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GRIEG – A GREAT CHORAL COMPOSER

Over the course of his career as a composer, Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) penned quite a few choral works. Grieg knew how to write for choirs, as the human voice was a medium he had a good command of not only as a composer, but also as a conductor. During his career he was the musical director of several choirs, and his experiences as a conductor gave him a strong practical knowledge of the range and capacity of the human voice. In writing for choirs he also learnt quite a lot from the pieces he composed for solo voice. Not least the close relation to his wife Nina and her performances of his songs gave him a very good insight into writing for voices. His choral compositions are clearly idiomatically written. To choirs of a certain standard his songs are easy to perform, and they also appeal to a broad spectrum of audience types, which means that many of his choral compositions have become very popular.

Looking more closely at his choral compositions, we find that Grieg wrote for all kinds of choirs, including mixed choirs, male choirs, female choirs and children's choirs.¹ All in all, he published more than 60 compositions. It is interesting and perhaps even surprising to learn that among all his approximately 60 choral works more than 40 pieces were written for male voices. These male choir writings have to be considered in an historical light. When after some years of living abroad Grieg returned home to Norway and Kristiania (now Oslo) in 1866 he had to make money. He started teaching, he worked as a pianist and conductor, and he composed. For a few decades in the second half of the 19th century there was a big market for male choir compositions, and Grieg produced the kind of music that the market was looking for. In what follows, I will offer a brief overview of the situation in Norway and comment on some of Grieg's male choir compositions, with particular focus on the song *Little Torø*.

In the middle of the 19th century many Norwegian and Nordic public choirs were established. Most of these were male choirs. Several factors led to the rise of the male choir movement. Among these was the idea of singing as a unifying and democratic activity, a way of facilitating contact between different groups of people and countries, a means of expressing ideals of the Romantic era and of national romanticism generally, and an element in the larger

project of national consolidation and patriotism. Norway was constituted as a nation and began to build a national literature during the Romantic era, a period which lasted for a long while in Norway because it overlapped with the process of gaining independence from Sweden with the nation building that followed it. Composers were influenced by the newly emergent national literature, resulting in a lot of national romantic and patriotic works, many of which were written for male choirs. Women's lack of rights and their general situation in the society influenced recruitment to choirs. Male choirs derived their members from students at universities, craftsmen and traders in towns, and labourers from the many factories that were being built at that time, etc. In the Nordic countries we find that student choirs were founded around the same time – choirs such as 'Akademiska sångföreningen' in Helsinki (Finland) in 1838, 'Studentersangforeningen i København' (Denmark) in 1839, and 'Den norske Studentersangforening' in Kristiania (Oslo) in 1845. The merchant choir 'Handelstandens Sangforening' (founded in 1845) and working men's choirs such as 'Kristiania Haandverker Sangforening' (1845) and 'Arbeidersangforeningen' (1850) developed in the same period. These choirs were all male, and it was only around 1900 that mixed choirs began to become standard in Norway. It might be expected that there was a difference in repertory between the different types of choirs, but this was not the situation in Norway at that time. For several decades there was a similar repertory among student choirs, merchant choirs and labour choirs, and it seems as if male choirs truly brought together different social classes and diminished class distinctions. One reason for this situation was the popular composer and conductor Johan Didrik Behrens (1820-1890). For many years he was the conductor of three different public choirs in Kristiania ('Den norske Studentersangforening', 'Handelstandens Sangforening' and 'Kristiania Haandverker Sangforening'), and he often brought together separate choirs to the same concerts for individual and joint performances.² Well-known patriotic and national romantic works such as *Sons of Norway* (Chr. Blom/H. A. Bjerregaard), *To Norway, Land of Giants* (J. N. Brun/A. Grétry) and *The Bridal Party in Hardanger* (A. Munch/H. Kjerulf) were on the repertory of many choirs.³

The founding and consolidation of such male choirs was a part of a new trend. Suddenly there was a large market for male choir compositions. Many composers of the time recognised that there were opportunities here and began writing for this type of ensemble and genre. Norwegian composers such as Carl Arnold (1794-1873), Friedrich A. Reissiger (1809-1883), Ludvig M. Lindeman (1812-1887), Halfdan Kjerulf (1815-1868) and Johan G. Conradi (1820-1896) all published works for male choirs. Behrens also has to be listed among the

composers, though he is principally remembered as a conductor and as a publisher. Through several male choir collections he published more than 700 works for male choir. Most of these works comprised of his arrangements of music by other composers.⁴

Grieg was quick to see the fashion for male choirs and the opportunities inherent in the lack of a substantial repertory for them. The male choir became a natural medium for his talents, and some of his songs became very popular. Among these we can mention *Land-sighting* from 1872 and *Greeting to the Singers* from 1883 – two songs which have been quite popular not only in Norway but also in the Nordic countries more generally.⁵ However, these were not the first of the songs Grieg penned for male choirs. As early as 1863, when living in Copenhagen, he composed four songs for male choir, dedicated to ‘Studentersangforeningen i Kjøbenhavn’. The choir’s musical director was the Danish poet Christian Richardt (1831-1892) who was responsible for two of the lyrics for the songs (*Fredriksborg* and *Student Life*). The two other lyrics were *Norwegian War-Song* written by Henrik Wergeland (1808-1845) – the only Wergeland text Grieg ever used - and *The Late Rose* written by Andreas Munch (1811-1884). It seems as if only one of the songs (*Student Life*) was performed by the student choir in Copenhagen.⁶ Grieg does not mention the songs in any of his letters and they have no opus number. The songs show us Grieg as a younger composer: all four are strophic, and written in a homophonic style with harmonies and in a typically romantic idiom inspired by the composer’s student years in Leipzig.

As a young man Grieg discovered texts by the famous Danish poet Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875). It was while he was still living in Copenhagen in 1864 that he used Andersen lyrics for one of his male choir compositions, and *Denmark* was the first that he set to music. The work is written in a homophonic style with a slightly anonymous piano accompaniment. Later in life Grieg would turn to several Andersen texts for his solo voice compositions, and some of these songs have since become quite popular.

Grieg settled in Kristiania in 1866, and the following year he wrote two male choir songs using lyrics by the Norwegian poet Jørgen Moe (1813-1882). *Evening Mood* and *The Bear-Hunter* are short strophic songs, but they show Grieg as a more mature choral composer than evidenced in his early attempts in Denmark. Grieg interprets Moe’s writing well and the moods of the texts are nicely reflected in the music. The harmonic schema of *Evening Mood*, which includes triplets in falling sequences and some chromatic lines in the last phrase, gives us a touch of the Grieg to come. The song creates much more of a dramatic impression than *The Bear-Hunter* – though the latter is composed with a fascinating echo-effect. Both songs were dedicated to ‘Den norske Studentersangforening’ and to Behrens, its popular conductor,

who went on to publish the songs in volume 23 of his male choir collections.⁷ *The Bear-Hunter* was also published in 1874 in the collection *Norges melodier* (The Melodies of Norway), with Grieg as editor. For many years Grieg demanded that his role as editor of this melody collection remain anonymous, but later in life he was more open, explaining that he had been forced to take the job on because he needed the money.⁸

During the next years Grieg wrote several male choir songs. Some of these were published in Behrens' male choir collections and in *Norges melodier*. Then, in the years 1877-1878, when living in Lofthus in Hardanger, Grieg composed his *Album for Male Voices* op. 30. The songs were dedicated to Behrens, and they are a true reflection of the maturity Grieg had attained as a choir composer, arranging male voices in the most beautiful way within typical harmonies and melodic lines. As with many of Grieg's other compositions the melodic source of opus 30 is based on the Lindeman collection *Ældre og nyere Norske Fjeldmelodier* (Old and New Norwegian Mountain Melodies). Grieg's album includes twelve songs from Lindeman's collection. Eight of the songs originate from the Valdres valley, which is well-known for its rich folk music traditions. Grieg knew the valley very well as he often had to pass through Valdres when travelling along the Bergen-Oslo route. Perhaps this was one reason for relying on so many Valdres melodies, but more probably Grieg chose all the melodies – including the ones that came from other districts – because he found them interesting and saw possibilities in them.

Album for male voices includes arrangements of Norwegian ballads, lullabies, religious folk tunes, cheerful dances and drinking songs. The titles are as follows: No. 1 *I lay down so late*, no. 2 *Children's Song*, no. 3 *Little Torø*, no. 4 *Kvålin's Halling*, no. 5 *It is the greatest Foolishness*, no. 6 *Spring dance*, no. 7 *Young Ole*, no. 8 *Halling*, no. 9 *Fairest among Women*, no. 10 *The Great White Host*, no. 11 *The Gipsy Lad* and no. 12 *Røtnams-Knut*. Of these songs, ten written for solo baritone and choir, one (no. 8 *Halling*) is written for solo tenor and choir, and the very last (no. 12 *Røtnams-Knut*) is without a solo voice. Some of the songs (e.g. *Kvålin's Halling*) are written in an instrumental style, while others (e.g. *Little Torø*) have a more vocal style. Grieg mostly used the 12 melodies originally notated by Lindeman,⁹ and he chose the same keys as Lindeman except for two songs (nos. 4 and 5) which are transposed a major second down. Some of the songs became more popular than others. Among these we can find that no. 1 *I lay down so late*, no. 2 *Children's Song*, no. 10 *The Great White Host* and no. 12 *Røtnams-Knut* have retained their popularity and are normally recognisable to many Norwegian choir singers. Two of the songs (nos. 9. and 10) have religious texts by the Danish poet Hans Adolf Brorson (1694-1764). No. 9 *Fairest*

among Women is seldom performed, because of the text which arouses rather strange sexual associations for modern audiences.

Together with the four mentioned songs the ballad *Little Torø*¹⁰ belongs to the most popular songs from the Grieg album. Lindeman's transcription of the song originates from Marit Larsdotter Leiro from Aurdal, Valdres in the year 1848. The ballad text consists of 14 stanzas including a refrain at the end of the first and last half of every stanzas ('Gud at råde' and 'Herre Gud sende os sin Nåde'). Grieg has chosen only the three first stanzas for his composition and given it a ternary form ABA with the third stanza as a repetition of the first. As for Lindeman's arrangement of the song, Grieg has notated the beautiful melody in F sharp minor.

Ex. 1: *Little Torø* (folk tune)

Du - va set - tø se på Lil - jan - kvist, Gud at rå - de, ho syn - gø så vak - kert um
 Je - sus Krist, Her - re Gud sen - de os sin Nå - de.

Little Torø shows Grieg's eminent talent and creativity at the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic levels, and also reveals his expressive ability. The composition has a strong element of rhythmic and melodic imitation. After a short one bar introduction the choir starts with rhythmic patterns derived from the folk tune followed by the soloist introducing the melody in the next bar. At the end of the first half of the stanza the choir imitates the soloist's refrain.

Ex. 2: *Little Torø* (Grieg), bars 1-5

The second half of the first stanza starts with the soloist and choir in rhythmical unison and at the end of the stanza the choir once again imitates the soloist's refrain.

The B part with the second stanza has some more dramatic tension. It opens with the melody sung in baritone solo, keeping to the folk tune all through second stanza. The imitation of the soloist's refrain at the end of the first half of the B part is not sung by the whole choir as before but by the second bass group alone. The dramatic tension of the B part is created by the choir using an ostinato rhythm harmonized in different ways as an accompaniment figure for the melody.

Ex. 3: Ostinato rhythm, bar 15

The ostinato rhythm, which takes the shape, first, of a strong dynamic crescendo and then of a diminuendo at the end of the stanza, is formed by the phrase 'å høyr du Torø liti' (Little Torø, listen) being repeated as many as six times – including some stanza text in the two last occurrences of the ostinato rhythm. Part of the ostinato rhythm is created by the first bass

group having a falling chromatic line from a to f sharp in bars 13-17. The falling chromatic line strengthens the dramatic effect of the repeated ostinato rhythm. We can also find some more chromatic lines in all three stanzas – an element which is typical of Grieg’s form of melodic expression. Among other melodic elements it is worth mentioning the striking g tone of the melody in bar 16 which creates a catchy variation from the first to the third stanza.

Ex. 4: Phrygian melodic element, bar 16

In bar 16 Grieg uses the g tone to match the A7#5/G chord sung by the choir, giving the B part of the song a Phrygian element.

When it comes to harmonies we can also mention two chords from the interrupted cadence in bars 8-9 (repeated in bars 29-30). The C sharp seven chord sung by male choir voices on the word ‘Herre’ (Lord) at the end of bar eight (including a 6-5 grace note in the solo voice) followed by the D major seven chord with a forzando on the word ‘Gud’ (God) in bar nine gives a solemn and meditative atmosphere to the closing cadence.

Ex. 5: Interrupted cadence, bars 8-9

This type of interrupted cadence in minor keys including a dominant seven chord on the fifth level followed by a major seven chord on the sixth level is a kind of ‘religious cadence’ in Grieg which is also found in interrupted cadences in minor keys on words like ‘God’ in several of his religious works. *Four Psalms* op. 74 has at least three corresponding examples (op. 74 no. 2 bars 84-85, op. 74 no. 3 bar 5, see also op. 74 no. 1 bars 47-48), and *At the Bier of a Young Wife* from *Two Religious Choral Songs* also has one example (bars 56-57). In secular works, for example piano works such as op. 17 and op. 66, it is not easy to find parallels to this cadence. Perhaps this type of cadence reflects Grieg’s religious longing in some way, as it often occurs in connection with religious texts.¹¹

In addition to this special interrupted cadence, *Little Torø* has some striking use of variant chords at the end of the B part. The expanded ostinato rhythm of bars 19-20, including rhythms from the first bar of the introduction, suddenly turns into F sharp major in bar 21 before changing into F sharp minor in bar 22. The expanded ostinato rhythm of bar 22 brings the second part of the song to an end. At the same time it functions as a bridge into the third and last part, along with the rhythms from bar 1 of the introduction.

Ex. 6: Change major/minor chords bars 21-22

The musical score for Example 6 shows the transition from a major to a minor chord in bars 21 and 22. The key signature is F# major (three sharps). In bar 21, the bass line features a major triad F#/C# (F#, C#, G#) with a piano (*p*) dynamic. In bar 22, the bass line changes to a minor triad F#m/C# (F#, C#, B) with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The vocal lines include the lyrics: "å højr du To-rø li - ti, ly - sti du at fyl - gji?". The score also includes a *ritard.* marking in bar 22. The Solo part is indicated by a bracket on the top staff.

Example 5 shows the change from the major F#/C# chord in bar 21 and the minor F#m/C# chord in bar 22. The change between major and minor keys reflects the uncertainty related to the question ‘lysti du at fylgji?’ (do you want to follow?) associated with the

expanded ostinato rhythm. The two examples from bars 8-9 and bars 21-22 both show Grieg's eminent talent in choosing suitable chords for his texts.

Little Torø was one of the many male choir songs penned by Grieg over a period of more than 40 years. The last part of the 19th century was a golden age for composers writing for male choirs – not only for Grieg, but for many of his Nordic colleagues also. In the Nordic countries at that time there was a general lack of instrumental ensembles and orchestras. For some composers, male choirs compensated for the more general absence of instrumental ensembles and gave them something to write for. A composer like Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) once stated: 'It's easy to understand the growth in this type of ensemble up here. It has been a surrogate for orchestras which did not exist'.¹² Surrogate or not – Grieg's male choir songs became popular not only in Norway, but also in Denmark, Sweden and Finland. His male choir composing inspired Nordic colleagues, and even today Grieg is ranked as one of the best among the many Nordic male choir composers.

¹ See Foster, Beryl 1999: *Edvard Grieg – The Choral Music* (Aldershot) for a more general discussion of Grieg's choral works

² Lysdahl, Anne Jorunn Kydland 1995: *Sangen har lysning* (Oslo) 229

³ See Lysdahl 559-574 and Enefalk, Hanna 2008: *En patriotisk drömvärld* (Uppsala) 63, 152

⁴ The Joh. D. Behrens publishing house was founded 1845 and taken over by Carl Warmuth in 1888

⁵ Lysdahl 432, 519

⁶ Benestad, Finn/Schelderup-Ebbe, Dag 1980: *Edvard Grieg – mennesket og kunstneren* (Oslo) 57

⁷ *Samling af flerstemmige Mandssange* vol. 23 no. 454 and no. 455

⁸ Grieg, Edvard 1998 (ed. Finn Benestad): *Brev i utvalg 1862-1907* (Oslo) vol. 1 628 (letter to Gerhard Schelderup 26 October 1905): 'Thi jeg kan unter uns betro Dem, at det er Undertegnede, der i sin Ungdom NB! efter Opfordring har harmonisert hele Stasen fra Ende til Anden! Forlangt blev Enkelthed i Harmonier og Letspilthed til det Yderste. Jeg havde Brug for Penge og forlangte for min Del blot Anonymitet. Voila tout!'

⁹ Lindeman, Ludvig M. 1963 (facsimile): *Ældre og nyere Norske Fjeldmelodier* (Oslo)

¹⁰ Grieg, Edvard 1977-1995: *Complete Works* (Frankfurt) vol. 17 31

¹¹ Grieg was fascinated by Unitarianism, a theology which advocated a belief in the single personality of God as opposed to the more traditional doctrine of the Trinity. For more on Grieg's religious beliefs, see Grieg 1998, e.g. vol. 1 24-25

¹² Tawaststjerna, Erik 1991: *Jean Sibelius* (Helsinki) vol. 3 182 (my translation)