

**The relationship between Olaus and Agathe Backer Grøndahl and
Edvard and Nina Grieg**

or

Hjaertelig Hilsen fra begge til begge

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I

At first, my study on the relationship between the musician couples Grieg and Grøndahl focused on the connection between life and work in the historical context. Particularly in German-speaking countries, it has long been questioned whether biographical research can meet musicological standards.¹ But the strict separation of empirical and aesthetic subject led to biographies of musicians being written to a large extent in the popular literature and thus to a national historiography of heroes.² When searching ways to describe the connection between work biography and life biography as a complex conditioning pattern, the question quickly arises of how to treat adequately the sources. Letters are among the most important testimonies, but they are usually used only in excerpts or selectively in the biographical context. However, letters are produced in a dialogical tension, a fact which is completely forgotten in this context. In the investigation of the Grieg and Grøndahl couples, letters play an important role, expressly as documents of a dialogue. They allow one to trace the genesis of a work, the performance history, the crises, turning points and decisions in their complex biographical context.

In what follows, I would like to describe the interaction between artistic work and biography of the two Norwegian musician couples. Apart from concert programmes, reviews and diary entries, the correspondence of the musicians constitutes one of the most informative sources. This also applies to the recently-discovered letters of Edvard Grieg to Agathe Backer Grøndahl.

¹ Carl Dahlhaus: Wozu noch Biographien?, in: *Melos / Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 1 (1975), p. 82; Hermann Danuser: Biographik und musikalische Hermeneutik. Zum Verhältnis zweier Disziplinen der Musikwissenschaft, in: *Neue Musik und Tradition. Festschrift Rudolf Stephan zum 65. Geburtstag*, publ. by Josef Kuckertz. Laaber 1990, p. 571-601.

² Beatrix Borchard: Mit Schere und Klebstoff, in: Cordula Heymann-Wentzel / Johannes Laas (publ.): *Musik und Biographie. Festschrift für Rainer Cadenbach*. Würzburg 2004, p.30 f.

II

It was the ardent wish of Edvard and Nina Grieg - undoubtedly Norway's most prominent musician couple - to make their collected documents accessible to the public after their demise. To achieve this, they appointed the Public Library of Bergen as administrator of their legacy.³

Letters between Edvard and Nina are scarce, compared with those to numerous other persons. In a letter to Frants Beyer, Nina Grieg explains this: "*In the first place, Grieg and I have been together almost constantly, so there are very few letters between us – and the ones that do exist are absolutely unsuitable for publication*"⁴ This makes it clear that the letters have not been preserved and handed down by chance, but consciously on a large scale, and also consciously in fragmentary form - an important fact that should be taken into account in the interpretation.

The following statement by Edvard Grieg shows how important Nina Grieg was as performer of her husband's works: "*I loved a woman with a wonderful voice and with an equally wonderful style of interpretation. This young woman became my wife and has been my life companion down to the present day. She, I dare say, has been the only true interpreter of my songs.*"⁵ - Indeed, Grieg's wife was regarded as an excellent lied singer and was the performer at some first performances.⁶ Also for his compositions, her function as adviser should not be underestimated, as stated by Grieg in many letters to friends.⁷ Grieg dedicated her his lieder op.4 and also his nine lieder op. 18, perhaps a lesser known fact.⁸ After his death, Nina Grieg took care of his musical legacy, collaborated with publishers for new editions of his works and influenced biographies. Her importance for Edvard Grieg's work is thus comparable to that of Clara Schumann for the work of her husband Robert Schumann.

³ See: <http://bergenbibliotek.no/digitale-samlinger/grieg/samlingen/grieg-samlingen-historie> (15. may 2011).

⁴ Nina Grieg to Frants Beyer, in Inger Elisabeth Haavet: Nina Grieg. Kunstner og kunstnerhustru. Oslo 1998, p. 290.

⁵ Op. cit., p. 5.

⁶ See Sange op. 21 or Sange op.18 Edvard Grieg. Thematisch-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis, publ.by Dan Fog, Kirsti Grinde, Øyvind Norheim, Frankfurt 2008, p. 86 and p. 70.

⁷ E.g. a letter from the 8th january 1897 from Edvard Grieg to Iver Holter: „*Die Ouvertüre war nicht gut instrumentiert, daran kann ich mich erinnern. Ich ließ sie also aus bloßer Mutlosigkeit liegen, fertigte einen vierhändigen Klavierauszug an und spielte ihn mit Nina zu Hause.(...)*“, in: Edvard Grieg, Thematisch-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis, publ. by Dan Fog, Kirsti Grinde, Øyvind Norheim, Frankfurt 2008, p. 35.

⁸ Ibid. p. 10 and p. 71.

III

With the Grøndahl couple, the Griegs` had more in common than a prominent position in Norway's musical life: indeed, all four artists collaborated intensively, a collaboration which can be traced in all their activities.

Agathe Backer's debut in Norway at the age of twenty marked the beginning of this collaboration; Edvard Grieg engaged her as soloist for Beethoven's piano concerto in E-flat Major for one of his "Abonnements-Koncerter" (subscription concerts) which took place in March 1868 under his direction.

Thus, Grieg offered her a platform to perform in public. Rapidly, a friendship developed between the young Grieg couple and the pianist. In a letter to Fridtjof Backer-Grøndahl, Agathe Backer Grøndahl's third son, Nina Grieg describes this period: "*I remember so well an incident that occurred during the first year that I was married. She lived on one of the streets below Øvre Voldgate, where we lived. I went to her house in the forenoons to hear some new songs that she had written. She hummed them for me in her sweet little voice, and I took them into my heart and repeated them as well as I could. That was even before she became engaged. She was so delicate and fair (...) as a blossom in springtime, so full of grace and poetry-qualities that she retained as long as she lived. I admired and loved her more than I can say. And I needn't tell you how fond Edvard was of her.*"⁹

During these years, Nina Grieg appeared not only as performer of her husband's lieder, but also of the first lieder by the young Agathe Backer and thus attracted more interest for these lieder: "*There was heightened interest in the concert because of Nina Grieg's beautiful performance of [Agathe Backer Grøndahl's] Four Songs.*"¹⁰

IV

In April 1870, Agathe Backer gave a concert in the *Logens store Sal*, with among other pieces Beethoven's third piano concerto in C-Minor. The Men's Octet from

⁹ Ole M. Sandvik: Agathe og O. A. Grøndahl, 1847-1947: Et minneskrift. Oslo 1948, p. 142.

¹⁰ Cecilie Dahm: Pianisten og komponisten Agathe Backer Grøndahl, Oslo 1998, p. 71.

Studentersangforeningen – The Student Song Society- under the direction of Olaus Andreas Grøndahl was also involved. The engagement took place in the same year already.¹¹

Olaus Grøndahl decided to give up his studies in theology in Christiania and studied singing between 1870 and 1874 in Leipzig and Cologne while Agathe Backer perfected her technique under Franz Liszt in Weimar and Hans von Bülow in Florence and already gave many concerts.¹²

In 1872, she organizes a concert in Christiania where Olaus Grøndahl also presents himself to a wider Norwegian public.¹³ At that time, Agathe Backer had already made herself a name as a pianist and composer, as reflected in the reviews of that concert. In this case, *she* is the one who paves the way for her future husband into Norway's musical life through this concert and numerous others.

Agathe Backer Grøndahl's biography makes her an exciting subject for gender investigations. Indeed, the female composers, or female performers of the 19th century, are known through the famous male musicians in their direct environment, e.g. Fanny Mendelssohn or Clara Schumann. In the case of the Grøndahl couple, it is the contrary, at least from our perspective today. Undoubtedly an unusual constellation.

In his time, Olaus Grøndahl was known particularly for his achievements as one of Norway's leading choirmasters and for his compositions for male choirs.¹⁴

For the first performance of some of his choir works, Grieg chose Grøndahl as conductor, thus demonstrating that he held Grøndahl in high esteem.¹⁵ In addition, he asked him to participate in the charity concert for the benefit of the Nordraak monument, a matter of special of importance for Grieg as is known.¹⁶ In 1895, with Ole Koppang, Grøndahl published a collection of a capella two-part nursery rhymes for which Grieg composed three melodies. Grieg was so enthused by this work that he composed five more nursery rhymes.

¹¹ Camilla Hambro: *Det ulmer under overflaten. Agathe Backer Grøndahl (1847-1907). Genus, sjanger og norskhet.* Gøteborg 2008, p. 94.

¹² See Camilla Hambro's data base: <http://folk.uio.no/oyvindyb/Konsserter/index.html> (18. may 2011).

¹³ Cecilie Dahm: *Agathe Backer Grøndahl. Pianisten og komponisten.* Oslo 1998, p. 85.

¹⁴ He conducted the Håndverkersangforeningen (1884-90), the Sangforening (1888-1912), the Studentersangforeningen (1889-1913) and established 1878 the „Grøndahls Kor“.

¹⁵ e. g. Grieg's *Kristianiensernes Sangerhilsen EG 173; (Nu Pintsens Klokker ringer)* and *Impromptu (Norske toner, norske toner)*, see Edvard Grieg. *Thematisch-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis*, publ. by Dan Fog, Kirsti Grinde, Øyvind Norheim, Frankfurt 2008. p. 450; p. 452.

¹⁶ See. Edvard Grieg: *Brev i utvalg. 1862-1907. Bind I. Til norske mottagere.* Oslo 1998, publ. by Finn Benestad, p. 241f.

The letters between Edvard Grieg and Olaus Grøndahl are marked by an artistic attachment, but they are mostly restricted to matters of a musical or organizational nature, programme selection and interpretation.¹⁷

V

A completely different tone can be discerned in the letters between Edvard Grieg and Agathe Backer Grøndahl. The composer's recently discovered letters to his female colleague reflect a strong trust relationship. In 1881, Grieg had dedicated her his lieder op. 33, the Vinje-Lieder, Backer Grøndahl thanked him with the dedication of her „Sange ved havet“ (“Songs by the Sea”) op. 17, which she composed in 1884 and were published in 1887. In the return letter, which was thought lost, Grieg thanks her for the dedication with the following words:

*“Accept my warmest thanks for the dedication! Nothing you could have done would have given me greater joy! For – yes, you certainly have known this for a long time – I don’t think there is anywhere in Norway a warmer admirer of your great talent than your Edvard Grieg.”*¹⁸

Agathe Backer Grøndahl sends Grieg regularly her compositions for review, a proof of Grieg's high opinion of her compositions. His responses are replete with both, sincere criticism, and affectionate encouragements. For example, his commentary to her lieder op. 29:
¹⁹ *“But what do you say regarding the last deep bass notes in ”Sommerkveld”? The whole phrase employs e, g and d, but it might be more reasonably be d and e-sharp. (...)Finally, you must permit an old admirer to complain about a few minor things in the otherwise so excellent ”Høst på Hejen”. Near the bottom of page 7 you have written the following: [musical excerpt]. These twice-repeated-sharps in the descending thirds in the piano part make no sense and are jarring harmonically, poetically, and with respect to the overall sound, why not retain c-sharp: in dark nights! Then on page 9 we read “but no one walks around” this on the two eighth notes looks comical. It just won’t work, and at the tempo you have indicated*

¹⁷ Edvard Grieg. Thematisch-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis, publ. by Dan Fog, Kirsti Grinde, Øyvind Norheim, Frankfurt 2008, p. 281.

¹⁸ Edvard Grieg to Agathe Backer Grøndahl, brev fra Trolldhaugen, 21th januar 1887. Letter in private hands.

¹⁹ Agathe Backer Grøndahl: Ti sange (Vilhelm Krag), written 1892, publ. by Carl Warmuth 1892.

*cannot be performed either. You see, I am a veritable music critic, ready to go to work for one or another of the Christiania newspapers.*²⁰

To this letter which Grieg wrote on February 5th, 1893, Nina Grieg added a letter one day later.

"Dearest Agathe!

*I must be permitted to send you a few words to thank you for your beautiful songs. You wouldn't believe how much I have been enjoying them all week. Ever since they arrived I have been sitting at the piano and playing them early and late (...). Take joy in the bright rays of your beautiful art. Dear, sweet [Agathe], heartfelt thanks for what you have given! With love and admiration! Your Nina.*²¹

Comparing the letters of the couple to Agathe Backer Grøndahl, it is striking that Edvard Grieg uses the "De" form, while Nina Grieg uses the "Du" form at that time. A letter by Agathe Backer Grøndahl to Nina Grieg in 1888 shows the confidential and trusting relationship between the two women, *"Now I come to you – or really to your husband – with an unusual question (...) All winter I have been thinking about going to London sometime in the spring to try some concerts. Today I have a letter from London in which I am told that Grieg is going to be the lion of the season... Could your husband make use of me in any way? I will not say any more about this for I don't want to in any way influence your husband to do something (...)"*

This question must have been very unpleasant to her, as the following passage discloses:

*"Dear Nina [...], just promise me to consider the matter from the business standpoint (...) If you are absolutely convinced that this will not lead to anything, there is no need for you to show him the letter or to talk about it .Warm greetings from your devoted Agathe Grøndahl.*²²

²⁰ Edvard Grieg to Backer Grøndahl from Leipzig, 5th february 1893. Letter in private hands.

²¹ Nina Grieg to Agathe Backer Grøndahl from Leipzig, 6th february 1893. Letter in private hands.

²² Agathe Backer Grøndahl to Nina Grieg: letter 20th february 1888.

Indeed, on March 28th, 1889, on recommendation by Grieg, a concert takes place in St. James` Hall with the Royal Philharmonic Society. Backer Grøndahl plays under Grieg's direction his concerto in A-Minor. The press reacted enthusiastically: *"His [Grieg's] expositor on this occasion, Mdme. Bacher-Grøndhal [sic!][...]- is a consummate artist; her technique is phenomenal, and she richly deserved the enthusiastic recall which she accepted hand in hand with Grieg"*²³

VI

As evidenced by a letter of Edvard Grieg in 1904, he continued to comment on her compositions also in later years: *"I spent last evening reading through your new songs, and I found so much in them that is beautiful and deeply felt that I must be permitted to send you my warmest thanks. I will only mention the song "Es muss was Wunderbares sein", where despite its opinionated declamation, which more than once would lead Beckmesser to "sætte Kryds på Tavlen" really is so "wunderbar" that anyone with ears to hear with must love you (...)"*²⁴

Particularly in his last letters to Backer Grøndahl, Grieg always expresses care and concern for his female colleague.

Already deaf in one ear at the end of her twenties, she was almost completely deaf in her late years and felt increasingly isolated. Grieg attempted in a touching way to console her: *"Let me just call your attention to two duties that you have – first and foremost to yourself, but also to those around you: to learn to understand what is being said by looking at the mouth of the speaker. In so doing, you will lighten the burden for yourself and your existence to an unbelievable degree. I hope that your eyesight will allow this. The other thing that you should do is to try using a little hops-pillow as a soporific. Nina´s sister Tonny, who suffered from insomnia for many years, swears by this means as the only thing that has helped her without negative side-effects: you fill a quite small pillow with dried hops. To be sure, it is not as*

²³ H.R. Hawsis: The Pall Mall Gazette, 29th march 1889, in: <http://folk.uio.no/oyvindyb/Konserter/18890328/> (14th may 2011).

²⁴ Edvard Grieg to Agathe Backer Grøndahl, Christiania, Hotel Westminster, 26th january 1904. Letter in private hands.

soft as feathers – but of course sleep is more important. So, please, do what I say. I am right about this,

Heartfelt greetings both from both.

Your Edvard Grieg”²⁵

His letters demonstrate clearly how he supported her personally and professionally, but in one of his later letters, he expresses also clearly her importance for *him*: “*But it is so remarkable I feel a deep desire to let you know what an infinite debt of gratitude I owe you for so much of that which is beautiful you have shared with me through the passing years. At the time when we were so alone here in Norway – I was so, in any case – then you were the quiet, sympathetic musical spirit.*”²⁶

VII

The significant part added to the known correspondence between Grieg and Backer Grøndahl confirms the musical and personal enduring relationship between the two musicians. These letters reveal that they were close to one another not only as performing musicians - their respective spouses were also musicians - but also as composers. The link between work biography and life biography, which also concerns sociological in addition to musicological research, appears particularly clearly in the relationship between the two prominent Norwegian couples. To conclude, I would like to cite Grieg's words in a letter to Backer Grøndahl from Copenhagen on may 21th 1905: “*We greet both of you most heartily and hope to see you again soon: Listener and advisor: Your Edvard Grieg*”²⁷

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Edvard Grieg to Agathe Backer Grøndahl, Kristiania, 12th november 1905, in: Finn Benestad (publ.): Edvard Grieg. Brev i utvalg 1862-1907, bind 1, Oslo 1998, p. 235f.

²⁷ Edvard Grieg to Agathe Backer Grøndahl, Kjøbenhavn, Hotel Fønix, 21th mai 1905. Letter in private hands.

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