

Grieg as Storyteller: the Poetics of the Ballade in G Minor, Op. 24

Gregory Martin

We are of north-Teutonic stock, and as such we have much of the Germanic people's propensity toward melancholy and brooding. However, we do not share their desire to express themselves broadly and verbosely. To the contrary. We have always loved brevity and succinctness, the clear and concise mode of expression—just as you can find it in our sagas, and as any traveler could observe even today in our social intercourse. These qualities are also what we aim for in our artistic endeavors.<sup>1</sup>

When Edvard Grieg penned this observation in 1900, he said as much about himself as about Norwegians in general. His recognition of the manner in which language and its use inform and reflect a people is brought into acute relief, a sensitivity further underscored in his letter of the same year to the American musicologist Henry T. Finck, in which he reflects that

the lyricism of, respectively, German, Danish and Norwegian poets is for the attentive observer so totally different that the music, too, must be equally varied in order that the contrasts among the several nationalities can be perceived, yet not in such a way that the differences can be precisely described verbally.<sup>2</sup>

Linguistic identity was, of course, a primary agent in nineteenth-century European national movements. Grieg's dialogue with the advocates of both *nynorsk* and *riksmål* is well enough known to need no further elaboration here. Rather, it is a corollary to the language debate that I'd like to investigate with respect to the Ballade—the citing of a great national epic which valorized the deeds and spirit of a people. These works were often the source of inspiration for the great nationalist composers, from the *Nibelungenlied* in Wagner to the *Kalevala* in Sibelius (though Wagner's work is in fact

---

<sup>1</sup> Edvard Grieg, "French and German Music" in *Edvard Grieg, Diaries, Articles, Speeches*, trans. and ed. Finn Benestad and William H. Halverson (Columbus: Peer Gynt Press, 2001), 352.

<sup>2</sup> Edvard Grieg, *Edvard Grieg, Letters to Colleagues and Friends*, ed. Finn Benestad and trans. William H. Halverson (Columbus: Peer Gynt Press, 2000), 230.

more Nordic than Germanic),<sup>3</sup> and the national language was seen as a link to the extraordinary past in which these tales played out. In this context, it is my purpose to submit that it was Grieg's dramatic collaborations with *riksmål* devotee Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson that most immediately left their mark on his most profound work for solo piano—the *Ballade* in G minor, Op. 24 (1875-6)—and that the source of those collaborations lead to the unique poetics of this work, making it Grieg's contribution to the great tradition of the Norse epic.

\* \* \*

In a letter to composer and conductor Iver Holter (1850-1941) dated 9 February 1897, Grieg wrote: “It is a sacred duty for me to call attention to the great influence that my association with Bjørnson from the autumn of 1866 to the spring of 1873 had on my art. He formed my personality in countless ways—that is to say, he contributed mightily to that process.”<sup>4</sup> And of those eight years or so, the final three were particularly productive, yielding no less than five major dramatic works. Whether written as a setting of an already completed poetical work or through cooperation with the author, each of these is based on the Norse sagas or saga themes, and it is of no small significant for my argument vis-à-vis the *Ballade* (1875) that these collaborations all occurred between 1871 and 1873:

- 1871, *Foran Sydens kloster*, Op. 20—text taken from Bjørnson's epic cycle *Arnljot Gelline*, the namesake of which is a character in the saga of St. Olav (Olav Haraldsson) by Snorri Sturluson

---

<sup>3</sup> Also to be mentioned in this context is the new value that the fairy-tale took on as a tool to stroke nationalist sentiment: P. C. Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe in Norway, Hans Christian Andersen in Denmark, and the Grimm Brothers in the German states, to name a few.

<sup>4</sup> Grieg, *Letters*, 419.

- 1871, the melodrama *Bergliot*, Op. 42—Bergliot was one of the chief female characters from the saga era and the wife of Einar Tambarskjelve (died c. 1050)
- 1872, the incidental music to *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, Op. 22—Bjørnson’s play concerns two Norwegian rulers from the twelfth century, Sigurd the Crusader and his brother Øystein
- 1872, the cantata *Landkjending (Land-sighting)*, Op. 31—written to raise money for the restoration of Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, the text deals with Olav Trygvason’s return to Norway in 995 after his years abroad
- 1873, the ‘operatic scenes’ *Olav Trygvason*, Op. 50—a continuation of the story of Olav’s arrival in Norway as begun in *Landkjending*, elaborating on his conquest and conversion of the people<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Grieg and Bjørnson briefly deliberated the prospect of an opera based on *Arnljot Gelline*, from which the text to *Foran Sydens kloster* had been drawn.<sup>6</sup>

These works not only incorporate the Norse epics topically, but draw much of their power from formal relations with the older examples. In *Foran Sydens kloster (Before a Southern Convent)*, op. 20, for example, the textual layout, a dialogue between Ingigerd and the abbess, resembles such precedents as *Gylfaginning (The Beguiling of Gylfi)* in the *Prose Edda*, a lengthy tract on Norse mythology cast as a conversation between Gylfi and three supernatural beings. As Beryl Foster has observed, “the conciseness of the dialogue, the form of question and answer to unfold the tale, is

---

<sup>5</sup> While Grieg and Bjørnson were never able to complete their opera, composer Ragnar Söderlind and librettist Knut Jørgen Moe did in 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg, The Man and the Artist*, trans. William H. Halverson and Leland B. Sateren (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 152.

reminiscent of an older form of storytelling.”<sup>7</sup> So much were these works patterned on the mediaeval genres and so obscure were some of their references that Grieg later asked the playwright to

do yourself, me, all the performers and audience the great service of attaching an explanation of the words underlined in blue in the accompanying text . . . One would like to know what the often metaphorically symbolized god is called and what he is god of, together with the meaning of several place names. You will forgive me this nuisance, but I lack the necessary mythological knowledge to manage it myself...<sup>8</sup>

It is clear from the composer’s letter to Finck some thirty years later that his immersion in the sagas left a grave impact on him and his understanding of their value as a reflector of his people:

Norwegian folk life, Norwegian sagas, Norwegian history, and above all Norwegian nature have had a profound influence on my creative work ever since my youth.<sup>9</sup>

Later in the same letter he elaborates:

Anyone who reads the *Elder Edda* soon becomes aware of its wonderful power and pithiness of expression, its remarkable ability to say much in a few words. Such a reader will admire the simple, plastic formulation of the sentences. The same is true of the sagas about the Norwegian kings, especially those written by Snorre Sturlason. The more deeply the heart is moved, the more condensed and enigmatic is the mode of expression. The language is constantly bold, serious and dignified. One senses more than one sees the stormy ocean of the passions. To display one’s innermost feelings was considered brutal. For the feelings, too, the mode of expression is as brief as it is chaste. This saga literature is the foundation on which Bjørnson and Ibsen built.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Beryl Foster, *Edvard Grieg: The Choral Music* (Aldershot, England; Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Grieg quoted in Foster, *Choral Music*, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Grieg, *Letters*, 226.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-1.



Edvard Grieg and Bjørn Bjørnson in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century caricature (public domain)

In 1875, then, when Grieg came to compose his sole contribution to the piano ballade repertoire, it was on the heels of these dramatic compositions and after an extended period of immersion in the sagas and Eddas.<sup>11</sup> Both of his parents had recently died, and rumors were circulating that his wife had had an affair with his brother John,<sup>12</sup> leaving the composer to later write that he had written his opus 24 “with my life’s blood in days of sorrow and despair.”<sup>13</sup>

The *Ballade* is ostensibly a set of variations on the folksong “Den nordlanske bondestand” (The Northland Peasantry) as found in L. M. Lindeman’s publication *Ældre*

---

<sup>11</sup> The composition of incidental music to Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, which Bjørnson mistakenly took to be another operatic project, resulted in a rift between composer and author, and the breakdown of work on their national opera *Olav Trygvason*.

<sup>12</sup> Benestad, 199.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

*og nyere norske Fjeldmelodier (Older and Newer Norwegian Mountain Melodies, 1858;* volume two, number fourteen). While the tune had migrated from Germany to Norway over the course of several hundred years with various sacred and secular texts,<sup>14</sup> Grieg found it paired with the following text:

E kann so mangen ein' vakker Sang  
um fagre land uti Væra,  
men aldør ha e no høyrte ei Gøng  
dei sang um dœ o ser næra,  
derfor vil e no prøvø paa  
o gjera Visa so Følk kan sjaa  
at o her Nora kunna vera bra  
um dœ foragta der søre.

I know so many lovely songs  
of fair lands throughout the world,  
but never have I heard a song  
of things close to us.  
Therefore shall I now attempt  
to write a song so people will see  
that even the North can be beautiful  
though despised by the South.<sup>15</sup>

Such earnest nationalism surely rang true with his allegiance to Norway and his devotion to the development of a Norwegian art, but Grieg used folksong throughout his career and the text of “The Northland Peasantry” can be seen as a credo for his entire life’s work. How are these elements uniquely engaged in this work? And why use a song without any real story, so to speak, as the foundation for a work so self-consciously aligned with an unmitigated narrative genre? Perhaps the answer lies in Grieg’s view of the historical course of folksong: “The music of each nation proceeds in the course of time from the folk song through the small forms and then into the larger, richer, more complex forms.”<sup>16</sup> The key sentiment in the text is “I now attempt to write a song.” But Grieg’s narrative is not just of a declamation of intent by some nameless skald. Rather, it is a chronicle of that attempt’s progress. Containing both the folksong itself and its ‘larger,’ evolved form, the *Ballade* is a narrative of the growth of folksong; and, through

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. This historical example affords a wonderful illustration of how intuitively Grieg understood the Norwegian folk-song. In the above-cited letter to Finck (17 July 1900), he wrote: “that many of our oldest folk tunes are based on old hymns seems to me to be beyond doubt (Grieg, *Letters*, 229).”

<sup>15</sup> The history of the tune is taken from Einar Steen-Nøkleberg and Ernst Hertrich, preface to *Ballade, op. 24*, by Edvard Grieg (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1991), vi, and Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, 201. The translation is from Steen-Nøkleberg and Hertrich.

<sup>16</sup> Grieg, *Diaries*, 219.

the application of folksong as an ambassador of his people, it is the story of the Norwegian struggle for not only independence, but recognition (i.e. cultural and political legitimacy in the eyes of the Continent). Political overtones aside, there is also certainly something of a personal quest contained in this mission statement. “People will see that even the North can be beautiful.”

Given his recent immersion in the sagas and Eddas and cognizant of their role in Norwegian identity, it seems only natural that he would fit his tale with a design intuitively reflective of his people; witness again the opening quotation, especially the following extraction: “We have always loved brevity and succinctness, the clear and concise mode of expression—just as you can find it in our sagas.” The equation of variation form with the strophic structure of folksong in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been well documented—perhaps the most overt acknowledgement by a major composer of the era is found in Sibelius’s 1896 lecture at the University of Helsinki, wherein he contends that variations are the closest formal analogue in ‘high art’ to folk music.<sup>17</sup> But it is not simply folksong that Grieg is acknowledging here. He is aiming at the sublime depth and substance of the mediaeval epics of Norway, and variation form is appropriated for that purpose—not as a reflection of nondescript stanzaic form, but as a specific generic reference. The particular manipulation of the variation form found in the *Ballade*, in which the earlier character variations build up to the later additive-verse structure, is crucial to his story’s unfolding, and indeed supports Aristotle’s definition of an epic, as we shall see. This, then, is Grieg’s great contribution to the ballade: fitting the story with

---

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, recognition of this parallel with regard to the *Ballade* has been made (Parakilas, 159), and the suggestion that Grieg equated ballad form with variations is perhaps supported by his decision to base his *Old Norwegian Romance with Variations*, op. 51 (1890) on a ballad, ‘Sjugurd og trollbrura’ (Sjugurd and the Troll Bride).

a form generically reflective of it—the *Ballade* belongs as much or more-so with the sagas and Eddas than it does with Chopin’s examples.<sup>18</sup>

But, as Grieg well knew, writing a saga and espousing its characteristics means more than simply formal procedures; there are vital aspects of genre at issue, among which are epic notions of time and duration, the role of the narrator/storyteller (an element introduced in the text—“I now attempt to write a song”), and the air of austerity prevalent in such tales. The last of these is perhaps the most subjective in its evaluation; it relates both to the vocabulary used—for the language of the epic is indivisible from its story—and ties in with perceptions of how Nordic landscape is reflected in Grieg’s music. I will not attempt to investigate this quality here; it is a familiar enough trope, and has been explored thoroughly elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> Suffice it to say that pianist Sviatoslav Richter spoke for not a few of us when he said: “in my own view he’s [Grieg] essentially an austere individual, like the landscape and nature of the North.”<sup>20</sup>

The epic as a genre cannot be separated from the great gulf of time implied, by its very nature, between ‘then’ and ‘now.’ Aristotle noted that “its action has no fixed limit of time.” M.M. Bakhtin elaborated on this quality in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, where he posits that “a national epic past—in Goethe’s and Schiller’s

---

<sup>18</sup> While James Parakilas does credit Grieg’s *Ballade* with being “a new venture—within the piano ballade tradition—in suggesting both the form of the song and the progression of the story (pg. 159),” he fails to recognize Grieg’s reasons for doing so (poetically and formally), and as a result, I believe, does not evaluate the work appropriately in terms of intent, proportion, or design.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Daniel Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Sviatoslav Richter, in Bruno Monsaingeon, *Sviatoslav Richter: Notebooks and Conversations*, trans. Stewart Spencer (London: Faber, 2005), 319-20.



terminology the ‘absolute past’—serves as the subject for the epic.”<sup>21</sup> He elaborates as such:

The world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of “beginning” and “peak times” in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of “firsts and “bests.” . . . the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance. The space between them is filled with national tradition. . . . In ancient literature it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse. That is how it was, it is impossible to change it: the tradition of the past is sacred.<sup>22</sup>

Bakhtin adds that “an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality”:

Thanks to this epic distance, which excludes any possibility of activity and change, the epic world achieves a radical degree of completedness not only in its content but in its meaning and its values as well. . . . It is impossible to achieve greatness in one’s own time. Greatness always makes itself known only to descendents, for whom such a quality is always located in the past (it turns into a distanced image); it has become an object of memory . . .<sup>23</sup>

Grieg’s letters, speeches, and diaries are proof of his understanding that the sagas and Eddas are representative of a “peak time” in his nation’s history—a time of heroes. We shall see how he portrays the quality of epic distance in the *Ballade*.

In the same essay, Bakhtin stresses the importance of national tradition over personal experience. He makes specific reference to the role of memory in the epic, noting that “it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse.”<sup>24</sup> That is, he articulates the importance of discriminating between the past, cumulative experience of a people and the current, subjective experiences of the individual. In his essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,”

---

<sup>21</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 17-18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Walter Benjamin bemoans the replacement of the legacy of shared experience by a more immediately accessible and disposable manner of communication: information. “If the art of storytelling has become rare,” he argues, “the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.”<sup>25</sup> This sentiment had been articulated as early as 1852 by Eduard Krüger, who mourned the decline of “the continual preservation of the after-echoes of that which has been experienced”;<sup>26</sup> John Daverio adds that art “thrives best in those societies whose members have retained the ability to exchange experiences, to tell stories.”<sup>27</sup> In the Leskov essay, Benjamin also writes:

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.<sup>28</sup>

That Grieg was sensitive to the unique ability of a people’s language to reflect their psychology should be clear by now: “What the poets have achieved in this respect is what I have striven for in music,” he wrote.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, regarding *Den Bergtekne*, op. 32, the only setting of mediaeval Norwegian that he completed, he wrote, “I have sought here to emulate the compact terseness of style that is expressed with such awesome power in the Old Norse poetry.”<sup>30</sup> This diagnosis, then, resonates well with Benjamin’s paradigm that the best storytellers write in a manner immediately reflective of their spoken language, and certainly Grieg meant his philosophy of “emulating the compact terseness” of Old Norse to apply beyond the single example of *Der Bergtekne*. It undoubtedly

---

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 89.

<sup>26</sup> Eduard Krüger, quoted in John Daverio, *Robert Schumann, Herald of a “New Poetic Age”* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 415.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, 84.

<sup>29</sup> Grieg, *Letters*, 231.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

applies to a work such as the *Ballade*, as well as any host of his smallest folksong settings. In its way, each was an attempt to remedy this epidemic decay in storytelling. In the instance of the *Ballade*, he employs two main musico-dramatic functions to unfold the tale: 1) the gradual purging of chromatic elements from the theme; and 2) an acceleration, assisted by the gradual elision of variations, which leads—through a liquidation of motives and phrase structure—to the achievement of a literal timelessness. These progressions are assisted by a formal shift from what Aristotle called the ‘episodic’ to the ‘tragic.’

As a first step in examining these strategies, it is imperative to investigate Grieg’s handling of the theme. A comparison of his setting with the arrangement in his source (Lindeman) makes explicit one important difference: the harmonization (Ex.1 a and b).

**Moderato**

E kann so man - gen ein vak - ker Sang um fa - gre Land u - ti Væ - ra, men

al - dor ha e no hoyrt ei Gong dei sang um dæ os er næ - ra. O der-for vil e no

pro-vo paa o gjer-a Vi - sa so Folk kan sjaa at o her No - ra kann ve-ra bra um

10

dø for-ag - ta der so - re.

15

Ex. 1a: Lindeman,  
"Den nordlandske bondestand"  
(Older and Newer Norwegian  
Mountain Melodies)

Andante espressivo

Poco animato

6

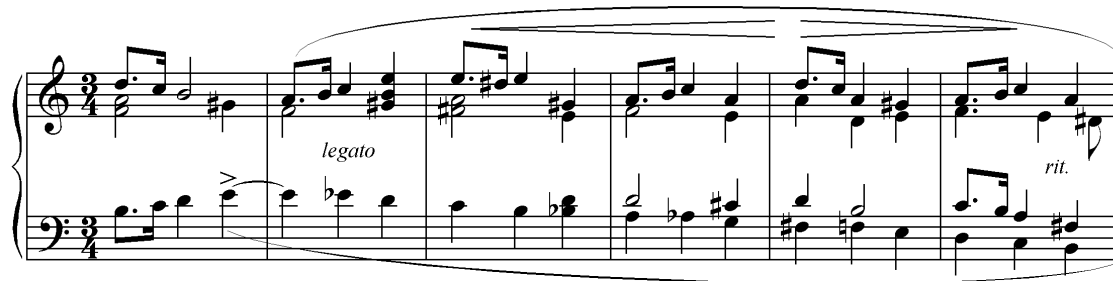
Tempo I

12

Ex. 1b: Grieg, theme from *Ballade*, op. 24

If we look at the harmonic treatment on a purely vertical level, we see one of Grieg's most idiosyncratic harmonic tendencies: the placement of a chromatic scale under a diatonic melody, and the filling of the space thus created with an harmonic progression that doesn't always sound functional. This technique was also employed in the Op. 66 folksong settings, which had a profound influence on Bartok's setting of folk music. Witness, for example, numbers 4 and 12 from that collection (Ex. 2 and 3, respectively).

Ex. 2: Grieg Op. 66, no. 4, mm. 14-21



Ex. 3: Grieg Op. 66, no. 12, mm. 6-12

Grieg found this harmonic language to be the natural result of the folksongs themselves.

He wrote:

The realm of harmony has always been my dream-world, and the relation between my sense of harmony and Norwegian folk music has always been an enigma to me. I have found that the obscure depth in our folk melodies has its foundation in their undreamt-of harmonic possibilities. In my arrangements in op. 66 and elsewhere I have tried to give expression to my sense of the hidden harmonies in our folk tunes. In so doing I have been rather especially fascinated by the chromatic lines in the harmonic texture.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of the *Ballade*, given the difficult personal circumstances surrounding its composition,<sup>32</sup> the application of chromaticism seems particularly appropriate, for, as

Grieg stated regarding his use of the chromatic,

my ideal teachers were names such as Bach, Mozart, and Wagner. I have observed that when these immortal masters gave expression to their deepest and

<sup>31</sup> Grieg, *Letters*, 229.

<sup>32</sup> According to Iver Holter, who was present at Grieg's play-through of the work for Dr. Max Abraham, director of Peters Publishing, in Leipzig (July 1876), Grieg threw so much of himself into the performance that "when he was finished, not only was he so physically exhausted that he was bathed in sweat: he was also so agitated and shaken that he could not say a word for a long time (Benestad, 200)." Grieg recalled, in a 1904 letter to Henri Hinrichsen, that, "when I was finished, however, to my surprise he [Abraham] said: 'A great, serious work which it will give me pleasure to publish and which will add even greater luster to your name (Ibid., note 3).'"

most fervent thoughts they had a marked fondness for chromatic lines, each in his own original way. On this basis I quietly evolved little by little my own sense of the importance of the chromatic element. . . See [also] *Ballade* op. 24.<sup>33</sup>

Carl Dahlhaus found this combining of centuries-old folksongs with a late nineteenth-century harmonic idiom to yield the creation of a dialectic between antiquity and modernity.<sup>34</sup> But more than this, through the juxtaposition of these two elements and their affiliated historical eras, Grieg succeeds in creating a great abyss of time—one of the most vital requirements in epic discourse, as we have seen. In his application of this device across his output, he not only accents the pregnant harmonic possibilities of folksong, but also casts epic light—that is, extraordinary history—on even the shortest of them. In the *Ballade*, this dense thematic chromaticism becomes one of the main elements manipulated in the variations which follow; indeed, some of them show more alliance with the chromatic nature of the theme than with the folksong itself.<sup>35</sup>

Grieg's awareness of this dichotomy is evidenced by his careful control over its playing-out as the work unfolds. But the theme is not simply the pairing of a diatonic melody with a free harmonic structure over a chromatic bass. While the progression created does certainly suggest an incredibly stretched harmonic language, the vertical sonorities would be more accurately described as polyphonic coincidences, and new lines are systematically added as melodic strands dissolve into the texture. Grieg has reinterpreted the melody not as a single voice but rather as the product of a gradually accruing polyphony.<sup>36</sup> That is, not

---

<sup>33</sup> Grieg, *Letters*, 229.

<sup>34</sup> See Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1989), 310.

<sup>35</sup> Also exhibited in the *Ballade*'s theme is the expansion of registral space from a third to four octaves; this growth will be mirrored on the global level as the piece progresses.

<sup>36</sup> This realization has profound effects on interpretation—the theme should be played not as melody and accompaniment, but rather with the sense of a string quartet texture.



but rather,

In this way, Grieg works chromaticism into not only the harmony, but the melody, as well; or rather, he derives his chromatic harmony from the melody itself!

And, indeed, it is the chromatic aspect of the theme that dominates the early variations. In variation 1, for example, it is not until m. 5 that pieces of the folksong begin to filter into the texture (Ex. 4), and variation 4 sets the chromatic scale in such relief that any other noticeable melodic affiliation with the theme is negligible (Ex. 5).<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Variation 4, cast with a *capriccioso* affect not too distant from the second primary theme of the Piano Concerto's first movement (mm.31-42, what some label a transition, though I argue that a deliberate lack of traditional transitional material is a hallmark of Grieg's approach to the sonata aesthetic), is one of several variations which use gestural cues and pianistic figurations not too far removed from the A minor concerto.



**Poco meno Andante, ma molto tranquillo**

*pp*

Leo. Leo. Leo.

4 etc.

Leo. Leo. Leo. Leo. Leo. Leo.

Ex. 4: Grieg  
*Ballade*, op. 24,  
Var. 1

**Allegro capriccioso**

*Gva*

*p*

3

*leggiere*

Ex 5: Grieg  
*Ballade*, op. 24  
var. 4

As is the case in *Bergliot*, the *Ballade* twice makes use of the funeral march topic (variation 3, in an inner voice duet reminiscent of Schumann's *Romance*, Op. 28/3, and variation 8, with block chords and bell tones anticipating Debussy's *La Cathedrale Engloutie*). In both works, its use contributes to the ethos of the genre—death is a common theme of the sagas, and the austerity of the musical topic matches the severe nature of the saga language and Bjørnson's appropriation of it, as well as Grieg's personal circumstances. As *Bergliot* mourns,

I will lock up the great rooms;  
I will send the people away;  
I will sell the cattle and horse;  
I will move away and live alone.  
Ride slowly,  
for we will be home soon enough.<sup>38</sup>

Variation 5 seems to be, as has been noted elsewhere,<sup>39</sup> an obvious homage to the opening of Chopin's first essay in the ballade genre, also in G minor: both excerpts exhibit slow, rising, *forte* unisons that diminuendo to *piano*, taper off on a descent from F to D, and are answered by a cadential motion that makes prominent use of an E-flat major triad over a D bass (Ex. 6a and b).<sup>40</sup> In an observation that is particularly poignant for Grieg's effort and its relationship to the Norse sagas, Parakilas adds that through this employment of quasi-recitative, "the title 'Ballade' comes alive in a modern tradition of evoking the age-old narrating voice of the ballad singer."<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Bjørn Bjørnson trans. by David Fanning in program notes to Edvard Grieg, *Bergrlot; The Mountain Thrall; Before a Southern Convent; 7 Songs*, performed by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Neeme Järvi, cond. (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon 437 519-2, 1993), compact disc.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Parakilas, 163.

<sup>40</sup> The etude from Grieg's op. 73 is subtitled "Homage to Chopin," and he was nicknamed early-on "The Chopin of the North."

<sup>41</sup> Parakilas, 164. Parakilas (correctly) parallels the two composers as artists coming from countries "on the outskirts of modern European culture" who attempted to gain acceptance within current continental thought and practice while remaining true to the cultural values of their respective homelands.

**Largo**

Ex. 6a: Opening of Chopin's *Ballade* in G Minor, op. 23

Ex. 6b: Grieg *Ballade*, op. 24, var. 5

Following two scherzando variations and the second funeral march is the critical variation 9, the fulcrum of the composition. Here, Grieg begins to more overtly shift his interpretation of the chromatic element from the linear dimension (as he established in the theme) to the vertical one, through the construction of harmonies replete with tertian-extensions. Once the chromatic element has been decidedly moved from the horizontal dimension into the vertical realm, Grieg begins his process of moving more exclusively within true harmony (i.e. not contrapuntally produced sonorities) and then attenuating or purifying it until all that remains is a triad. This variation is also significant in that its temporal suspensions, wherein an A-flat 9<sup>th</sup> chord is treated with a cadenza-like arresting of motion, portend the removal of measured time which Grieg will achieve by the end of the last variation (Ex. 7).<sup>42</sup>


---

<sup>42</sup> In their excellent book *Edvard Grieg, The Man and the Artist*, Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe claim that one aspect of this variation that sets it apart from those before it is its 9+17+17 phrase construction. While a literal reading does yield such a find, it seems to me more accurate to describe the additional bars (1+5+5) as ‘temporal suspensions.’ It could thus be represented: [8(+1)] + [4+8(+5)] + [4+8(+5)].

Ex. 7: Grieg  
*Ballade*, op. 24  
 var. 9

The acceleration that follows Var. 9 is intimately linked with a formal shift from the episodic to the tragic. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defined a plot construction as episodic “when there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence of its episodes,”<sup>43</sup> and— to a great extent—this is what we have met with so far. The first nine variations of the

<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, 678.

*Ballade* are character variations—“of much the same character as the best of his miniatures, but they have the greater advantage of being unified by a definite theme, so that as they proceed they gather a momentum denied to sets of unrelated pieces.”<sup>44</sup> “Tragedy, however,” Aristotle adds, “is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear. Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another. . . . Even matters of chance seem most marvelous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them.”<sup>45</sup> Beginning with variation 10, momentum gathers, as one variation leads without pause into the next, the first three unified by a shared burlesque/siciliano rhythm . The first elision occurs after a series of chromatically rising dominant-seventh sonorities in second inversion that, upon conclusion, seems to herald an official close to chromatic predominance. After three fragmented thematic statements, each over a six-four harmony modulating up sequentially by a minor third, a grandiose major variation adds some much-needed breadth. Energy mounts again, and is unleashed in the *Allegro furioso* variation 13. By its end, the only residual chromaticism is in the chains of mediant-related chords (y) that alternate with premonitions of the

---

<sup>44</sup> Kathleen Dale, “Edvard Grieg’s Pianoforte Music,” *Music and Letters* XXIV no. 4 (Oct. 1943): 202.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 678-9.

diatonic last variation (x) (Ex. 8).

Ex. 8: Grieg  
*Ballade*, op. 24,  
 var. 13

When the final variation is unleashed in all its fury, the more overt teleological impulse which the ballade has acquired since the onset of the variation elisions is aided by a complete phrase and motivic liquidation. The theme has become as primitive as it can be—*ff*; accented downbeats on every bar; a relentless open-fifth pedal on the tonic in the bass; and the only notes in the treble other than the melody, banged out in *furioso* octaves, are the tonic and the fifth. Aided by the effects of the right pedal, the conjoined use of the tonic open-fifth drone in the bass and the alternating use of scale-degrees 1 and 5 in the treble can conjure up an effect redolent of the vibration of sympathetic strings on the Hardanger fiddle.<sup>46</sup> If played with the abandon it demands, this variation reaches the heightened chaos of “In the Hall of the Mountain King” or the “March of the Trolls” at their most frenzied moments. The limited compass and repetitive nature of the tune now

<sup>46</sup> Grieg would later publish piano transcriptions of the Hardanger fiddle, perhaps his most revolutionary work, Op. 72.

contribute to the especially epic manner, in that, as the melody begins to disintegrate, the tune begins to sound less like a folk-song and more like the rune melodies or recitation formulae used by bards in the singing of epic poetry. The final three notes of the tune quicken to eighth-notes, further contract to just A and G, and accelerate into a lengthy tremolo; as in so many examples in late Beethoven, Grieg has effected the removal of any temporal guideposts. Suddenly, the music stops, there is a chasm of silence, and that devastating, low, lengthy E-flat octave (Ex. 9).<sup>47</sup> *A long duration is sublime.*<sup>48</sup>

Ex. 9: Grieg  
Ballade, op. 24  
final variation and  
theme return

<sup>47</sup> In a letter of 27 March 1898, Grieg wrote to Frants Beyer about a performance of the *Ballade* by d’Albert: “you should have heard that daringly long *fermata* on the deep [E-flat]. I think he held it for half a minute! But the effect was colossal. And then he concluded that old, sad song so slowly, quietly and simply that I myself was completely enthralled (Grieg, *Letters*, 85).” Benestad notes here that in an extant recording, d’Albert’s E-flat lasts for about seven seconds (Ibid., FN 159).

<sup>48</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 49.



As the sound of the low E-flat octave decays, the opening bars of the theme are heard again, as if in a memory. While obvious precedents may be cited in the *Goldberg Variations* or the third movement of Beethoven's op. 109 (aesthetically, this movement may very well have been a paradigm from which Grieg was working), the effect here, given the sudden rupture of the musical continuum and the abrupt reversal thus created, is quite different. This is Grieg's final expression as storyteller in his ballade, for experience is rooted in memory, and, as Benjamin reminds us, "memory is the epic faculty *par excellence*."<sup>49</sup> By restating the original theme almost literally, he is transporting us back to the beginning of his saga as a mark against which to esteem how far we have come. It is the storyteller looking back over not just his experience, but that which he has gained from past storytellers and their methods and experiences, as well.<sup>50</sup> After such a dramatic discourse, this structural framing of the *Ballade* also suggests a somewhat conscious awareness of the role of narrator in the genre—Grieg is not the hero, but rather the storyteller. It is not his experience that matters, but that of a mythic archetypal endurance.

One final piece of evidence may be presented in support of the *Ballade*'s claim to placement with the Sagas and Eddas: its relationship to *Den Bergtekne*, Op. 32. Written for baritone, two horns, and strings in 1877-78, only two years after the *Ballade*, it sets seven stanzas which Grieg found in Magnus Brostrup Landstad's collection *Norske Folkeviser* (Norwegian Folk Poetry, 1853). Each four-line stanza is in the *gammelstev* form, a verse that dates back to the sagas of the thirteenth century (the *nystev*, a newer form with different rhyme schemes and stresses, has evolved since the seventeenth

---

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, 97

<sup>50</sup> Given that the music moves from a more elaborate contrapuntal and harmonic idiom to a more barbaric discourse, the *Ballade* may be seen as a journey back to a more primitive time, the E-flat octave marking an abrupt return to the present, a stirring from our time-travel reverie, as the theme returns.

century). Grieg certainly found this work to be musically representative of Old Norse verse, and referred to it as a *stev* on the manuscript, as well as in his letters.<sup>51</sup> He wrote to

Finck that *Den Bergtekne*

has had a special significance in my creative work. I have sought here to emulate the compact terseness of style that is expressed with such awesome power in the Old Norse poetry, and I think perhaps that in this little piece I have best succeeded in doing this.<sup>52</sup>

Grieg, significantly, derives the music of *Den Bergtekne*, the *only* setting of Old Norse in his output, from the *Ballade*. Set in E minor, it begins on a G minor chord with *exactly the same voicing* as the last chord of the *Ballade*, signaling that this music is a continuation of Op. 24. *Den Bergtekne*, then, essentially begins *in media res*, a common technique in epic construction (witness the *Odyssey*), and modulates up a chromatic third, an emotionally charged gesture in 19<sup>th</sup>-century musical rhetoric, to arrive at the new dominant (Ex. 10).

The musical score shows two systems of piano music. The first system, labeled 'Andante', shows the end of the *Ballade* with a G minor chord (Bb, D, F) in the bass and a G minor triad (Bb, D, F) in the treble. The second system, labeled 'longa', shows the opening of *Den Bergtekne* with an E minor chord (G, Bb, D) in the bass and an E minor triad (G, Bb, D) in the treble. The dynamic marking changes from *fp* (fortissimo piano) to *pp* (pianissimo). A bracket under the first system indicates the end of the *Ballade*, and a second bracket under the second system indicates the opening of *Den Bergtekne*.

Ex. 10: the end of the *Ballade* and the opening of *Den Bergtekne*

The theme that follows, now in the new tonic of E minor, is related to the *Ballade*'s theme melodically, harmonically, rhythmically, and metrically (Ex. 11).

<sup>51</sup> Beryl Foster, *The Songs of Edvard Grieg* (Hants, England: Scolar Press, 1990), 4, 131.

<sup>52</sup> Grieg, *Letters*, 235.

The image displays two musical staves. The top staff is titled "Andante espressivo" and is in G minor, 3/4 time. It features a melodic line in the right hand and a chromatically descending bass line in the left hand. The marking "p" (piano) and "molto legato" are present. The bottom staff is titled "Andante" and is in G major, 3/4 time. It also features a melodic line in the right hand and a chromatically descending bass line in the left hand. The marking "p" (piano) and "espress." (espressivo) are present. Both staves end with "etc." indicating the continuation of the piece.

Ex. 11: the themes from the *Ballade*, op. 24, and *Den Bergtekne*, op. 32, respectively

The first two bars of each theme twice traverse the distance from scale-degree 1 to 3, with an incomplete neighbor note on #7; these initial efforts are then answered by a scalar rise from the tonic to the dominant. This melodic unfolding in each work is played out over a chromatically descending bass, and is marked by a dotted rhythm on the downbeats of the first two bars, and cast in triple meter. The third staff of *Den Bergtekne* shifts to G minor, related not only to the opening chord, but to the tonality of the *Ballade*, and makes prominent motivic use of the m3 that dominates the theme in each work. The alliance between the two works is further supported by the performance indication *Andante espressivo* in each (in *Den Bergtekne* the *espress.* marking occurs in the score) and the terms with which the composer described them: the *Ballade* was written “with my life’s blood in days of sorrow and despair,”<sup>53</sup> while *Den Bergtekne* contains “marks

<sup>53</sup> Benestad, *Grieg*, 200.

and splashes of pure and simple heart's blood."<sup>54</sup> *Den Bergtekne*, then, is certainly an extension of the *Ballade*'s musical space.

So does all this talk of minstrelsy and mediaeval epic shed some light on Grieg's work as a whole? I believe it does, and though it is beyond the scope of this essay to pursue such a line of thought too far (a more exhaustive study is forthcoming), it should at least be mentioned. While his output is receiving some much needed reappraisal, many seem to maintain a position dangerously close to that of Daniel Gregory Mason, who belittled Grieg's "power both to assimilate previous resources and to add new ones."<sup>55</sup> And this is surely from comparing the proverbial apples and oranges. Placing Grieg's Op. 1 piano pieces against, say, Brahms's Op. 118 may seem a brutal test, but in many ways is a much fairer evaluation than a comparison between Brahms's late collections and Grieg's more mature music. And this is because of intent. Not surprisingly, the early works fall much more within the boundary of a more Germanic ethos of original genius, as espoused by Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner, and are therefore more liable to comparison.<sup>56</sup> With increasing frequency, however, Grieg attempted to abandon this approach, and such anxiousness to unfetter this new way would remain his primary artistic aim. And this included not simply a new manner of utilizing folksong or refracting Norwegian landscape through music, but more importantly a new approach to narrative agency.

In *The Singer of Tales*, Albert B. Lord, who spent much time with the epic singers of Yugoslavia, contends:

---

<sup>54</sup> Foster, *Grieg Songs*, 134.

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Gregory Mason, *From Grieg to Brahms* (New York: The Outlook Company, 1902), viii-ix. Mason also places Grieg below Dvořák, Saint-Saëns, Franck, and Tchaikovsky in his study, and evaluates each by the same criteria, as if the artistic objective and *modus operandi* of each were equivalent.

<sup>56</sup> This is, of course, not to belittle the often difficult relationship the German masters had with the past.

We ought to take a fresh look at tradition, considered not as the inert acceptance of a fossilized corpus of themes and conventions, but as an organic habit of re-creating what has been received and is handed on. It may be that we ought to re-examine the concept of originality, which is relatively modern as a shibboleth of criticism; there may be other and better ways of being original than that concern for the writer's own individuality which characterizes so much of our self-conscious fiction.<sup>57</sup>

It would seem that Grieg increasingly played the role of singer of tales, taking what had been handed to him in centuries of Norwegian folksong, and re-casting it in the contemporary vernacular for the mores and conventions of his “day and generation,” acting as “at once the tradition and an individual creator.”<sup>58</sup>

Those who have engaged in hands-on fieldwork notating folk poetry and song—be it Lord or Ralph Vaughan Williams—have noted the extraordinary memory capacity held by the storytellers they met; the aptitude for memory, as such, has been a dominant theme in this essay, and for just that reason. Along with his interaction in the Norwegian language debate, such development of the bard figure, replete with personal utterances of his own, shows Grieg aligning himself with an oral tradition that champions not so much a self-conscious individuality, but rather the reception and personalized handing-on of tradition that are the hallmark of the oral poet. This may be his greatest legacy to composers like Sibelius.

\* \* \*

Grieg's *Ballade* seems to have its origins not only in the Romantic piano tradition, but more personally in the great mediaeval epics of the North. Born of his dramatic collaborations with Bjørnson and a need to express the grand scope of both personal sorrow and the struggle of his people, Grieg turned to the most Norwegian of genres,

---

<sup>57</sup> Lord, xiii.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

lifting the saga from its pages and returning it to its place as an aural experience for its audience.<sup>59</sup>

Ultimately, the *Ballade* is a précis of what the composer deemed quintessentially Norwegian: “a deep sense of melancholy that can suddenly change into wild, unbridled humor. Mysterious gloom and unrestrained wildness—these are the contrasting elements in the Norwegian folk song.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, it seems just these two polarities that he has marked in his work, as the affectively Baroque lament texture of the theme is transformed into a barbaric dance of runic song then abruptly juxtaposed back against its original countenance, met along the way with both the funereal and the jocular. This ideal reflection of his people’s temperament in music lead Walter Niemann to aver that the *Ballade* is “the most perfect embodiment of Norway and the Norwegian people, of its agonized longing for light and sun, and at the same time the most perfect embodiment of Grieg the man.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, it may be used to expose the irony in Grieg’s own assertion: “I make no pretension of being in the class with Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. Their works are eternal, while I wrote for my day and generation.”<sup>62</sup> By writing for the people of his time in their language, and founding his saga in tradition and generations, he has chosen the tried and lasting experience of the storyteller, rather than a more disposable immediacy. As storyteller, he, “hammer in hand, like Ibsen’s Miner, makes his way to the very heart of the hidden secrets.”<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> With its relationship to the stanzaic structures often found within the sagas, however, he has set his work in a broader socio-historical context—as a *flokk* is a part of the larger story, so his contribution is part of something greater—and, as verse acted as an historical footnote in the sagas, so is the *Ballade* a footnote to a specific time in the history of Norway.

<sup>60</sup> Grieg, *Letters*, 231.

<sup>61</sup> Walter Niemann, quoted in Henry Finck, *Grieg and His Music* (New York: J. Lane Co., 1910), 207.

<sup>62</sup> Edvard Grieg quoted in Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg, Chamber Music* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 181.

<sup>63</sup> Grieg, *Diaries*, 68.