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EDVARD GRIEG, ALF HURUM, AND MUSICAL IMPRESSIONISM

My paper deals with a discrepancy between a composer's musical output on the one hand and a statement made by the same composer on the other. The composer is Alf Hurum (1882–1972) who is regarded as the first Norwegian musical impressionist and whose compositional career stretched from 1903 to 1927. From his Op. 4 from 1911 and onwards the main bulk of his compositions exhibits strong impressions from the music of Claude Debussy. Hurum encountered the music of Debussy for the first time in 1911 in Paris¹, an encounter that was clearly a positive and liberating revelation to him. In spite of this fact Hurum in the first edition of the reference book *Musikkens verden* from 1951 says the following: "During a period of my years of study I was interested in the music of Claude Debussy which pointed the way to greater harmonic freedom—in a couple of early piano pieces I experimented with the whole tone scale—however, this interest was short-lived and did not exercise any influence on my musical development."² In the second edition of *Musikkens verden* from 1963 Hurum altered his original statement. Now he simply points out that the composers which have had a significant influence on his musical line of development were Grieg, Debussy and Stravinskij.

Debussy's standing in Norway in 1911 was extremely low. His music, represented by «Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune», «Nuages» and «Fêtes» from *Trois Nocturnes*, had been introduced at a concert five years earlier and the critics were extremely negative. The critic Otto Winter-Hjelm, in the *Aftenposten*, characterized the music as "a sickly, one-sided taste, alien to a

¹ There are reasons to believe that this was the first time he heard the music of Debussy, even if there had been possibilities prior to this point in time. Debussy's music was performed for the first time in Norway 9 December 1906 (see Benestad, Finn: «Claude Debussy i norsk musikkliv frem til 1925. Et dokumentarisk arbeidsmateriale» (Claude Debussy in the musical life of Norway up to 1925. A documentary presentation), in *Studia Musicologica Norvegica* (ed. Nils Grinde), No. 2, Oslo 1976). And during Hurum's study at the Royal Academy of Music in Berlin 1905–10 music of Debussy was performed at several occasions in the German capital (see Lang-Becker, Elke: *Aspekte der Debussy-Rezeption in Deutschland zu Lebzeiten des Komponisten*, Cahiers Debussy, N. S. N° 8, 1984). However, the first time Debussy is mentioned in the source material of Alf Hurum's life and work is in an interview in *Aftenposten* 3 January 1912.

² "I en periode av min studietid var jeg interessert i Claude Debussys musikk som viste veien til større frihet i harmonisk henseende – i et par tidlige klaverstykker eksperimenterte jeg med heltoneskalaen – men denne interesse var av kort varighet og har ikke hatt betydning for min musikalske utvikling." *Musikkens Verden* (ed. S. Hagerup Bull) Oslo 1951, p. 1017.

really fresh flight of the imagination”³, the critic V. H. Siewers, in the *Morgenbladet*, called Debussy ”the anarchist”⁴ and Ulrik Mørk in the paper *Ørebladet* wrote that ”Debussy seems to detest melody, he is not on good terms with rhythm and his harmonies are extremely arrogant ... the pages of the score you could simply shuffle and ’play’ them anyway you like.”⁵ Debussy’s music was simply too radical to the Norwegian musical public at this time. Grieg was present at the concert, but even if he found Debussy’s music to be ”a truly tasty morsel ... they must not establish a school along these lines.”⁶ Full of admiration for Debussy Hurum in an interview in *Aftenposten* 3 January 1912 portrays him as the foremost representative of the new French school, and characterizes harmonic and formal freedom as the important strength of this school.

Hurum’s admiration for Debussy does not seem to have been of a temporary kind confined only to the stay in Paris in 1911. On the contrary it seems to have left a lasting imprint on him. From a letter 14 May 1918 to his close friend, the composer David Monrad Johansen, Hurum seems just as occupied with Debussy as in 1911: ”By the term modern French music I understand ’Debussy’, he has together with the Russian Mousorgski opened a world of future possibilities. Do not judge Debussy until you are more acquainted with him. In stead use one of your scholarships and go to Paris.”⁷ In 1920 Hurum published his ”Fairyland” Op. 16 and ”Gothic suite” Op. 17, his most impressionistic works and in fact the most important expression of his admiration for Debussy. Still occupied by impressionism he attaches impressionism to Grieg and national idioms in an interview at the end of 1923.⁸ In fact Hurum seems to have been occupied with the music of Debussy during the main part of his compositional period. Therefore his statement in the first-edition of *Musikkens verden* is strange, and it has puzzled me ever since I read it the first time. In my opinion it requires an explanation.

³ *Aftenposten*, 11 December 1906: ”En sygelig, ensidig Smagsretning, som er fremmed for virkelig frisk Fantasiflugt ...”

⁴ *Morgenbladet*, 11 December 1906.

⁵ *Ørebladet*, 10 December 1906: ”Debussy nærer en rodfæstet Ringeakt for Melodi, han staar i et mere end løst Forhold til alt, som heder Rhythmik, og viser en halsløs Forvovenhed i Harmonierne ... man maatte næsten kunde blande Partiturets Blade som en Kortstok og spille med dem, ganske som det faldt sig.”

⁶ Entry in Grieg’s diary 8 December 1906: ”... den rene Schmaus ..., men der må ikke dannes Skole i denne Retning.”

⁷ ”Med moderne fransk musik forstaar jeg ”Debussy”, han har sammen med russeren Mousorgski aabnet en verden av fremtidsperspektiver. Døm ikke Debussy før du kjender ham, men tag et av dine stipendier og reis til Paris med.” Hurum’s letter to David Monrad Johansen is preserved in the National Library in Oslo Cat. No. 573.

⁸ Selmer, Tordis Gjems: «Norske musikpersonligheter. I. Komponisten Alf Hurum» [Norwegian music personalities. I. The composer Alf Hurum] in *Urd* no. 3 (ed. Anna Bøe) 1924, p. 33f.

In this connection it is well worth keeping in mind what he says in the preceding paragraph in *Musikkens verden*. Here he emphasizes Grieg as one of his great favorites from early childhood together with Norwegian folk music and Russian music as the main influences on his musical development. To try to find an answer to the contradiction between Hurum's statement from 1951 and his compositional output and other statements he has made I have formulated the following hypothesis:

When Alf Hurum in 1950 looked back on his first encounter with Debussy's music in 1911, he did not recognize it as important as he in fact had done in 1911. In 1950 he found that he in 1911 already had been familiarized with many of the typical impressionistic features of style. This familiarity stems from the influence that the music of Edvard Grieg had had on his musical development.

In an investigation from 1953 Professor Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe has made clear Grieg's importance for the development of the musical impressionism⁹. Searching for a solution of the discrepancy and in the light of Hurum's own statement about Grieg's influence on his musical development, I have used Schjelderup-Ebbe's study as a means to investigate Hurum's compositions from the time before he encountered the music of Debussy as well as the four piano pieces which he composed in Paris in 1911. Hurum's works prior to his encounter with the music of Debussy consist of four simple songs, 12 piano pieces and a sonata for violin and piano. The compositions that he composed in Paris during 1911 were four piano pieces — "Impressions" Op. 4 including "Notre-Dame", "La Fontaine" and "Chanson" in addition to "The Waterlily", Op. 5 No. 1.¹⁰

Schjelderup-Ebbe underlines that his investigation is restricted to harmonic features only and even if impressionistic music is not solely defined by harmonic features, I find it natural to claim that if features that Schjelderup-Ebbe points out in Grieg's music as important for the development of impressionistic music are also found in the compositions of Hurum just mentioned, this may substantiate my hypothesis.

⁹ Schjelderup-Ebbe, Dag: *A study of Grieg's harmony. With special reference to his contribution to musical impressionism*, Oslo 1953.

¹⁰ Alf Hurum's complete works—in printed or in manuscript—is preserved in the National Library in Oslo. In addition to the compositions mentioned above, there exist some unfinished compositions, which, however, are not taken into consideration in this paper.

In the light of Schjelderup-Ebbe's investigation one finds that of the 44 stylistic features over which his study extends 25 are found also in Hurum's music composed prior to 1911, 19 features are missing. The following survey is the table of content of the three first main chapters in Schjelderup-Ebbe's book (style features in bold type—made by me—indicate that they are not found in Hurum's compositions prior to his encounter with the music of Debussy; the figures in parenthesis are numbering the style features of Schjelderup-Ebbe's investigation—the numbering is mine):

I. INFLUENCE OF SCALE-FORMS ON MELODY AND HARMONY

A. Major and minor scales (1)

B. Modal and other scales

1. Modal scales

a. Modal progressions of chords (2)

b. Chords being conditioned by modal scales (3)

c. Melodies using modal scales (4)

2. Other scale-forms

a. Minor scales with a raised (sharp) fourth (5)

b. Pseudo whole tone scales (6)

c. **Pentatonic scales** (7)

C. Chromatic scales

1. Chromatic melodies (8)

2. **Chromatic harmonies** (9)

II. TYPES AND SPECIAL USAGE OF CHORDS

A. The six-four chord

1. **Freedom of the bass note** (10)

2. **The chord used as resolution for simple and complex dominants** (11)

3. **Successions of six-four chords** (12)

4. **The chord as the initial one of a composition** (13)

5. **One or more six-four chords used at the end-cadence right before the tonic** (14)

6. The chord used in sudden changes of key (15)

7. the chord used for coloristic purposes (16)

B. Types of dissonant chords

1. Chord dissonances

a. dominant seventh chords (17)

b. dominant ninth chords (18)

c. dominant eleventh chords (19)

d. dominant thirteenth chords (20)

e. **Secondary seventh chords** (21)

f. **Secondary ninth chords** (22)

g. **Secondary eleventh chords** (23)

- h. **Secondary thirteenth chords** (24)
 - 2. Chords with nonharmonic tones (25)
 - 3. Pedal points and chord combinations
 - a. Pedal points of one tone (or an octave) (26)
 - b. Pedal points of two tones a fifth apart (27)
 - c. **Pedal points that are dissonant** (28)
 - C. Successions of dissonant chords (29)
 - D. Parallel chords
 - 1. Consonant chords (triads) (30)
 - 2. Dissonant chords
 - a. Dominant 7th (31), **9th** (32), **11th** (33), and **13th chords** (34)
 - b. **Secondary seventh chords in root positions** (35)
 - c. **Inversions of secondary seventh chords** (36)
 - d. **Altered chords** (37)
 - E. Open fifths (38) and incomplete chords (39)
- III. VAGUENESS OR OBSCURITY OF TONALITY INDUCED BY
 - A. Pedalling (40)
 - B. Postponing the tonic chord (41)
 - C. Avoiding authentic cadences (42)
 - D. Avoidance of tonal clarity in endings (43)
 - E. **Sudden changes of key** (44).

Not all of the 25 features are equally well represented. The most prominent is the modal one. The rest are however present in a way that clearly shows that they were familiar to Hurum. The question is then which of these features are common to all three groups—to Grieg’s music, to Hurum’s music composed prior to 1911 and to Hurum’s piano pieces composed in Paris in 1911.

My investigation shows that the style features common to all three groups are 1) modality, 2) other scales than the major, minor and the modale scales – the whole tone scale, 3) non-functional harmonic progressions—parallel consonant and dissonant chords, 4) open fifths and incomplete chords and 5) pedalling. In the following I will give a survey of examples taken from all three groups and covering all five style features. Even if the examples may seem somewhat oversimplified I trust they will give you a hint of what it is all about.

1) Modality

A typical example of Grieg’s use of the Lydian mode Schjelderup-Ebbe takes from the ”Røtnams-Knut. Halling”, Op. 72 No. 7 where a Lydian melodic passage creates a rather strong contrast to the surroundings in the usual minor key (Ex. 1a). In Hurum’s ”Danse grotesque” Op. 1 No. 3 from 1908, measures 5–8, a Mixolydian (or Dorian) passage creates a similar contrast to the g and c minor in measures 1–4 (Ex. 1b). Several other examples of Hurum’s use of modality

may be given, but it should be clear that modality was by no means a new style feature to Hurum in 1911. The first piece he composed in Paris in 1911 was "Notre Dame", Op. 4 No. 1, and it is full of modal features beginning with the melody (the top notes in the r. h.) in the Aeolin mode in the first four bars (Ex. 1c).

2) Other scale-forms than modal scales—the whole tone scale

About Grieg's use of the whole tone scale Schjelderup-Ebbe writes among other things: "Grieg is not aware of the possibility of employing a scale which consists of *six* whole-tones, but he obtains the flavor of such a scale by various means, using *five* whole-tones at a time."¹¹ In measure 36 in "The Death of Aase", Op. 46 No. 2, an altered dominant chord is "responsible for the presence of four whole-tones in the chord, to which a fifth whole-tone comes in as a passing note."¹² (Ex. 2a)

Hurum creates a whole-tone effect of four whole-tones by means of an altered dominant chord in some isolated instances. In measure 30 of the piano piece "Humoreske" (No. 1 in "Three piano pieces", without Opus nos.) from 1908 there are four whole-tone steps on the first two beats in the right hand—with d^1 in the left hand as a fifth whole tone—correspondingly on the two first beats in the left hand, but then with $f^{\#1}$ as the fifth whole tone, in both instances by means of the altered dominant chord (Ex. 2b). In the sonata for violin and piano Op. 2, 1st movement, from 1910 one finds five whole tones caused by the altered dominant chord on the third and first part of the fourth beat in measures 87–89 (Ex 2c).

In "La Fontaine", Op. 4 No. 2, from 1911 Hurum uses five whole-tone steps in the left hand in measures 67–68 (Ex. 2d); this phenomenon is also seen in several other places in this piece. The whole tone scale in its complete form is the basis of the ascending chords in the last five bars of "Notre-Dame", Op. 4 No. 1 (Ex 2e). Indeed, in this complete form the whole tone scale is new to Hurum in 1911.

3) Non-functional harmony—parallel chords

As for parallel consonant chords in Grieg's music, Schjelderup-Ebbe gives measures 79–83 from "Tusseslått", EG 11 (Ex. 3a), as an example. Among Hurum's earliest compositions parallel

¹¹ Schjelderup-Ebbe: *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, s. 40.

consonant chords are most clearly found in the piano part of the violinsonata, Op. 2, m. 77–78 (Ex. 3b) where a b minor chord is followed by C[#] major and f[#] minor chords, all three chords are (arpeggiated) in root position with the third as the top note. Parallel chords are also found in measures 94–95 of the piano part (Ex. 3c—chords in root position with the fifth as the top note – g minor to b-flat minor), in the piano part in measures 215–216 (Ex. 3d—chords in root position with the octave as the top note – f minor to a-flat minor), measures 217–218 (Ex. 3d—chords in root position with the octave as the top note – b minor to d minor). Parallel consonant chords are seen already in the opening measures of the "Notre-Dame", Op. 4 No. 1 (Ex. 3e), as well as in measures 24–27 of the fourth piano piece Hurum composed in 1911, "The Waterlilly", Op. 5 No. 1 (Ex. 3f).

As an example of parallel dissonant chords in Grieg's music Schjelderup-Ebbe shows the harmonic scheme of measures 118–134 from the Waltz-Caprice, Op. 37 No. 1, as an example (Ex. 3g). Parallel dissonant chords in Hurum's earliest music are to be found for instance in measures 13–14 in the 1st movement of the sonata Op. 2 (Ex. 3h), where we find parallel seventh chords, third inversion (an enharmonic spelling of the lowest note in the pianopart in m. 14 is necessary). In "Notre-Dame", Op. 4 No. 1, we find parallel dissonant chords (augmented chords) in measures 63–67 (Ex. 3i) and in "The waterlilly", Op. 5 No. 1, parallel seventh chords are found in measures 19–22 (Ex. 3j).

4) Open fifths and incomplete chords.

Schjelderup-Ebbe states that open fifths play an important part in Grieg's harmony¹³—the most famous example being "Bell ringing", Op. 54 No. 6. Open fifths are also found in Hurum's earliest music, for instance in measures 3–4 and 86–90 in "Marsch humoristique", Op. 1 No. 1, and in measures 17–19 and 42–47 in "Danse grotesque", Op. 1 No. 3.

The two part form found in "Rigaudon", No. 2 in "Roccoco. Two piano pieces" without Opus nos. (Ex. 4a), creates an extreme form of incomplete chords. This is the same phenomenon as one finds in Hurum's "La Fontaine", Op. 4 No. 2 (Ex. 4b), which is in fact a pastiche with Debussy's "Jardins sous la pluie" from "Estampes" as its model. This shows, however, that incomplete are not a new style feature to Hurum in 1911.

¹³ *Ibid.*, s. 118.

5) Pedalling

Several of the examples that Schjelderup-Ebbe points to in his study show "the part that the pedal may play in the construction of complex chords, chord combinations, pedal points and successions of dissonant chord."¹⁴ One example is from Grieg's song "Little Kirsten", Op. 60 No. 1 (Ex. 5a) of which Schjelderup-Ebbe writes that it illustrates "how an added sixth is incorporated into the closing harmony"¹⁵ by the use of the sustaining pedal. In Hurum's earliest compositions one finds very few pedal markings. That does not mean that an "ordinary" use of pedal will not result in the blending of different harmonies and dissonances. In measures 61–64 of "The Brook", Op. 3 No. 2 (Ex. 5b), the ninth is incorporated into the D major and the g minor chords in all four measures, while the eleventh and thirteenth notes are incorporated into the g minor chords in measures 62 and 64. The special pedal marking in the closing measures of "Notre-Dame", Op. 4 No. 1 (Ex. 5c) creates an extreme cluster effect based on the whole tone scale and augmented chords with 1D as organ point. Thus, the pedalling as a means of obtaining new harmonic colour is not something new to Hurum in 1911.

As one can see none of the five stylistic features which I have exemplified were new to Hurum in 1911. Two of the features—modality and non-functional harmony—are very prominent features of impressionistic music and Hurum had already met them in the music of Grieg before he found them in the music of Debussy. In addition Hurum uses all features in the same basic way as Grieg – for colouristic harmonic purposes.

Then the question follows: what did Hurum find new in Debussy in 1911? Without giving this too much space, the following may be mentioned: the titles "La Fontaine" and "The Waterlily", Op. 4 No. 2 and Op. 5 No. 1, may be characterized as typical impressionistic titles. The pentatonic scale, not used by Hurum prior to his first encounter with the music of Debussy and which is the basis of the melody in measures 1–8 and 18–25 of the piano piece "Chanson", Op. 4 No. 3, must be recognised as an influence of Debussy and not of Grieg. The same is the case with the whole tone scale as the basis of the five last measures of "Notre-Dame", Op. 4 No. 1. On the other hand the chord oscillation—asccribed as typical of Debussy—found in Hurum's

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, s. 123.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, s. 128.

”Chanson”, Op. 4 No. 3,¹⁶ is not new to Hurum in 1911. Examples of this are also found for instance in measures 56–60 and in measures 79–82 in the violin sonate Op. 2, 1st movement both examples with an organ point. In ”The Waterlilly”, Op. 5 No 1, there is another feature typical of impressionistic music—the melody played in double octaves¹⁷. But not even this may be seen as a Debussy influence. In Hurum’s ”Rigaudon”, No 2 in ”Roccoco. Two piano pieces” without Opus nos., we find the melody in double octaves—even in its most simple form: as a plain scale (see measures 18 and 19, parallel places in measures 84 and 86).

The influence from the music of Debussy in 1911 seems to have been rather slight. This fact and the influence Hurum must have felt from the music of Grieg in fields essential to musical impressionism, may be the explanation why Hurum in 1950 no longer recognized the revolutionary elements in Debussy’s music as being as revolutionary as they might have been to him in 1911. On the other hand—while the impressionistic style features here and there spiced Hurum’s earliest compositions, they more or less govern Op. 4 and Op. 5 No. 1. And it is without doubt the encounter with Debussy’s music that creates the style of these four piano compositions. In other words—the influence from Debussy results in an essentially different and new lay-out.

In one decisive field, however, Hurum realizes that Debussy has gone a step further than Grieg. In Grieg’s music Hurum had found that the rules of harmony were set aside in many instances. In his comments to this Schjelderup-Ebbe writes that Grieg ”in reducing the difference between a consonant and dissonant chord, Grieg seems to have gone as far as any of his contemporaries.”¹⁸ However Grieg maintains ”that there exists a basic difference between dissonances and consonances”¹⁹. Hurum realizes that Debussy is the one of the two who makes the decisive break with functional harmony. I take this as an explanation of Hurum’s altered statement in the 2nd edition of *Musikkens Verden* from 1963—here he simply says, as already mentioned, that his musical line of development and the composers that have influenced him are Grieg, Debussy and Stravinskij.

It is of course a possibility that the impressionistic elements in Hurum’s earliest compositions, elements ascribed to an influence from Grieg, may stem from other sources. The

¹⁶ See for instance measures 9–16 and 26–33 with the oscillation T–(D)D– T–(D)D.

¹⁷ See for instance bar 8 to the first beat of bar 9; by the repetition in measures 36–37 the melody is found in a distance of a tripple octace.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, s. 86f.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, s. 86.

fundamental fact of neutralization of dissonances was—as we know—an evolution within romantic music and Grieg was definitely not the only one to set aside the rules. In this connection it is, however, important to keep Hurum's own words in mind as he formulates himself in the 1st edition of *Musikkens verden* from 1951: "Since my earliest childhood Edvard Grieg has been one of my favorite composers, without doubt he has influenced my musical development." And I do believe that Grieg's music to Alf Hurum became an important road map and catalyst to musical impressionism.

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