

## *Haugtussa* and the Poetics of Enchantment.

By Gregory Martin

The topic of enchantment is a common one in critical discourse surrounding Edvard Grieg, whether it be rather general pronouncements of how, for example, the *Lytic Pieces* “create individual worlds of enchantment,”<sup>1</sup> or more thoughtful investigations into the nature of his music, such as Daniel Grimley’s reiteration of the popular trope so often affixed to Grieg’s work: “the myth of a subterranean supernatural music that enchants or bewitches passers-by (1).” While this motif may perhaps sometimes border on cliché, it is not unmerited; indeed, it is a conceit with which the composer engaged in much of his greatest and most popular work: *Peer Gynt*, *Den Bergtekne*, and the string quartet in G minor, to name but a handful – not to mention naming his home Trolldhaugen. Today, I would like to briefly examine this premise through the lens of the masterful song-cycle *Haugtussa*, and in so doing outline how Grieg’s artistic choices collude to produce a work that conveys the sense of enchantment not merely as a surface-level poetics, but in its very structure.

Before getting too involved with the music, however, we should define exactly what we mean by enchantment. There is, of course, the popular definition of bewitch, or hold under a spell. Aligned with this might be the idea of bewilderment, not so much in the modern sense of confusion, but rather in the original sense of being “lost in the wild,” an overwhelming space in which one loses orientation – in this regard, the notion of infatuation merits inclusion, as it literally means to follow the *ignis fatuus*, the ‘will o’ the wisp’ that in folklore leads the

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<sup>1</sup> Barnes and Noble review of L O Andsnes recording

uninitiated traveler into a bog or quicksand<sup>2</sup>; bewilderment also means “a tangled or labyrinthine condition of objects” – as in “a bewilderment of light and color”<sup>3</sup> – and this, too, will play into our discussion. Then there is the cognate “incantation,” “the use of a formula of words spoken or chanted to produce a magical effect; the utterance of a spell or charm (OED)”; with its priority on words and song, this definition holds special sway for our purpose. Finally, there is the more ontological aspect of enchantment which functions as a sort of mediator between the physical and extra-mental worlds, of which more later. As we shall see, each of these elements of enchantment finds musical expression in *Haugtussa*.

Almost tautologically, Grieg enchants this music first and foremost by casting it in an enchanted world.<sup>4</sup> In *Haugtussa*, he perfects techniques explored in earlier works like *Travel Memories from Mountain and Fjord* and the Op. 54 volume of *Lyric Pieces* to transport us to Faërie in the form of the mountains of western Norway (much as Schumann had used the German forest in, for example, *Genoveva* and *Waldszenen*). In her study on Arne Garborg’s writings, Ingebrigt Lillehei describes the backdrop against which his novel *Haugtussa* plays out in terms of

The silence of the great fjords, where the moonlight divides sharply the zone of light from the zone of darkness; the great calm of the mountains; the ocean sleeping in its crushing immensity or lashed into fury by the storms of autumn and winter; and, finally,

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<sup>2</sup> Shippey, Road, 164.

<sup>3</sup> Shippey, Road, 88.

<sup>4</sup> Cheryl Ann Christensen claims that, “there is reason to believe that he [Grieg] may have originally intended to include more allusion to trolls and the underworld from Garborg’s novel in the musical work” (110)

the weird light of the summer midnight – all these are factors in arousing the imagination to fancy and dreams.<sup>5</sup>

Grieg had a similar impression of this landscape, a place where he found that “the whole existence is like a fairy-tale.”<sup>6</sup>

The mountains of Norway are the embodiment of what French philosopher Gaston Bachelard called ‘intimate immensity,’ casting the listener into a world that “bears the mark of infinity.” It is in such a place where the spiritual struggle Grieg found inherent in his Northern sonorities could play out, and where – in what his distant relation Glenn Gould would later recognize as “the idea of North” – one becomes “aware of the creative opportunity which the physical fact of the country represents,” ultimately “measure[ing] their own work and life against the rather staggering creative possibility.” In the mountains, we are in a world older than history, one where we are confronted with geological epochs, temporal dimensions beyond our comprehension. In this fairyland, Grieg writes,

the waterfalls’ immense symphony can be heard, the glaciers shimmer, the air is filled with an aroma, the nights are light ... Just imagine, we didn’t go to bed in the evenings. We sat in the light night one evening after another, drinking in the beautiful air and light dawning fjord, which then lay in its deep calm.<sup>7</sup>

In this description we meet a specifically Nordic sense of being outside Time: the midnight sun, when the regular pulse of night and day is suspended. It is not at all a coincidence that in the

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<sup>5</sup> Ingebrigt Lillehei, “The Language and Main Ideas of Arne Garborg’s Works” (*Scandinavian Studies and Notes*, Vol. 3, 1916), 159

<sup>6</sup> Grimley, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Grimley, 69.

same account in which he compares the mountains of Western Norway to fairyland, he describes his visits there as occasions when he would “bathe in the timelessness.”<sup>8</sup>

It is astonishing how many fairytales deal with the issue of time distortion, with one night spent in the mountains masking the passage of hundreds of years in the outside world, or deal with an escape from time altogether (that is, deathlessness).<sup>9</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien wrote that such stories, “open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe.”<sup>10</sup> In *Haugtussa*, Grieg effects the feeling of timelessness he experienced in the mountains from the very beginning. The cycle opens with a series of spacious, rolled chords and trills which overwhelm any sense of temporal pulse (Ex. 1); the unfolding of the chord at the beginning of m.2 may offer some definition (in hypermetric terms), but even here the rolling of the sonority blurs any true inkling of where the downbeat actually is; it is not until the voice enters in m.4 that any true metric sense is established. This opening also suggests a sort of musical *creatio ex nihilo* not just in its gradual accrual of regular time, but also in its harmonic syntax. The opening chord is, I think, not a II7 chord, as many commentators have claimed: at this point, we have no tonal reference point, and so no way to know that the harmony which is unfolding is founded on the supertonic; when it happens at the beginning of the second verse, it’s a different story. The major scale which flourishes upwards at the end of the second measure adds another hint of ambiguity to the proceedings, as the tonal landscape continues to expand. Other pieces within the cycle contain similar temporal effects. The opening of “Blåbær-Li” [Blueberry Slopes], for example, while written in a specific

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<sup>8</sup> Grieg, quoted in Grimley, 79. Also, see my “Lost Among Mountain and Fjord: Mythic Time in Edvard Grieg’s Op. 44 Song-Cycle” (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> “The fairy tale conquers time by ignoring it (Lüthi, 44).”

<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” 129.

rhythm, is surely meant to be more of a gesture than a figure designed to instigate a triple meter; so, too, the rests in bar 2, which are more rhetorical than measured (Ex. 2a). The *lur* call which begins “Elsk” [Love] serves a similar function, intoning without initiating meter, and seeming to impinge upon the narrative space from another realm (Ex. 2c), as does the *lokk* that opens “Møte” [Meeting] (Ex. 2b).

*Haugtussa* also assumes the “mark of infinity” in its portrayal of space, something which, though often overlooked as an aspect of storytelling, is in fact vital to narration. *Enargeia*, “the achievement of persuasively lifelike description” which brings things into narrative space before abstracting them into plot events, was valued as crucial by, for example, Aristotle, Lessing, and Longinus, who privileged the poet’s ability to “make the speaker see what he is saying and bring it *visually* before his audience” above his ability to “order and arrange material.”<sup>11</sup> Grieg employs this aspect of narrativity by using musical devices that open up the sense of space. The expansion of registral space at the beginning of “Det Syng” [The Singing] carries with it a spatial dimension, as does the *lokk* figure at its end (which, though ending the song, signals the beginning of the narrative proper; Ex. 3); the calls of mountain instruments – several of which have already been mentioned – similarly suggest the wide open spaces that stage the story, a landscape made even vaster by the echo effects featured through the cycle (for example, those given in Ex. 4)

Grieg also contributed to the sense of infinity in his cycle by, perhaps paradoxically, limiting his narrative. His decision to focus on the love story at the expense of other plotlines and themes has earned him a fair amount of criticism – with James Massengale even writing that the

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<sup>11</sup> Longinus, quoted in Robbins, 3.

composer had, “breathed life into Veslemøy, even as he had maimed her story”<sup>12</sup> – but I would argue exactly the opposite. Grieg’s text choices suggest that the story is much bigger than the plot to which we are made privy, whether it be details such as the cryptic opening narrator whose identity remains unclear, the litany of animals we encounter in “Blåbær-Li” [Blueberry Slopes] and “Killingdans” [Kids’ Dance], or places that receive mere passing mention – from Skare-Brôte to the shepherd’s hut. The decision to retain such details in the texts he set gives the cycle a sense of what might be called ‘literary depth,’ a vast backcloth against which to draw the central narrative into focus. Simply stated, it hints at infinity just beyond the borders of our story. The fleeting references to being, for example, “in the Blue Hill” also place *Haugtussa* in the category J.R.R. Tolkien ascribed to such works as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of which he wrote: “Antiquity... hangs ever behind the scene. Behind our poem stalk the figures of elder myth, and through the lines are heard the echoes of ancient cults, beliefs and symbols... His story is not *about* those old things, but it receives part of its life, its vividness, its tension from them. That is the way with the greater fairy-stories...”<sup>13</sup>

Much of the musical vividness and tension which does so much to give *Haugtussa* this quality is laid out in the first song, “Det Syng” [The Singing]. Grieg casts each verse in a bifurcated form, the first part of which is structurally founded exclusively on the interval of the minor-second, and the second of which is purely diatonic and saturated with arpeggiation, both in terms of the harp-like rolls in the accompaniment, and the intervallic structure of the melody (See Ex. 1). These two ideas, which receive ample room for thematization in the song’s three verses, provide the dominant material of the entire cycle. The idea of weaving two such strands around

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<sup>12</sup> James Massengale, “*Haugtussa*: from Garborg to Grieg,” *Scandinavian Studies* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 150.

<sup>13</sup> Tolkien, *Monsters*, 73.

each other as a narrative device (and here the song texts absolve us of the need to defend the work's narrative capacity) is reminiscent of interlace, a literary technique that was used to organize much of medieval literature. C. S. Lewis – who referred to this practice as “polyphony” – called it a “quintessentially medieval characteristic,” and related it to the labyrinthine quality in much medieval art and architecture (such as at Urnes stave church, Ex. 5, between Bergen and Jotunheim – the very region where Grieg routinely went for creative renewal).<sup>14</sup> As Eugene Vinaver writes, to achieve the desired effect, the threads have to alternate while “remaining constantly present in the author's and the reader's [or in our case, listener's] mind.”<sup>15</sup> As another commentator has noted, “the idea that Viking art and skaldic poetry are manifestations of the same underlying sensibility is a commonplace of Scandinavian literary criticism,” to which she adds, through extensive example, the sagas.<sup>16</sup>

The dominant role that the two intertwining strands introduced in “Det Syng” will have in *Haugtussa* as a whole is, in fact, summarized in the opening vocal phrase, which unfolds as an ascending minor arpeggio – the main melodic motive of the cycle as a whole – and a rising half-step (which in turn initiates another arpeggio; Ex. 6). Grieg confirms their significance by opening both “Veslemøy” and “Vond Dag” [Hurtful Day] – that is, the first and last songs in the narrative proper – with gestures that again juxtaposes these two elements (Ex. 7); the opening of also affirms the. Here, I should add that I don't mean to suggest that these two motivic ideas are each independent narrative strands which somehow converge at the denouement, but

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<sup>14</sup> Clover, 92

<sup>15</sup> Vinaver, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Clover, 90.

rather that they are like the threads of a tapestry which piece together to give us the big picture (that is, my analogy is closer to Old Norse visual art than story).

In this context, it is interesting to note that the past participle of *texere*, the Latin word for “to interlace, or weave,” is *textus*, the root of both ‘text’ and ‘textile.’ A poetic text, then, is a linguistic textile, a braid of words; remnants of this etymology exist in such turns of phrase as “to spin a yarn.” Indeed, the Old Norse-Icelandic word for a short story is *þáttur*, which also means thread, or a strand of rope/yarn; the sagas employ interlace in that they often have several *þættir* wound together.<sup>17</sup> Grieg would have certainly encountered this technique in the native art around him and the Norse sagas with which he was so familiar, and which he held to be a central part of Norwegian thought:

We have always loved brevity and succinctness, the clear and concise mode of expression—just as you can find it in our sagas, and as any traveler could observe even today in our social intercourse. These qualities are also what we aim for in our artistic endeavors.<sup>18</sup>

The portion of Garborg’s verse which Grieg set in the first and third verses, “you shall turn your silver spinning wheel,” are thus aptly text-painted: as Daniel Grimley has noted apropos this

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<sup>17</sup> Heather O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 226.

<sup>18</sup> Edvard Grieg, “French and German Music” in *Edvard Grieg, Diaries, Articles, Speeches*, trans. and ed. Finn Benestad and William H. Halverson (Columbus: Peer Gynt Press, 2001), 352. 2  
Edvard Grieg, *Edvard Grieg, Letters to Colleagues and Friends*, ed. Finn Benest

line of verse, “her spinning wheel [is] an archetypal image that suggests the unscrolling of a mythic narrative (‘spinning a yarn’) or the unraveling of fate.”<sup>19</sup>

Grieg’s use of a musical analogue to interlace in *Haugtussa* is significant for two reasons. First, interlace is a compositional technique that, by design, moves the audience to lose orientation; as one commentator has noted, “In this contrast between half- and full perception lies the point of interlacings.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, notes Vinaver, interlace is rooted in the belief that “any theme can reappear after an interval so as to stretch the whole fabric still further until the reader [or listener] loses every sense of limitation in time or space.”<sup>21</sup> Another major feature of this technique – one that places it in stark contrast to Aristotelian poetics – is that it may be used to deny closure.<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, these are all qualities that are at the very heart of enchantment.

Second, the affiliation of interlace with medieval Norwegian art proves vitally important to setting Garborg’s text. In *Haugtussa*, Garborg used a form of *landsmål* which was remarkably close to Aasen’s standardized version.<sup>23</sup> In choosing, for example, to end infinitives with *a* (except in a handful of instances), Garborg has retained Aasen’s decision to adopt the normal ending in Old Norse<sup>24</sup> – one ingredient in producing a, “rather archaic norm, most closely approaching the fjord and mountain dialects of Southern Norway, where the ancient forms in phonology, morphology and word stock were best preserved.”<sup>25</sup> So, Grieg sets a language that

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<sup>19</sup> Grimley, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Shippey, Road, 163.

<sup>21</sup> Eugene Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Harper-Scott, 218.

<sup>23</sup> Lillehei, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Lars S. Vikør, *the New Norse Language Movement* (Oslo: Forlaget Novus, 1975), 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

falls back on Old Norse as its structural backbone by using a technique endemic to its expression; this is one manifestation of his dictum that:

The lyricism of, respectively, German, Danish, and Norwegian poets is for the attentive observer so totally different that the music, too, must be equally varied in order that the contrasts among the several nationalities can be perceived, yet not in such a way that the differences can be precisely described verbally.<sup>26</sup>

Garborg's dialect is one that is itself pregnant with enchantment. The word *byting*, for example, means both "ugly person" and "changeling," because it was believed that trolls would trade their own ugly progeny for human children, and *haugteken* refers to someone who is acting peculiarly, because those taken into the mountains by trolls who managed to escape would return without all their faculties.<sup>27</sup> More explicit phrases, like "langt inn i ein annan heim [far into another world]," further add to the sense of the numinous.

Finally, there is the aspect of enchantment which draws one in, or allures one, to a certain location, often in terms that reflect the quest to recover Eden or return to a "Time before time"<sup>28</sup> – that is, a homecoming. One recent commentator has compared this with the English painter and critic Adrian Stokes's belief that an individual's relationship with a particularly poignant work of art is akin to an "emphatic, identificatory pull," a sort of magnetism which he

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<sup>26</sup> Edvard Grieg, *Edvard Grieg, Letters to Colleagues and Friends*, ed. Finn Benestad and trans. William H. Halverson (Columbus: Peer Gynt Press, 2000), 230.

<sup>27</sup> Lillehei, 185.

<sup>28</sup> Mircea Eliade, quoted in Lindsay Jones, 75, who appropriates the word "allurement" in this sense. David Brown notes that the term "ultimately comes from the falconer's art in which the hawk is enticed into more than it realizes (25)."

called the “incantatory process in art.”<sup>29</sup> As has already been noted, “incantation” is cognate with “enchantment,” and this facet of enchantment – which allures and bedazzles, a discovery of the beautiful or sublime without requiring needing tangible (or practical) consequences for validation – has been examined by philosopher David Brown through the dual intervention of what he calls transcendence and immanence.<sup>30</sup> In this context, transcendence may be summed up as ‘a truth bigger than us which draws us beyond our own sense of the familiar,’ and immanence as that same truth “invading the material order and transforming it.”<sup>31</sup> To pick a familiar and visible historical example: it is no coincidence that the architectural transition from Romanesque to Gothic coincided with the introduction of genuflection and the elevation of the host in the Roman Catholic Mass – that is, as cathedrals reached ever more towards heaven, there came a commensurate pull back towards the human and physically accessible, most obviously in gestures celebrating the divine presence in the Eucharist: so, while the Church’s theologians were advocating the inclusion of more immanent signs within the liturgy, its architects were expressing the transcendent.<sup>32</sup> The extraordinary monuments that resulted became the destinations of pilgrims from across Europe (and later the world), who found themselves allured to these sites.

These two categories – immanence and transcendence – find musical corollaries in *Haugtussa*.

Perhaps the most notable example of immanence may be found at moments of strophic turn-around – when one verse ends and the next begins – in songs like “Blåbær-Li” and “Elsk.” As has

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<sup>29</sup> Stokes, quoted in Jones, 76.

<sup>30</sup> David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); Brown’s study is more explicitly theology than mine.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, 276.

already been mentioned, they begin with musical gestures designed to be timeless; but Grieg fashions them in such a way that when these figures return at the beginning of each new verse or at the return of the A section, they now have a sense of measured time about them. This entity that was above time has now entered a framework of regular temporality. Furthermore, the cyclical quality that obtains is related not only to Garborg's concern with such matters as the habitual and repetitive routines of rural life, or seasonal rotation (as Grimley notes, the novel's events, "revolve around two key festival dates in the folk calendar: midsummer night and midwinter"<sup>33</sup>), but also to the poet's decision to structurally turn to Old Norse *alla Aasen*, a language imbued with a cyclical, pre-Cartesian, and more mythical way of thinking.

As for transcendence, one need look no further than "Ved Gjøtlet-Bekken" [By the Gjøtlet Brook], which concludes a cycle that has been predominantly fixed around F major/minor in the key of A major. This affixes a sort of global Picardi third quality to it, but, more importantly, closes the work with a chromatic mediant modulation, a gesture, as Julian Johnson notes, that is "not merely a conventional sign or symbol for the idea of transcendence; rather, it does quite literally transcend the gravitational field of the key system it leaves behind."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, this harmonic relationship is reaffirmed in the quasi-development, which begins its chromatic-lament bass descent on an F major chord in 6/4 inversion.

It is also, I think, not accidental that as Veslemøy ponders her fate looking into the "gentle ripples" of the brook, Grieg has crafted music which acts as a reflection of the cycle's opening song. As has been noted, "Det Syng" is built on two strands replete with echoes, the first more

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<sup>33</sup> Grimley, 126.

<sup>34</sup> Julian Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature*, 55.

rhetorical, almost speech-like in its declaration, and structurally saturated with the half-step, the second more lyrical, with softly unfolding arpeggios. “Ved Gjøtlet-Bekken” is a mirror image, now with the verses beginning with a lyric rippling built on arpeggios, and closing with a recitative section founded on the m2; of course, both are again suffused with echoes (compare Examples 1 and 8, respectively).

It goes without saying that there is plenty more to say – but perhaps that’s just part of the spell. The feeling of beguiled space and the experience of altered time that reside at the very heart of the idea of enchantment are but two incarnations of a quality that blooms infinitely toward both the intimate and the immense. Perhaps all we can do is, like Grieg, bathe in the timelessness, and find ourselves bewildered by mountains and eternal sunsets, and – as in so many things – turn for the last word on the subject to William Shakespeare, who wrote in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy’s images,  
And grows to something of great constancy;  
But howsoever, strange and admirable. (V i)