

Were Agathe Backer Grøndahl's Performative Strength Wasted upon "Scrappy Works like Edvard Grieg's"-?

At the untimely death of Edvard Grieg's lesser-known compatriot, close friend and interpreter Agathe Backer Grøndahl (1847-1907) he made the following entry in his diary: If a mimosa could sing, it would sound like her most beautiful, intimate tunes. As the Norwegian composer and music critic Pauline Hall noted 1947, Backer Grøndahl became a banner for women composers in Grieg's era, a stimulation for those that followed in her footsteps (Hall 1947: 6). With 150 piano works, an Andante for piano and orchestra, Scherzo for orchestra, the cantata *Nytaarsgry*, arrangements of Norwegian folk tunes and over 250 romances, Backer Grøndahl's output is a major contribution to 19th century music. Beside her active life and glittering career, Backer Grøndahl, together with her sister Harriet Backer and Erica Nissen, made it a priority to join the women's suffrage movement's club in Kristiania.

After two years of studies (1865–7) at Theodor Kullak's *Akademie der Tonkunst* in Berlin she made her debut march 17. 1868 at one of Edvard Grieg's Kristiania subscription concerts. In a letter the day after Grieg told his friend Gottfred Matthison-Hansen that an exceptionally gifted pianist, Agathe Backer, performed Beethoven's piano concert in E flat major. However her first songs were dedicated to *Nina* Grieg, who assisted her at several concerts. In a letter to Niels Ravnkilde *Edvard* Grieg reveals a great admiration of her songs. Backer Grøndahl put compositions of his in her concert programmes at her numerous concerts in Scandinavian cities. As long as the Grieg couple stayed in Kristiania *Nina* Grieg continued to perform Agathe Backer's songs and Edvard Grieg to invite Agathe Backer to play at his concerts. In addition Edvard Grieg and Backer Grøndahl dedicated Song Cycles to each other (Backer Grøndahl's *Sange ved Havet* and Edvard Grieg's *Vinjesanger*).

Nearly two decades passed, Backer Grøndahl's time was for the most part occupied in Kristiania, as a multi-tasking wife and mother, pianist, educator and composer. In this way her hard daily work in building a musical life in Kristiania from small beginnings grew into something of wider dimensions. She acquired an influential position in the Scandinavian countries as a composer as well as an outstanding performer of apparently exceptional powers. The successes gave her the determination to press on and perhaps she felt by the end of the 1880s that it was time to travel further afield. In a letter to *Nina* Grieg February 20. 1888, she asked the Griegs to pave her way to London's Concert

Halls: She had heard that Edvard was going to be Lion of the Season, and that there was a keen interest in his music. If Backer Grøndahl could perform something together with him, her road to success would be secured. Through her songs she herself was relatively known to the Londoners as a composer. She had her biography printed and her British publisher, Pitts and Hatsfields, wanted to promote her a little in England. If Nina thought she wouldn't get anywhere with Edvard, Backer Grøndahl asked her not to mention the letter to him. Backer Grøndahl's letter to Nina Grieg prompted the desired effect: When Edvard Grieg performed his A minor Concerto in London May 1888, it was a great success. New engagements the following year resulted, this time as a conductor. During the negotiations with the Royal Philharmonic Society's secretary he introduced a quite unknown "absolutely phenomenal" Norwegian pianist who he "accidentally" knew was planning to come. He promised that the society wouldn't regret inviting such an outstanding pianist pre-eminent in playing all genres of piano music perfectly, concertos, solo pieces and chamber music. He even sent Francesco Berger a reminder, and added that he didn't know if she played his A Minor Concerto, but recommended that they contacted her. The Concert Management was persuaded to engage her for the Philharmonic Society's second concert of the season at St. James's Hall. She accepted, was Grieg eternally grateful and studied The Concerto together with him. Grieg also came to her rescue when complications on the monetary and practical side followed: He refrained from his fee to secure her assistance. Backer Grøndahl proved herself to be an invaluable ally. An extraordinary success was gained by her brilliant and artistic interpretation of what *The Morning Post* described as the "quaint and graceful work" (March 30. 1889). The reception was full of superlatives: The pianist whose reputation hardly had travelled beyond her native country was proposed as an instrumentalist of exceptional powers, a second Clara Schumann, with a superb technique that added to her rare brilliancy of style and a full, rich tone with a singularly delicate, sensitive touch. Thoroughly in sympathy with Grieg's music, the critics agreed on that she embodied the composer's fascinating characteristics and demonstrated his capabilities. Grieg and Backer Grøndahl were enthusiastically applauded and recalled five times.

George Bernard Shaw was one of very few critics in the unfortunate position of reporting never having heard Backer Grøndahl play Grieg's Concerto. He was one of the most malicious critics of Grieg's "miniature" music, commenting on its sweet but very common modulations and Grieg's

lacking ability to compose anything but “pretty” short melodies. Agreeing with Shaw on the Grieg matter Haweis declared Grieg “the Heine of the concert room” in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (March 29. 1889). The *Monthly Musical Record* also described him as the “Chopin of the North” (April 1. 1890). When Grieg moved on to bigger genres and meddled with Shaw’s favourite author Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* Shaw characterized it as infantile. Understandably he left before Backer Grøndahl had played the “infamous” A minor Concerto.

Ibsen made his breakthrough, and of course Shaw made certain to attend a very interesting Doll’s House dinner at the Novelty Theatre. A “neglected” and “unknown” lady he felt had some indescribable sort of refinement about her was also present. She seemed to have lost her way and found herself in a very questionable circle. After dinner the whole party went down to the stage and finished the evening in the doll’s house scenery. When their resources were at last exhausted and the entertainment was on the point of petering out, the hosts had to play their last card. Could anybody play the Helmer piano and oblige them with a tune? There was a general shaking of heads until it appeared that the “quiet lady” could play some pieces. As she went to the little piano Shaw prepared himself for the worst and people stopped talking, more or less. To encourage the poor lady he went to the piano and sat beside her to turn over for her, expecting The Maiden’s Prayer or an old-fashioned set of Variations on The Carnival of Venice. He felt he was being very good to her. Shaw reported that she played (one of her own compositions) upon Helmer’s (theatre) piano as it was never played upon before, and perhaps never will be again. Shaw asked: “Has anyone ever told you that you are one of the greatest pianists in Europe ? ‘ Evidently a good many people had; for without turning a hair she said: ‘It is my profession. But this is a bad instrument’” (*The Star* July 21. 1889).

Through Backer Grøndahl’s irony she morally regenerated the guests at the Doll’s House Party. Shaw gives an account of “hidden theatre” at a party in theatre scenery, as well as the communication and interpretation in relation to musical genres and gender expectations. The “role play” sheds light on the relationship between the event, contemporary music in doll’s houses and makes Ibsen’s drama seem rather defamiliarized and anachronistic. Backer Grøndahl also proves herself to be anything but the sensitive mimosa Grieg described. At several occasions Shaw certainly also puts her position in the latest edition of Norwegian Music History in Grieg’s light and composing “poetic works” for Noras in perspective.

Turning up at her Piano Recital in Princes' Hall a month later Shaw made negative remarks in his review on her performing Grieg with the violinist Johannes Wolff: "I adhere to my opinion that she should have played a Beethoven sonata instead of Grieg's violin sonata in C minor; but if we had no Beethoven we had at least Schumann and Chopin" (*The Star* July 19. 1889). When Shaw's editor sent him to interview the "aggravatingly modest" Backer Grøndahl, her earnest admiration for her compatriots Svendsen and Grieg infuriated him; "for she is a thousand times a finer player than he; and I got quite beside myself at the idea of his presuming to teach her how to play this and that instead of going down on his knees and begging her to deliver him from his occasional vulgarity, and to impart to him some of her Mendelssohnic sense of form in composition" (*The Star* July 13. 1889).

At her third visit to England Backer Grøndahl committed the impertinence of yet again playing several Grieg works in front of a Shaw. Shaw condescended to stay on and listen yet another time:

On Saturday she came to the Crystal Palace in clouds of boreal snow. I should not have minded her bringing the snow if she had left Grieg's concerto at home. I hinted last year, and I now explicitly repeat, that Madame Grøndahl's powers in interpretation are wasted upon a scrappy work like Grieg's. [...] But when you are longing for Mozart in D minor or Beethoven in G, or the E flat over again, the Grieg's is an impertinence. The programme, as far as the pianoforte was concerned, would have INFURIATED A SAINT. Madame Grøndahl put Grieg where she should have put Beethoven, and Chopin where she should have put Grieg (*The Star* March 3. 1890).

Backer Grøndahl's next appearance was at her own recital in Steinway Hall two days later. She played many of her own pieces as well as pieces by Grieg and other Norwegian composers. One work left Shaw in an, if possible, even more perfect frenzy of exasperation than the A minor concerto: Backer Grøndahl and Alma Haas performed Mozart's Fantasia in C minor (K 475), with the additional second piano composed by Edvard Grieg. He felt Grieg's interpolation was an impertinence. There was a general regret in newspaper and journal reviews on Backer Grøndahl's and Alma Haas' deciding to perform this un-Mozartian two piano arrangement. Still their reading of this "vulgarized" and "spoiled" Mozart work was considered splendid: *The Musical Times* suspected that some evil spirit had tempted Grieg to write this outrage on good taste, full as it was of "discord and extravagance [...] alien to the spirit of the original music" (April 1890). The *Academy* condemned the arrangement as want of reverence towards Mozart (March 8. 1890). *Pall Mall Gazette* regretted that Grieg was destroying

the Salzburg master as far as possible (March 6. 1890). According to *The weekly Dispatch* it as a “disgusting outrage worthy of condemnation in the strongest language” (March 9. 1890). By *The Observer* Grieg was even named “a farthing rushlight to the sun” for his vulgarizing and spoiling of Mozarts fantasia (March 9. 1890). Shaw on his side recommended Grieg to ascertain that “no brickbats or loose and suitably heavy articles have been left carelessly about the room” if ever he was to play it himself to an audience with adequate musical culture (*The Star* March 7. 1890).

In a letter to Shaw Backer Grøndahl explained her choice of Grieg’s “disgusting” arrangement of the Fantasia (March 8. 1890):

As a novelty and as an experiment I think the Fantasia might interest, but in the reality I am myself of your opinion, if not in the same degree. I reverence Beethoven and Schumann as my musical gods, but there are so many different kind of beauties in the art as in the world; I think the mind ought to be open to and able to accept every sort of it. Your bad opinion of this Fantasia I understand, but not of the concerto, which for me contains great beauties. But if ever I come to London again, I will try to be only classical, except perhaps in Grieg.

According to Shaw a pianist and composer that had earned a high reputation should stick to classics like Beethoven, Schumann and Mozart *au naturel*. Like Ibsen Backer Grøndahl should not be tainted by Grieg, and her respect for Grieg infuriated him. What perhaps disappointed Shaw the most was Backer Grøndahl’s bad judgement shown in her choosing to play Grieg in general and his “trivial additions” to Mozart’s fantasia as an indifferent substitute for the orchestra in particular.

Nevertheless she continued to perform Grieg, but not the Fantasia: As late as 1898, Grieg relied on sick, frail, broken down (and half death) Backer Grøndahl on the brink of giving up her pianist carrier as The Interpreter of his Concerto at the Music Festival in Bergen (June 30. 1898).