

**Beryl Foster:
From Bjørnson to Brorson: Some of the texts behind Grieg's choral songs.**

In Grieg's solo songs, the quality of the texts plays a large part in the success of the musical settings and although this dependence is not so critical in the choral songs, the texts certainly cannot be dismissed. Of course, in the various commissioned works Grieg did not always have the choice of text and, consequently, some of those settings are functional rather than inspired.

Grieg's most personal collaboration was with the writer and nationalist, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, which produced a number of dramatic works, though not the longed-for opera, while Bjørnson's eminently singable verse also provided the texts for a dozen solo songs and several choral pieces. The first of these was *Norsk Sjømandsang* (Norwegian Sailor's Song), written for a regatta in Stavanger in 1868, and Grieg's energetic, march-like setting is well suited to the poem's short lines and strong rhymes, briskly extolling the virtues of the seafarer. Bjørnson's Serenade, "*Lyt nu, du lydende Sanger!*", written for a students' procession in honour of J. S. Welhaven later the same year, emulates that great writer's elegant phraseology and alliteration in both vowels and consonants, and is beautifully matched by Grieg's graceful melody. In contrast, the cantata written for the 25th anniversary of the Hals Brothers' piano factory produced some fun: in the fourth movement, the pianos themselves complain of their treatment by incompetent players and tuners, of being placed in draughts and even of having the cat walk across their keys and Grieg illustrates this with a deliberately badly played version of *Ach, du lieber Augustin* and a "sobbing" vocal line, a rare example of humour in his music.

Grieg's increasing interest in the harmonic possibilities of Norwegian folk music was furthered by his encounter with Lindeman's great collection and between 1877 and 1878, he "freely arranged" twelve songs from it for baritone soloist and male-voice choir: the *Album*, op. 30. His handling of the songs represent a breakthrough in the presentation of such material both to performers and audiences. Nowhere is the music "prettified"; Grieg retain the dialect texts and uses sometimes dissonant and angular harmony to underline the features to be found in the melodies. In three of the songs, there is little or no text and the music is vocalised to meaningless syllables. The songs range from the nursery-rhyme, *Bådn-låt* (with more cats!) and the boisterous *Springdans*, where Grieg's use of contrary motion and accelerating tempo

brilliantly portrays the feeling of drunken unsteadiness, to two melodies with religious texts by H. A. Brorson, the second of which, the well-known and well-loved *Den store, hvide Flok* (The Great, White Host), Grieg requested to be sung at his funeral.

Two commissions for the *sangerfester* (choral rallies) in Trondheim in 1883 and Christiania in 1896 produced excellent responses. The text of *Sangerhilsen* by Sigurd Skavlan has imaginary taken principally from the sea, the route taken by most of the participants, and Grieg's rousing setting, with its fanfare-like opening, had to be repeated many times that first evening and has remained popular ever since. In *Nu Pinsens Klokker Runger* (Now Whitsun's bells ring out), Jonas Lie compares the awakening spring, with its bright flowers and greening meadows, to the dream of freedom (Norway was moving ever closing to its independence) and Grieg's setting has great melodic and rhythmic variety and is harmonically adventurous.

Also in 1896, Grieg made a setting for male-voice choir of a poem from Jonas Dahl's book of "*Christmas stories and Jæder life*", *Vestanvejr*. The language is robust and concise, with a strong rhythmic pulse, describing the prevailing western wind in all its moods, from "mild and light" to one which brings "hailstorms and drifting snow" and, occasionally, shipwreck. Grieg's setting, entitled *Jædervise* (A Song of Jæren) is equally energetic and unsentimental, underlined by close part-writing and dissonances that are only briefly resolved.

In 1906, for the *Four Psalms*, op. 74, Grieg returned to Lindeman's folksong collection. As he could not accept a personal God nor the divinity of Jesus, it must have been the melodies rather than the texts that appealed. This is particularly true of the second psalm, *Guds Søn har gjort meg fri* (God's Son has set me free). However, the most distinctive feature of the piece, and one of the most remarkable episodes in all his compositions, the often-cited bitonal third stanza, must have been inspired by the words: the mixed choir is fined down to a male-voice quartet singing in B-flat minor, while the soloist, asserting "*Nu er jeg Gud i Vold, trods Slanger tusindfold!*" (Now I am in God's power, despite a thousand serpents), remains confidently in the tonic B-flat major.

Unfortunately, interesting and varied as the texts to Grieg's choral songs are, it is these very texts which, because of dated or non-existent translations, have precluded a wider knowledge of the music outside Scandinavia. It is to be hoped that, almost a century after his death, this situation may soon be remedied.

