

**Asbjørn Ø. Eriksen:**

**Boris Asafiev's book about Grieg (1942) - an original contribution to the literature on the composer.**

The enduring Russian affection for the music of Grieg is well known. He has been one of the most widely loved composers in Russia throughout the 20<sup>TH</sup> century, and several illustrious Russian musicians and orchestras have performed his works. Much attention has been paid to the friendship between Tchaikovsky and Grieg. Many Russian composers at the beginning of the 20<sup>TH</sup> century valued Grieg's music highly, for instance Ippolitov-Ivanov, Rakhmaninov, Miaskovsky and the young Prokofiev. Grieg also inspired Russian artists outside musical circles. Maxim Gorky is supposed to have counted him his favourite composer, and the Russian symbolist poet Andrei Bely (1880-1934) dedicated a work in rhythmic prose to him, called *First Symphony*, with the subheading "The Nordic" (1901).

Although Boris Asafiev's (1884-1949) book on Grieg is of modest dimensions of about 100 pages, it achieved a prominent place in the Russian Grieg-research. This is understandable, as it was written by the leading musicologist in the Soviet Union - indeed, Asafiev can be counted as the founder of Soviet musicology. The book on Grieg (written in 1942, published in 1948) was originally intended for a citizen with interest in music in Stalin's Soviet - a class of readers rather far removed from a Westerner at the turn of the millennium. However, the work has qualities that makes it still interesting and relevant. I have translated it into Norwegian, thus making it accessible to a wider Norwegian public. (Boris Asafjev: *Grieg. Innledning, oversettelse og kommentarer ved Asbjørn Ø. Eriksen*. Solum Forlag 1992.) Besides a short "preface" and an introduction, the book consists of five chapters: "Briefly on Grieg's life and thoughts about music", "Grieg's keyboard lyricism", "Grieg's vocal lyricism", "Norwegian folk songs and dances" and "Grieg's concept of the sonata". As we can see, four chapters are devoted to some of the most central genres in Grieg's output.

There are three aspects of the book that in my view will attract even a contemporary, Western lover of Grieg. Firstly, Asafiev often offers very accurate characterisations of Grieg's music; secondly, he evaluates many of the pieces differently than leading Norwegian musicologists; and thirdly, being a Soviet musicologist, he has a distinctive perspective on the material that can be of interest to a Western reader.

It is remarkable that the work by Grieg that is provided the broadest examination in the book, is *Slåtter* (op. 72), which Asafiev discusses with impressive empathy and understanding, not least if one takes into consideration that this was done by a foreigner almost 60 years ago. In addition to the examination of various works, Asafiev offers several

interesting observations on the placing of Grieg in the history of music, and on characteristic traits of harmony, piano style and form.

Asafiev equals Norwegian musicologists in his high appraisal of works such as the *Haugtussa* cycle, *19 Norwegian Folk-Songs* op. 66 and *Slåtter* op. 72. But he also has evaluations that differ strongly from those held in authoritative quarters in Norway. This is especially true of two of the song opuses - *Reminiscences from Mountain and Fjord* op. 44, set to poems by Holger Drachmann, and *Six Elegiac Songs* op. 59, set to poems by John Paulsen. Both of these compositions have been given very low rating by leading Norwegian Grieg specialists. Asafiev, on the other hand, thinks that *Reminiscences from Mountain and Fjord* as a total approaches the standard of *Haugtussa*. On *Six Elegiac Songs* he writes: "We have here brilliant songs, unforgettable in their refined romantic depictions of atmosphere." (p. 71)

The Marxist view on art rejects the thought that art exists in a vacuum - it should always refer to phenomena in real life. Asafiev agrees with this tradition as he constantly describes how music *reflects* human emotions, daily life, phenomena of nature etc. Some of his statements can be construed as plain attacks on the "l'art pour l'art"-aesthetics. We can also detect in him a reluctance against purely technical descriptions of the music, which can be ascribed to the same philosophy of art.

In his writing, Asafiev criticises composers that invent music in their ivory-towers that only they themselves and a small group of disciples can understand. If we define the asafievian term *intonation* as an *arrangement of notes that offers musical meaning in a society*, the condition for musical communication is, according to Asafiev, that composer, performer and audience have *a common vocabulary of intonation*. In the book on Grieg, elements of Asafiev's so-called theory of intonation are expressed in the particular praise of pieces that in his opinion has intonations that are accessible to a broad section of the population. For instance, he stresses Grieg's ability to *transform* and *generalise* the more local dialects of folk music.

Even though the views in this book may not have had much impact on Norwegian Grieg studies, it was an important foundation for the Russian musicologist Olga Levashova, who in 1962 published an 800-page treatise on Grieg's life and work which to this day is the *magnus oper* in Russia on the composer.

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