

FRANZ LISZT AND EDVARD GRIEG

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Jubilees are always very important in turning the limelight of publicity on the person in question. This year the main person to celebrate in musical life is Franz Liszt who was born 200 years ago in Raiding, Hungary and died 125 years ago in Bayreuth, Germany. As I am first of all a Liszt scholar, it was proposed to me to give here a short survey about the personal relations between Franz Liszt and Edvard Grieg. The facts I shall recall here briefly, are not unknown either in Liszt, or in Grieg scholarship. However, it is worth while recalling them, for Franz Liszt has to be present at this conference, as he was present at some important points in the development of Edvard Grieg's musical career.

I shall lean on my earlier, longer lecture held at the conference „Grieg in Rome” and on the material of the exhibition „Liszt and Grieg” I organized four years ago in Hungary (in Sopron and in Budapest) in the centennial year of Grieg's death. In addition to well-known literature on Grieg and Liszt, I can also rely on such authentic sources as Liszt's volume of letter-drafts from 1877/78 in the National Széchényi Library with some relevant unpublished letters, and Liszt's Budapest music library which he donated to the Academy of Music and which is now preserved in Liszt Memorial Museum. This music library is a vivid testimony of his relations to Scandinavian musicians, including Edvard Grieg and his circle.

Of the Scandinavian countries Franz Liszt visited only Denmark, in the year 1841 – two years before Grieg was born. The thirty-year-old Liszt was on the top of his virtuoso career already. He spent two weeks in Copenhagen, played twice at the Royal Court, gave three public concerts in the Royal Theatre and was decorated by King Christian VIII (whom he found very musical) with the Dannebrog-Orden. Liszt was accompanied by the composer and organist **Johann Peter Emilius Hartmann** (1805-1900), important representative of the Danish romanticism of his time. Their musical friendship proved to be lasting and fruitful: later Liszt as court conductor in Weimar, put on the programme Hartmann's and Andersen's opera *Liden Kirsten* (*Klein Karin*, first German performance in January 1856). Hartmann was the first to pronounce the deepest thoughts echoed later by a whole generation of young composers of the North. He was later held in great esteem by Grieg, too.

Hartmann's son-in-law **Niels Wilhelm Gade** (1817-1890), the conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig from 1844 to 1848 first at Mendelssohn's side, later as his successor, was also known by Liszt. They were not tied by bonds of friendship but by mutual esteem. Gade dedicated to Liszt his *Piano sonata* op. 28 in e minor, while Liszt conducted Gade's *Spring fantasy* and *3rd Symphony* in Weimar. Gade who after 1848 played a leading role in the musical life of Denmark, first as leader of the Copenhagen Musical Association and then as director and professor of the Copenhagen Conservatory, seemed too conservative for the younger generation which Grieg belonged to.

A much more important connection Liszt's from Grieg's circle going back to times before Grieg's birth, was with **Ole Bull** (1810-1880) who belonged to Liszt's generation. They played together Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata* several times and Liszt wrote about Bull to Marie d'Agoult in 1840: „*He is a great artist: or at least, has all the stuff of a great artist in him. And you know that I count barely four such in Europe. [...] He is a kind of savage, very ignorant of counterpoint and fugue, but a savage of genius who is brimming over with charming and original ideas.*” In this circle, it is superfluous to stress how important Bull was as Grieg's model in idealist love and constant activity for Norwegian national culture.

Let us turn now directly to **Edvard Grieg** (1843-1907) himself. When did their ways first cross? Much earlier than generally known. Professor Patrick Dinslage called my attention to an unpublished note of Grieg, according to which, the sixteen-year-old conservatory student saw and heard Liszt conducting at the very first *Tonkünstler-Versammlung* in Leipzig. This event, the first step towards establishing the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein* with its musical festivals held every year in different towns, took place on **1-2 June 1859**, and afforded Grieg occasion to hear some of Liszt's music under the composer's baton, including the symphonic poem *Tasso* and the *Gran Mass*; on the programme, there were also some Liszt piano pieces played by Hans von Bülow.¹ Unfortunately, Grieg did not leave any testimony about his impressions.

Much more is known about Grieg's impressions when he met Liszt several times in Rome during his first study tour on the turn of 1865/66, because he kept a detailed diary.² On 20th December, he was present at the concert given by the Italian violinist **Ettore Pinelli** (1843-1915) and „Saw Liszt strutting about for some young ladies”. (Pinelli, together with the pianist and composer **Giovanni Sgambati** (1841-1914), belonged to Liszt's inner circle in Rome.)

On January 4, Grieg „went to the church *Ara Coeli*] on the *Capitoline Hill* at 3 PM and heard a piece of church music by Franz Liszt for castrata, natural male voice, and harmonium. Liszt himself led the performance. That is to say: someone else was conducting, Liszt led the whole affair with his black-gloved fingers that one moment were waving in the air, the next moment were busy on the organ. - The composition – a *Stabat mater dolorosa* – is a sad proof of the decline of the newer German music. For it would be hard to find a more affected, pale, formless, shallow piece than this. It is unsound and untrue from beginning to end. The beginning did impress me, however; it was brilliant, mystical and demonic – as Liszt can be in inspired passages here and there. But the whole piece remained in this underworld. [...] to employ trite, highly strung, platitudinous Wagnerian opera reminiscences in a *Stabat mater* – that I would call to sink deep.”

An important rectification to Grieg's diary note: the piece in question was not a *Stabat mater dolorosa*, but its joyful and devout paraphrase, the *Stabat mater speciosa* from the 1st part of Liszt's oratorio *Christus*. It was a very bad performance by an incapable choir and choir master, who almost murdered the piece as Liszt remembered on it seven years later at the much more successful Vienna performance under Anton Rubinstein.³ In Grieg's judgement the least understandable for me is that he found „Wagnerian opera reminiscences” in this simple, harmonic choir movement, the song of the mother at the manger of her little child. Let us listen to a small excerpt.

Music: Liszt: *Christus* – *Stabat mater speciosa*

I can only imagine that young Grieg was influenced by the „Leipzig Conservatory spirit” generally hostile towards Wagner, Liszt and the so-called „New-German School”. Liszt's *Stabat mater speciosa* is everything but a typical product of German music and has nothing common with Wagnerian operas.

Thanks to an adequate performance, Grieg had a much better opinion when on 31 January he heard „A concerto for piano by Liszt played by Sgambati” which „was well suited to show the composer as well as the performer in the most favorable light. This piece is

¹ 1 June, opening concert: Bülow played piano pieces by Liszt; Liszt conducted the *Vorspiel zu Tristan und Isolde*, the symphonic poem *Tasso* and a duet from *Der fliegende Holländer*. – 2 June, Thomaskirche: *Graner Messe*. In the evening, a feast which was the base to found the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein*.

² Edvard Grieg: *Autobiographical Writings*, transl. by William H. Halverson, pp. 18-51. Quoted *passim*.

³ La Mara: *Franz Liszt's Briefe*, Vols. I-VIII, Leipzig 1893-1905 (=Br.) VI. Nr. 299, p. 321.

the best thing I have ever heard by Liszt. Brilliant from the beginning to end.” Grieg doesn’t specify which of the Liszt piano concertos he heard; from his description we suppose that it was the 1st Concerto in E-flat major.

All these encounters with Liszt and his music were registered only by Grieg, and there is no sign that anyone introduced at that point the young composer to Liszt. It was more than two and a half years later that they established personal contacts, first through correspondence. Liszt’s letter to Grieg, written on 29 December 1868 from Rome to Christiania⁴ and praising Grieg’s violin Sonata op. 8 in F major which „*bears testimony to a vigorous, reflective, and inventive talent of excellent quality – which to achieve the heights has only to take its natural course*” is generally known, since it helped a lot that the composer got the state scholarship for a longer stay in Italy.

How did Liszt get to know Grieg’s 1st Violin Sonata? Maybe through Pinelli who became one of Grieg’s closest friends in Rome, and when Grieg gave a concert in the Scandinavian Society on 24th March 1866, they played the F Major Sonata Op. 8 for violin and piano together. But it cannot be excluded that the Danish pianist and composer **Niels Ravnkilde** (1823-1890) was the intermediate. Ravnkilde as president of the Scandinavian Society in Rome, helped young Grieg much during his stays in Rome. And he was on very good terms with Liszt, too. In Liszt’s Budapest music library, there are 9 publications by Ravnkilde, five of them with the author’s handwritten dedications to Liszt from several years between 1861 (the year of Liszt’s settlement in the Eternal City) and 1864.

Grieg acknowledges in a letter to his biographer Aimar Grönvold the extraordinary importance of Liszt’s letter which „*brought sunlight into my universe. There was at that time no one at home who cared anything at all about me as a creative artist. I had expressed my despondent feelings in a letter to a Roman friend; he had spoken of it to Liszt, who he knew was warmly interested in me, and it shows a very noble trait in Liszt that he sat down immediately at his writing table, conscious of the good he could thereby accomplish. I had thought it worthwhile to apply for a travel grant but had little hope of getting one, since I was in the black books of our conservative musicians and the rest of the ruling dilettanti. But Liszt’s letter worked wonders.*”⁵

Let me quickly pass over the events of Grieg’s second, very important stay in Rome, since they belong to the best known moments of the composer’s biography, and the personal encounters with Liszt are documented in any Grieg biography, since the composer’s letters to his parents left interesting and detailed descriptions about them.

Arriving in Rome at the beginning of 1870, Grieg asked his Danish musician-friend **August Winding** (1835-1899) to give him back some of his scores, in order to be able to show and present them to Liszt. (According to items in Liszt’s estate library, Winding also presented Liszt with four volumes of his own compositions, one of them with handwritten dedication „*Herrn Abbé Liszt mit der tiefsten Verehrung*” from February 1870.)

Grieg first visited Liszt in the cloister Santa Francesca Romana in mid-February, played him his *2nd Sonata for violin and piano* op. 13 in G major, to the Master’s greatest pleasure; then he continued with the Minuet of the *Humoresques*. Liszt played to Grieg his own *Tasso Funeral March (Tromphe funèbre de Tasse)*, a composition he had just completed, and Grieg reciprocated with his *Funeral March (Sørgemarsch)* in memory of his early deceased friend **Rikard Nordraak** [Núrdrók] (1842-1866). The second visit took place six weeks later, in the presence of Winding, Sgambati and others. This was the famous encounter when Liszt played Grieg’s *Piano Concerto* ‘prima vista’ from the manuscript score, commenting on some musical phrases he particularly liked.

⁴ Brf. II. Nr. 81, pp. 135-136, transl. Adrian Williams: *Portrait of Liszt by Himself and His Contemporaries*, Oxford 1990, Clarendon Press, p. 453.

⁵ D. Monrad-Johansen: *Edvard Grieg*, New York, 1938, p. 115. Quoted by Williams, p. 453.

I quote Grieg: „*At the end he said with a singularly cordial accent as he handed me the volume: 'You carry on, my friend, you have the right stuff in you. And don't ever let them frighten you!' [...] Often, when disappointment and bitterness come, I shall think of his words, and that the remembrance of this moment will have a wonderful power to sustain me in days of adversity, I firmly believe.*”

As a token of his enduring gratitude, Grieg dedicated to Liszt in print the Leipzig edition of his cantata *Foran Sydens Closter (Vor der Klosterpforte)* op. 20 for women's voices, orchestra and organ, written in 1871, and sent him a copy of the score with an added manuscript dedication on the cover to Budapest. I don't think it is a mere chance that this cantata was the first composition by Grieg to be performed in Hungary in a public concert on 6 April 1877. – In addition to the Cantata, there are four more scores in Liszt's Budapest music library which were obviously presented to him by Grieg himself: the *2nd violin sonata* op. 13, the *Sørgemarsch*, the *Romancer og Ballader* op. 9 for voice and piano on A. Munk's poems and the *Ballade* for piano op. 24. Both the *Romances* and the *Ballade* bear Grieg's handwritten dedication to Liszt. – The collection of Norwegian folk melodies of **Ludvig Mathias Lindeman** (1812-1887), from which Grieg took the basic melody of his *Ballade*, can also be found in Liszt's Budapest music library. Liszt was presented with the three Lindemann volumes by the Norwegian publisher **Carl Warmuth junior** (1844-1895) in 1877, and in his letter of thanks dated 25 January 1878 in Budapest, he remarked that the *springdands* in 3/4 reminded him of the *mazurka*, while he found the *halling* in 2/4 similar to the *krakowiak* and even to the *csárdás*, the typical Hungarian dance.

From the late 1870's on, on Liszt's suggestion the musical festivals of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein*, originally established for supporting new and progressive German music, were gradually opened for composers of other countries, including Scandinavians as **Johan Svendsen** (1840-1911), **Johan Peter Selmer** (1844-1910), **Johan Gotfred Matthison-Hansen** (1832-1909). „*To increase the international character of our festival doesn't harm*”- Liszt wrote to Carl Riedel, secretary of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein* in May 1877. But he refused such compositions which he found epigonic, like the *Souvenir de Rome* by the Danish composer **Johan Adam Krygell** (1835-1915). „*Even the sublime Beethoven must not be copied; as it is necessary to continue composing music, one has to find his own ways to step forward.*”

And Grieg did not fail to find his own ways. On the programme of the 1879 festival in Wiesbaden, Grieg's *1st String Quartet* op. 27 and the *Cantata* op. 20 were performed. According to the letter of a friend who was present, Liszt praised the String Quartet which had failed a year earlier in the Leipzig Gewandhaus, with following words: „*It is a long time since I have encountered a new work, especially a string quartet, which has interested me so strongly as this singular and excellent work by Grieg.*”⁶

In the Weimar festival of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein* in 1884, it was the *Sonata for violoncello and piano* op. 36 which was performed. At the same festival, the old Liszt conducted himself the premiere of the orchestral movement *Salve Polonia*, an interlude written to his *Legend of Saint Stanislaus*, an oratorio about the Polish saint on which he worked for a long time but it remained unfinished. Since a new Hungarian recording has been released quite recently, I should like to play a short part of this interlude, combining two famous Polish national melodies, one of them being the Polish anthem.

Music: St. Stanislaus, Interlude II: Salve Polonia

⁶ Grieg's letter to Grönvold on March 18, 1883 is quoted in: Finn Benestad & Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe: Edvard Grieg. The Man and the Artist, transl. By William H. Halverson & Leland B. Sateren, Gloucester 1988, Alan Sutton Publishing, p. 221.

At this occasion, Grieg was not present, either, but a year earlier, in October 1883 when he gave a concert in Weimar as a first stop of his longer German concert tour, the two composers met. In a court concert, Grieg played his *Piano Concerto*, and his *Two elegiac melodies* op. 34 for string orchestra were performed with the highest perfection. „*It was a brilliant beginning, and for that I must thank Liszt first and foremost. Ah, how wonderful he was to me. Besides the applause of the audience, I heard Liszt's grunt – the well-known sound that is elicited only by something he thinks highly of. [...] He has become unbelievably old since I saw him in Rome. It was sad to see him again.*”⁷

And this was the last time that Liszt and Grieg met personally. Yet I have to remark that with growing age and declining health, Liszt's interest for new music, including Scandinavian composers, did not cease. Even some five month before his death, in February 1886 in Budapest, when his eyes were deteriorating, he asked his pupils to play new works for him, among them a concerto by the Danish composer **Ludvig Schytte** (1848-1909) to whom he sent a praising and encouraging letter. No wonder that his pupils, among them especially **Agatha Backer** (1847-1907) and **Eugen d'Albert** (1864-1932) were ardent partisans of Grieg's music, and his Hungarian students **István Thomán** (1862-1940) and **Árpád Szendy** (1863-1922) as Liszt's successors at the Budapest Academy of Music put Grieg's piano music on their official teaching programme as early as the beginning of the 1890's. But we shall stop here, since these facts belong to the Hungarian Grieg reception in Hungary after Liszt's death which I had dealt with at the jubiliary Grieg conference in Bergen.

⁷ Grieg's letter to Franz Beyer, 17 October 1883. Quoted from Williams, p. 626. Also in Benestad & Schjelderup-Ebbe, p. 241.