

Frank Van der Stucken (1858-1929): a friend of Grieg and translator of his songs

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This paper fits in with a research project that is presently being implemented in the library of the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp about the composer-conductor Frank Van der Stucken. The library preserves a large collection of scores and documents of Van der Stucken, which form the basis of this research.

The contacts between Edvard Grieg and the Flemish composer-pianist Arthur De Greef (1862-1940), who met in 1888, are well documented, but the piano virtuoso De Greef wasn't Grieg's first Flemish contact. One decade before, Grieg had already got to know an American composer with Flemish roots, namely Frank Van der Stucken.

Frank Van der Stucken was born in 1858 in Fredericksburg, Texas, as the son of a Flemish father and a German mother.¹ When the Secession War (1861-1865) had finished, the family no longer felt safe in Texas and in 1865 they returned to father Van der Stucken's native town of Antwerp (Belgium). There Van der Stucken junior studied at the Flemish School of Music – the later Royal Flemish Conservatoire. He was a student of the director Peter Benoit (1834-1901), the standard bearer of nationalist music in Flanders. After his studies with Benoit, Van der Stucken went to Leipzig in 1878, like so many of his contemporaries, with a view to continuing his formation with Carl Reinecke. That's where he first met Grieg, who became his friend. The biography of Henry T. Finck, published in 1906, devotes some pages to Van der Stucken's account of his contacts with Grieg.² On the advice of the publisher Ernst Wilhelm Fritsch, Van der Stucken allegedly sent around his first printed songs to musical periodicals and to some prominent musicians who stayed in Leipzig at the time. Among the composers that reacted was Grieg and according to Van der Stucken's testimony in Finck's biography this was the beginning of a friendship: ‚Ever since that hour our friendship was sealed, and scarcely a day passed during Grieg's stay in Leipsic that we were not found together, either at dinner, supper, or some musical or dramatic performance.‘³ Via Grieg, Van der Stucken got in touch with the Scandinavian colony in Leipzig - Christian Sinding, Iver Holter, Ole Olsen, Robert Kajanus and others -, playing whist together in Café Français and relishing oysters, caviar and a good glass of wine.

Van der Stucken's contacts with Grieg were also echoed in the letters he addressed to the home front in Antwerp, more particularly to the Antwerp composer Jan Blockx, also a student of Peter Benoit. Spurred on by Van der Stucken's enthusiasm, Blockx travelled to Leipzig as well, and there he also met Grieg. Iconographic evidence of that contact is a photo of Grieg kept in the Antwerp AMVC-Letterenhuis (House of Literature)⁴, the back of which has the autograph dedication: ‚Herrn Jan Blockx zur freundlichen Erinnerung, Edvard Grieg.‘ (‘To Mr Jan Blockx in friendly

remembrance, Edvard Grieg.') In later sources, such as the biography published in 1943 about his father by Blockx's son, it is suggested that the warm contacts between the two young Flemish composers and Grieg were not only based on personal affinities, but were also nourished by the common ideas around romantic nationalism, ideas that in fact were defended and put to practice by these two adepts of Peter Benoit.⁵

The correspondence carried on between Van der Stucken and Grieg after their common stay in Leipzig indeed testifies to a close friendship. Thirteen letters of Van der Stucken to Grieg are kept in the Bergen Public Library, whereas only three letters of Grieg to Van der Stucken are found in the archives of the Letterenhuis in Antwerp. Obviously only a fraction of the exchange of letters has been preserved. Yet it covers a period from early 1879, that is after the stay in Leipzig, until the end of 1906, barely some nine months before Grieg's death. The earliest letter of Van der Stucken is dated on 26 February 1878, but the contents make clear that Van der Stucken made a mistake here, as it was still early in the new year, and that he did write the letter on 26 February 1879: in the beginning of 1878 Grieg and Van der Stucken hadn't met yet and Ash Wednesday was on 26 February in 1879 and not in 1878. Meantime we have transcribed all the letters and are planning an annotated edition. This isn't always self-evident, since they communicated in German, which for neither of them was their mother-tongue. This explains the many orthographic errors and often the lack of clear nuances.

Not only do the letters give evidence of a warm affection, but they also provide relevant information about the two composers and the music scene in those years. Thus in addition to intimate matters like the love he felt for his fiancée, Van der Stucken also wrote about his profession as a composer and conductor and about the reception of Grieg's compositions in Antwerp and later in the United States.

In 1881 Van der Stucken became conductor of the Stadttheater of Breslau, a function he held for two years. Among the works he wrote for this theatre was the stage music to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

In the summer of 1883 Van der Stucken and Grieg met again in Rudolstadt, a town close to Weimar, where according to Van der Stucken in a letter to Grieg 'das Leben so billig, die Luft so rein, das Bier so gut ist!'⁶ As we know Grieg went through a difficult period then: he struggled with great doubts about his compositions and the relationship with his wife was under pressure. That Grieg accepted Van der Stucken's invitation to pass the summer together in Rudolstadt actually proves something about their friendship. In Finck's biography Van der Stucken evokes an idyllic picture of this episode which he claims to be 'a most delightful period in our lives'.⁷ In July they travelled together to Bayreuth to attend *Parsifal*. Van der Stucken was then also teaching French to Grieg as the latter planned to travel to Paris in the winter, and he also translated some of Grieg's songs into French, but more about this later.

Most likely it was also in Rudolstadt that Van der Stucken orchestrated Grieg's *Fra karnevalet* op.19 no. 3 ('From the Carnival') from *Folkelivsbilleder* ('Scenes from folk life'), an orchestration that is mentioned in the biography of Antoine Cherbuliez. Allegedly he also orchestrated the numbers two and three from the *Norwegische Tänze* op. 35 ('Norwegian dances'). In the same period Grieg wrote for the Leipzig *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* a substantial and balanced review on Van der Stucken's first song collections, which were published in Berlin and Leipzig. It is a well-argued and finely tuned article, in which Grieg seems to be particularly charmed by the collection *Neun Gesänge* opus 5,⁸ dedicated to him.

In October 1883 they were together again in Weimar. Like so many young composers Van der Stucken undertook a pilgrimage to Franz Liszt in Weimar and that wasn't in vain. Thanks to the moral and financial support of Liszt, Van der Stucken got the opportunity to organise a concert on 3 November 1883 in the Hoftheater exclusively with work of his own. He conducted some of his large orchestral works and in between the mezzo Louise Schärnak together with Alexander Siloti performed some of his songs and piano pieces. Present in the audience was Grieg, who himself was giving a concert in Weimar with his piano concerto, the start of a three months' tour through Germany and the Netherlands. Supposedly Grieg and Van der Stucken saw each other for the last time then in Weimar.

Early in 1884 Van der Stucken, probably on the advice of Max Bruch, received the offer to succeed Leopold Damrosch as music director of the Arion Society in New York, a large oratorio choir with orchestra. He accepted the offer and this was the beginning of an international career which mainly took its course at the other side of the ocean. I will give you a brief survey before returning to Grieg and Van der Stucken.

After having made his name in New York as a conductor, in 1895 Van der Stucken became the first chief conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. From 1905 onwards he was also the music director of the biennial May Festival, a choral festival inspired by the music festivals in the Rhineland. In all these activities Van der Stucken revealed himself as an ardent advocate of the new American music, thereby obviously inspired by the efforts of Benoit and Grieg to create a national movement in music. In addition he also conducted many American premières in the United States of works by for example Tchaikovsky, Berlioz (*Les Troyens*) and Brahms (*Third Symphony*). With that he also paid a lot of attention to the national schools, introducing the American public to several works of Benoit and Grieg. Already at his very first concert with the Arion Society he programmed Grieg's *Landkjending* opus 31 (*Land-sighting*), a work he featured again and again over the years to come. Furthermore he also presented several times *Peer Gynt*, the piano concerto, *Olav Trygvason* and separate choral works. In between his American activities he was often invited by European orchestras as a guest conductor. One of the many examples is the concert he conducted on 13 October 1911 here in Berlin in the Philharmonic, where he combined composers such as Bach, Mozart and Wagner with

the world creation of Frederick Stock's *Symphonic Variations*. Van der Stucken can be considered as one of the first jet set conductors. He crossed the ocean more than 90 times to conduct on the old and the new continent. In 1929 he was accepted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters owing to his great merits in the field of American music. However, he couldn't enjoy this honour for long, as he died on 16 August 1929 in Hamburg, at a moment he wanted to settle in Germany, to find time and peace for composing again and writing his memoirs. Undoubtedly we would have learned more then about his contacts with Grieg and probably also about his translations.

As is the case for many composers of songs in small linguistic regions, also for Grieg the use of Norwegian and Danish texts prove(d) to constitute a difficult barrier to international success, hence the many translations. This was indeed the kind of problem his Flemish contemporary Benoit was faced with as well, since he was composing in Dutch, a small language, and what's more, doing so within what was then a dominating francophone Belgium. He felt rather wary of translations, though this was just as much for ideological as for musical reasons.

From the same letter to Finck we learn that Grieg was very disappointed with the translations of his songs at large. Yet Grieg did trust Van der Stucken as a translator. This is proved by the letter he sent on 29 July 1883 to Max Abraham of Edition Peters, that is during his stay with Van der Stucken in Rudolstadt: 'You once talked about a French edition of my songs, and in this respect [I] have a good idea. My brilliant young friend [Frank] v.d. Stucken, who himself even writes his own opera librettos, writes poetry in French as in his mother-tongue and you could certainly never find a luckier chance for the distribution of a *good* French translation of my songs. He has already translated one poem of mine and that was excellent. How about inviting him to translate 6 of the better and for the French taste suitable songs!'⁹

In any way Van der Stucken did comply to some extent with the requirements a translator of Grieg's song texts had to meet according to his letter to Finck: the translator has to be concurrently a poet, a language expert and a music expert. Like so many composers Van der Stucken was also a literary talent, for example for his lyrical drama *Vlasda* he wrote the libretto himself, and in fact sent it to Grieg in 1881. From the accompanying letter we learn that Van der Stucken was well acquainted with the oeuvre of Bjørnson and Ibsen. Van der Stucken was a composer who had a keen sense of language, having also mastered French prosody very well, which for Grieg was of primordial importance. In a letter to the publisher Peters on the translations made by Hans Schmidt, Grieg wrote: 'What matters most is an excellent declamation of the song. Regardless of how beautiful the poetry and the music, if the declamation leaves found wanting, the songs will be put aside and ignored.'

The six songs translated by Van der Stucken and published by Edition Peters, are:¹⁰

1. Berceuse

Margretes Vuggesang, op. 15 nr. 1 - Hendrik Ibsen

(*Margaretens Wiegenlied – Margaret's cradlesong*)

2. La jeune princesse

Prinsessen, EG 133 - Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson

(*Die Prinzessin – The princess*)

3. Je t'aime

Jeg elsker dig, op. 5 nr. 3 - Hans Christian Andersen

(*Ich liebe dich – I love but thee*)

4. Souvenir

Eit syn, op. 33 nr. 6 - A.O. Vinje

(*Was ich sah – A vision*)

5. Printemps-Amour

Jeg giver mit digt til våren, op. 21 nr. 3 - Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson

(*Dem Lenz soll mein Lied erklingen – To springtime my song I'm singing*)

6. Chanson de Solveig

Solveigs sang, op. 23 nr. 18 - Hendrik Ibsen

(*Solveijgs Lied – Solveig's song*)

We don't have the time here to look at the translations in detail, but let's limit ourselves to the conclusion that at times Van der Stucken indeed took the liberty of making rather radical adjustments. The most striking example of this is *Je t'aime*, his translation of the unpretentious and at once wondrously beautiful *Jeg elsker Dig* op. 5 no. 3 ('I love but thee'), on an original text by Hans Christian Andersen. Van der Stucken added a second stanza onto it, supposedly from the assumption that 'a song with only one stanza cannot be complete like that', as Beryl Foster writes in her masterly book 'The songs of Edvard Grieg'.¹¹ Moreover it is true that Scandinavian singers already used to simply repeat the stanza. Yet as the singer Adstra Desmond remarked in 1948, this completely unnecessary addition disturbs the delicate balance between word and music, and creates a terrible anticlimax, for sure if the singer complies with the 'poco accelerando' twice. Due to the Peters publication of Van der Stucken's adaptation with a German translation by Franz von Holstein and an English one by L. David, Van der Stucken's second stanza found a wide distribution. The same procedure was applied by Van der Stucken in *Printemps-Amour*, his translation of *Jeg giver mit Digt til Våren* op. 21 no. 3 ('I will give my song to the spring'), on a text by Bjørnson. The poem has twelve lines which are treated by Grieg as one stanza, and here also Van der Stucken felt the urge to add a second stanza. In this extra stanza he sings of love and so he allows this theme to recur in the title as well. Doing so he obviously inspired the German translation which Hans Schmidt also made for Edition Peters. You only have to put these translations side by side to see how far they have actually drifted away from the original.

I don't know of any further statements of Grieg about Van der Stucken's translations. From a letter of Abraham to Grieg dated 8 June 1894 we do understand that the anthology with six songs had a good distribution in France and that he hopes these translations could still be used for the third anthology of song translations into

French.¹² In his answer of 14 June Grieg, however, insists that for the third anthology the new translations by Julien Leclerc should be used, also for the songs that had been translated by Van der Stucken, 'so there would be no confusion.'¹³

For the two first anthologies, translations were used of the famous Wagner translator Victor Wilder (1835-1892), who incidentally is also Flemish. In his book 'Edvard Grieg et la musique Scandinave', published in 1892, the Belgian musicologist Ernest Closson compares Van der Stucken's translations with those of Wilder and his preference appears to vary from song to song.¹⁴ As such he finds Van der Stucken much better in *La jeune princesse*, while judging Wilder to be superior in *I will give my song to the spring*, translated by Wilder closer to the original as *Chantons la saison des roses*.

In the other four songs from the collection *Six mélodies* Van der Stucken's adaptations are restricted to some minor necessary rhythmical adjustments for the textual spacing. Also his translation of *Foran sydens kloster* op. 20 ('Before a southern convent') closely sticks to the original text. It is remarkable that in 1887 Grieg presented Van der Stucken's translation to Gabriel Pierné, whom he had met in Rome in the spring of 1884. Pierné only had two suggestions concerning the prosody at the end of the final chorus of the nuns – corrections that were taken up by Grieg both in the vocal and the full score, published by Peters.¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that for the performance of this work in Antwerp a Dutch translation was used made by the composer Edward Keurvels (1853-1916),¹⁶ the right hand of Peter Benoit, who for the Flemish Opera translated librettos of foreign operas into Dutch.

In conclusion I would like to inform you that the research project around Frank Van der Stucken will result in a monograph, one chapter of which will be devoted to his contacts with Grieg, including a list of performances of Grieg's works.

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¹ Biographical information about Vanderstucken in: Jan DEWILDE, *Frank Valentin Van der Stucken (1858-1929): componist en dirigent tussen twee continenten*, in *Musica antiqua*, vol. 17, 2000, nr. 2, p. 64-69 & nr. 3, p. 117-125.

² Henry T. FINCK, *Edvard Grieg*, London: John Lane, 1906, p. 51-56.

³ Henry T. FINCK, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁴ Antwerp, AMVC-Letterenhuis (G 8057/P – PH 16399).

⁵ Frank BLOCKX, *Jan Blockx, 1851-1912*, Antwerpen: Manteau, 1913.

⁶ Hannover, 9 March 1883.

⁷ Henry T. Finck, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁸ Published by Kistner in Leipzig.

⁹ *Edvard Grieg : Briefwechsel mit dem Musikverlag C.F. Peters 1863-1907*, (ed. Finn Benestad en Hella Brock), Frankfurt: C.F. Peters, 1997, p. 98.

¹⁰ *6 Mélodies composées par Edvard Grieg. Texte français d'après des poésies norvégiennes*

par Frank Van der Stucken, Leipzig: C.F. Peters (No. 466 z.)

¹¹ B. Foster, *The songs of Edvard Grieg*, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990, p. 47.

¹² *Edvard Grieg : Briefwechsel mit dem Musikverlag C.F. Peters 1863-1907*, (ed. Finn Benestad en Hella Brock), Frankfurt: C.F. Peters, 1997, p. 310.

¹³ *Edvard Grieg : Briefwechsel mit dem Musikverlag C.F. Peters 1863-1907*, (ed. Finn Benestad en Hella Brock), Frankfurt: C.F. Peters, 1997, p. 312.

¹⁴ Ernest CLOSSON, *Edvard Grieg et la musique Scandinave*, Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1892, p. 45-47.

¹⁵ Cfr. two unpublished letters by Pierné (13 February and 8 March 1887) in the Grieg archives of the Bergen Public Library.

¹⁶ Cfr. score and program in the library of the Royal Conservatoire in Antwerp.

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