

Reidar Bakke
Associate Professor
NTNU – Department of Music
N-7491 Trondheim

GRIEG AND BARTÓK – SOME ASPECTS ON THEIR CHORAL COMPOSITIONS FOR CHILDREN

The two composers Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) and Béla Bartók (1881-1945) both had a reputation as outstanding teachers. From 1866 and for several years, Grieg taught piano and music theory in Kristiania. In 1867 he was one of the founders of the ‘Kristiania Musikakademi’¹, which unfortunately only existed for a few years. His reputation even went as far as Finland, and in 1881 and 1882 he was offered a job as the first director, conductor and piano teacher at the newly established ‘Helsingfors Musikinstitut’ – the beginning of Finland’s famous ‘Sibelius Academy’.² However, Grieg did not go to Finland, because his primary passion was to be a composer. In the years 1907-1934, Bartók held a professorship in piano at the Budapest Academy of Music. He was a reluctant, but gifted teacher to a number of excellent musicians, and we know he also worked as composer, pianist and ethnomusicologist.

Being teachers, we could expect the two composers to have published pedagogic works. In searching these two composers’ works for music intended to be used in teaching children, we will find that both of them wrote music with pedagogical intentions. Bartók wrote several works for children, such as for example *Mikrokosmos* and *For children*; both works intended for teaching piano. Grieg’s pedagogic music is less defined as such, but there were pedagogical aspects to some of his early piano compositions. The very first edition of his *Lyric Pieces* op. 12 published in 1867 by Horneman & Erslev was called *Lyriske Smaastykker*. In a letter to Niels Ravnkilde in November 1868 Grieg wrote: ‘Last Christmas I published at Horneman a collection of easy piano pieces, ‘Small Lyric Pieces’ – to be used by pupils’.³ These words from Grieg confirm that his first publication of opus 12 was intended for teaching. We do not know if Grieg specifically intended these pieces to be used by children, but most of the pieces from opus 12 are idiomatically written and suitable to play for children with a moderate level of technical piano skills. Hella Brock and Øyvind Norheim have published articles on Grieg’s music for children, and these fine articles are recommended.⁴ The following text relates Bartók’s 27 *Two- and Three-part Choruses* to the

1901 version of Grieg's *Children's Songs* op. 61, and tries to draw some parallels between the choral compositions for children in these two works.

Both composers wrote several choral works. Grieg especially wrote many compositions for male voices, and he became a popular composer for the many male choirs that were established in Norway during the last part of the 19th century and early 20th century. In his *Album for Male Voices* op. 30 from 1878, Grieg used Norwegian folk songs as a thematic foundation for his compositions. The album is a reflection of Grieg as a young, but still mature composer. He knew how to write for male voices; his choral compositions clearly are idiomatically written, and this may have been the primary reason why some of his male choir songs became very popular. None of the choruses from opus 30 were intended for children's voices, but such pieces as *I lay down so late* and *Little Torö* and especially the cheerful *Children's Song* would at least be appropriate for children to listen to, and the original folk melodies were sung by children.

In searching for choral music by Grieg specifically written for and intended to be performed by children, we actually have to go as far as his *Children's Songs* op. 61. The first version for voice and piano was written by Grieg in 1894, who by this time had grown into a more mature composer. In a way, the songs can be viewed in light of Grieg's own experiences with the Norwegian school system. Since his school years, Grieg had been negative to the school system. He found the system to be old-fashioned and felt it did not stimulate children the right way. However, in 1892 the Norwegian author Nordahl Rolfsen (1848-1928) published his reader *Læsebog for Folkeskolen*. The reader was based on new educational ideas, and it became quite popular. Grieg was fascinated by the texts and ideas in the book, which also included a lot of modern Norwegian lyric poetry. Shortly after the book was published, there was a demand for melodies to fit poems from the book, and Grieg, among others, was asked to compose some of these melodies. In 1894 he composed seven songs with piano accompaniment, based on seven texts he chose from Rolfsen's book. His wife Nina had the honour of performing these songs for the first time. In 1901 the songs were arranged for three-part children's choruses. The three-part choruses were among Grieg's first songs written specifically for children's voices, as his earlier choral works were primarily written for adult voices.⁵ Actually, Grieg was fascinated by the unique sound of children's voices, which allowed him to discover a new way of expressing his music. In a letter to his friend and publisher Sigurd Hals in April 1901 he wrote: 'To sing oneself into children's hearts would be fantastic'⁶. A few days later he wrote: 'I have experienced that almost all my children's songs

would sound remarkable with children's voices. Upon my return to Trolldhaugen, I really look forward to arranging them'⁷.

When the 1894 version of the opus 61 songs is viewed in light of these quotations from Grieg's letters in 1901 and the fact that his wife was the first to perform them in April 1894, we could question whether Grieg originally intended his seven songs to be sung by children. The songs in the 1894 version published for voice and piano would at least be appropriate for children's listening. In a letter of September 1894 Grieg wrote: 'The songs are meant to be sung by youths, and also in schools'⁸. Later that same year he experienced his *Fatherland Hymn* being performed in a concert hall. He did not like this, writing: 'This song must be sung in school and in the home, and not in the concert hall'⁹. These two Grieg quotations indicate that the *Fatherland Hymn* as well as the six other songs from the 1894 version were intended to be sung at least by youths in school. The melodies were shortly after printed in school books, and Grieg later arranged the songs for two voices. In 1901 the seven songs were arranged for three-part children's choruses, and from this point on there is no doubt that all seven songs were intended to be performed by children.

Some of the melodies have been more popular than others. The six songs named *The Ocean*, *The Christmas Three*, *Farmyard-Song*, *Good-night Song for Dobbin*, *The Norwegian Mountains* and *Fatherland Hymn* have through the years been printed in several school song books, such as books published by Sandvik (*The Ocean*, *Fatherland Hymn*, *Farmyard-Song*), Sjøraas (*The Christmas Three*, *Good-night Song for Dobbin*, *The Norwegian Mountains*, *Fatherland Hymn*) and Berg¹⁰ (*Fatherland Hymn*, *The Norwegian Mountains*, *The Christmas Three*). *Good-night Song for Dobbin* has probably been the most popular one of all. Grieg's melody to *Fisherman's Song* has not been found in any school song book¹¹, presumably because this song has been sung with the more popular melody composed by Ole Olsen. We must also mention that *Good-night Song for Dobbin* is often sung to a Norwegian folk tune, and that *The Christmas Three* is mostly sung to the more famous melody composed by Danish C. E. F. Weyse.

While many of Grieg's other choral works – such as his *Album for Male Voices* op. 30 – are arrangements of Norwegian folksongs, all seven pieces in his *Children's Songs* op. 61 have their own melodies, even though most of the melodies are composed in a folk song style. Among the seven three-part choruses, *Farmyard-Song*, *Good-night Song for Dobbin* and *The Norwegian Mountains* have all been especially popular in children choirs during the middle and the last part of the 20th century.¹² The reason behind the popularity of the three particular choruses is probably the interesting texts with pedagogical intentions and aspects in

combination with Grieg's good melodies and arrangements, a combination which will appeal to children even today. At the time these songs were composed, the texts were taken from modern Norwegian lyric poetry. The popularity of Rolfsen's book, which was published in numerous editions, made the texts function almost like folk song texts, however. *Farmyard-Song* is originally taken from Bjørnson's novel *Arne*. Bjørnson was a very popular author in the first part of the 1900s, and Grieg loved Bjørnson's texts. *Good-night Song for Dobbin* and *The Norwegian Mountains* were both written by Rolfsen himself. Grieg was not particularly fond of Rolfsen's drama texts, but he was very fascinated by his poems for children. In a letter from 1906 he wrote: '...his [Rolfsen's] dramas are of little value, but he has great lyrical talent. When his fantasy dwells upon his childhood, he always comes through'¹³. Also, Rolfsen really did succeed in making the lyric poetry appealing; using a combination of words, rhythms, atmospheres, and pedagogic aims in such a way that the texts, as previously mentioned, are quite interesting to children even today.

A few comments on the three above-mentioned choruses from Grieg's *Children's Songs* op. 61:¹⁴ Bjørnson's *Farmyard-Song* text is a typical children's text, inviting the children to play, and Grieg takes the children into this childish world with his melody and rhythm and underlines the cheerful atmosphere. The song has a ternary form (ABA') with the melody of the first part A mostly in broken triads. The melody of part B moves in greater intervals, starting in bar eight with a characteristic major nine, followed by a minor seven, which is repeated twice. Both the nine and the sevens are reminiscent of traditional cattle call melodies sung by milkmaids. The harmonies of the first part A are on tonic level, while the harmonies of the second part B are on dominant level. In the repetition part A' Grieg introduces a touch of Mixolydian mode with the F-tone of soprano II. The last part also has a coda or a kind of tail, which is a variation of the main theme.

Rolfsen's text *Good-night Song for Dobbin* takes the children to a scene of getting ready for the night. Grieg's beautiful melody has the rocking, sleepy rhythm of a lullaby suitable for being sung by the cradle. The melody has a varied strophic form with four phrases in each verse. The characteristic theme in F tonic is striving upwards in pentatonic-like sequences. The varied second part from bar nine on dominant C is primarily moving upwards in sequences of broken thirds. The B flat-tone of soprano II in the very last part creates a secondary dominant to the subdominant B flat and a feeling of a closing plagal IV-I cadence at the end, which also gives this song a touch of Mixolydian mode.

With *The Norwegian Mountains* Rolfsen takes the children on a geographical journey, hiking through the highest and most famous mountains of Norway. Grieg has made the song

strophic, with each of the six verses having five phrases in the form of a lied. The rhythm of Grieg's melody has the character of something perpetual, reflecting the atmosphere of the long trip described in the text. Several harmonic changes reflect shifting scenes in the text. The two first phrases are in C tonic. Third phrase is in G minor, and the B flat-tone of soprano I also offers a Mixolydian feeling. The fourth phrase concludes with the secondary dominant A, which leads to the D minor in the opening of the fifth phrase before the last cadence and the return back to C tonic.

While Grieg was a popular choral composer, Bartók did not experience the same popularity in regards to his choral works for a number of years. Some of his choral works were actually quite difficult to perform for most Hungarian choirs. Bartók knew this, as he in a letter commented on his *4 Slovak Folk-Songs* from 1917: '...they are very difficult to sing and to accompany'¹⁵. His instrumental music from the early 1930s was often composed with difficult part-writing and a severe polyphonic structure, and this instrumental style is also reflected in choral works like *Hungarian Folk Songs* for mixed voices from 1930 and *Székelly Songs* for male voices from 1932. Bartók started composing works that were easier to perform after reading texts from the *Hungarian Folk Poetry Collection* published by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences from the mid-1930s onwards. These collections contain the majority of all known Hungarian folk songs texts. In 1934 Bartók was commissioned by the Academy of Sciences to be one of the collection's editors¹⁶. As he read the old Hungarian texts, he probably got inspiration from the archaic language and the rich vocabulary of these old poems. Bartók's friend and fellow composer Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) for some years had great success with his choral music intended for use in schools. Inspired by old Hungarian texts and stimulated by Kodály's example of writing specifically for school use, a more mature Bartók published his first four volumes of two- and three-part choruses for use in schools in 1935. After including the next four volumes, the songs became collectively known as *27 Two- and Three-part Choruses*. These songs were easier to sing than many of his earlier choral works, and they became quite popular. The first six of a total of eight volumes include 21 songs written for children's choirs. The two last volumes with six songs are primarily intended for female choirs, but can be performed by children's choirs as well. Like Grieg, Bartók was fascinated by the way children sang. In 1937 he heard 19 of his 27 choruses performed for the first time, sung by five different Hungarian school choirs. He commented on this in a letter: 'It was a great experience for me when – at the rehearsal – I heard for the first time my little choruses coming from the lips of these children. I shall never forget this impression of the freshness and gaiety of the little ones' voices. There is something

in the natural way these children from the suburban schools produce their voices, that reminds one of the unspoiled sound of peasant singing.’¹⁷

In his *27 Two- and Three-part Choruses*¹⁸ Bartók did not make folk song arrangements as he had often done in earlier choral works. Instead, he gave every chosen text its own melody. However, most of the melodies are still reminiscent of folk songs. A few comments on three songs from Bartók’s *27 choruses*: *Choosing of a Girl* is the third song in the second volume. The atmosphere is a bit introverted, reflecting the serious situation among children when choosing a best friend. The form is ternary (ABA’), a form which can also be found in many of Bartók’s smaller works. The song is written in G major, with chords often changing, mostly in V-I progressions. The B part starts in bar 16 with imitation, and the meter changes. The F of the lowest voice in bars 26, 31 and 32 gives the B part a touch of Mixolydian mode.

Thieving Bird is the fourth song of the second volume. The song has a cheerful atmosphere and is written in bar form (AA’B). The first part of the song is canon-like with imitations, whereas the last part starting in bar 25 has a homophonic structure. The song is primarily written in D Dorian, before turning into D Phrygian at the end of the chorus.

Don’t leave me is the first song of the third volume and is written as a two-part modal canon. The first part starts in C Lydian, the second part from bar 15 moves to E Dorian, the third part from bar 25 starts in D Dorian, and the last part returns to C Lydian. The tempo of the two-part chorus is *molto tranquillo*, reflecting the earnest atmosphere of the text.

When Bartók’s *27 choruses* are compared to Grieg’s 1901 version of opus 61, we could ask whether their children’s choruses represented new trends in their respective compositions. Grieg did not follow up his opus 61 with other choral works for children’s voices. After opus 61 Grieg returned to his earlier paths in writing piano pieces, romances, works for mixed choruses, etc. Bartók did not compose anything else specifically for children’s voices either, but he did start a trend in that he began composing in a way that was easier to perform, as we can see in his *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* from 1936, for example. Still, it is possible to identify certain parallels between the two composers and their works for children’s voices. Most of Grieg’s and Bartók’s choral works were written for adult voices. They were both mature composers when they first started writing their children’s choruses, and both of them expressed their fascination for and saw new possibilities in the sound of children’s voices. Grieg’s 1901 version of his *Children’s Songs* op. 61 and Bartók’s *27 Two- and Three-part Choruses* are music written specifically for and intended to be performed by children. The choruses were intended to be used in schools and in children’s

choirs and the works became popular in their respective homelands. While Grieg and Bartók often used folk song melodies from their own countries in their earlier compositions, the two mentioned works are composed with their own unique melodies. However, both the songs in Grieg's *Children's Songs* and Bartók's *27 Two- and Three-part Choruses* are composed in a folk song style. Bartók used modality in his choruses, and we can also find a touch of modality in Grieg's choruses. Both composers wrote their songs in traditional forms. They were both inspired by texts when composing. Bartók chose folk song texts for his choruses, while Grieg's chosen texts in a way functioned like folk song texts because of the popularity of Rolfsen's reader – the book was re-printed numerous times. In their music both composers brilliantly reflected the atmospheres given in the texts. In considering these parallels between Grieg and Bartók in their writings for children's voices, one could ask whether there is a connection between Grieg's opus 61 and Bartók's *27 Two- and Three-part Choruses*, but this question is impossible to answer. Bartók possessed great creativity and a strong artistic ability to compose works in his own musical language. We do not know whether he was familiar with Grieg's choruses, and it is difficult to find any influences of Grieg in his 27 choruses.¹⁹ If anything were to influence Bartók's 27 choruses, Bartók was, as previously mentioned, inspired by the success of his friend Kodály's choruses for children. But we also know Bartók was fascinated by Grieg. Shortly before Bartók's death in 1945, the Hungarian conductor Antal Dorati visited him in his home in New York. The two musicians talked about Grieg, and Bartók said: 'We have to be serious about Grieg. He was a very important composer. Did you know he was one of the first of us to throw away the German burden and instead turn to the music of his own people.'²⁰ So, even if we can find certain parallels between the two composers in their works for children's choruses, it is impossible to say whether Grieg's opus 61 was connected in any way to Bartók's 27 choruses, but at least we know that Bartók looked upon his fellow colleague from Norway with the utmost respect.

¹ Grieg founded 'Kristiania Musikakademi' together with Otto Winter-Hjelm.

² See letter from Grieg to Thyra Neovius (wife of Grieg's friend Edvard Neovius) of November 4 1881, and letter from Leon Borgström (one of the founders of 'Helsingfors Musikinstitut') to Grieg of March 16 1882. Both letters can be found in the Bergen Public Library.

³ Grieg, Edvard 1998 (ed. F. Benestad): *Brev i utvalg 1862-1907*, vol. 2, Oslo (Aschehoug), p. 206.

⁴ About Grieg's music for children, see Brock, Hella 1990: 'Edvard Griegs Musik für Kinder' in *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, vol. 16, Oslo (Universitetsforlaget), p. 21, and Norheim, Øyvind 1999: 'Grieg som barnesangkomponist: Barnlige Sange opus 61' in *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, vol. 25, Oslo (Universitetsforlaget), p. 24.

⁵ In 1894 Grieg arranged two songs from opus 61 (*The Ocean* and *Fatherland Hymn*) in two-part versions. Later he also arranged the five other songs in two-part versions. All two-part versions were published together with the three-part versions in 1901.

⁶ Grieg 1998, vol. 1, p. 326.

⁷ Ibid., p. 327.

⁸ Ibid., p. 299.

⁹ Ibid., p. 300.

¹⁰ See e.g. Berg, Mads 1970: *Skolens sangbok*, Oslo, (Aschehoug), Søråas, Lars 1960: *Sangboka*, Oslo (Lunde), Sandvik, O. M. 1928-1938: *Melodier til Nordahl Rolfsens lesebok*, Sandvik, O. M. 1962: *Sangbok for skoleungdom*, Oslo (Aschehoug).

¹¹ A number of different song books have been examined, but here I primarily refer to Nordheim 1999, p. 28.

¹² Here I refer to concerts with choirs like NRK's jentekor, Gloppen jentekor, Stord Ungdomskor and Voci nobili.

¹³ Grieg 1998, vol. 2, p. 411.

¹⁴ Grieg, Edvard 1977-1995: *Complete Works*, vol. 17, Frankfurt (C. F. Peters).

¹⁵ Bartók, Béla 1971: *Letters*, London (Faber and Faber), p. 237.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 238, p. 417.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 257, p. 423.

¹⁸ Bartók, Béla: *27 Two- and Three-part Choruses*, Budapest (Editio Musica Budapest).

¹⁹ A work like Grieg's *Peasant Dances* opus 72 usually is considered to be a forerunner to some of Bartók's music.

²⁰ *Norges musikkhistorie* 1999-2001, Oslo (Aschehoug), vol. 3, p. 22.