

Edvard Grieg and a Mother's Grief. Portrait with a lady in no man's land

No doubt, my music will be forgotten a hundred years from now. However, I feel that I have not wasted my time in writing music that has delighted millions of people in all enlightened countries [...]. I make no pretensions of being in the class with Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. Their works are eternal, while I wrote for my day and generation. [...] Liszt once said of Thalberg, '*Son genre es petite, mais il est grande dans son genre.*' That saying could be applied to me as a composer.¹

No one could have put it better than Edvard Grieg did himself when he characterized his own œuvre: He reveals his goals, suggests characteristics and exposes the heart of his production. His wife Nina Grieg performed his songs; over the years they merged more and more into each other as artists and this was an important part of their branding. A connection between how her voice developed and the design of the songs seems almost traceable in his letters. "In our consciousness these two people were so closely linked together that in mind and body she was his expressed image".² Several accounts exist about how audience members felt as if Grieg's songs were created of his wife while she was performing them. As exemplified by the Swedish women's magazine *Idun*,³ not only were the songs intimately related to Nina Grieg's voice, to the outside world she acted like the composer's voice in the word's most multifaceted meanings:

There was something peculiarly fascinating about her on the concert podium. Her small figure and expressive, beautiful features alone seemed sympathetic to the audience, and her profound interpretations of both text and melody enchanted everyone. Her singing was rather like musical recitation. In time, naturally, she specialized in performing Grieg's songs and was, by his own account, "their only true interpreter". [...] She performed at his concerts, played and sang his works to him until they got their final design, took a lively interest in his plans and every little detail of his life.⁴

However, we should not regard the masquerade, the husband behind Nina Grieg's singing, as a symptom of an aesthetic failure, but rather as an essential part of the social message of his songs.⁵ To most of the reviewers in women's magazines works like Grieg's in the "small" genres in fact represented something "true", "a safe haven" and a "real alternative" in what they experienced as an aesthetically chaotic time.⁶ Hence, time and occasion feels right to present a close reading of a *herstory* by the signature THEO in the woman's magazine *Urd* 24 March 1906.⁷ Inspired by Peder Severin Krøyer's 1898 portrait of Edvard and Nina Grieg (see following page) the article is entitled "With Nina Grieg's picture".⁸ THEO accounts for live experiences of two of the Griegs' drawing room performances and gives us access to a rare account of the Grieg couple performing his music in a private and a semi-private circle. She describes the changing degrees of intimacy and distance between the Grieg couple, herself and the present audience, together



Peder Severin Krøyer's famous portrait of Edvard and Nina Grieg (1898)

with the intensity of her experience of the music. Furthermore, her article describes how arrangements were made for personal interaction and dialogue through music. In her account from the events, THEO also makes use of her own life and musical experiences. She lets musical and private discourse influence each other in sly ways that mutually affect each other in expression and hold great ideological power.

When THEO's husband introduced her to Nina Grieg for the first time, they were happily engaged to be married and on their way to a private party in Bergen. In his eagerness to tell her about the artist couple, her fiance, to her resentment, failed to recognize that she was wearing blue silk stockings. Upon spotting the Grieg couple on their way to the same function and looking forward to the possibility of hearing them perform Grieg's music, he told her: "No one sings like Mrs. Grieg, I am looking forward to you getting the chance to hear her!" And he said it in a special warm way, that raised expectations". Shortly after they got the opportunity to listen to the Grieg couple perform his music. Due to her fiance's lacking interest in her blue silk stockings, THEO intended not to listen and during the following conversation voice the opinion that Nina Grieg did not understand her husband's music. Then, she describes the guests' changing facial

expressions the moment Nina Grieg started to sing, and how people gather in the street outside the open windows and applaud after each song. What made such a great impression on THEO, the audience in the drawing room and on people listening outside the window? In a follow-up of her first article, THEO elaborates on these kinds of questions:

With Nina Grieg, poetic as well as musical instincts are so pure, that she apparently without labor or reflection immediately seizes the whole picture. Moreover, she interprets every detail to the more subtle distinctions. In addition, her personality is so strong and brilliant that it always gives something new to enjoy, something that seems born of the moment. Her devotion to what she reproduces is so great that she never violates beauty or disturbs equilibrium. Perhaps our readers now get the impression of a certain reserved tameness, but nothing is further from Nina Grieg's singing than that. It's fresh like birds singing in the woods and deep as the roar of the sea; it holds all of life's anguish and sorrows, its love and sparkling joy of being. She owns the expression of humor and roguishness too—perhaps best of all. Not only is her spirit deep, but also to a rare degree extensive. And she owns the ability to leave her mark on everything she touches. What she pours out of herself in her performance is just as new and rich as the music her husband has composed, or what authors like Ibsen and Bjørnson have given us.¹⁰

A surprised THEO went home with a feeling of having heard singing for the first time in her life, being so touched by “the picture entering her soul from it.” At this occasion it stemmed from “the fullness of spring and love and power it brought, not only by one point or by a few effects, but through all its small and big elements to something full and beautiful—to a perfect artistic effect.”

An ellipsis of several years has passed in THEO's account when she recollects her next experience with the music-making Grieg couple: A grieving THEO and husband manage to gain access cards to a semi-private matinee with Nina and Edvard Grieg. Without naming time and place of the concert, she emphasizes Henrik Ibsen's presence and his response to Nina Grieg's interpretation of her husband's songs to his texts. Hence, the matinee in question took place in Rome 18 March 1884, as Edvard Grieg himself describes the event in a letter to Frants Beyer the day after:

Nina sang a great deal, including almost all of my songs of Ibsen's poetry; and, imagine, after little Håkon [Margretes Vuggesang] and especially after “I called you my messenger of joy” and “A swan“, the ice-berg melted. With tears in his eyes, Ibsen came over to the piano where we were, and shook our hands, almost without being able to say anything. He mumbled something about this being understanding, and I don't have to tell you that Nina, on this occasion, did not sing any less intelligently than she always does.¹¹

The host of the matinee was the Norwegian-born painter Christian Ross¹² (1843-1904). In her account of the Ross' matinee, THEO renders her experience with one of Edvard Grieg's currently lesser known songs, “Mother's Grief” (Op. 15/4), from without and within its own assumptions. At a certain level this song also can be viewed as intertextual with “Mothering songs”, a significant sub-genre of music targeted at women and the home music market. Conventionally, title and cover of a song like this should suffice to inspire conversations after performances at parties like Ross'. THEO also mentions the

MOTHER'S GRIEF.

(*Mutterschmerz.*)

From the Danish.
English version by Ellis Gray.
German by F. Holstein.

Music by Edward Grieg. (1870)

Con moto.

Voice.

1. Did you see my
Sahst du wohl mein
2. Gen - tle Je - sus!
Mil - der Je - sus

Piano.

lit - the boy, with his cur - ly gilt - ter - ing hair?
Kneb - lein klein mit den Aug' so hell and so klag?
eru - el one! To the stars you have tak - en my boy!
du wurst hort, der du ihn zu den Ster - neu ent - rückt!

Grieg Songs. Copyright 1927 by G. Ricca & Co. 14875

title of the song, “Mother’s Grief”, as one of the preconditions for her self-described apprehension before the matinee.

It is likely that “Mother’s Grief” invoked strong mythic images of mother and child reminding the audience of the Grieg couple’s loss of their only daughter Alexandra. Nina Grieg’s performance of the song can also be considered intertextual with Ellen Key’s relatively recent ideas about motherhood that were so crucial to Norwegian society at the time. This was perhaps important and necessary parts of the social “message” the song conveys.¹³ The “mother” has the perspective in the song: Edvard Grieg has given the voice a central position in the sound design of the work, reminding us of that the person singing is this mourning woman. And, in her very being, Nina Grieg carried meanings associated with the mother’s grief that THEO herself felt in her own life, even before the rendering of the song.

On her way to the matinee, long before Nina Grieg had the chance to sing, her possible performance of the song influenced THEO’s expectations. Even before she had listened to Nina Grieg’s rendering of “Mother’s Grief” THEO knew the romance from

playing it at home. There she controlled the music like an object because perception and action (which got separated in the drawing room) entered into a dynamic relationship with each other. This probably felt safer than entering into a dynamic relationship with Nina Grieg's rendering at the Ross matinee. Hence, she reports having felt apprehension towards what listening to Nina Grieg's rendering would sound and feel like. In what follows THEO not only portrays Nina Grieg as the one moving Ibsen to tears, but also as the bearer of meaning that sets the text and music of Edvard Grieg's "Mother's Grief" in motion. The boundaries between art, THEO's life, and Nina Grieg's *persona* dissolve, and she lets herself get totally absorbed into the song and its lyrics. To a certain extent, THEO expands the sentimental text of "Mother's Grief" to include Nina Grieg as a narrative and lets this influence her experience of the music. For THEO, this may have been crucial to make the poem function as a speech act. Nina Grieg's singing made such a strong impression that THEO really strained her senses in order to hear every subtle nuance of her interpretation.

In her article THEO compares her experience of Nina Grieg's interpretation of "Mother's Grief" to a mourner who finally let a persistent priest into his home, although he had no desire to listen to what he thought he was going to hear, since nothing would help: The author of the lyrical basis of the song, Christian Reichardt (1821-1892), worked as a parish priest at Western Funen in Denmark. The subject taken up by the lyrics contributes to building up a notion in THEO of Nina Grieg as a *persona*. Her rendering made THEO take the meaning of the priest's and Edvard Grieg's song in for the first time. In this way the text of the song became useful for her. Facing the priest and facing the performance of "Mother's Grief" was not as the widower of the parable or THEO had expected it to be. As anticipated, when finally singing at the Ross' party, Nina Grieg turned out to be of the utmost importance to the function of the romance. For THEO this was all about communication and identification with Nina Grieg and with the lyrics of the song she was singing. Upon hearing her rendering THEO confides in us how she, to her big surprise, experienced a mixture of understanding and awakening. To her Nina Grieg's interpretation of the song takes on several of the functions of discourse and express whatever language could not manage or was not permitted to express. THEO did not only let the singing Nina Grieg communicate with her, but sometimes also for her and on her behalf: Like the man in the parable she remembers how she, to her own big surprise, got a "God bless you" that made it easier to fight on with her grief.

By THEO's own account, the apprehended effect of Grieg's songs was not achieved by the melodic line or the harmonics—she states that she barely knew anything about that—but the picture that Nina Grieg's singing made enter her soul. Obviously, she

neither felt a need to analyze or even mention the acoustic space Nina Grieg's husband arranged for when he composed "Mother's Grief", nor to focus on the tonal coloring effects that might have been inserted. Not a single word of her article is devoted to how the accompaniment contributes to the continuity of the vocal line through basic rhythmic and motivic elements. In this way, Edvard Grieg's performance of the simple structure of the accompaniment plays no role as a secondary source of explanation for the connection between THEO, Nina Grieg and the song. Surely, his setting of the poem must have fueled the process THEO renders in her article, but she describes Nina Grieg's interpretation as the sole decisive factor, as it was "carried out by the understanding from she who had suffered in the same way herself".

"Mother's Grief" was transformed into a phenomenological reality by the user group. The briefness of the song along with the homophonic texture was important to secure effortless listening,¹⁵ and—as exemplified by "THEO's article—the song should make it possible to be led by the performance and to put in one's own associations and feelings. In this way "Mother's Grief" turns out to be not *one* romance, but rather *several* romances that can be heard/performed in parallel: users of the song who choose only to engage themselves in the surface of what the song and its lyrics displays, can experience "Mother's Grief" relatively different from THEO, and rightly so.

Articles by THEO and other women in *Urd* as well as reviews by male critics in newspapers show a lack of a positive, creative, present and aesthetic masculinity. In this way THEO's narrative becomes a strikingly good illustration of a music and gender historiographical void: She takes us to a no man's land, where Nina Grieg's composer husband receives almost no mention, and in this way, sparkles by his absence. To date, this no man's land serves as a field of knowledge with no room for *fin de siècle's* emerging reconceptualization of masculinities.

As the composer's voice Nina Grieg was everything her husband never was: she was a woman and a singer. In this way her renderings gave his songs greater strength in the delivery of the message than the poems he set. In 1904 the Swedish women's music magazine *Damernas Musikblad*¹⁶ went as far as to describe her as his Jeanne d'Arc:

Even though her voice sounded tiny and weak, her execution had soul and flamed. When Mrs. Nina was younger, he barely could have gotten better interpretations of his songs. In her singing she demonstrated what a tremendous power spirit has over the matter. In her renderings she was the master's "innermost thoughts" his "Jeanne d'Arc", who with the cause's holy zeal fought and brought him great victories. Naturally, her lovely, soulful understanding of Grieg's works was the most natural and authentic possible, and the two were one and same entity.¹⁷

In her article, THEO highlights how Nina Grieg guides her husband in no man's land. She helps him maneuver between male composers' conventional performative femininity

in the romance genre and the femininity required to match the needs of the music publishing business targeted at women consumers. Equilibristically the Grieg couple themselves “conducted” the ever-changing dynamics of “text”-levels, contexts and parts of identities at the dawn of the Women’s Century to their own advantage.

Notes

- ¹ Grieg's Response to Jadassohn's Criticism in Arthur Abell 1994 (1955): *Talks with Great Composers*. New York: First Carol Publishing Group Edition, pp. 160-161
- ² The signature “R.M.” [Reidar Mjøen] in *Aftenposten* (Oslo), 22 September 1927
- ³ The Swedish magazine *Idun* “for the woman and the home” (1887–1963) contained a wide range of relevant reports, debates (including equality issues) as well as literature.
- ⁴ *Idun* 1934, number 22
- ⁵ Solie, Ruth 1992: “Whose Life? The Gendered Self in Schumann's Frauenliebe Songs” in Scher, Steven Paul: *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 222
- ⁶ The signature “E. S.” in the Norwegian Women's Magazine *Urd* 27 november 1897
- ⁷ The Norwegian magazine *Urd* (1896-1958), had female readers as its target group. The profile was Christian and family oriented. Among other topics of interest was public education, art and culture.
- ⁸ The whole article is available in Norwegian at the Norwegian National Library's homepage at the following url: <http://www.nb.no/avis/>
- ¹⁰ *Urd* 31 March, 1906. The whole article is available in Norwegian at the Norwegian National Library's homepage at the following url: <http://www.nb.no/avis>
- ¹¹ Grieg to Beyer, Rome, 19 March 1884, in Benestad, Finn and Kortsen, Bjarne (ed.) 1993: *Edvard Grieg. Brev til Frants Beyer 1872–1907*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, p. 58
- ¹² Krøyer and Ross painted series of portraits of their friends in the *Circolo Scandinavo*. The Swedish painter Georg Pauli labeled Ross' painting “conversation pieces in costume” like “satin velvet” and describes him being “as helpful as if he was our aunt”, unfolding his talents of entertaining in all living languages. In full beard he amused the audience with his ballet parodies in ballerina costume. In traditional views, only feminine men could assume feminine masquerade. Still, the “Masculine masquerade” in the *Circolo Scandinavo* might have worn several masques, of which one was masculine. Alternatively, it might have been one or more masculinities on masquerade, while others were not. Cf. Bull, Francis 1960: *Nordisk Kunstnerliv i Rom*, Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, p. 203
- ¹³ In *Misused Woman's Power* (1896) Key highlighted gender differences and focused attention on women's distinctive skills and responsibilities, a set of values she labeled “Mothering Society”. In her opinion, women did wrong when they claimed equality, instead of developing their equal, specific feminine qualities as mothers and within personal relationships. Key feared an abuse of female power, and she also feared that women wouldn't get anywhere in society. In response to the release of her book, she received charges from many quarters, not least the Norwegian Women's liberation movement: On April 15th 1896, *Nylände* accused her of reserving seats for “independent” women in charities and voluntary social work.
- ¹⁵ See Ballstaedt, Andreas & Widmaier, Tobias 1989: *Salonmusik. Zur Geschichte und Funktion einer bürgerlichen Musikpraxis*, Beiheft zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft; 28. Wiesbaden: Steiner, p. 225
- ¹⁶ The stated goal of *Damernas Musikblad* (lit. *The Women's Music Magazine*) was to spread some joy and recreation in the homes of its musicking readers. The scores printed were arranged in such a manner that any reasonably skilled piano player could make use of them. It also contained articles on composers, performers, newer and older compositions, based on the printed scores and its reception on the vibrant music life in Stockholm and other Swedish cities.
- ¹⁷ *Damernas Musikblad* No 6 1904