

Axel Bruch:**Variation Form and Cyclic Conception****Grieg's Ballad op. 24.**

About this important piano-work there has been written a lot.¹ However, this ballad follows two different traditions of genre since it is conceived in variation form.² An analytical work with Grieg's ballad requires an understanding of its formal process. Only by an analysis of the theme the framework of the variations can be shown – a framework which hasn't been seen before because of national implications which are caused of the tradition of the genre *ballad*.³

I Grieg modified the model of the melody⁴ that he selected for the theme in the ballad:

¹ Axel, Gertrud, *Die Klavierballade*, Diss. Wien 1934, masch., p. 86-92; Gaukstad, Øystein, *Temaet i Griegs ballade*, in: *Norsk musikk Tidsskrift* 1964, p. 105-108; Puchelt, Gerhard, *Variationen für Klavier im 19. Jahrhundert*, Hildesheim 1973, p. 147ff.; Benestad, Finn u. Schjelderup Ebbe, Dag, *Edvard Grieg. Mennesket og kunstneren*, Oslo 1980, p. 175-178; Steen-Nøkleberg, Einar, *Med Grieg på podiet. Til spillende fra en spillende*, Oslo 1992, p. 98ff.; Bruch, Axel, *Folklore im Formprozeß. Griegs Ballade in ihrem Kontext.*, Mag. Kiel 1997.

² See the works of Gerhard Puchelt; further Fischer, Kurt v., *Zur Theorie der Variation im 18. und beginnenden 19. Jahrhundert*, in: *Festschrift Joseph Schmidt-Görg zum 60. Geburtstag* hrsg. v. Dagmar Weise, Bonn 1957, p. 117-130; Dahlhaus, Carl, *Zur Problematik der musikalischen Gattungen im 19. Jahrhundert*, in: *Gattungen der Musik in Einzeldarstellungen*, Gedenkschrift Leo Schrade, Bern u. München 1973, p. 840-895, specially p. 851ff., Bruch, *Folklore im Formprozeß*, p. 19-31.

³ Cp. Gertrud Axel (footnote 1), further Wagner, Günter, *Die Klavierballade um die Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (= *Berliner musikwissenschaftliche Arbeiten* 9), München u. Salzburg 1976.

⁴ Lindeman, Ludvig Mathias, *Ældre og nyere Norske Fjeldmelodier. Samlede og bearbejdede for Pianoforte*, 2 Bde., Christiania [1858], Facsimile edition in one volume ed. Øystein Gaukstad, Ole Mørk Sandvik, Oslo 1963 (= *Norsk Musikk Samling Publikasjon* nr. 3), II. Bind, Nr. 337 „Den nordlandske Bondestand“; p. 34f.

By cancellation of modification in the motive repetitions, which mainly are made of dotted phrases, Grieg achieves a high level of standardisation. He also deleted further variants in the creation of the melody for the ballad so that the main motive is practically repeated. The melody takes 16 bars and moves in its first motif within the minor third *B flat* and the leading note *F sharp*. The second motif increases the range with the fourth *c* and the fifth *d*. This period of four bars gets repeated, so that the first motif is heard eight times in the A-section.

The repetition of the whole second section is unusual for Norwegian melodies of this kind, but this way the main motive appears eight times in all in the theme. To avoid that monotony in the variations, which is intended in the modified formulation of the melody, Grieg was forced to create further material of variation by a daring harmonisation.

The model of the tune is kept in a diatonic way except for the leading note *F sharp*. The main motive is characterised by the leading note. At the same time the melodic model obtains a cadence metrical structure, since a harmonisation of the tune generates the expectation of a functional interpretation of *F sharp* as a dominant leading note. The added bass part runs to a great extent chromatically downwards, serves as a second horizontal line and appears as equal to the melody. A polarity of the upper- and the bass-part is obtained, whose paradigms must be seen in two likewise equal motifs:

Andante espressivo Opus 24

C-Minor₃ D-Major
B-Minor₃ C-Major
D₇ t₃
D-Major^{6/7} G-Major
C-Major^{6/7}

F-Major
D₇ t₃ 1
(D) D₇⁹ D₇ t

On the one hand the upper-part contains that main-motive *B-G-F sharp*, whose leading note will be treated later. On the other hand the bass-part contains a counter-motive, which takes up a weighty status in the progress of the theme: the succession of the notes *E flat – D*.

The mentioned polarity is expressed already in the harmonisation of the first four bars. The entry of the middle-part continues the main-motive chromatically, also the middle-part describes a chromatic line up to the second quarter of bar 3 and moves in the distance of a minor third to the bass. By the chromatically slipping away of the two lower parts there is caused a B flat minor sixth chord on the third quarter of bar 1, followed by a C major triad, which after lowering of the major third *E* to *E flat* serves as a regular subdominant. After the dominant, appearing on the second quarter as a second chord, the tonic key G minor appears for the first time, however, as a sixth chord. The regular cadence in bar two builds a contrast to the harmonisation of bar one. B minor on the third quarter is not based in a functional way. It is rather caused by the moving lower parts as further C major in bar 2. However, if you interpret the first two tones as a C minor sixth chord without keynote and a D major triad without the fifth, you get the sequence of the keys C minor – D major – B flat minor – C major, where both C minor and B flat minor appear as sixth chords. The first two sounds may be interpreted as a succession of subdominant and dominant; but in the moment where B flat minor appears, the functional expectation of hearing gets disappointed. The sketched succession of keys can rather be seen as a harmonically sequence of a Phrygian cadence with the characteristic upper leading notes *E flat* and *D flat*.

By the combination of a repeated motif, which is distinguished by simplicity, and an almost chromatical line, which leads downwards in two voices, Grieg expresses the polarity of functional harmony and chromatics on the one hand and modality and diatonic on the other.

The further harmonisation carries out the contrast: the added alto part exposes leading- and keynotes with the notes *F sharp-G – E-F*, which imply sequences of fifths by using the keys D major, G major, C major and F major. D- and F major appear with an alteration of the fifth and with a sixth suspension to the seventh. Because of the melodic happenings the sequence of fifths is thrust into the background, the foreign tunes in this context of G major and F major remain. The latter key turns by a dorian close into the tonic G minor. To sum it up, in both

passages, bars one and two and bars three and four, you find harmonically structures which are based on sequences, but which are veiled by the cadence metrical structure of the melody.

The melodic repetition of the following four bars differs essentially in its harmonisation, since there exists a final cadence, which is prepared already in bar seven: in contrast to the turn in bar two and three, which is characterised by the formulation of a sequence and the introduction of G major, the tonic gets stabilised in the first quarter of bar seven through the break with the chromatical moving in the bass part. After the regular cadence in bar 6 the tonic is reached by sequences of fifths via E major functioning as a dominant chord. *E flat* in bar seven serves as a lowered fifth of the dominant's dominant A major. Not until in bar eight the falling fifth – or as we in German say, a „Quint-fall“ – takes place in the bass part, while in bar five B flat minor sounds over *D flat* in the bass part – still analogous to the beginning.

The harmonisation of the last phrase of four bars amounts to a synthesis of the first two phrases of four bars during counter-point compression:

13

(D⁷) D⁹₅ D⁷ t

While Grieg in bar 13 and 14 falls back on the beginning, the theme closes with the same formula, which is determined by the bass figure *E flat – D – G* in bar seven and eight. The succession of the notes *E flat – D* is harmonised in different ways and works as a hinge of modal and functional harmony. Not until this figure is separated from its chromatical context are the closing cadences in bars eight and sixteen enabled to be done. Increasingly, this figure manifests itself as a counter-motive to the main-motive in the melody, particularly since it sounds as an echo in the middle parts – this in bars two, six and fourteen.

In the B-section a peculiar synthesis takes place:

Tempo I

The bass figure *E flat – D – G* is splitted and the bits are used parallel with each other. While the falling fifth is placed in the bass part, the succession *E flat - D* for the present forms an accompaniment part. However, it also turns up in the melody in bars nine and ten. After that the crossing figure *G – F*, an imitation of the preceding succession *E flat – D*, appears in very strange parallels of fifths to the sequel of the melody *C – B flat*. The following modulation via the Neapolitan sixth chord in bar twelve does not keep this crossing figure in parallels of fifths, but rather again the countermotive *E flat – D* sounds, which this way exists in each single bar of the B-section.

This extremely opulent kind of theme seems quite unusual for variation works from this time. Through the idea of setting an almost chromatically moving counterpoint of equal weight besides the melody, Grieg achieves a simultaneously running dualism of themes implicating the harmony.

II

To avoid monotony in the variations, a monotony, which Grieg planned in the forming of the melody in the theme, a sensitive dosage of the melodic material was required. Of the fourteen variations there are three above all, which vary exclusively the melody in a way, that the melody comes to the fore:

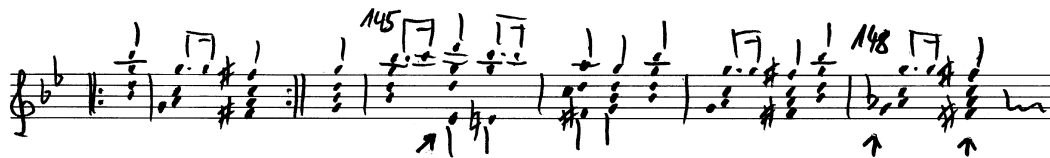
Theme	3. Var.	8. Var.	12. Var.	Theme				
1. Var. sect.	2. Var. sect.	3. Var. sect.	4. Var. sect.					
1-16	17-49	50-65	66-141	142-159	160-234	235-274	275-334	335-343

First the third variation *Adagio* shows it in a two parted form. This variation is reserved for taking up the melody itself. Then it is the eighth variation *Lento*, which formulates the complete melody. By being placed in about the middle of the work as well as the piano-like writing in combination with the harmonisation, this variation directly calls out the melodic essence, which was avoided in the theme.⁵ In the *Meno allegro e maestoso* of the twelfth variation the melody appears in the major key and works as a goal reached by the increasing development of the variations ten and eleven on the one hand, by the refrain-like variations three and eight on the other

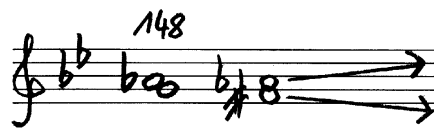
⁵ Cp. Steen-Nøkleberg, *Med Grieg på podiet*, p. 100.

hand. In the cyclic process the third, eighth and twelfth variation act as memories of the melody. In combination with the theme and the coda these variations build the framework of the composition. At the same time four variation sections get visible, which, however, won't be discussed now. It is rather a detail of the eighth variation, which will be examined next.

It was already mentioned, that the leading note *F sharp* characterises the main motif and gives a cadence metrical structure to the melody of the theme. Øystein Gaukstad noticed, that folk-songs of this kind mostly contain floating notes, especially concerning the sixth and the seventh,⁶ and that also here the seventh likely was intonated as a quarter-step. Since such an intonation is not possible on the piano, the leading note *F sharp* shows a strange harmonisation in the eighth variation.



In the repetition of the first four-bar-phrase the lowering *A* to *A flat* in bar 148 causes a harmonically cloudiness. In the interval *G – A flat* *G* is the predominant tone, because it is part of the melody and is repeated in the main motif and in the outer parts. Further the chord *G - A flat – C - G* is already found in transposition, namely in bar 145 on the second quarter. Since *E flat* in bar 145 served as a part of a counterpoint, *A Flat* in bar 148 is kept while the melody turns to the leading note *F sharp*. In the following chord *F sharp – A flat – C – F sharp* the interval of the lowered third *F sharp – A flat* gives the impression, that the repeated *A flat* was a higher note than the same *A flat* on the first quarter.

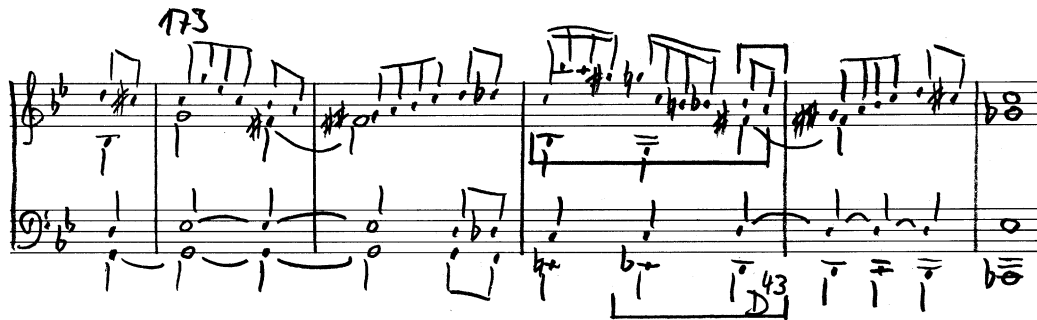


This illusion is founded on the fact that in the lowered third there still remains a dissonant chord, through which the kept *A flat* aims at the opposite direction. This

⁶ Gaukstad, Øystein, *Temaet i Griegs ballade*, in: *Norsk musikk Tidsskrift* 1964, p. 106. Cp. further Krummacher, Friedhelm, *Streichquartett als „Ehrensache“*. *Linie und Klang in Griegs Quartett op. 27*, in: *SMN* 25 (1999), p. 94; Haeffner, Johann Christian Friedrich, *Anmärkning ar över gamla nordiska sången*, in: *Svea. Tidskrift för vetenskap och konst*, 1818, S. 78ff. printed in the preface of the edition by Erik Gustaf Geijer and August Arvid Afzelius, *Svenska folkvisor*, ed. R. Bergström and L. Hoijer, Stockholm 1880, Vol. III, S. VIIff.; Oechsle, Siegfried, *Symphonik nach Beethoven. Studien zu Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn und Gade* (= Kieler Schriften zur Musikwissenschaft XL), Kassel u.a. 1992, p. 73-78.

unusual treatment of dissonance suggests that Grieg consciously intended the simulating of a floating intonation in order to characterise the melodic essence of the ballad.

While the eighth variation handles the melody alone, the ninth variation focuses on the far-reaching structures of composition in the theme. Here the diverging parameters of the theme are kept parallel under a new melody, which belongs to the variation. This can be made clear at the reprise section:



For better illustration the elaborate piano setting is reduced to a four part writing, in whose upper part the internal melody of the variation takes place. In the alto the main motif is touched by using its tones *B flat*, *G*, and *F sharp*, which is kept parallel with the counter-motive *E flat* – *D* in the tenor. From bar 173 the bass builds an organ point on the keynote *G*. However, in its further context the lower part turns out to be a reminiscence of the bass-line in the theme.

Following the theme, *G* in the lowest voice is left in bar 174 in order to be part of the *C* major chord in bar 175. Subsequently, the main- and the counter motif appear simultaneously and build a half close, again simultaneously with the internal melody of the variation. In close connection with the theme (bars 2-3), the bass-line moves in the whole steps *C* – *B flat* – *A flat*, so that *A flat* serves as basis for the formal extension from bar 177, which is also given already in the theme.

Harmonically, the bars three and four are made of a sequence of fifths (see example above). The strangeness of sound in bar three, which results from the polyphonic structure, obtains a high level. Not just the key *G* major seems conspicuous – it is rather the configuration of suspension on the first quarter. The chord *A flat* – *C* – *F sharp* – *C* on the second eighth becomes an *A flat* seventh chord by enharmonic change of *F sharp* to *G flat*, even if the harmonically context differs in the ninth variation. While the bass-line of the theme from bar 170 is almost

completely worked into the ninth variation, even the interrupted cadence turning into A flat major follows the bass-line: By *C – B flat – A flat* you find the only whole steps in the otherwise chromatic succession.

III

The term of a reminiscence of the theme, which has been used especially for the eighth variation, can be expanded on the ninth variation. At the same time the central position of this variation in the cyclic form can be proved: On the one hand the polarised elements of the theme are brought together under a new melody, which in turn portrays the melody of the theme in its outlines. The synthesis of the so far used techniques of composition amounts to a reshuffle of the musical material. On the other hand the second tonal plain, which causes the formal extensions, holds an important meaning. The note *A flat*, which simulated a floating intonation in the eighth variation, appears in its tonal formulation in the ninth variation. The intention of an adequate succession of the eighth variation by an extremely lyrical tone is recognisable. In this way the ninth variation can be seen as an inner culmination of the ballad.

An analytical work with Grieg's Ballad requires the understanding of its formal process. Essential is the specification of the framework being made of the theme and the coda as a frame and the variations three, eight and twelve serving as refrain-like memories of the melody. By removing the melody from its structural network in the theme in these variations, Grieg first opened himself possibilities of setting up gradual development in the single sections of variations. The theme is more than just an arrangement of a folk-song. Here you rather find different forms of polarity implicated by synchronising the melody and the bass-line, which involves a tension of modal and chromatic harmony. In the process of form, which is unfolded in the variation sections, moments of folk-music and artificial music imbue each other in permanently changing plains.