

Wojciech Stępień (Katowice, Poland): **Grieg's uncanny** - representations of Scandinavian mythical creatures

Freud's essay 'Das Unheimliche' (1919) [The 'Uncanny'] provides a key reference point not only in discussions of art and literature but also of music. The term 'uncanny' means that something frightening "leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 1955: 220). This thing is at the same time both very familiar and completely alien for observers or subjects, which renders the uncanny object disorienting and ambiguous. Amongst the most typical examples listed by Freud include human corpses, skeletons, parts of bodies, ghosts and animated spirits (see Freud 1955: 241, 244). Some musicologists (Abbate 2001, Välimäki 2005) have applied successfully the notion of the uncanny to music that represents or depicts topics such as ventriloquism, automatism, doubles and repetitive compulsion. Although the category of the 'uncanny' in music generally concerns these topics, it can appear also in the harmonic structure of tonal music. Richard Cohn in his article 'Uncanny resemblances: Tonal signification in the Freudian age' (2004) claims that the best example of 'uncanny' in tonal music is the harmonic pairing represented in Figure 1 that he labels a 'hexatonic pole'.

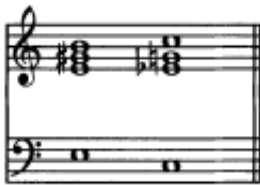


Fig. 1. 'Hexatonic pole' – E major and c minor

When one of the chords is heard as a tonic, the two chords E major and c minor have a problematic relationship: the first doesn't exist in c minor and the second doesn't exist in E major (Cohn 2004: 304-306). As Cohn demonstrates, composers very often used 'hexatonic poles' to express magical, supernatural, metaphysical and mystical categories in music.

In my paper I will prove that although Grieg often used 'hexatonic poles' in his music, he created also his private musical 'uncanny' in instrumental pieces with titles which refer to Scandinavian mythical creatures – elves, gnomes and trolls. The composer left only a few such pieces, the majority of which were for piano: Op.12 no 4 *Elverdans* [*Elves' Dance*] (1867), Op. 23 no 8 *I Dovregubbens Hall* [*In the Hall of the Mountain King*](1874) from *Peer Gynt*,¹ Op. posth no 2 *Tusseslåt* [*Procession of Gnomes*] (1889), Op. 54 no 3 *Trolldtog*

¹Also no 10 *Peer Gynt jages av Troll* [*Peer Gynt Hunted by the Trolls*].

[*March of the Trolls*] (1891), Op. 71 no 3 *Småtroll* [*Little Troll*] (1901). Although they were composed over a thirty four year period, they nevertheless share similar musical material and form. In my analysis I will focus on elements which are old, long familiar and completely alien for listeners, all of which evoke the Freudian sense of the ‘uncanny’ in Grieg’s music.

All of the pieces are written in minor keys: *Elves’ Dance* and *Procession of Gnomes* are in e minor, *In the Hall of Mountain King* in b minor, *March of the Trolls* in d minor and *Little Troll* is in e-flat minor. Notably, all of the works contain the raised fourth degree, which normally occurs as a characteristic step in the Lydian mode that distinguishes it from the natural major scale. Its presence in minor-key works therefore seems surprising and paradoxical. Moreover, the raised fourth is often strongly emphasized by the composer: it is used on downbeats and at ends of phrases (*In the Hall of the Mountain King*, *March of the Trolls*, *Little Troll*), and frequently appears as a passing or neighboring note in the main motif (*Elves’ Dance*, *Procession of Gnomes*). I have chosen *Little Troll* as an example of these observations (Ex.1).



Ex.1. E.Grieg *Little Troll* Op. 71 no 3, mm. 1-5

Vincent Persichetti, in his *Twentieth-Century Harmony* (1961: 44), called the minor scale with the raised fourth degree the Hungarian Minor. Its name carries connotations of traditional folk-music from Hungary and gypsy music, and its use could introduce the characteristic music flavor of them. Obviously it is doubtful that Grieg wanted to portray Scandinavian creatures through the use of the Hungarian Minor scale. In fact, although the structure of the first tetrachord of the scale from *Little Troll* is identical to that of the Hungarian Minor, the structure of the second tetrachord is different, as Grieg very often changes the sixth and seventh step of the scale. Through this distinction it is closer to the Lydian scale, but also to the Acoustic, so-called Overtone, scale, as is demonstrated in Figures 2 to 5 (see Persichetti 1961: 44).



Fig.2. Scale from Grieg's *Little Troll* Op. 71 no 3



Fig.3. Hungarian Minor Scale beginning on E-flat



Fig.4. Lydian Scale beginning on E-flat



Fig.5. Overtone Scale beginning on E-flat

It is interesting that the Lydian and Overtone scales are very often found in mountaineer's folk-music of different countries, and Grieg frequently stylized folk-music using them. Moreover there is an example of his music in which he used the scale from *Little Troll* in a composition without a title that refers to a Scandinavian mythical creature, *Evening in the Mountains* Op. 68 no 4 (1899) for piano (orchestrated in 1900). Although the tempo is slower than in the compositions I am looking at, there is a clear similarity with them through the shared use of the minor scale with the characteristic Lydian step. It seems that Grieg highlights the important mountain environment in his musical representation of elves, trolls, gnomes by the correspondence to this piece and the use of the deformed Lydian Scale with the minor third (Ex.2).



Ex.2. E.Grieg *Evening in the Mountains* Op. 68 no 4, mm. 9-17.

Returning to the works that refer to mythical creatures, all of them employ fast tempi, and with the exception of *Elves' Dance*, duple meter. Moreover, their accompaniment is almost identical: ostinatos based on the perfect fifth in different configurations. The perfect fifth is often used in classical and romantic music as an echo or symbol of nature, deriving from its place as the second interval in the series of overtones, and it very often appears in the accompaniment of folk-music as a *bourdon*.

All of the aforementioned features - the perfect fifths in the accompaniment, the duple meter and the fast tempi - are allusions to the *halling*, a Norwegian mountain dance. The dance, which was very often stylized by Grieg, is based on Major Scale or Lydian Scale). Grieg's *Halling* Op. 47 no. 3 displays many of these features (Ex. 3)".²



Ex.3. E.Grieg *Halling* Op. 47 no 4, mm. 1-13.

Although there are some similarities between the *Halling* and the pieces referring to mythological creatures, the minor keys of the latter are not typical of Norwegian folk-music.

²Grieg also used this *halling* in the introduction to music for Ibsen's drama *Peer Gynt* (Op. 23 no 2).

As a result they seem simultaneously familiar to the listeners through certain reminiscences of Norwegian folk-music and completely alien through the use of minor modes that unconsciously make them disorienting, ambiguous and paradoxical. That is to say, these pieces are perfect examples of the ‘uncanny’ in music. In one interpretation, the use of minor keys in the light of associations with Norwegian folk-music could be taken as a harmonic deformation of the Lydian Scale of the *halling*. In another I might say that the raised fourth degree is rather a deformation of minor scale.

To understand the significance of this harmonic deformation it is essential to return to the programmatic titles of Grieg’s pieces and connect them with the music itself. Scandinavian creatures such as elves, trolls and gnomes belong to the unreal, magic world of myths, legends and fairy-tales. All of these creatures have anthropomorphic forms but at the same time they are completely alien to observers due to deviations from the human form: in general, elves are tiny and have wings that make them similar to insects, gnomes are tiny and ugly, and trolls are hairy giants who sometimes have a tail hidden in their clothing. Through these deformations that distinguish them from human forms, they belong to the sphere of the unreal and magic world. Grieg used the same kind of deformation to represent them in music: on the one hand, the raised fourth degree which together with perfect fifths in the accompaniment, fast tempi and duple meter refers to the *halling* and symbolizes Norwegian folk music (and thus ‘nature’), and on the other the use of the minor scale as something odd, demonic and magical refers to Norwegian superstition and mythology. In fact all mythological creatures - trolls, gnomes and elves - are portrayed in Grieg’s music in very similar way.

It is a kind of a rhetorical question as to how the composer treated these representations. Was it serious, since he called his villa ‘Troidhaugen’ [‘The Hill of the Trolls’]³ and once said, “the peculiar in life was what made me wild and mad...dwarf power and untamed wildness...audacious and bizarre fantasy”? Or rather was it a parody or caricature for comic effect, as he said about the ‘Dance of the Mountain King’s Daughter’ from the music to *Peer Gynt* (Op.23 no 9) that “here the music must be an absolute parody, and in such a way that the audience understands that it is a parody. Only then will the effect be comical” (Benestad, Schjelderup-Ebbe 1988: 185).⁴ The parody was achieved through the

³As Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe discovered the idea of name of the villa ‘Troidhaugen’ came from composer’s wife (1988: 260).

⁴About his most famous piece of music, ‘*In the Hall of Mountain King*’, the composer said: “I literally can’t stand to listen to because it absolutely reeks of cow pies, exaggerated Norwegian provincialism, and trollish self-sufficiency!” (from a letter to Beyer, August 27, 1874, cited in Benestad, Schjelderup-Ebbe 1988: 185).

combination of the Lydian mode with the rhythm of the tarantella along with instruments such as the xylophone and harp: another means of creating the category of the musical ‘uncanny’ (see Horton 1945: 74). Nevertheless Grieg in very simple way created his own ‘uncanny’ label by joining typical tendencies in Romantic music to portray demonic creatures with the deformation of Norwegian folk music. His interesting results are unique, for many Romantic composers wrote pieces in reference to Scandinavian myths and legends.

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