

**ENCOUNTERING THE SUPERNATURAL “OTHER”  
IN THREE MUSICAL SETTINGS  
OF HENRIK IBSEN’S *SPILLEMÆND*<sup>i</sup>**

HELENA KOPCHICK

47 Music, 1225 University of Oregon  
Eugene, OR 97403 USA

518.275.9884  
helena.kopchick@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

Henrik Ibsen's poem *Spillemænd* (written in 1851 under the name Brynjolf Bjarne as part of the larger poem *En løverdagsaften i Hardanger*; published on its own in *Digte*, 1871) is based on the Norwegian folktale of the *fossegrim*, a male water spirit who could teach the art of violin-playing, but often at the price of personal happiness. As an allegory for the alienated Romantic artist, the legend of the *fossegrim* attracted composers Edvard Grieg, Frederick Delius, and Alban Berg, all of whom set Ibsen's poem to music. Analysis of these settings – Grieg's *Spillemænd* (1876), Delius's *Spielmann* (1890), and Berg's *Spielleute* (1902) – reveals the use of similar techniques to evoke the *fossegrim*'s supernatural "otherness." Yet each composer created his own distinct musical portrait of the *fossegrim*, and these three strikingly different characterizations illustrate the different aspects of the supernatural "other" that inspire fear.

## **Keywords**

Norwegian romance – German lied – Henrik Ibsen – Edvard Grieg – *Spillemænd* – Frederick Delius – *Spielmann* – Alban Berg – *Spielleute* – *fossegrim* – supernatural – water

In the twilight of nineteenth-century musical Romanticism, three settings of Henrik Ibsen's poem *Spillemænd* were created: Edvard Grieg's *Spillemænd* (1876), Frederick Delius's *Spielmann* (1890), and Alban Berg's *Spielleute* (1902). Ibsen's poem is the epitome of Romantic sensibilities, with its intense, fluctuating emotions; its depiction of the artist as alienated from society; and most importantly, its treatment of a supernatural character from Nordic folklore. The poem is based on the Norwegian folktale of the *fossegrim*, a male water spirit who could teach a person to become a virtuosic fiddler, but could also trick that person into drowning.

The poem is divided into three narrative segments, to which I have appended descriptive titles. The first stanza comprises The Longing, the exposition in which the protagonist introduces the cause of his tragedy: his desire for the beloved. The next two stanzas depict The Encounter, in which the *fossegrim* promises that becoming a master of music will allow the protagonist to become master of the beloved, as well. Yet although the protagonist summons the *fossegrim* to teach him these skills, the beloved marries his brother instead. It is the protagonist, in fact, who has been bewitched by the *fossegrim*'s music. In the final stanza, The Transformation, the protagonist has become a master fiddler, but is now a cursed, wandering musician deprived of earthly love.

This paper focuses on the protagonist's central experience: his encounter with the supernatural. Analysis of these settings reveals similar compositional techniques utilized by Grieg, Delius, and Berg to create the *fossegrim*'s supernatural otherness. Beyond their commonalities, however, these composers crafted three distinct characterizations of the *fossegrim*. These characterizations reveal possible answers to a basic question: What exactly is so terrifying about the supernatural? Each composer, through his own

portrayal of the *fossegrim*, emphasized a different aspect of the supernatural other that inspires fear.

### Edvard Grieg, *Spillemænd* (1876)

Among these settings, the fear of the supernatural other is perhaps most palpably evoked in Grieg's *Spillemænd*, which features a threatening, violent *fossegrim*. The creature startles the protagonist out of a naïve reverie on unrequited love with an offer to teach the *gru og sange*, or "horror and songs," that will mesmerize and control the beloved.<sup>ii</sup> The *fossegrim*'s enticement is introduced with a sudden *forte-pianissimo* tremolo, an almost clichéd "scary" effect dating back to Monteverdi and an obvious code for the presence of the supernatural. In this middle Encounter section of Grieg's setting, the *fossegrim* is clearly depicted as a dangerous, belligerent supernatural being through tremolos, harsh accents, dramatic dynamic swells, and ominous chromatic descents in the piano.

Grieg, *Spillemænd*, mm. 9-12.

9

recitando

Hej, kjen-der du gru og san-ge, kan du  
Hei! kennst du Ge-sang und Schau-ern, kannst du  
Heigh, do you know song and ter-ror? Can you

Edvard Grieg, Sämtliche Lieder, Band I/Opus 25 Sex Digte af Henrik Ibsen, Nr.1 “Spillemand”  
 © 1990 by C.F. Peters, Frankfurt; New York 31632

In response to the *fossegrim*'s threat, the protagonist's escalating agitation is reflected in an urgent, *Sprechgesang*-like vocal line that sequences up by minor thirds. This sequence eventually forms a large-scale fully-diminished seventh chord, another code for the uncanny, firmly established by nineteenth-century Romantic tradition and exemplified in dramatic works such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Weber's *Der Freischütz*. This large-scale fully diminished seventh-chord finally resolves with the climax of the poem: the protagonist has lost the beloved to his brother. The protagonist's encounter with the supernatural continues to haunt him: in the fourth measure from the end, the menacing tremolo on *aldrig* (“never”) is a memory of the *fossegrim*'s music, while the repetition of the last line of text and an imperfect authentic cadence in C-minor reinforce the perpetuity of the *fossegrim*'s curse.

Grieg, *Spillemand*, mm. 33-37.

### **Frederick Delius, *Spielmann* (1890)**

The presence of the dangerous *fossegrim*, made so obvious by Grieg, is significantly obscured in Delius's *Spielmann*, due in part to the use of Ludwig Passarge's German translation of Ibsen's poem. In Passarge's translation, the protagonist's decision to use magic to win his beloved is his own idea, rather than an enticement planted by the *fossegrim*.

#### **Ibsen, *Spillemand***

Hej, kjender du gru og sange,  
*Hey, if you know horror and songs,*  
kan du kogle den deiligens sind,  
*you can bewitch your beloved's mind*  
så I store kirker og sale  
*so that into great churches and halls*  
hun mener at følge dig ind!  
*she'll dream of following you.*

#### **Passarge, *Spielmann***

Hei! Verstün' ich wie der zu spielen,  
*Hey! If I understood how to play like him,*  
zu umgaukeln der Schönen Sinn,  
*how to bewitch the beloved's mind,*  
sie lauschte wohl meinem Liede,  
*she would listen to my songs,*  
Sie folgte mir überall hin.  
*she would follow me everywhere.*<sup>iii</sup>

Even if a performer chooses to fit Ibsen's original Norwegian text to Delius's setting, there is still no significant musical shift indicating a change in perspective to the voice of the *fossegrim*. The protagonist's initial longing and his subsequent temptation share the same angular melodic contours and the same texture, with an eighth-note ostinato pattern reminiscent of Schubert's *Der Erlkönig*.

Delius does, however, employ musical cues that effect small-scale narrative shifts within the protagonist's supernatural encounter. These shifts break the Encounter into the following subcategories: The Enticement, The Summons, The Enchantment, and The Trick. An augmented triad in measure 10 marks the sinister "aha!" – the flash of inspiration that triggers the protagonist's scheme to captivate the beloved with music. This line cadences in a triumphant E-Major, as the protagonist is carried away to his own fantasy world. The protagonist then summons the *fossegrim* to the accompaniment of

chromatically descending chords, but the *fossegrim* enchants him with a brief section of arpeggios that musicologist Zoltan Roman describes as “[depicting] the water and the music that rises from the deep.”<sup>iv</sup> In fact, since Nordic water spirits could be fiddlers or harpists, it follows that this passage depicts the music that flows from the harp of the *fossegrim* himself.

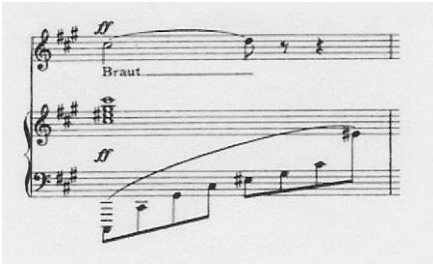
Delius, *Spielmann*, mm. 20-26.

The image shows a musical score for Frederick Delius's "Spielmann" (The Player), measures 20-26. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Tie - fe, er spiel - te, noch heut' mir graut; -" and "Als ich ein Mei - ster ge -". The piano part includes a section marked "Meno mosso tranquillo." with dynamics "mp" and "ff".

Frederick Delius, “Spielmann” © 1910 by Fischer and Jagenberg, Köln T.&J.10

A solemn chordal texture marks the protagonist’s realization that he has been betrayed, and his voice seems to crack with emotion, breaking from a C# up to a D, as his memory is permeated by an echo of the *fossegrim*’s harp music.

Delius, *Spielmann*, m. 30.



Delius's *fossegrim* has no distinctive “voice”: only his musical enchantment is represented, which makes his appearance much more mysterious and fleeting. The portrayal of the *fossegrim* through only his harp-playing is therefore appropriate, since music is a more enigmatic, indirect form of communication than spoken language. Furthermore, this Enchantment passage itself is harmonically mystifying: though its individual chords can be analyzed, it defies the rules of conventional progressions. This creature is far more elusive than his predecessor in the Grieg setting, and therefore represents the supernatural as it relates to the unknown and the intangible. By bringing out the elements of mystery and ambiguity in his depiction of the *fossegrim*, Delius emphasizes the power of the supernatural to inspire a fear of the unknown.

### **Alban Berg, *Spielleute* (1902)**

Unlike the veiled mystery of Delius's *fossegrim*, the presence of the supernatural is all too tangible in Berg's *Spielleute*. Yet there are actually two characters that audibly haunt Berg's protagonist: the *fossegrim* and the beloved. The beloved, or at least the protagonist's longing for her, is encapsulated in an f# fully-diminished seventh chord which acts as an *idée fixe* throughout the song. *Spielleute* opens with the *idée fixe*



oscillating between different voicings, indicative of the beloved's fickle vacillations that lead the protagonist to bargain with dark supernatural forces in a desperate attempt to finally win her.

The *fossegrim* exploits the protagonist's desire for the beloved, using the *idée fixe* to convince the protagonist to surrender his soul. As the protagonist's road leads him down to the river, the *fossegrim* can be heard laughing in the distance. The *fossegrim*'s laugh uses the same oscillating *idée fixe* of the opening: he cruelly mocks the protagonist's unrequited love by reminding him of the beloved's ambivalence. Yet the *fossegrim* changes tactics once he directly addresses the protagonist. After gently reminding the protagonist of the beloved with a calm, almost tender statement of the *idée fixe*, the *fossegrim* delivers his enticement in a deceptively soothing tone.

Berg, *Spielleute*, mm. 12-17.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 15-17) features a vocal line with lyrics "Ja, ver - stehst du mit Grau'n und Sin - gen zu um -" and a piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 12-14) features a vocal line with lyrics "Was - ser - - mann lacht." and a piano accompaniment. The score includes various dynamic markings and performance instructions.

Alban Berg, *Jugendlieder*, Band I/Lied Nr. 2 "Spielleute"  
 © 1985 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE 18143

The *fossegrim*'s seemingly innocuous offer to teach the protagonist "horror and songs" is set above a chromatically descending bass line and an unusual second-inversion appearance of the dark Neapolitan chord, indicating the creature's true evil nature. Yet the protagonist is tempted by the promise that he will be able to win his beloved with the help of magic, and The Enticement continues, with the *fossegrim*'s assurance that the protagonist will be able to lure the beloved to great cathedrals and magnificent halls. That power of compulsion, acquired by supernatural means, is alluded to with forceful chromatically descending octaves in the piano. The *fossegrim*'s enticement ends with the *idée fixe* as a single, immobile *fortississimo* chord: it is a false vision of the beloved, transfixed by the protagonist's newly acquired musical prowess.

In the final lines of Berg's setting, the protagonist adopts the same music that was used to ensorcell him: he has become a master musician in the mold of his teacher, the *fossegrim*. But he has been tricked, and Berg's protagonist laments this deception softly and helplessly, in stark contrast to the full-blooded climaxes of Grieg's and Delius's settings. Having gained supernatural powers as a musician, the protagonist is stripped of all earthly power as a suitor. Berg did not set the final stanza of Ibsen's poem, thus creating a "shock" ending that closes with the *fossegrim*'s trick. Nevertheless, the emotional content of Ibsen's final stanza is captured in a brief piano postlude. Just as in Grieg's setting, there is a musical reminiscence of the supernatural encounter, with tremolos and melodic motives from when the protagonist's path first twisted towards the *fossegrim*'s watery lair. There is also a brief, yet poignant appearance of the *idée fixe* chord, achieved by a surprising A-natural in the third measure from the end. The

protagonist has one final, momentary thought of the beloved before accepting his fate as a wandering minstrel, forever transformed by his encounter with the supernatural.

Berg, *Spielleute*, mm. 42-47.

The image shows a musical score for Berg's *Spielleute*, measures 42-47. The score is written for voice and piano. The voice part (top staff) is labeled "Braut." and has the tempo marking "nicht eilen" above it. The piano part (bottom staff) has a dynamic marking of "pp" at measure 42, followed by "p" at measure 43, "pp" at measure 44, "p" at measure 45, "p" at measure 46, and "ppp" at measure 47. The piano part also includes the markings "marc." at measure 43, "aufflackernd" at measure 46, and "rit." at measure 47. The piano part features a tremolo in the right hand and a chromatic descent in the left hand. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor).

As evinced by these musical examples, Grieg, Delius, and Berg used many of the same musical techniques in their settings of Ibsen's *Spillemænd* to code for the presence of the supernatural: tremolos, chromatic descents, unexpected dynamic contrasts, and dissonant harmonies such as fully-diminished seventh chords and augmented chords. Significantly, all settings employ a musical reminiscence in which the protagonist is haunted by the *fossegrims gru og sange*. Yet ultimately, each composer characterized Ibsen's water spirit in a unique manner. Grieg's *fossegrim* is aggressive and threatening; Delius's is shadowy and ephemeral; and Berg's is persuasive and deceptively alluring. In these three strikingly different manifestations, the *fossegrim* represents each of the most feared aspects of the supernatural other: its danger, its mystery, and its overwhelming attraction.

---

<sup>i</sup> This paper was originally presented on 30 May 2007 at the International Grieg Society conference in Bergen, Norway, and appears in *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, 33 (2007), pp. 33-41. It represents part of the author's ongoing study of the motif of water spirits in nineteenth-century Scandinavian art song. Special thanks to Anne Dhu McLucas, Stephen Rodgers, Lori Kruckenberg, Thérèse Hurley, Steve Vacchi, Sophia Tegart, and, most of all, to Marian Smith for feedback on earlier drafts.

<sup>ii</sup> According to the late Ibsen scholar William Mishler, the word *gru* held great significance in the dramatist's work: "Related to the English 'gruesome,' *gru* carries connotations of the horrible and the uncanny, usually with reference to death [...]. When spoken by a character in a poem or play, it generally translates a feeling of having come into contact with [...] ghostly presences [...]." See Mishler, 1997: "Mimetic desire and poetic vocation in Ibsen's poems," in *Nordic Theatre Studies*, 10, p. 106.

<sup>iii</sup> William Mishler's literal English translation of Ibsen's *Spillemænd* is used here. The English translation of Passarge's *Spielmann* is by Jorma Daniel Lünenbürger and the author.

<sup>iv</sup> Roman, Zoltan. 1999: "(Musical) *Jugendstil* Revisited: Interspecific Conceptual Modeling and the Turn-of-the-Century 'Peripheral' Arts," in *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 30, no. 2, p. 134.

#### APPENDIX: Texts

##### Grieg, *Spillemænd*, 1876 (Henrik Ibsen, 1851)

Til hende stod mine tanker  
hver en sommerlys nat,  
men vejen den bar til elven,  
i det duggende orekrat.

Hej, kjender du gru og sange,  
kan du kogle den deiliges sind,  
så i store kirker og sale  
hun mener at følge dig ind!

Jeg maned den våde af dybet;  
han spilled mig bent fra Gud,  
men da jeg var bleven hans mester,  
var hun min broders brud.

I store kirker og sale  
mig selv jeg spilled ind,  
og fossens gru og sange  
veg aldrig fra mit sind.

##### Delius, *Spielmann*, 1890 (trans. L. Passarge)

Zu ihr stand all mein Sehnen,  
in der lichten Sommernacht;  
doch der Weg ging vorüber am Flusse,  
wo heimlich der Wassermann lacht.

---

Hei! Verständ' ich wie der zu spielen,  
zu umgaukeln der Schönen Sinn,  
sie lauschte wohl meinem Liede,  
sie folgte mir überall hin.

Ich rief ihn herauf aus der Tiefe,  
er spielte, noch heut' mir graut;  
als ich ein Meister geworden,  
war sie meines Bruders Braut.

Zu großen Kirchen und Sälen  
trug mich mein Lied wohl hin,  
des Wassermanns heimliches Singen  
geht mir nicht mehr aus dem Sinn.

Berg, *Spielleute*, 1902 (adapted from Passarge)

Zu ihr stand all' mein Sehnen  
in der lichten Sommernacht.  
Doch der Weg ging vorüber am Fluß,  
wo heimlich der Wassermann lacht.

Ja, verstehst du mit Grau'n und Singen  
zu umgaukeln der Schönen Sinn,  
so lockst du zu großen Kirchen  
und prächtigen Säulen sie hin.

Ich rief ihn heraus aus der Tiefe,  
er spielt' und mir heute noch graut.  
Da ich sein Meister geworden,  
ward sie meines Bruders Braut.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chadwick, Nicholas. 1971: "Berg's Unpublished Songs in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek," in *Music & Letters*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 123-140

----- . 1972: *A survey of the early songs of Alban Berg* (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford)

Desmond, Astra. 1941: "Grieg's Songs," in *Music & Letters*, vol. 22, no. 4, pp. 333-357

----- . 1950: "The Songs," in *Edvard Grieg: A Symposium*, ed. Gerald Abraham (Norman, OK), pp. 71-92.

- 
- Eriksen, Asbjørn Ø. 1981: "Forholdet mellom harmonikk og tekst i noen Grieg-romanser," in *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, 7, pp. 29-57.
- Foster, Beryl. 1990: *The Songs of Edvard Grieg* (Aldershot)
- . 1993: "Grieg and the European Song Tradition," in *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, 19, pp. 127-135
- Hold, Trevor. 2002: *Parry to Finzi: Twenty English Song-Composers* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY)
- Holland, A.K. 1951: *The Songs of Delius* (London)
- Jarrett, Sandra. 2003: *Edvard Grieg and his Songs* (Aldershot)
- Jones, Robert John. 1991: *Poetic and Musical Relationships Established by Alban Berg in Selected Lieder from the Jugendlieder* (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma)
- Mishler, William. 1997: "Mimetic desire and poetic vocation in Ibsen's poems," in *Nordic Theatre Studies*, 10, pp. 117-130
- Pilkington, Michael. 1993: *English Solo Song, iii: Delius, Bridge, and Somervell* (London)
- Roman, Zoltan. 1999: "(Musical) *Jugendstil* Revisited: Interspecific Conceptual Modeling and the Turn-of-the-Century 'Peripheral' Arts," in *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 111-149
- Zaro-Fisher, Wendy. 1993: *A Pedagogical Guide for the Jugendlieder of Alban Berg* (D.M.A. thesis, University of Oregon)