is in its final form it inevitably assumes the role as primary source object, eclipsing all recorded material, even when the composer was an acknowledged performer and recorded, as in the case of Rachmaninoff for example, a very substantial amount of his own music, often recording pieces more than once over a long period of time and giving us ample opportunity to see what was a fleeting inspiration of the moment and what was more deeply imbedded in the composer's aural conception of the piece.

But of course there are good reasons why this anomaly between the written and the sounded exists, some are technical and are to do with recordings themselves and some are to do with what is going on in our heads.

As far as the original recordings are concerned there are many things to unravel. For example we simply don't know exactly what speed these discs were recorded at. This may seem like an insurmountable problem but in truth it is not if one takes the time to develop the sensitivity to the material. In fact the human brain is, even if you are not consciously aware of it, very sensitive to incredibly small changes of timing and so we believe it is possible to get very close indeed to the

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1 The title of this paper is taken from the celebrated novel by L.P. Hartley *'The Go – Between'* published in 1953. The prologue begins with the memorable and highly apposite line: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'

2 Edvard Grieg letter to Oscar Meyer February 12<sup>th</sup> 1906 *Letters to Colleagues and Friends* Benestad/Halverson p.528

3 "Mechanical Music", *Essays*, 298

original playback speed by working with the recordings. Certainly, there seems no doubt that the piano Grieg used in Paris was tuned at a lower pitch than modern counterparts, as a playback at modern pitch simply sounds impossible even to the casual listener. There is also considerable historical evidence for this as well as the irrefutable evidence of our ears.

Much more problematic is the instability of the original recordings. The Paris branch of the Gramophone and typewriter company were quick to realise the potential of the new medium for recording great performers and composers but their enthusiasm was not matched by the technical skill of the London based engineers. All of the recordings that were made in Paris at this time suffer from the same fault, which resulted in a wax disc that was simply impossible to deal with before the advent of some fairly advanced computer processing. This distorts the pitch and, more insidiously, the timing of Grieg's playing.

If the playback speed is wrong, even by a very small amount, then the internal workings of the performance subtly start to implode, the playing no longer makes sense and we begin to instinctively reject it, both intellectually and, perhaps even more important, emotionally. This is not a conscious process, which makes it all the more insidious. In fact few musicians are aware of what is happening here and their 'rejection' becomes centred on the performance rather than being correctly analysed and ascribed to a speed anomaly.

We also feel it is essential to work from the primary source material, and not work from commercially available CD transfers that are almost always incorrectly pitched and inevitably over-processed for use in research. The Simax transfers, which are still the main source for most listeners of the Grieg recordings, were pioneering in their time, but are for the most part incorrectly pitched and always highly unstable in pitch and speed, as are the original discs. We have spent a considerable amount of time in establishing what we feel is the correct playback speed and have used direct transfers made from the original 78s, which have been stabilised to run without the deviations inherent in the original recordings.

Let's listen to an example of where we are. Here is a little duet between Grieg in 1903 pitch corrected to A =434 and pitch stabilised,<sup>4</sup> and Sigurd on the Trolldhaugen Steinway from 1892 which we have restored for this recording to the more historically correct pitch of A = 436.

As you will hear it cuts between the two in a more or less arbitrary way:

### ***Music Example 1: Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen, Opus 65 no. 6***

Our reasons for embarking on this massive project – begun over three years ago now - are twofold. Firstly we want to understand at a really fundamental level how Grieg's playing actually functions and develop from that methods and principles that can be incorporated in the interpretation of his music today.

Secondly we feel Grieg the performer has been much underrated, in fact virtually ignored outside this circle of course, and we want to create something that gives a good impression of exactly how he sounded because in our opinion he plays his own music better than anyone else captured on record. We have been nothing if not obsessive in this quest (ask our wives).

The greatest musical minds seem to display an incredible density in their playing and

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4 This is also without noise processing so you will have to listen past the wall of surface noise but the resulting, unprocessed, piano sound is remarkably vibrant and incredibly similar to the sound of the Trolldhaugen piano as recorded last year. There is an inevitable trade off in noise processing that effects the sound and the inner detail of the performance that renders processed recordings unsuitable as source material for detailed study.

remarkably little of the often pretty but non-functional surface glitter. We would argue that what is most important is to understand and utilise these fundamental elements and resist the temptation to cherry pick from the array of obvious details on offer. It is certainly incredibly difficult to fully understand the fundamental processes of a performance. These processes can remain hidden by the more apparent elements but to find and understand them is to find the key.

I should say now that each reconstruction took a large amount of time to record with much of the material recorded over 50 times – in all we recorded well over 1800 individual takes. The extremely complex post production stage has meant developing new - and extending existing - techniques with each little piece taking weeks of work to get really right and sound natural, and we are not finished yet!

During the process of recreating these performances certain features of Grieg's playing gradually appeared to us as being fundamental to his style:

The nervous and anxious are a strong personal characteristic in his playing. The pulse and tempo are constantly affected by minute changes of direction, creating complex undercurrents in often visually simple structures.

This element is also closely related to the issue of swing or "schwung", which Grieg himself clearly regarded as an essential element in performance (he talks about it a number of times in his correspondence) and he was certainly not alone in this as it too was an essential part of the style of many of the greatest musicians who have recorded.

Through our work we have come to realise that this particular element is constantly present in Grieg's performances and of fundamental importance. The very word 'Swing' is a slightly woolly expression, which most of us associate with commercial music and jazz. Unravelling the many secrets behind Grieg's peculiar form of 'schwung' has been a particularly rewarding element for us to investigate using the method of re-creation, as there is hardly any element in performance that suffers more from verbal explanation or notation than swing, and yet this is of such importance in Grieg's style of performance.

In trying to describe this complex phenomenon we have found it useful to make a very general distinction between the kind of swing found in popular, music styles and a kind one could call 'functional' or 'structural' swing. The first kind is what most people today would recognize as "swing" and found in both contemporary popular and classical music performances. This is basically static, centred around a reoccurring and regular beat – and of course most often related to dance.

The 'structural' form of swing - lets call that 'Schwung' from here on in - lives alongside the static kind in Grieg's performances. Typical of 'Schwung' is the building of larger divisions over and above the shorter, regular shapes, very often working *against* the obvious paper structure of the score. This frequently forms *irregular* phrase structures and centres around the *less* weighted parts of the bar, and very importantly, is often created by opposing tendencies in the material. So at the same point in a performance we hear various lines with a different sense of direction or orientation. We see some of this in action when we look at the recording of the Minuett from the piano sonata a little later.

Grieg, the composer, is generally criticised for his schematic structure and the lack of thematic development. The seams of the structure are so very apparent on the page and almost inevitably reinforced in performance. However, when listening for the first time to Grieg playing, for example his famous lyric piece *Sommerfugl* (Butterfly), one can have problems grasping the

structure, at least with a modern set of ears. We certainly had some difficulty understanding what he was doing here. The impression of this performance and certainly of *Til våren* (To Spring) is of an improvisatory style of playing, evolving as if the shape and the length of the musical units are being decided on as the pieces unfold. What our studies have shown us, however, is the presence of firm structural patterns on which a given phrase is moulded, for example where Grieg performs the same melodic material in a surprisingly fixed, but extremely sophisticated and complex way, even in very different textural contexts. This is not to say that it sounds stiff or academic in any way, far from it. He creates a dynamic structure, a framework that enables him to form the smaller elements with the freshness of the newly made. Here is the theme of 'Til våren'. Inspired, yes, fresh certainly and far richer in detail than anything written in the score, but perhaps surprisingly not of the moment:

### ***Music example 2: To Spring, Opus 43 no. 6, opening (Grieg)***

Here again is the theme of *Til våren* in its second appearance in the piece in a very different textural setting. The structural pattern of the melody, although very intricate, is remarkably similar in both appearances. This is clearly no 'will-o-the-wisp' treatment but, we would argue, deeply embedded in the composers aural conception of the theme but not transmitted in the paper notation.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Music example 3: To Spring, Sigurd, re-issue***

What seems like the very obvious structure of the theme is very deliberately underplayed. . Not only does he eliminate the very prominent structures as they appear on paper, but he creates over and above that a new contour, released from the confines of the score. And the score of course gives us no hint of this flight.

This might seem like a simple principle, but it affects the phrase structure fundamentally and consequently the character of the piece. Both in a piece like this and, for example, Sommerfugl, Grieg the performer confounds the critics of Grieg the composer, who constantly sing the mantra of lack of development and schematic formal structure. It is very interesting to see how Grieg himself shows how the key to solving this problem lies in the actual performance.

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5 . Grieg spins a complex web here as elsewhere and the level of detailing along with a wish for highly charged propulsive forward motion reminds one of the many descriptions of a very different contemporary who was a composer and performer of the highest order – Gustav Mahler. Mahler's obsessive desire to capture performance details in written notation was an altogether new one at the time. But one wonders how would we perform his music today if his scores were as simply presented as Grieg's and his contemporaries?

The important structural elements that we pointed out in 'Til våren' are by no means an individual feature of Grieg's playing, but a significant element in the playing style of a number of the greatest performers of the time. Listen now to how Rachmaninoff follows the exact same principles in the performance of his Prelude Op. 3 nr. 2, c# minor.

It is important to note here that he does the same detailed shaping here in all three of his recordings.

exp. 1

here.....

and again.....

The image displays a musical score for Rachmaninoff's Prelude Op. 3 nr. 2, c# minor. The score is written for piano and consists of seven systems of music. The first system includes dynamic markings such as *ppp* and *Andante*. The second system includes *ppp* and *Andante*. The third system includes *dim.* and *mf*. The fourth system includes *ppp*. The fifth system includes *dim.* and *ppp*. The sixth system includes *ff*. The seventh system includes *ppp*. A red box highlights a specific passage in the seventh system, and the text "and again....." is placed to its left. The text "here....." is placed to the right of the second system.

### *Music example 4, RACHMANINOFF: Prelude in C# minor*

Another important area of investigation is the structurally unstable transitional areas within a piece. The performance of transitions, both within smaller and larger sections of a work can lift a performance to the level of the exceptional and can powerfully articulate our perception of a work's structure. One of the most significant aspects of this is the introduction of overlapping or eliding of phrases, with each usually pointing in opposing directions, when for example a phrase clearly has a point of arrival far ahead, but is overlapped by another impulse taken from the character of the succeeding phrase.

There is perhaps a visual analogy here for any of you film buffs in the technique developed at the time used to great effect by David Lean and his editor in *Laurence of Arabia* and used countless times since, where an edit to a new scene is preceded by a couple of seconds by music or a sound effect taken from the following scene. We are not really aware of what is done here as we watch but are powerfully influenced by its effect, which joins in our minds two seemingly disparate elements.

One can find literally hundreds of examples of this kind of slight of hand in Grieg's performances, There is a particularly clear example in *Til våren*.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C# minor. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The first system includes markings such as 'cresc. molto', 'f', and 'sosten.'. The second system includes 'ritard.', 'ff', 'p a tempo', and 'dim. e rit. poco a poco'. The notation features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, and is annotated with performance instructions like 'Ped.' and 'una corda'.

### *Music example 5, To Spring, Grieg*

There is a strong tendency now among performers to reinforce formal shapes rather than encourage contradictions, to clarify rather than mystify. So a phrase ending will often be dynamically reduced to match a descending melodic shape, perhaps with a slight rhythmic softening and phrasing off, perhaps also a slight easing of general tempo. All these small events

delineate structure and add to stability and clarity but are most probably counter to the intentions of most composers in the romantic period who expected greater complexity and internal conflict in the finest presentations of their works.

Let us quickly go back to another previous example and listen to a very good example of this same idea, see score example 1, 3<sup>rd</sup> system bar 1 beat 4.

*Listen to music example 4 again, RACHMANINOFF Prelude in C# minor.*

Generally speaking, it is hard to find any transition in Grieg's performance and with many other performers of the time where all tendencies point in the same direction. And when it actually happens, it is usually introduced as a striking effect.<sup>6</sup>

The particular effect of linear shaped changes of tempo within a context of general flexibility can also be a very powerful tool in articulating musical form. Here are two examples which in principle are doing exactly the same thing: in a context of apparently free and flexible phrasing we suddenly hear an almost mechanically measured ritardando leading into a new section, dramatically emphasising and highlighting the new or repeated material. The effect in this case is a strong feeling of release as we move into the new section. Let us first listen to Grieg:

*Music example 6, Grieg: Butterfly, Opus 43 no. 1 (Transition to the reprise 1<sup>st</sup> time)*

<sup>6</sup> Another example of this phenomenon, recorded in the same year as Grieg, and going contrary to a very solid paper structure is Joseph Joachim's recording of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brahms Hungarian Dance. Here he underplays the start of the main theme's return in dynamics and tempo retaining the character of the previous section and gradually unfolding into the impassioned theme. This eliding is again apparently at odds with the notation but so natural in effect.

And here is Percy Grainger recorded in 1925 playing Chopin's 3<sup>rd</sup> Sonata in b minor, the transition into the second theme of the 1<sup>st</sup> movement::

*Music example 7, Grainger/Chopin*

Finally Let's look in more detail at a few bars where we can see some things in action. Here are the first few bars of the minuet in Grieg's original:

*Music example 8: Piano Sonata in E Minor, Opus 7, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement: Alla Menuetto*

There is certainly a lot going on here and we do not have time to go into great detail but let us focus on a couple of important elements. Firstly that wonderful “parlando” four note figure in the right hand in the start of the second bar, which is remarkably non-instrumental and finely shaped rhythmically, with details not at all contained within the original notation. This really feels “spoken” and its performed shape can be clearly seen in the spacial score<sup>7</sup> of the opening bars:

*Score example 5 (spacial score minuet):*

Our parlando figure also develops in the most interesting way from its opening presentation. As is clear from the spacial score with each recurrence it gradually evolves, compressing as it does while keeping the essential shape established at the first presentation until it contracts to its minimum point and becomes almost exactly like it is notated, just before that first fortissimo. The fortissimo now assumes in Grieg's performance the position as the main statement of the theme. The transitionary nature of Grieg's opening works wonderfully when connected to the imaginary slow movement it would have emerged from, and indeed it will do so in our recording that completes the Sonata<sup>8</sup>. Here is a good example of new line drawn over the material creating a far larger shape than the notation would suggest.

7 Here the notes are plotted against a time line. We have used a resolution of a 25<sup>th</sup> of a second although we were able to be accurate to a 50<sup>th</sup> of a second in this kind of material.

8 This is not unlike what Joachim does in the Brahms 2<sup>nd</sup> Hungarian dance discussed in footnote 5 above.

In fact the triplet finds many forms throughout the piece and only in rare exceptions is it found in the stable state that we see as the single form of notation in the score. We know of no other recording of this work that approaches this level of sophistication. What is clear is that the figure as notated gives the performer only the outer limits of what is possible. The amount of wiggle room expected gives the possibility of the development of a rhythmic figure over time, as Grieg does here, creating its own contour in the larger scale of the piece. This was very much part of the performer's tool bag and can be heard in countless recordings by the finest musicians of the period. The greatest among them use this as a means of painting the line longer but with great complexity of inner detail as Grieg does so wonderfully here.

Looking at the placing of that recurrent third beat in the bass is also interesting. The 'schwung' that Grieg the performer creates here is the physical powerhouse that drives the piece forward and helps draw those longer lines. In doing so it is often in conflict with the right hand (as in the opening bars where, to simplify, the right hand is pulling back while the left is urging forward) and Grieg's handling of the tensions and releases of tensions is truly 'symphonic', not that of the miniaturist.

The first fortissimo is also an important example of eliding two phrase sections. Any modern performer I can think of would hold back before the big fortissimo making the chord before the bar line the longest beat and then moving forward directly on the fortissimo. Grieg by wonderful slight of hand indeed slows considerably but makes his longest beat the fortissimo chord itself, a beat later, moving immediately forward on the beat following. This keeps the bar before in motion, effectively removing the bar line effect and creating great shape with forward motion<sup>9</sup>. This may seem a small detail, and what he does is, but the effect far exceeds the means and creates a wonderful effect again not for the moment but for the structure of the piece. Rachmanninoff uses a similar device in the C# minor prelude (score example 1). He avoids the barline and emphasises the irregular phrasing by swinging back to tempo a beat before rather than a beat later than expected (score example 1. 3<sup>rd</sup> system 1<sup>st</sup> bar 4<sup>th</sup> beat).

As well as recreating all nine of Grieg's recordings we have just finished recording the next stage of the project, also on the Trolldhaugen Steinway. The stepping stone is the completion of the piano sonata. The Minuett was recorded complete by the composer and will stand in our recreation of it. His recording of the last movement was heavily cut and we will complete it. We have recorded the first two movements, applying what has been learnt from our research. The final step in this part of the project is, however, the most difficult: the Ballade<sup>10</sup>. Loved by Brahms, this great work has somewhat dipped below the horizon internationally although not so in Norway where its place is assured. It remains a tough nut to crack both technically and musically and exhibits the full force of the problems outlined above, chief among them being to follow the performer Grieg, the musical alchemist, and make fluid that which often seems built of stone.

To conclude, here is the opening of the Ballade as recorded by Sigurd on Grieg's beloved Steinway.

The journey is just beginning.

### **Music example 9 Ballade**

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9 This also removes, at a stroke, an almost inevitable 'dead' area that occurs in performance a split second before the downbeat when this kind of slowing up is employed in a piece.

10 'Horowitz reached far back in his memory one evening and slowly fingered his way through about half the piece, a work he had not played for over half a century. "All the great pianists had this in their repertoire then," he said to me.' David Dubal author of *Evenings with Horowitz* private communication with the authors, Oslo 2008