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Grieg as the “father of Finnish music”?

Notes on Grieg and Sibelius with special attention to the F major Violin Sonatas

In researching themes around the music in the late 19th century in Norway and Finland it is important to know some details about the cultural and historical frame of this time. Both countries were not yet independent. Norway was part of Sweden and Finland was an autonomous part of Russia, but in both countries a cultural identity was rising. Music played an important role, and Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius were representatives for this development. Even from the first appearance of books on Sibelius, it has been common to search for a connection to Grieg. I do not want to answer general questions of cultural identities, but rather wish to analyse and compare the music of both composers. Although the main focus of the œuvre of both composers is quite different, the violin sonatas are particularly worthwhile to compare; we not only have examples from both composers, but examples in F major. While a number of authors have written about general similarities of both works, I want to particularly focus on aspects of Sibelius's sonata. While other chamber music works of Sibelius were clearly influenced by the Viennese classical period, we find Grieg as a model for the F major violin sonata.

I

In discussing Sibelius's F major violin sonata, I must mention Erik Furuhjelm, who wrote the first, and until today the only, longer analytical approach to this opus in his 1916 Sibelius biography.¹ This study is particularly interesting considering Furuhjelm's comments regarding Grieg and his concluding remarks about Grieg as the “father of Finnish music.”² While other authors do not go to such lengths, they recognize Grieg as Sibelius's inspiration. Normally, scholars use a more diffuse term of ‘northernness’ even though in actuality the northern countries were not very well known during this time. In 1891 Sibelius wrote to his fiancée: “They always say to me: ‘Your compatriot Grieg’. So little they know about us Northmen.”³

¹ Erik Furuhjelm, Jean Sibelius, Porvoo 1916, from pages 50-71 he wrote mainly about the violin sonata.

² Op. cit. p. 67, cited by Fabian Dahlström, Grieg und Finnland, in: Studia Musicologica Norvegica 19 (1993), p. 84.

³ SuviSirku Talas (ed.), Sydämen aamu. Aino Järnefeltin ja Jean Sibeliuksen kihlausajan kirjeitä (The morning of the heart. The letters of the engagement time of Aino Järnefelt and Jean Sibelius), Jyväskylä 2001, p. 138.

The idea of the 'north' is so prevalent throughout all literature on Sibelius, that it has become cliché to speak of the connection to Grieg. Nonetheless, in researching this connection in the 21st century it is necessary to use the term 'Nordic music' and the 'Nordic tone' very carefully. In the 19th century these terms dominated the musicological treatment of music from Nordic countries. The term 'Nordic music' is closely connected to the question of using folk music in art music.⁴ In the 19th century, composers – not only from northern countries – began to collect folk songs and used them and their folkloristic elements in their compositions. Later, in the 20th century, Béla Bartók was perhaps the most prominent example of composers using folk music. He distinguished between three kinds of use: folk song adaptation, invention of new folk melodies, and composing with the same 'atmosphere' as original folk music.⁵ This kind of subtle influence had already appeared in the 19th century.⁶

The label 'Nordic tone' was used in the 19th century to describe quite different phenomena in the compositions of northern composers, which were different from the German or middle European tradition.⁷ Some authors described some musical features, like the *modi*, bass fifths and melodic specifics. We find nevertheless similar features also in other countries, as the Bartók example shows. The main problem of the term 'Nordic tone' is that it was used for all music from the North without differentiation from the treatment of folk music. In fact, it is important to distinguish between the special 'Nordic music,' which uses special folkloristic elements, and the music from the North in a broader sense, which is all music composed in the North.⁸ Thereby we can separate the music from the idea of nationality.

Those questions were obviously important also for Grieg and Sibelius. Grieg learned a middle European style in the heritage of Mendelssohn and Schumann at the Leipzig conservatory starting in 1858. After these studies he searched for his personal style and met the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull, who was from the elder generation, and the Danish composer Niels W. Gade, yet they gave him conflicting advice. Bull wanted to impart on him the Norwegian folk

⁴ See Vollsnes, Arvid, *Die Nationalromantik und der »nordische Ton«*, in: Greger Andersson (ed.): *Musikgeschichte Nordeuropas. Dänemark, Finnland, Island, Norwegen, Schweden*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 195-217, and Kube, Michael, "Nährstoff" nationaler Identifikation. Zur Bedeutung der Volksmusik in nordeuropäischer Kunstmusik, in: Salmen, Walter und Schubert, Giselher (ed.): *Verflechtungen im 20. Jahrhundert. Komponisten im Spannungsfeld elitär – populär*, Mainz 2005, p. 88-130.

⁵ Bartók, Béla, *Vom Einfluß der Bauernmusik auf die Musik unserer Zeit* (1931), in: Szabolcsi, B. (ed.): *Béla Bartók. Weg und Werk. Schriften und Briefe*, Budapest 1972, p. 164-177, see p. 168ff.

⁶ See Kube 2005, p. 98.

⁷ See Schwab, Heinrich W., *Das Lyrische Klavierstück und der nordische Ton*, in: Krummacher, Friedhelm und Schwab, Heinrich W. (ed.): *Gattung und Werk in der Musikgeschichte Norddeutschlands und Skandinaviens*, Kassel 1982, p. 136-153.

⁸ Compare Ling, Jan, *Gibt es einen 'nordischen Ton'?*, in: Andraschke, Peter und Spaude, Edelgard (ed.): *Welttheater. Die Künste im 19. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg 1992, p. 49-57.

music. Gade, who himself became famous with his ‘Nordic tone’ in the 1840s,⁹ had turned away from this direction and developed a more international style. In the end it was the young Rikard Nordraak, who died prematurely in 1866, with whom Grieg developed his interest in the Norwegian folk music.

Sibelius began his studies in Helsinki in 1885 as one of the first generations at the Helsinki Music Institute. The institute was founded in 1882, and incidentally Grieg’s F major violin sonata was played in the first public “musikaftnar.”¹⁰ Also the middle European influence of the Leipzig conservatory was strong in Helsinki, because the founder of the music institute, Martin Wegelius, was a Leipzig alumnus. In general it is well known that Sibelius had his first great success in Finland in 1892 with his “Kullervo” symphony, in which he used a row of melodies of the Kalevala epos. But there is simply little known about the chamber music which he wrote before 1892. Yet already in 1889, when he wrote the F major violin sonata, we have some clear signs of his interest in Finnish folk music. Sibelius spoke in 1896 in his tentative lecture about “the influence of folk music on art music.”¹¹ Later, after a decade of Finnish-influenced orchestra music, Sibelius developed in the first years of the 20th century a more international style. For many critics it was difficult to see that a Finnish composer did not use a primarily Finnish music style. This is somehow a problem in Sibelius reception even today, especially in Germany.

II

It is not only the common key that establishes a relationship between Grieg’s and Sibelius’s F major sonatas, but both composers also wrote their opus almost at the same respective ages. Grieg wrote the sonata in 1865 at the age of 22 – incidentally the birth year of Sibelius. The latter composed his sonata in 1889 at the age of 23, having just graduated in Helsinki and heading to Berlin. Those 24 years between the inceptions of both works reflect in some respects the interval of the musical development of both Nordic countries.¹² Even more important is the question of the use of folk music, which became important in both sonatas. Finally, we could see both sonatas as an important step to master the sonata form.

⁹ see Schwab 1982, p. 139, and Ling 1992, p. 52.

¹⁰ Dahlström, Fabian, *Sibelius-Akademien 1882-1982*, Helsingfors 1982, p. 348. The founder of the Music Institute, Martin Wegelius, asked Grieg to become the first director of the institute (p. 22). Grieg did not accept, but his works in the first public concerts was obviously a reverence to him (p. 341 and 348).

¹¹ Sibelius, Jean, *Några synpunkter beträffande folkmusiken och dess inflytande på tonkonsten* (1896), original Swedish, with Finnish translation by Ilkka Oramo, *Musiikki* 1980 (2), p. 86-105.

¹² Fabian Dahlström speaks of a quarter century time difference. Dahlström 1993, p.77.

In regards to the violin sonata tradition, Benestad and Schjelderup compare Grieg's F major sonata op. 8, to Beethoven's 'Frühlingssonate' (op. 24) in the same key.¹³ Grieg wrote this sonata in 1865 while he was searching for his own style, and as a young composer, Grieg discovered the possibilities of the folk traditions. It is also a sonata that was one of the works written in a "happy time of triumph and accomplishment."¹⁴ Together with the piano sonata op. 7 "he tried out his new national style for the first time in some larger works."¹⁵ After his early studies in Leipzig, he did not have much experience with cyclic forms, other than the early string quartet, cyclic works were very rare in his œuvre of the first years.

Sibelius's sonata also continues the F major tradition of the 'Frühlingssonate' although it is not possible to prove that he played or heard this Beethoven piece.¹⁶ Sibelius wrote the sonata JS 178 in the summer of 1889, just after he finished his studies at the Music Institute in Helsinki. It was not his first violin sonata: in 1884 he wrote a sonata in A minor (JS 177), which was one of his first cyclic works. This composition had four movements in different keys – a typical phenomenon of Sibelius's school time works. In the spring of 1889 Sibelius composed the string quartet in A minor (JS 183) as his final work at the Music Institute. Sibelius spent the summer in 1889 again in the small town Lovisa, near the Finnish Gulf. He had spent some previous summers there, which was a place of happy childhood for him. The new violin sonata was first performed on July 16th.¹⁷ Remarkably, this event was reported not only in the local newspapers but also in the *Hufvudstadsbladet*, one of Helsinki's leading newspapers at the time. Here the sonata was mentioned together with the A major string suite (JS 186) and the A minor string quartet.¹⁸ A few days before the debut performance, Sibelius wrote to his uncle Pehr about his new opus:

The first movement, 2/4 in F major, is fresh and daring as well as gloomy with some brilliant episodes; the second movement, A minor, is Finnish and melancholy; it is an authentic Finnish girl who sings on the A string; then some peasant lads perform a Finnish dance and try to entice her to smile, but it doesn't work; she only sings with greater sadness and melancholy than before. The third movement, 3/8, F major, is fresh and spirited as well as romantic. There are people in a meadow singing and playing on Midsummer Night. Meanwhile, a meteor falls down among them. They are amazed, but even continue playing,

¹³ Benestad, Finn and Schjelderup-Ebbe, Dag, Edvard Grieg. *The Man and the Artist*, Nebraska 1988, p. 73.

¹⁴ op. cit., p. 63.

¹⁵ op. cit., p. 72.

¹⁶ We find important references in Dahlström 1982, who shows the programs of all early concerts since 1882 at the Helsinki Music Institute and in the music collection, shown in Mäkelä, Tomi, *Jean Sibelius. "Poesie in der Luft"*, Wiesbaden 2007, p. 186. In both cases this piece was not found.

¹⁷ Dahlström, Fabian, *Sibelius-Werkverzeichnis. Jean Sibelius. Thematisch-bibliographisches Verzeichnis seiner Werke*, Wiesbaden 2003, p. 610.

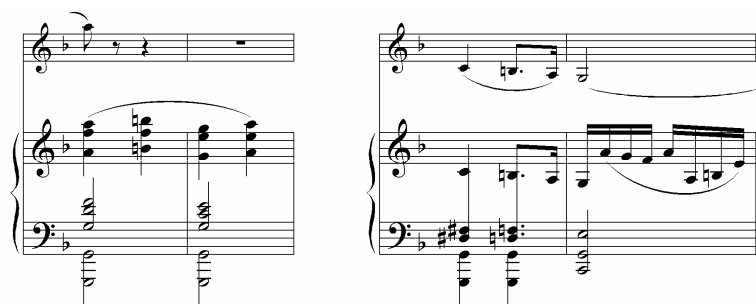
¹⁸ See Rosas, John, *Otryckta Kammarmusikverk av Jean Sibelius*, Åbo 1961, p. 43.

but not as readily as before because everyone is more serious. At the end the mood becomes splendid but gloomy [the meteor!] and also playful and happy.¹⁹

This letter is a rare document of a ‘programme’ for a cyclic work. There are no descriptions for other pieces, and later Sibelius disapproved of programmes for his symphonies. Nevertheless, this sonata programme shows that Sibelius turns away from the classical string quartet as a model, which his teacher Martin Wegelius had exposed him to. Other than the works for string quartet like the A minor quartet, Sibelius wrote – outside the reach of his teacher – a set of works for different settings like piano trio. Outside of his composition lessons he felt more free and creative, and by at least the beginning of 1889 he became interested in Finnish folk music. He learned, for example, to play some folk music pieces on the Kantele for a masquerade, at which he went as a Kantele player.²⁰ Yet, this interest was not only for one occasion. It was employed in the ‘programme’ to the second and third movement of the sonata.

III

In literature there are many comments on the violin sonatas of Grieg and Sibelius.²¹ I want to focus my notes, however, on formal aspects in the first movements of both sonatas. To begin, it is interesting to show some approaches to the ‘Grieg motive’ in Sibelius’s sonata.



Example 1+2: Jean Sibelius, Violin sonata in F major, JS 178, 1. movement, b. 59f. / 73f.

¹⁹ Letter on July 6th 1889 in Goss, Glenda Dawn, Jean Sibelius. The Hämeenlinna Letters, Esbo 1997, p. 105. Original Swedish p. 181: „1sta satsen 2/4 f dur är frisk och djerf, samt äfven dyster med några brillanta episoder; 2dra satsen a moll är finsk och vemodig; det är en äkta finsk flicka som sjunger på a strängen; sedermera upträda några bondpojkar med en finsk dans och försöka locka henne att le, men det lyckas icke utan hon sjunger djupare och vemodsfullare än förut. 3dje satsen 3/8, f dur, är frisk och spirituelle samt svärmisk. Det är folk om midsommar afton ute på ången, de sjunga och leka. Under detta slår en meteor ned ibland dem. De blifva häpnade, men fortsätta med lekandet, som icke mera vill gå så ledigt som förut ty alla äro alvarsammare. Till slut blifver stämningen dystert praktfull [meteoren!] och äfven lekande glad.“

²⁰ Letter to his uncle on February 3rd, 1889, Goss 1997, p. 102.

²¹ Benestad & Schjelderup-Ebbe 1988; Benestad & Schjelderup-Ebbe, Edvard Grieg. Chamber music. Oslo 1993; Bruch, Axel, “Verborgene Harmonien”. Satzstruktur und Gattungstradition in Griegs Duosonaten, Kassel 2002; Furuhielm 1916; Rosas 1961; Tawaststjerna, Erik, Jean Sibelius. Volume I. 1865-1905, Berkeley 1976.

In bar 59/60 a jumping-off leading tone could evoke such associations (example 1), and there is a phenomenon in bar 73/74 even nearer to the Grieg motive (example 2).

Both violin sonatas do not begin directly with the main theme. Sibelius's sonata begins with one bar of 'C' in the violin (example 3), which appears as a long 'upbeat' to the theme, although it is metrically too long for an upbeat.



Example 3: Jean Sibelius, Violin sonata in F major, JS 178, 1. movement, b. 1-5.

This gesture is reminiscent of the beginning of Grieg's sonata with four bars that are harmonically detached from the main theme (example 4). Axel Bruch proved the importance of these four bars for the whole movement as a substantial harmonic progression, which returns at the beginning of the development section and the coda.²²



Example 4: Edvard Grieg, Violin sonata in F major, op. 8, 1. movement, b. 1-7.

A comparison with the end of the development sections shows some interesting details of the formal structure. In both cases the main part of the development section ends on an A chord and the retransition is made from a part of the second key section. In his analysis of Grieg's sonata, Bruch calls "die merkwürdig isoliert stehenden" bars 174-181 a "Rückführung" and gives two different interpretations.²³ Whereas he uses the interpretation as an elongation of D major and later D minor to show the general harmonic idea of the whole movement, he also interprets it as two half cadences (174-5 in D major, 178-9 in G minor), which forms a sequence of fifths going on to the tonic in the recapitulation (see example 5).²⁴ This

²² Bruch 2002, p. 122.

²³ Op. cit., p. 135f.

²⁴ Related to the main key F major, the passage starts from the III in bar 173 and continues with VI-ii-V-I. Taking the half cadences in consideration, it has the exact formula (VI-III)-(ii-VI)-ii6-V-I.

interpretation is similar to Ekkehard Kreft's analysis.²⁵ Strikingly, the dominant function sounds in one bar as a bass tremolo (single C). This bar with the single C is already part of the recapitulation and could have been a model for the beginning of Sibelius's sonata.

Example 5: Edvard Grieg, *Violin sonata in F major, op. 8, 1. movement, b. 171-183.*

Example 6: Jean Sibelius, *Violin sonata in F major, JS 178, 1. movement, b. 160-181.*

²⁵ Kreft, Ekkehard, *Griegs Harmonik*, Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 170. Bruch does not mention this sequence.

In Sibelius's sonata the corresponding part of the development section closes with an A augmented triad (b. 160f.) and continues with two bars from the second key section in the violin. This part alternates with its variation and forms a chromatically rising sequence (see example 6). The unusually built cadence to G in bar 172 is the temporary point of resolution.²⁶ Together with the violin D pedal point, the cue from the piano with the E flat triad in bar 174 generates a dissonant chord. A diminished triad over E, which is the vii° in F major, mitigates this dissonance.²⁷ Sibelius already uses the head motive of the main theme in the piano voices, and the closing bars of the main theme in the violin. The piano bass begins here again and proceeds from the G area to D minor as a minor dominant. As a kind of deceptive cadence (V-vi⁷) in bar 178, a new sequence in the piano left hand begins. The head-motive starts here with a diminished E triad and proceeds with falling thirds through C major and A minor to F major. The arrival of F major is the recapitulation's beginning.

The comparison of both sections shows the composer's similar ideas. While traditional compositions would remain on the dominant, both cases here resolve to the parallel D minor. In Grieg's sonata the traditional dominant sounds as a C tremolo in the bass. Sibelius uses a simple triad without dissonant tones between two seventh chords (b. 178-180). Both these chords over E and A are the same chords which open the sonata of Grieg (without sevenths and without the diminished fifth over E). It seems possible that this phenomenon is not an accident. In contrast, the opening first bar of Sibelius's sonata evokes the original idea of Grieg's sonata's recapitulation beginning. Sibelius obviously used the Grieg's sonata as a model for his form and changed the harmonic members in a chiastic kind of way.

IV

Both sonatas have a specific folkloristic colour in their second movement. Although Grieg's later-written G major sonata is called "the national,"²⁸ we find already in the second movement of his F major sonata clear references to nationality. Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe wrote: "The A section has the lilt of a charming minuet, with a touch of Nordic folk song."²⁹ The B-section also has a "...strikingly national colouring. Grieg here imitates the

²⁶ Only the fundamental fifth progression D-G (Quintfall) is a traditional cadence step. All other voices have an unison C-C sharp-D to the fifth of G.

²⁷ Compare with the change from E flat to E in Grieg's development section, b. 179-180.

²⁸ Benestad & Schjelderup-Ebbe 1988, p. 73.

²⁹ Benestad & Schjelderup-Ebbe 1993, p. 26.

indigenous Norwegian folk instrument, the Hardanger fiddle”.³⁰ Given how well known this passage is, it is not necessary to extend discussion on it here.

Sibelius’s middle movement appears as a Finnish counterpart to this national colour (see example 7). The composer himself wrote: “The second movement, A minor, is Finnish and melancholy; it is an authentic Finnish girl who sings on the A string.” It is a clear hint of how Sibelius composed in the style of a Finnish folk song.

Example 7: Jean Sibelius, Violin sonata in F major, JS 178, 2. movement, b. 1-9.

Maa - tien poik - ki ne rii - a - rit loik - ki ja lak - ki o - li kal - lel - lan - sa.

Tään ky - län poi - jat ne ko - mei - lee tuol - la hoi - kal - la var - rel - lan - sa.

Example 8: Finnish folk song „Maantien poikki ne riiarit loikki“

This theme has some similarities to the Finnish folk song „Maantien poikki ne riiarit loikki“ (example 8). The similarities include the dactyl rhythm and cadences with repeated closing

³⁰ Op. cit., p. 29.

notes, which are typical for Finnish folk songs. Yet, there is no doubt that Sibelius wrote his own melody. Tawaststjerna suggested that the piano accompaniment sounds like “stylistic writing for the kantele.” He claims: “The Andante is the first portent of Sibelius’s national style.”³¹ We find therefore, in literature on both sonatas, interpretations for a model of the typical folk instruments, the Hardanger fiddle and the Kantele.

Another aspect is still important to note in comparing Grieg’s and Sibelius’s sonatas.

Regarding the B-section of Sibelius’s second movement (example 9), we remember the composers hint: “then some peasant lads perform a Finnish dance and try to entice her to smile.” The B-section has a dance character theme in A major, its melody is clearly related to Grieg.

Example 9: Jean Sibelius, Violin sonata in F major, JS 178, 2. movement, b. 33-40.

We find two examples within the violin sonatas, both in E major. The first is the B-section theme of the second movements of Grieg’s violin sonata op.13 (example 10) and the second is the main theme of the second movement of the violin sonata op.45 (example 11). Strikingly, the theme is introduced in both cases by the piano without the violin.

Example 10: Edvard Grieg, Violin sonata in G major, op. 13, 2. movement, b.46-49 .

³¹ Tawaststjerna 1976, p. 34f.



Example 11: Edvard Grieg, Violin sonata in C minor, op. 45, 2. movement, b. 1-7.

We know Sibelius's teacher, Hermann Csillag, played Grieg's C minor sonata op. 45 with Ferruccio Busoni on October 4, 1888 at the Music Institute in Helsinki.³² Sibelius probably heard this concert because it was Busoni's first official performance as the new piano professor at the small institute. In this case we could assume Grieg was a direct influence. Sibelius composed his sonata in a related key (E major – A major) with a similar aesthetic.

Example 12: Jean Sibelius, Violin sonata in F major, JS 178, 1. movement, b. 52-63.

However, he used this theme also as the second key theme of the first movement, beginning with A minor and ending in C major (example 12). Here we also find the first example with similarities to the 'Grieg motive.' The second example concludes the theme. In context of the whole theme, the relation to Grieg is more evident.

³² Dahlström 1982, p. 355.

V

Finally, it's important to note that Sibelius's third movement, a mazurka in rondo form, also contains some allusions to Grieg. The most unusual passage of the „programme,“ where Sibelius composed the “meteor falls down among them,” is hard to pinpoint, because within the long rondo form there is no clear disruption. On the one hand, the F major sonata is a reflection of Sibelius's happy childhood in the Finnish countryside, but on the other hand we could interpret the “meteor” as a symbol for something new, which breaks into the music of the young composer. This newness is modelled after the Finnish folk music tradition. Already in the A minor quartet we find some allusions to Finnish folk music tradition. Beyond his official study works, he tried to realize his new interest with the violin sonata. In 1889 Sibelius began to study in Berlin, and one year later was in Vienna. In the environment of international students and artists, he reflected on his own origin and thus enhanced his national style.

The parallels to Grieg are obvious, yet it is not easy to answer the title question. Given the important role Grieg played for the development of Finnish music, he was, in this sense, a “father.” Yet, many things have changed since Furuholm. Tawaststjerna, for example, wrote a lot about the importance of the Viennese classical period, especially Haydn and Mozart, and from the 19th century, names like Beethoven and Mendelssohn were important. Amongst others Tomi Mäkelä also recently wrote about other possible influences on Sibelius beside Grieg. Finally, we should not forget that Sibelius was surely the most important but not the only Finnish composer. There still are many unanswered questions in the research of Grieg's role as the “father of Finnish music”.