

**GRIEG IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT  
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“Grieg Has To Be Taken Seriously”:  
The Influence of Grieg’s Music on Béla Bartók’s *For Children*

When the Hungarian conductor Antal Doráti, amused by having caught Bartók studying Grieg’s piano concerto, asked him about his impression about the work, Bartók answered: “Well, ... a bit boxy, but it is an excellent work in its own terms: original and honest.” And he continued with the following exhortation: “Anyhow, Grieg has to be taken seriously. He is one of the most important composers of the turn of the century. Don’t you know that he was among the first who cast off the German yoke?”<sup>1</sup>

These statements, pronounced a few months before his death, clearly spell out Bartók’s high opinion of Grieg’s music. But how much did he know of it? There are documents indicating that he knew some of Grieg’s works already in his student years. When he was sixteen, Bartók started to make a list of compositions that he had had a chance to either hear or play. The first Grieg piece on the list was the First violin sonata, which he probably played in 1887 with one of his occasional amateur chamber music partners in Pozsony, now Bratislava, the provincial town of his high school years. Other works, in the order of their appearance in the list, are some piano music (*kleine Klavierstücke*), the first *Peer-Gynt-Suite*, the *Second violin sonata*, the *Cello sonata*, the song “Ich liebe dich”, the *String quartet*, and finally, in 1901, the *Ballade* and the *Piano concerto*.<sup>2</sup>

None of these pieces ever appeared on Bartók’s concert programs. As a professor of piano at the Academy of Music in Budapest, however, Bartók could have assigned Grieg’s piano pieces to his students. No systematic research has yet been conducted into that repertoire. We know from the recollection of Andor Földes that he learned a Grieg composition with Bartók.<sup>3</sup> Bartók also mentioned Grieg’s name among the composers whose pieces he recommended to be reviewed in one of his letters in which he was arranging lessons with a student in 1941.<sup>4</sup> We also know that the sheet music library of Ditta Pásztory, Bartók’s student and second wife, also

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<sup>1</sup> *Így láttuk Bartókot*, ed. Ferenc Bónis (Budapest: Püski, 1995), 88. Originally in Hungarian; my translation differs from that of the one published in *Tempo* 136 (March 1981), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Denijs Dille, *Thematisches Verzeichnis der Jugendwerke Béla Bartóks: 1890-1904* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1974), 243.

<sup>3</sup> Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, “Béla Bartóks forhold til Edvard Grig og Norg”, *Norsk Musikk Tidsskrift* 1 (1993), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Dorothy Parrish, 7 May 1941. See *Bartók Béla levelei*, ed. János Demény (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1976), 667.

contains Grieg's music, namely the first three volumes of the *Lyric Pieces*.<sup>5</sup> Thus it was primarily through his teaching that Bartók could have become familiar with Grieg's piano pieces.

In 1993, Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe visited the Budapest Bartók Archives and the home of Bartók's older son, Béla Bartók junior, in search of Grieg compositions in Bartók's sheet music collection. He found three pieces: not surprisingly, all three are folksong arrangements: the *Ballade*, op. 24, the *Norwegian Folksongs and Dances*, op. 17 and the *Slåtter*, op. 72.<sup>6</sup> On the original back cover of the *Slåtter*, within the advertisement of other Grieg compositions, Bartók marked two further folk song settings: the solo piano version of the *Norwegian dances*, op. 35 and the *Norwegian folksongs*, op. 66; an indication perhaps that he intended to purchase those as well.

Among Bartók's papers in the Budapest Bartók Archives, there is a receipt by the publisher Rozsnyai with the composer's recent purchases, including Grieg's opp. 17 and 72, which were delivered on February 21, 1910. Shortly after, in May, Bartók met Frederick Delius in Zürich, at the second Tonkünstlerfest, where Bartók played his *Rhapsody* for piano and orchestra and Delius's *Brigg Fair* was also performed. Bartók was immediately captivated by Delius's personality. He wrote to a friend that the greatest profit of the Zürich trip was the opportunity to get to know Delius.<sup>7</sup> To Delius, he confessed that he regarded the days spent in Zürich as one of the most beautiful times of his life because of the sympathy he felt towards Delius.<sup>8</sup> That folk music was very much part of their conversations is evidenced by their subsequent correspondence. In one of his letters, Bartók urged Delius to fulfill his promise to visit Budapest so that he could demonstrate to him the "peculiarly oriental character" of the music of the Romanian villages.<sup>9</sup> A few months later, towards the end of 1910, Bartók sent Delius some transcriptions of instrumental folk music he collected from the Romanian inhabitants in Transylvania.<sup>10</sup>

It would be interesting to know which pieces Bartók sent exactly, to find out whether he observed, at this early stage of his Romanian folk music collecting, the strong affinity between certain types of Romanian instrumental pieces and the Norwegian *slåtter*, especially those from the area of Telemark, the subjects of Grieg's op. 72 settings. In this latter, to quote from Grove's description, "an 'organic building technique' prevails: two-bar blocks are each repeated several times, with each repetition adding small changes."<sup>11</sup> Bartók differentiated two main types of melodies in his Romanian instrumental folk music collection: melodies with a

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to László Vikárius, head of the Budapest Bartók Archives, for letting me examine Mrs. Bartók's sheet music library and for providing additional information pertaining to this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, "Béla Bartók's forhold til Edvard Grig og Norg", 5.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Etelka Freund, 31 May 1910. See *Bartók Béla levelei*, ed. János Demény (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1976), 166. In English in: *Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. János Demény (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 104.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Frederick Delius, 7 June 1910. See *Béla Bartók Briefe*, ed. János Demény (Budapest: Corvina, 1973), vol. I, 123.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Frederick Delius, after 17 August 1910. See the English translation of the original German in *Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. János Demény (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 106.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Frederick Delius, December 1910. See the English translation of the original German in *Delius: a Life in Letters*, ed. Lionel Carley (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988), vol. II, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Remnant and Chris Goertzen, "Hardanger fiddle", [www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com) (accessed 18 June 2009).

determined structure and those without it. He called the latter “melodies with motive structure” and described them consisting mostly of two or three bar motifs, which are repeated or follow each other without apparent system.<sup>12</sup> As his analyses reveal, those motives are usually related to each other, much of the same way as in the *slåtter*. Bartók never pointed out this close relationship in his writings but just around that time, in early 1911, in his essay published about the folk instruments of Hungary and their music, the examples he quoted for purely instrumental folk music that he could not find among Hungarians, were the Norwegian *slåtter* and the Romanian *joc*.<sup>13</sup>

**Ex. 1. Romanian bagpipe melody with motive structure  
from Bartók's *Rumanian Folk Music*, v. I.**

Delius's enthusiastic descriptions of Norway and its folk music exerted such a strong appeal on Bartók that he postponed his plans to travel to Africa and, in the summer of 1912, he spent five weeks in Norway instead. It is a pity that his hope to witness some folk music performances during the trip did not come true. However, he was able at least to acquire the original instrument of Grieg's op. 72, a *Hardanger* fiddle.

Preparing for a new project, it was Bartók's custom to examine works of other composers written in the same genre he was considering to compose. He either bought or borrowed recent representative works of contemporaries when he wrote his first string quartet, his first violin sonata, his first piano concerto, and, even later in his career, before the composition of his violin concerto. Doráti's anecdote about Bartók studying Grieg's concerto fits well into this pattern: it was only a few weeks before this episode that Bartók wrote to his younger son about his plan to write a new concerto for his wife.<sup>14</sup> This became the *Third Piano Concerto*, his last

<sup>12</sup> Béla Bartók, *Rumanian Folk Music*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), vol. I, 13.

<sup>13</sup> "A hangszeres zene folklora Magyarországon", *Zeneközlöny*, 9, no. 5 (1 January 1911), 141-148. In English, combined with other similar Bartók essays: "The Folklore of Instruments and their Music in Eastern Europe", in: *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 241.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Peter Bartók, 21 February 1945. In: Peter Bartók, *Apám* (Budapest: Editio Musica, 2002), 302. In English:

completed composition which, in contrast to his two former piano concertos, is technically less demanding and a more pleasing work.

One can presume that Bartók also wanted to orient himself in 1908, when he was faced with the unusual task of writing easy pieces for the piano student, based on original folk music. The interest in such a series originated from the Hungarian publisher, Rozsnyai, and the first two books, containing 42 pieces, were published the following year with the title *For Children*. By that year's end, Bartók proposed a continuation of the set, this time based on Slovak folksongs. The third and fourth books of the second series of *For Children*, containing 43 pieces, appeared in 1910 and 1911, respectively. In this presentation, I will refer to the numbers of these early editions which are somewhat different from that of the revised 1943 version.

If Bartók was indeed curious about some of the precedents in the field of folksong settings, especially those written for the piano, the only composer whose oeuvre had a great number of pieces that could serve as possible models was Edvard Grieg. Even if Bartók did not own Grieg's folk song settings at that time, he might have had a chance to examine them in the collection of his close friend and student, Emma Schlesinger, who in 1910 married their mutual friend, Zoltán Kodály. Emma owned a sizable collection of Grieg's piano compositions, including not only opp. 17, 24, and 72, but the two works Bartók marked in his copy of op. 72: the solo piano version of op. 35 and the *Norwegian Folksongs*, op. 66.<sup>15</sup> While there is no data about the time when these publications became part of Emma's collection, it is reasonable to suggest that she owned them by this time, since she herself was interested in composing pieces in the same vein. Indeed, Bartók and Emma might even have spent some time playing through Grieg's pieces together because Bartók not only knew Emma's settings but included two of them in the fourth book of his *For Children*.<sup>16</sup> Emma also contributed to the publication by translating the original Slovak words of the melodies into German. One of the pieces on the phonograph recording that Bartók made of his own playing and presented as a wedding gift to Mr. and Mrs. Kodály is one of his Slovak arrangements from *For Children* – a possible reference to their cooperation.<sup>17</sup>

While some of Grieg's arrangements are easy enough for the amateur player, only a few of them are appropriate for beginners. Obviously, Bartók had to consult other works for his project. One such work could have been the *Notenbüchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach*. But the primary model was every young pianist's perennial classic: Schumann's *Album für die Jugend*.<sup>18</sup> The affinity between the pieces of the *Album für die Jugend* and *For Children* is deep and it has yet to be thoroughly investigated. The striking structural and textural similarity between the first pieces of these works, already demonstrated by James Parakilas, can almost be regarded as symbolic.<sup>19</sup> Beyond this telling analogy, one can recognize further

Peter Bartók, *My Father* (Homosassa, Florida: Bartók Records, 2002), 308.

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Teréz Kapronyi of the Kodály Archívum, Budapest for providing these data.

<sup>16</sup> These pieces appeared as nos. 33 and 34 in the first edition of *For Children*; they were, however, omitted from the revised version.

<sup>17</sup> This recording is available in the CD, *Bartók Recordings from Private Collections* (Hungaroton Classic Ltd., 1995), HCD 12334.

<sup>18</sup> In 1911, Rozsnyai published Bartók's practical edition of the *Album für die Jugend*.

<sup>19</sup> James Parakilas, "Folk Song as Musical Wet Nurse: The Prehistory of Bartók's *For Children*", *Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 3, 476-499.

correspondences on several levels. All the components that Peer Findeisen identified analyzing the technique of a selection of Bartók's folksong arrangements: linearity, unisono, ostinato and fifth-bordun, as well as the application of certain overall patterns or repeated figures in the accompaniment, are present both in the *Album für die Jugend*'s simple settings and *For Children*.<sup>20</sup> Grieg applied most of the same techniques in his folksong settings, a clear indication to their common roots in Schumann's easy pieces.

Further means of arranging simple melodies for the piano, the transposition of the theme into another key, its transformation from major to minor, or vice versa, alternating the melody between the two hands are again common to both Grieg's and Bartók's settings and have precedents in the *Album für die Jugend*. Missing from Schumann's pieces are the short, usually two-measure introductions that are almost mandatory in Grieg's folksong settings. If the theme is a dance tune, the introduction anticipates the pattern of the accompaniment that follows. In some vocal settings, the first line of the melody is quoted, establishing the general mood of the composition. About one third of the pieces in *For Children* have introductions, exclusively of the type that presents the pattern of the accompaniment that in most cases can be shown to have derived from the melody in one way or the other. Both Grieg and Bartók display great inventiveness in devising these patterns: in the seventeen pieces of the op. 72 series, there are not two that are identical. Another small detail shared only by Grieg and Bartók is the playful breaking up of the melody, tone by tone, between the two hands, as in op. 17, no. 18; and nos. 3 and 13 of the Slovak set of *For Children*.

Equally lacking in most Schumann pieces is a certain type of ending that occurs a number of times, especially in the more advanced pieces of the second book of *For Children*: a sort of flourish, or virtuosic passage, involving some showy gesture, such as hand crossings, extreme registers, repeat of the same motive several octaves higher or lower, as a kind of afterthought that sometimes is only loosely connected to the foregoing and its purpose is admittedly pianistic display. There are abundant examples to be found for the antecedents of this closing formula in the repeated motives at the end of Haydn's and Mozart's sonata movements; Mendelssohn favored its more brilliant version and Grieg also had a predilection for it, especially in his folksong settings.

Bartók preferred to finish his technically demanding compositions this way as well and even some of his later folksong arrangements have similar endings. Nevertheless, its occurrence in the relatively undemanding settings of the *For Children* seems to be following the precedent of Grieg's folksong arrangements, with some surprisingly similar solutions. One consists of a repeated motive in one hand while the other plays the same chord successively in four registers (op. 17, no. 5 and no. 18, op. 66, no. 14, *For Children*, book II, no. 39).

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<sup>20</sup> Peer Findeisen, *Instrumentale Folklorestilisierung bei Edvard Grieg und bei Béla Bartók: vergleichende Studie zur Typik der Volksmusikbearbeitung im 19. versus 20. Jahrhundert. Beiträge zur europäischen Musikgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1998), 229-247 and 331-352.

49 *fz* *sostenuto* *fz* *ff* *Piu Allegro e sempre string*

Ex. 2a. Ending of Grieg's op. 17, no. 5

*f* *fff*

Ex. 2b. Ending of v. II, no. 39 of Bartók's *For Children*

In another type the motive or chord is repeated over several octaves by changing hands (op. 66, no. 16; op. 72, no. 4 and no. 10; *For Children* book II, no. 31 and no. 38

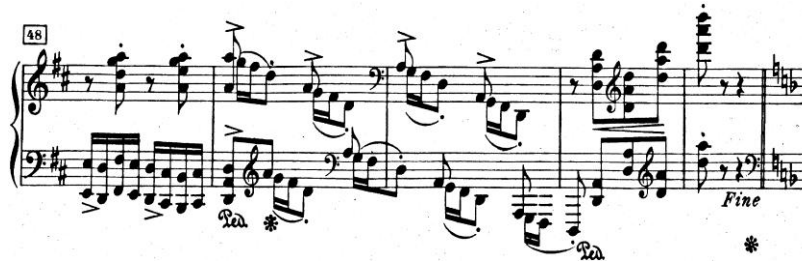
42 *e stretto* *ff*

Ex. 3a. Ending of Grieg's op. 66, no. 16

*f* *ff* *Piu vivo*

Ex. 3b. Ending of v. II, no. 38 of Bartók's *For Children*

Or they can be repeated by the two hands together (op. 72, no. 7, *For Children*, book II, no. 41)



#### 4a. Ending of Grieg's op. 72, no. 5



#### 4b. Ending of v. II, no. 41 of Bartók's *For Children*

There is another closing feature, which, however, is practically absent from Grieg's settings but very conspicuous in Bartók's *For Children*. In these endings the penultimate (often the third) line, or the first part of the last line of the melody is emphasized by a *ritardando* and the last line or motive follows, sometimes after a long-held note or rest, concluding the piece in the original tempo. This tempo change is completely uncharacteristic of folk performance. In some of these miniature pieces, it might be understood as the marking of the recapitulation, especially in those songs where the first and last lines of the four-line theme are identical. Perhaps because of its brevity, this conclusion usually has a surprise effect, almost like a punch line. Several pieces in *For Children* end this way, while in his later compositions Bartók used this type of ending sparingly, and only for an explicitly humorous effect. Remarkably, his 1945 recording of no. 19 of *For Children*, a piece where the *ritardando* and *al tempo* is not even called for, Bartók played the ending with these tempo changes, evidently having strong feelings about the effectiveness of rounding off a piece in this manner.

Two movements in the *Album für die Jugend*, no. 24 ("Ernteliedchen") and no. 28 ("Erinnerung") have similar ending, with the return of the original tempo at the conclusion of the piece after a slowing down and rest. But the sixth movement ("Herberge") of Schumann's *Waldscenen* is the example closest to what happens in some Bartók pieces, namely that the punch-line is the first motive of the melody. There is only one movement among Grieg's settings, in his op. 17, no. 9 where the first motive of the melody is recalled at the end, but without any tempo changes. The ending of a few dance tunes also comes close to this solution where the *decrescendo* towards the end is followed by a few surprising boisterous chords.

Langsamer. Im Tempo.

Edition Peters. 7000

This musical score shows the ending of Schumann's "Ernteliedchen". It is written for piano in G major and 4/4 time. The piece begins with a tempo marking of "Langsamer." (Ad libitum) and later changes to "Im Tempo." (Allegretto). The score includes various fingering numbers (1-5) and articulation marks. The piece concludes with a repeat sign and a final cadence.

Ex. 5a. Ending of Schumann's "Ernteliedchen"

rit. a tempo

*p*

attacca

This musical score shows the ending of the second volume of Bartók's "For Children", piece number 37. It is in 3/4 time and features a tempo change from "rit." (ritardando) to "a tempo". The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and an "attacca" sign at the end, indicating a connection to the next piece.

Ex. 5b. Ending of v. II, no. 37 of Bartók's *For Children*

49

*ff* *pp* *stretto* *fff*

*ped.* \*

This musical score shows the ending of Grieg's op. 72, no. 10. It is in 3/4 time and features a variety of dynamics including *ff* (fortissimo), *pp* (pianissimo), and *fff* (fortississimo). The tempo is marked "stretto" (rushed). The score includes a "ped." (pedal) marking with an asterisk at the end.

Ex. 5c. Ending of Grieg's op. 72, no. 10

On the larger structural level, another conspicuous analogy between the *Album für die Jugend* and *For Children* is their pieces in canon-form. Apparently, Grieg did not feel this form appropriate to a folksong setting. The "Canon" of his second set of *Lyric pieces*, however, has a number of common features with Schumann's piece: the imitation in the lower octave one measure later, the added parts for harmonic filling, and the *maggiore* middle section, the first two of these features also shared by Bartók's "Canon". In the *Album für die Jugend*, several pieces contain contrasting sections. In a folksong setting, unless the folk melody also has such a composite form, such structures can be created by using two melodies in a single setting. Grieg chose two contrasting folk melodies in three movements of his op. 66. The counterpart of these in *For Children* is the piece called "Rhapsody", in which Bartók alternated two contrasting melodies. Grieg also linked together some pieces with *attacca* signs, to suggest that they could be performed together. He created four such units in his op. 66, each consisting of two pieces. In *For Children*, there are nine such cycles, joining either two or three settings. Interestingly enough, it was the publisher who asked Bartók to create these units, but it is conceivable that the publisher himself might have taken the idea from Grieg's example. In two of the *Slåtter*, Grieg provided his own variant of the melody to serve as a middle section. Bartók subjected the folk melody to variation that brings on a basic structural



change only once in *For Children*: the third variation of no. 5 of the Slovak series where the original triple meter is changed into 2/4.

Finally, I would like to call attention to the affinity between some of Grieg's folksong settings and the last piece of the second volume of *For Children*. It is the final and only piece based on an instrumental performance within the series using Hungarian melodies: Bartók called it the "Swineherd's dance" when he orchestrated it in 1931 as the final movement of his *Hungarian Sketches*. An old man played this melody on a peasant flute into Bartók's phonograph in 1907, a recent experience for the composer at the time of composing the setting.<sup>21</sup> It is an ornamented version of a vocal melody, which also appears in *For Children*.<sup>22</sup> The original instrumental performance consists of two quite differently varied stanzas.

Using volume and density, Bartók created an arch-form in the setting: it starts *pp* with isolated notes in the left hand that develop into a varied drone accompaniment to the melody which is set in the high register to evoke the sound of the original peasant instrument. The melody begins in the middle of the second stanza, with *ppp possibile* dynamics, even missing some of its notes, quasi inaudible because coming from far away. Finally, in measure 17, the volume becomes *p subito*, and the first stanza now begins, as if the shepherd and its flock would have appeared from behind the bend of a road. During the subsequently heard two stanzas the dynamics get louder, the accompaniment thicker and more stirring until the climax is reached with a *ff* at the beginning of the third stanza. We are now surrounded by the noisy flock, but then the procession passes on and the commotion starts to dwindle halfway in the third stanza. By the end of the fourth, the dynamics are back to *pp*. The fifth stanza, *sempre decrescendo*, is again scattered with missing notes as if fading away. In fact, the very last note is missing, quasi drowned by the ever distant thumping of the flock.

Finn Benestad and Schejlderup-Ebbe observed that most pieces of the op. 72 series have an arch form: "The peak of intensity and dissonance occurs toward the middle, and there is a gradual relaxation of tension thereafter."<sup>23</sup> It is tempting to think that Bartók knew Grieg's op. 72 series at the time of composing the "Swineherd's dance", and it was some of its pieces, especially the bridal marches that fired his imagination to set this flute melody. Although in Grieg's compositions the advancing and passing of the procession is not as consistently depicted as in Bartók's, they also create a spatial effect, similar to that of Bartók's piece. Especially evocative is the first dance of the op. 72 series, "Gibøen's Bridal March", where the main motive's last appearance is just as fragmentary as in Bartók's piece, ending with *ppp morendo* dynamics. That it indeed served as the model for Bartók is admittedly a mere conjecture. Nevertheless, it represents yet another intersection between the two composers' paths and if Bartók had a chance to consult Grieg's folksong settings around the time of working on *For Children*, it is an indication that he profited from them in multiple ways.

<sup>21</sup> Bartók's transcription of this melody appears in my book, *Folk Music in Bartók's Compositions* (Budapest: Hungarian Heritage House, 2008), p. 90 (no. 70), along with the digitized phonograph recording on the CD accompanying the book.

<sup>22</sup> No. 39 (37 in the revised version). This melody was collected by Bartók in the same village as the peasant flute melody. See his transcription of it in my book, *Music in Bartók's Compositions*, 89 (no. 67). The recording has also survived and can be found on the CD accompanying the book.

<sup>23</sup> Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg, The Man and the Artist* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 369.