

Grieg in the “World of Unborn Music:”  
Edvard Grieg’s Creative Journey Through Language in *Haugtussa*, Op. 67

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When Ivar Aasen (1813-1896) published his *landsmål* dictionary of “new” Norwegian in 1853, it enlivened the imagination of poets and artists including Arne Garborg (1851-1924). His *landsmål* verse novel, *Haugtussa*, kindled, in turn, the fire of imagination in Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) who was deeply touched by the novel and, particularly, by the language of it. He felt that the poems themselves were infused with music. A few years after he had first read Garborg’s novel, Grieg wrote a letter to Garborg’s wife Hulda. Of *Haugtussa*, he said: “what a plumbing of the depths of the soul of the language—and what a world of unborn music!”

Garborg’s protagonist, Veslemøy, is both a voice for Garborg, and a symbol of humanity; her emotions represent the universal joys and angst of all mankind. Christian Rynning, observes: “It is perhaps self-evident that we find in a figure such as Veslemøy, with so much of the poet’s own soul, the symbolic emanation of something deeply universal.” The setting for *Haugtussa* is rural, pre-pietistic Norway—where Christianity, nature, mysticism and the otherworldly domain of trolls and spirits coexist in a wonderful amalgamation. Veslemøy is spending her first summer on a hill as a shepherdess. She is young and innocent in many ways, but she possesses second sight. She sees trolls, spirits, and the dangerous inhabitants of the “blue hill,” and this second sight makes her more vulnerable to them. She meets Jon when she takes over his shepherding duties, and they fall in love. The romance is short-lived, however; Jon forsakes her to marry a rich girl. Veslemøy, grieving for the loss of her love, becomes sick and feverish and wants to die. She does eventually reconcile herself to losing Jon, but only after walking a difficult path—being seduced for a time by the evil beings of the blue hill but, eventually, fighting to free herself from their terrifying power. Even though Veslemøy’s lingering pain is evident throughout the rest of the novel, her final triumph is unmistakable. She has a vision of her sister who tells her: “Arise, arise, dear sister! / You are now released to a better journey... You won your freedom from all the trolls. / And in your sorrow, you found yourself. / Now up to higher things...”

In his song settings, Grieg focuses on only one aspect of Garborg’s narrative—the sorrowful love story between Veslemøy and Jon. Grieg does not, therefore, allow Veslemøy’s

story to continue to its conclusion. Lawrence Kramer, in his book, *Music and Poetry: the Nineteenth Century and After*, discusses what he calls “structural dissonance,” a type of deconstruction that can occur when a composer sets a text. He explains that structural dissonance takes place when the music denies the text its “expressive support in a crucial way or at a crucial moment.”

We see this in Grieg’s *Haugtussa*, but only if we know “the rest of the story.” Whereas in Garborg’s novel, we see that Veslemøy is able to triumph over her trials, the song cycle ends with Veslemøy at her most vulnerable. So why would Grieg choose to tell only part of the story and end it on a sorrowful note? We can hardly help comparing Grieg’s *Haugtussa* to two other masterful song cycles.

*Dichterliebe* by Robert Schumann and *Die schöne Müllerin* by Franz Schubert—have textual narratives that are strikingly similar to *Haugtussa*. We see the theme of love, loss, and betrayal in all three of these song cycles, and each one ends at water’s edge. This would seem to indicate an influence of *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Dichterliebe* on *Haugtussa* so far as textual narrative and organization are concerned.

Grieg constructs a *new* narrative in his *Haugtussa*, one based on Garborg’s original, but abridged. With regard to the spirit and quality of each *Haugtussa* song, however, Grieg succeeds in “[letting] the poem reveal itself and... [in intensifying] it.” Garborg himself was well pleased with the result. He praised Grieg in a letter in November 1899 saying: “I love [the *Haugtussa* songs] more than I can tell you...“Yes, now I am happy and proud—absolutely disgracefully proud—that you were able to use these verses. Thank you!”

Underlying the textual storyline in the song cycle is a musical narrative structure based on melodic motive. The study of motive in Grieg’s music has long been used to individuate the composer. This analysis, however, looks at motive, not as an identifying marker or a stylistic device, but as an active participant in the musical narrative.

Two motives are of particular importance throughout the cycle, and both are common melodic figures that are easy to find in much of Grieg’s music and, in fact, in folk music from many parts of the world. They acquire motivic significance in *Haugtussa* by repetition and, more importantly, by consistent association with the characters or emotions they represent. And as we will see later on, rhythmic motive also plays an important supportive role at times.

The first melodic motive, which I refer to as the “Veslemøy” motive, is a simple ascending tonic triad, and it serves as a consistent musical representation of the protagonist throughout *Haugtussa*. The motive is altered and varied at times, reflecting Veslemøy’s experiences, but it consistently refers to her with only a few exceptions.

The original, unaltered motive is a minor tonic chord, although it occurs on different scale degrees and in the major mode as well. The triad, simple and unadorned, yet somewhat darkened by a minor third, is a fitting representation of a girl who, though young and innocent, sees otherworldly beings and is vulnerable to those dark influences.

The Veslemøy motive is the opening vocal gesture in five of the eight songs of op. 67. The primary, unaltered Veslemøy motive is an arpeggiation of an f-minor triad from C to C (Det Syng, Vond Dag). The two most common variations of the motive are an arpeggiation that begins from the chord root, rather than the fifth (Veslemøy) and a passing motion from the chord root to the third, preceded by a leap from the fifth (Møte).

**See Example 1. The Veslemøy motive and variations as they appear in opening vocal phrases of *Haugtussa* songs.**

I call the second motive the love motive. It appears as the opening vocal gesture in three of the eight songs of op. 67 although in the case of the sixth song, “Killingdans,” the motive is what musicologist Jing-Mao Yang refers to as a “latent” form. The original, unaltered love motive is a semi-tone descent followed by a skip of a major third.

This motive is such a common stylistic feature in Grieg’s music that it is often referred to as the “Grieg motive.” It has its roots in folk music, and though Grieg uses it frequently as a stylistic device, it has a particular meaning in *Haugtussa*; it is a musical signifier for love. The motive always *denotes* love, but it has different *connotations* throughout the cycle. Initially the motive connotes joy, but in the course of the the entire work, it is gradually transformed into a symbol of sorrow, accurately mirroring the text and representing Veslemøy’s feeling of loss when Jon eventually betrays her.

**See Example 2. The love motive and variations as they appear in opening vocal phrases of *Haugtussa* songs.**

The interaction of the Veslemøy motive and the love motive reflects the poetic narrative—as love turns painful, it has a powerful effect on Veslemøy. The effect on the motives is similar; just as Veslemøy is eventually overcome by the pain of love lost, the love motive eventually overpowers the Veslemøy motive in the song cycle.

A useful semiotic device for representing the logical contrary relationship of Veslemøy’s joy and sorrow is a paradigm most often referred to as the “semiotic square.” It is a valuable graphic representation of relationships within a given system. We begin with two contrary (or opposite) terms.

As we are observing the interaction of the Veslemøy and love motives in *Haugtussa*, we will chart the two most prominent emotions Veslemøy experiences in connection with her love for Jon—joy and sorrow. A dashed line represents a **contrary** relationship.

**See Figure 1. Contrary relationships in the love narrative of *Haugtussa* Op. 67.**

Next, we chart **contradictory** terms—represented by solid lines—onto the square. In this narrative, the contradictory of sorrow is obsession, and the contradictory of joy is resignation.

**See Figure 2. A semiotic square mapping the contrary and contradictory emotions expressed in the poetic and musical narrative in *Haugtussa* Op. 67.**

In the next figure, we see the semiotic square with all of the songs from *Haugtussa* that participate in the narrative listed under the emotion they express.

**See Figure 3. All songs participating in the love narrative of *Haugtussa* mapped onto the semiotic square.**

With each song mapped onto the semiotic square, we can see the complete narrative path—marked by the purple arrows—in the *Haugtussa* love story.

**See Figure 4. The Narrative Path in *Haugtussa* Op. 67**

Now we will consider some Interrelationships between two pairs of songs in *Haugtussa*.

The two songs that, without doubt, have the strongest interrelationship are songs four and seven, “Møte” and “Vond dag.” Note that the two songs are in a contrary relationship, with “Møte” expressing Joy and “Vond dag” expressing sorrow.

It is likely that Grieg worked on settings of the two songs simultaneously; sketches of “Møte” and “Vond dag” are on consecutive pages of Grieg’s sketchbook. Furthermore, by composing these two songs as counterparts to each other, Grieg is modeling musically what Garborg has already done poetically.

Rhythm is, perhaps, Garborg’s most powerful connecting tool. Indeed, according to Christian Rynning: “The expressive value of the rhythm in the *Haugtussa* poems ought to be the real aim of the [literary] analysis.” Only five of the 71 poems in Garborg’s epic are written in six-line iambic pentameter. Each of these poems tells part of the story of Veslemøy and Jon. “Møte” and “Vond dag” are both in this meter.

As a complement to Garborg’s poetic meter for both “Møte” and “Vond dag” as well as a vehicle for the melodic motives, Grieg uses two rhythmic ideas almost exclusively in the composition of these two songs. The first, rhythm “a,” comprises the opening vocal phrase of both songs.

**See Example 3. Rhythm “a,” and rhythm “b”—the basic rhythmic ideas employed in “Møte” and “Vond dag.”**

Example 4 illustrates the identical rhythm in the openings both songs. Note also that rhythmic motive helps us to better recognize that both songs do, in fact open with some variation of the same melodic figure—the Veslemøy motive.

**See Example 4: Opening vocal phrases of Møte and Vond Dag; identical rhythms (Rhythm “a”)**

Rhythm “b” is nearly identical in length to rhythm “a” and is the other unifying metric element in both songs. Though neither rhythmic idea is a musical imitation of iambic pentameter, the two rhythmic ideas are supportive, subtle vehicles for the poetic meter. These two rhythmic

ideas comprise virtually all of “Vond dag” and, while there is some departure from the rhythms in “Møte,” they comprise the large majority of that song as well.

The openings of both songs are full of anticipation—Veslemøy sits waiting on the hill for Jon, and the picture Garborg paints of the scenes is very similar in both poems.

“Møte,” opens with a variation of the love motive in the piano. It is ornamented with a grace-note figure as well as by scale-degree in two octaves. It is also accompanied by a three-note, chromatic descent that becomes a narrative substitute for the love motive precisely by its immediate association with the motive it accompanies. The voice then enters with a variation of the Veslemøy motive.

### **See Example 5: “Møte,” mm. 1-4**

The mood of the lyric is anticipatory, excited, and nervous; all of the emotions one associates with new love are depicted in the text. The various alterations of the Veslemøy motive and its interaction with the love motive musically mirror this mood.

Both the Veslemøy motive and the love motive appear consistently through the song, but there is always some element of aural ambiguity, because of alteration or ornamentation. Such motivic variation is expected in this song if the music is to reflect the poetic narrative, because love is new and unfamiliar, and Veslemøy is caught up in the emotional upheaval of love.

The opening of “Vond Dag” is also full of expectation and hope, but Grieg tells us almost at once that the second Sunday will be very different from the first. The song is in minor mode, whereas the previous four songs have been in major mode. In two of the early occurrences of the love motive in this song, a grace note adds a “weeping” quality to the music. The song opens with the primary, unaltered Veslemøy motive in both the piano and the vocal parts, but the love motive encroaches steadily.

Throughout “Vond dag,” the love motive contends with the Veslemøy motive, and by the end of the song, it completely overpowers the Veslemøy motive, symbolizing the finality of Veslemøy’s loss.

As is clear from the text, Veslemøy now experiences *sorrow*, and the love motive now *connotes* sorrow. Certainly that same sequence of three notes has a very different aural effect now than earlier in the song cycle.

**See Example 6: “Vond dag” mm. 1-14, highlighting Veslemøy motive and love motive.**

Now let us consider a few aspects of the interrelationship between songs three and eight—“Blåbær-Li” and “Ved Gjøtlet-Bekken.” These two songs frame the love story in Grieg’s *Haugtussa*. Grieg makes admirable use of motive and motivic alteration to emphasize the interrelationship between “Blåbær-Li” and “Ved Gjøtlet-Bekken.” To begin with, “Blåbær-Li” and “Ved Gjøtlet-Bekken” are the only two songs in the cycle that begin with a clear, easily recognizable love motive.

“Blåbær-Li” is the first song of the cycle that is in the major mode. Though we know nothing of Jon *yet*, the appearance and treatment of the love motive in the opening vocal line is a musical hint that Veslemøy is falling in love. It is clear from the song that she feels joyful, free, and courageous—maybe a little cocky. In Garborg’s story, Veslemøy has recently been terrified by the dark forces surrounding her, and her emotional state now—after she meets Jon—is strikingly different from what it was before. In “Blåbær-Li,” Veslemøy, having discovered a patch of beautiful, ripe blueberries, imagines what she will do if various animals, such as a bear or a fox, come by and want to share her find. In the penultimate verse, she sings that if the wolf comes along, she’ll get a birch club and whack him on the snout. In the last verse of the song, she sings that if “that nice boy” comes by, he’ll get one on the snout too, but preferably in another way.

Both literary and musical context help to clarify the connotation of the love motive, but it is the musical expressiveness that first indicates the joyful feeling of love in this song. Grieg indicates that it is to be sung *Vivace*, the mode is major, and the love motive, as sung in the opening phrase, is preceded by an exuberant leap of a perfect fourth.

In contrast, the love motive in “Ved Gjøtlet-Bekken,” is preceded by a slow, sorrowful whole step. In this song, Veslemøy, resigned to the fact that Jon has, indeed, forsaken her, retreats to a brook seeking solace. This is in stark contrast to her joy when love was new and had transformed her from a lonely, frightened girl into a happy, fearless young woman.

As figure 5 illustrates, “Ved Gjøtlet-Bekken” marks the conclusion of the narrative path, but Grieg employs some musical devices that point us back to “Blåbær-Li,” where the narrative began. Thus, we can consider both the conclusion of the narrative path outlined on the semiotic

square (marked by purple arrows) AND the contradictory emotions of joy and resignation (marked by the green double arrow).

**See Figure 5: The narrative path in *Haugtussa* and the contradictory relationship between Blåbær-Li and Ved Gjætle-Bekken**

The melodies of “Blåbær-Li” and “Ved Gjætle-Bekken” are both composed almost entirely of the Veslemøy and love motives, and both songs make use of retrogrades of the motives. In both songs, the love motive is the principle melodic motive, and the Veslemøy motive is a secondary—often elided or interlocking—melodic element. Also, the love motive is rhythmically similar in both songs in that each is preceded by an upbeat and the first note of the motive is a longer note value than then next two notes.

**See Example 7: Opening vocal lines of Blåbær-Li and Ved Gjætle-Bekken**

Note that the motivic material is identical but that the treatment of the two motives highlights Veslemøy’s divergent emotions.

The melodic material makes the connection between the two songs, but as they are in a contradictory relationship, nearly everything else about the two songs—including key, meter, and harmony—is different. And while both songs are, technically in major keys, “Ved Gjætle-Bekken” is actually quite tonally ambiguous in places. For example, at the very beginning the piano is clearly A major while the voice part seems to strongly suggest the relative minor of  $f\sharp$  as a tonal center. This explains why the love motive is the minor version even though the key is, technically, A major.

I will conclude with one final example of the power of motive in *Haugtussa*.

“Ved Gjætle-Bekken” closes with four measures of solo piano playing the by-now familiar sixteenth-note brook imitation. The echo of the love motive also comes in, but it is incomplete. The piano tries again an octave higher with the same result. The tempo slows and the dynamic level decreases as the echo tries, unsuccessfully, to complete the familiar three-note figure, but the love motive is fragmented, signaling that love is forfeited.



**See Example 8: Ved Gjætle-Bekken mm. 93-6**

By this simple but telling device, these last measures reflect Veslemøy's final resignation, sorrow, and loss.

The music that Grieg heard in Garborg's *Haugtussa* inspired a creative journey that resulted in what are, arguably, Grieg's best vocal compositions. His song cycle represents a *new* narrative based on the verse novel, but each song is musically true to the mood and spirit of Garborg's story. And in the composition of his *Haugtussa* songs, Grieg not only gives voice to the universal figure of Veslemøy, but also expresses his own uniquely individual voice.