

Hella Brock:

**Griegs Articles on Music and Musicians –
Reflection of his Personality**

We may regret that Edvard Grieg did not write a complete autobiography. He often was asked to do it, most urgently by the German publisher Albert Langen, who finally succeeded in encouraging Grieg to write his autobiographic sketch „My first Success“. This sketch, however, only deals with his school-time in Bergen and his years of study in Leipzig. The American writer Henry Finck, at least, succeeded in Grieg`s writing his famous and weighty letter about his songs , about their genesis and their contents. And Henry Hinrichsen, Grieg`s publisher in Peters-Verlag Leipzig, may perhaps have contributed to Grieg`s intensifying his entries in his diary during his last years; in 1903 Hinrichsen writes to Grieg that he should note episodes from his eventful life, and he adds:

„[...] I cannot think of something more interesting than to publish leaves of Grieg`s diary [...]

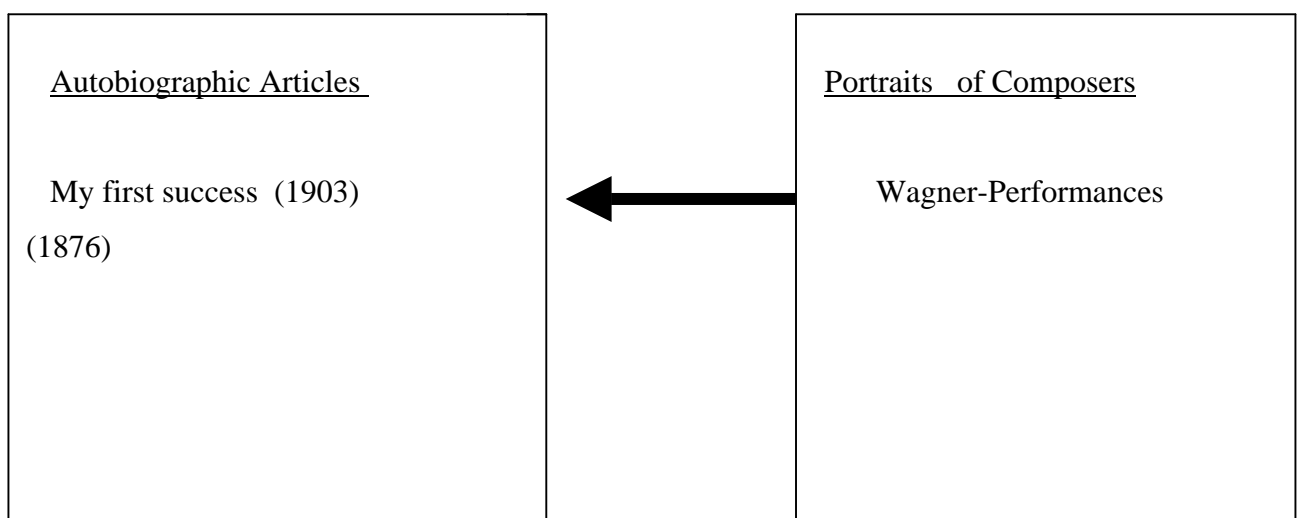
and:

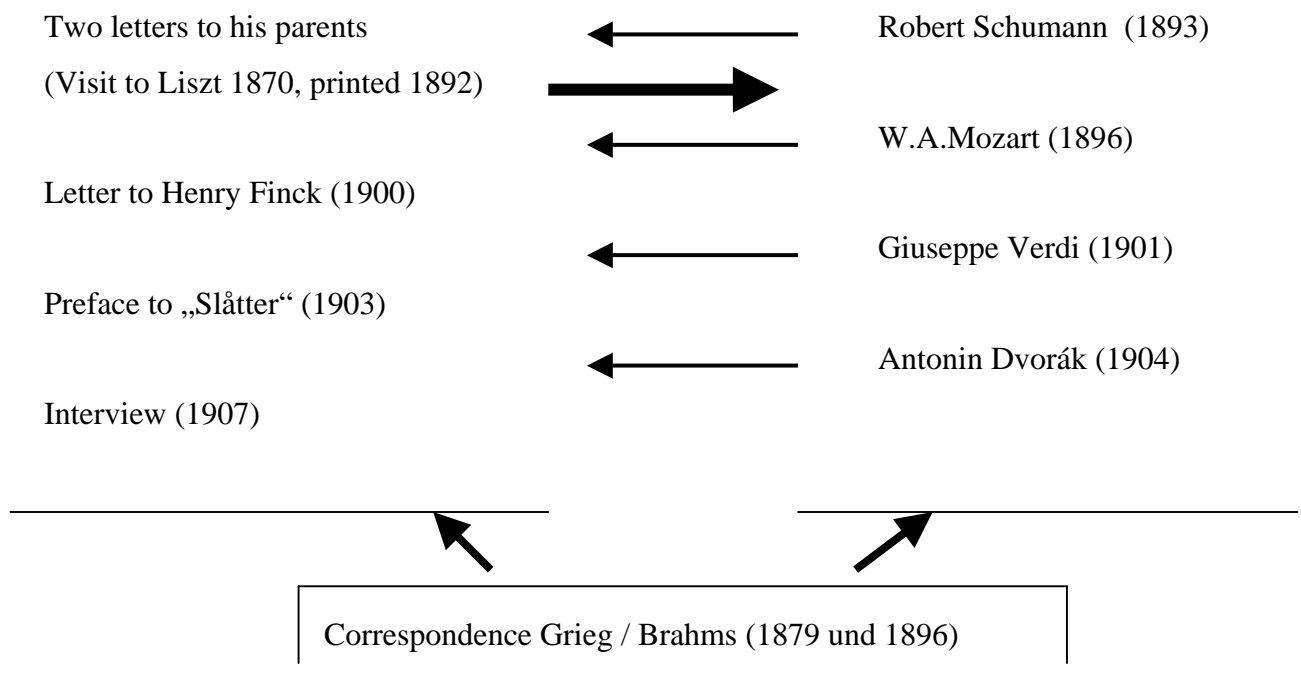
„I am absolutely sure, this would be the finest Grieg-biography.“

Albert Langen, Henry Finck, Henry Hinrichsen and others – they all had got to know, at least from Grieg`s letters, the abundance of his ideas and experiences and his ability, to impart them to the reader in plain and – at the same time – in impressive words.

My new book „Edvard Grieg as writer on music and musicians“(„Edvard Grieg als Musikschriftsteller“), for which I translated Grieg`s most important Norwegian articles into German, comprises altogether five autobiographic articles and five portraits of composers. Here they are:

Grieg`s Articles





Most of these articles were already published 1957 by Öystein Gaukstad in his book „Edvard Grieg – Artikler og Taler“, except two: Grieg`s two letters to his parents about his visit to Franz Liszt from 1870 and his Interview in „Berliner Lokalanzeiger“ 1907. I also included in my book the complete correspondence between Grieg and Johannes Brahms. Grieg did not write a special article on Brahms, but the importance of their relationship called for adding this correspondence into my book. It was never completely published before. Gaukstad`s book is out of print since long. In order to avoid mistakes and omissions I translated all articles from their autographs or from their first print. A great lot of explanations and annotations were to be added and errors to be corrected. I am greatly obliged to the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters and its Grieg Research Group, which invited me for a three months` stay in Norway where I could study and translate most of the sources.

As you can see, I have on this survey marked relations between Grieg`s portraits of composers (right side) and his autobiographic articles (left side) by lines and arrows. This means: Not only Grieg`s autobiographic articles, also all of Grieg`s portraits of composers contain autobiographic features of Grieg`s life. Especially Griegs reports about the Wagner-Performances in Bayreuth in 1876 – (please mind the fat line) are at the same time autobiographic, since Grieg analyses here not only Wagner`s great opus, the *Ring*, but also tells his impressions of the visitors in Bayreuth, of King Ludwig and Kaiser Wilhelm, and he describes, for instance, – with greatest pleasure – his bold activities to get a place during the

final rehearsals – in the orchestra room!.

On the other hand, one article of the left side, about his visit to Franz Liszt (please mind the fat line in opposite direction!), is not only autobiographic, but gives, at the same time, a portrait of Franz Liszt.

All of Grieg`s articles are – in spite of proving his expert knowledge – no learned essays, in which we nearly cannot recognise Grieg`s personal emotions, his own concrete experiences and his view of life and music. On the contrary: from each line of his articles speaks Edvard Grieg`s rich and warm personality with his broad experience of musical life and his own cultural activities. The variety and intensity of his activities as composer, as conductor, as pianist and accompanist in the European music centres, and, after all, as a passionate frequenter of concerts from his youth – all these activities had made him acquainted with musical culture and the public resonance all over Europe, with leading musicians, composers, interpreters and reviewers. From here result his moving reports on his meetings with Johannes Brahms, Antonin Dvorák, Franz Liszt, and Clara Schumann or his characterisations of Richard Wagner, Arthur Nikisch, Hans Richter, Felix Weingartner and other composers and interpreters. These manifold personal experiences are always the starting point for Grieg`s comments on music and musicians. At the same time it is from his national and cultural responsibility, when Grieg in his articles deliberately refers to his own personal experiences and emotions, by this making his articles an attractive reading. He does not want his articles only to be written for experts on music, he addresses them to a broad circle of readers, whose interest in music and musical culture of his time he ardently wants to gain. It is for this reason, too, that Grieg combines his reports with humorous comments and anecdotes (which are not always proved!) and with poetical comparisons between music and literature.

Here two examples of Grieg`s personal meetings with great musicians:

In Grieg`s comprehensive article on Schumann and his compositions we find among other autobiographic details also Grieg`s short, but impressive report on his visit to Clara Schumann in Frankfurt, where he gave a concert within his long concert tour through Germany in 1883. (This seems to be Grieg`s only report on this personal meeting with Clara Schumann that has passed on to us.) And it was a moving meeting. Grieg here wanted to enjoy Clara Schumann in telling her that her husband`s popularity had increased during the last years, even in such a remote country as his fatherland Norway. But Grieg tells us here that he was mistaken: Clara Schumann`s face clouded, and she only answered “Yes, now!“

Another example: In his necrology on Antonin Dvorák 1904, in which Grieg gives a short but exact survey on Dvorák`s most famous compositions, Grieg can tell us about his last personal meeting with the Czech composer 1903 in Prague. Here Grieg learned to know Dvorák as a kind and fascinating original – in contrast to his first meeting with Dvorák in Vienna 1896, where Dvorák was gruff and unapproachable. At the end of his article Grieg emphasises, how glad he was about this last impression of the great Czech master.

All these short reports on meetings with leading musicians made me curious, of course, to find further manifestations of Grieg`s relations to them: in his comprehensive correspondence, in his diary leaves or in other sources. I have made use of them in my supplementary essays, in which I also included facsimiles of the most precious letters. Among those facsimiles that are published in my book for the very first time, there is one of Grieg`s letters to Clara Schumann, in which he asks her to tell him her judgement about his Schumann article.

The close connection between Grieg`s representation and analysis of other composers` life and work and his own biography does, of course, not only exist in telling about his personal meetings with these composers or interpreters. Grieg`s most interesting autobiographic statements in his articles are the following:

He often stresses those characteristic features of the composers concerned, in which there are parallels to his own life and work, in most cases without identifying them as parallels. Or he deals with those problems of their compositions that were predominant for himself, too. These characteristic features and problems were so important for Grieg, that he did not only deal with them in one of his articles, but in three or more of them. Grieg was chiefly concerned with the following three subjects:

1. Edvard Grieg: National composer or cosmopolitan?
2. Problems of musical interpretation
3. Progress in music.

Some words about the first subject mentioned:

Edvard Grieg: National composer or cosmopolitan?

This subject is treated in:

– Letter to Henry Finck (1900)

- Verdi (1901)
- Interview in „Berliner Lokalanzeiger“ (1907)

In his article on Verdi Grieg characterises Verdi as the national composer, who already in his youth was deeply connected with his Italian people and who also in his later years, when his horizon widened, when he composed *Aida* and *Othello* and became cosmopolitan, had always remained the national composer.

One year before, Grieg had used similar words in his „Letter to Henry Finck“. But here Grieg characterises his own work with these words. Here Grieg turns against some German conservative reviewers, who used to characterise his music as „Norwegerei“, that means, as one-sided Norwegian, in a disparaging way. Grieg, of course, admits and underlines the national basis of his music, but, at the same time, he stresses the amalgamation of cosmopolitan and national factors in his art.

This problem has been so important for Grieg, that he even deals with it in his very last Interview 1907 in the „Berliner Lokalanzeiger“. Here Grieg decidedly emphasises: After his study in Leipzig he had recognised that he only could develop on his national basis. On the other hand, he claims for his individuality, too, a good deal of his “Germanisation”.

I could be sure that this problem, with which Grieg had occupied himself in three of his articles, would also play an important role in his wide-spread correspondence and in some of his public statements. Therefore, in my additional essays I had to deal with these of Grieg`s autobiographic comments and declarations, too, for instance with his so-called „Cosmopolitan confession of faith“, published in „Musikbladet“, Copenhagen 1889.

Now to the second subject that plays an important role in Grieg`s articles:

Problems of musical interpretation

These problems are dealt with in Grieg`s articles:

- Schumann (1893)
- Mozart (1896)
- Letter to Henry Finck (1900).

No wonder that Grieg in his Schumann article deals with problems of musical interpretation

moreoften and more intensely than in his other articles. Schumann has been the composer with whom Grieg felt most deeply connected from his youth. During Grieg`s study in Leipzig Schumann belonged to those German composers whose works were frequently performed, especially in Gewandhaus. Here also Clara Schumann gave a number of guest performances. Grieg remembered her impressive interpretation of Schumann`s *piano concert* in Leipzig 1860 not only in his Schumann article of 1894 but even in his diary 1907. Also the interpretation of Schumann`s Heine song *Ich grolle nicht* in 1859 by the famous Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient remained unforgettable for Grieg. (I could include the program of this Leipzig matinee in my book).

Above all, Grieg`s own early interpretations of some of Schumann`s piano works (f. i. *Kreisleriana* already in his first concert in 1861) and, some years later, his and Nina`s Interpretations of Schumann`s songs have contributed to his profound connection with his favourite composer.

In his Schumann article Grieg`s views on interpretation predominantly refer to Schumann`s songs. Grieg holds that in Schumann`s songs the contents of the poem are the main point, in spite of important technical aspects which, however, comparatively have to stay behind. The singer of Schumann`s songs must be able to read between the lines, whereas (according to Grieg`s opinion) in Schubert`s songs everything is already prescribed. Grieg claims that the singer must care in mind the important role of the piano and of all its nuances. He even goes so far as to claim that the singer must also be able, in a certain degree, to play the piano part, too.

Five years later, in his Letter to Henry Finck, Grieg once more occupies himself intensely with vocal interpretation, in this case with interpretation of his own songs. Here he predominantly characterises his wife`s singing, calling her „*the only true interpreter of my songs*“. He stresses her ideal declamation, and, above all, her aim to translate, to interpret the poem, to meet in her interpretation the most intimate thoughts of the poet. From Grieg`s description of her singing follows that Nina met all of those requirements which Grieg had pointed out in his Schumann article.

Besides, we find in Grieg`s Letter to Henry Finck also his vivid and angry descriptions of all the rudeness and bad habits of the so-called primadonnas of his time: their lack of musical education, their preference of effectful instead of intimate songs, their disregard of the right tempi etc. „*When will this all be punished legally?*“ Grieg exclaims.

In Grieg`s Mozart article his views on musical interpretation are mainly concentrated on opera performances. He complains that many opera leaders of his time are one-sided adherents of Wagner. In Germany he often had heard excellent performances of Wagner operas. The same leaders, however, had interpreted Mozart`s operas very carelessly. In some towns, Mozart operas were usually left to second-class leaders, whereas Wagner operas were only conducted by the chief leader. But Grieg mentions one exception: Arthur Nikisch. Enthusiastically Grieg remembers Nikisch`s performances of several Mozart operas in Leipzig, especially *Don Giovanni*, and he emphasises Nikisch`s careful regards of every detail, especially in Mozart`s recitative.

Grieg complains the lack of reverence for Mozart in the young generation. He, therefore, appeals to the conductors` responsibility, because in their hands lies the fate of the great masters .

Finally some remarks to the third subject that is emphasised in Grieg`s articles:

Progress in Music

All of Grieg`s articles show his deep interest in signs of musical progression. In particular, this is revealed in these articles:

- Wagner-performances in Bayreuth (1876)
- Mozart (1896)
- Preface to *Slåtter* (1903)
- Interview in „Berliner Lokalanzeiger“(1907)

The intensity of Grieg`s reports on Wagner`s Ring - performances in Bayreuth 1876 surpasses all reports of his contemporary composers and reviewers, who also had been present in Bayreuth, among them Saint-Saens, Tschaiowsky, Eduard Hanslick, and many others. Grieg had been looking forward to this event with eager expectation, especially in regard of all new dramatic aspects and realisations in Wagners music. At this time, Grieg himself had already worked in the dramatic field (we think of *Peer Gynt*, *Olav Trygvason*, *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, and his melodrama *Bergliot*). Therefore, in his reviews, sent to “Bergensposten“, Grieg especially describes and stresses all of Wagner`s new dramatic means and their effects. Grieg mainly found them here in the field of harmony and instrumentation.

In his Mozart article Grieg also lays stress on advanced features in harmony. For instance, he describes Mozart`s bold use of chromatic combinations in his great *sinfonies*. And Grieg

makes fun of the French reviewer Francois Fétis, who had wanted to cancel Mozart's introduction of his *string-quartet in C major* (the so-called dissonance-quartet), because of its bold chromatism.

In Grieg's Mozart article we also find one of his far-seeing remarks about storing up music by new technical inventions. Already in this article (1896) he mentions the phonograph. He praises this invention and predicts that in future it will be possible to store up a complete picture of the presence, not only visually but also acoustically. And Grieg jubilates: one day all quarrels about questions of interpretation (here Grieg refers to Mozart's tempi!) would be abolished!

Grieg always aims at waking also his readers' and interpreters' interest in all these progressive trends of music and musical development. This is, in particular, evident in his Preface to *Slåtter*. Since his *Slåtter op. 72* belong to his boldest works, Grieg wrote this preface in order to explain the principles of his arrangements. Besides, he cared for the legends that belong to the *Slåtter* and had them printed, too. In addition to this, Grieg even persuaded his editor also to publish the original *Slåtter* for violin in order to enable interpreters and hearers to compare both versions.

Grieg has shown his ardent interest in musical advancement even in his last years. In spite of his increasing weakness he seemed to be indefatigable in getting to know new works of music. In his Interview with „Berliner Lokalanzeiger, few months before his death, he spontaneously and sincerely tells about new trends of music in Germany and his ambivalent relation to the music of Richard Strauss. We are, therefore, moved by his desire to hear *Salome* during his strenuous concert tour (from München to Berlin and Kiel) and his short stay in Berlin. Grieg was, not at all, prepossessed in favour of or against a composer's works. One year before this interview, after the performance of *Tod und Verklärung* in Kristiania, he had sent an enthusiastic telegram to Richard Strauss. The grandson of Richard Strauss sent me a copy of this telegram, and in Bergen's precious archive I also found the letter of thanks from Richard Strauss to Grieg. Both documents are included in my book.

At the beginning of my report I mentioned that in my book I tried to add to Grieg's articles all material that may compensate for Grieg's not writing a whole autobiography. For this reason, I compiled corresponding facts of Grieg's life and ideas from his widespread correspondence and other relevant sources and added a chronological table, many facsimiles of concert programs and pictures. I also included some relations between Grieg's compositions and the works of those composers, to whom he devoted his articles. I dealt with these relations, in

particular, in connection with the Grieg/Brahms correspondence.

Let us, therefore, finally listen to the second movement, an Adagio, of Brahms' *String- quintet op.111*. At the beginning of 1897, Brahms and Grieg were sitting together in a concert in Vienna, listening to an excellent performance of this quintet. It was their last meeting , Brahms died only few months later. Grieg described his deep impression of this quintet in a letter to his friend Julius Röntgen. We remember: In 1879, at the beginning of their acquaintance, both had heard together Brahms' *Violin Concert* in Leipzig. Brahms afterwards had sent the first beats of the lyric, songlike Adagio to Grieg.

I suppose, in listening to the second movement in d minor of Brahms' *String Quintet*, again a songlike, lyric Adagio, but, this time, full of woe and including sequences of notes that remind us of Grieg, we can even more imagine Grieg's and Brahms' mutual relations in the field of music:

Adagio (2 .Movement) of Brahms' op.111 (beginning)