

Edvard Grieg and his critical and popular reception in England

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When Edvard Grieg first came to England as a 19-year-old in the company of his parents and brother in the summer of 1862 he was, of course, completely unknown. When he returned twenty-six years later, in 1888, he was welcomed in London as a conquering hero. What then had happened in the intervening years to effect this transfiguration?

At a time when Grieg's works had begun to be played in public in the Nordic countries and then in Germany, the English public at large did not know him. Apart, that is, from his earliest piano compositions, which on account of their playable compass were being taken up in musical homes in the 1870s and even being introduced into their lessons – in London at least – by the more progressive piano teachers of the day.

Throughout the 1870s, Scandinavia in music had largely been represented in English concert halls by Niels Gade, who enjoyed for a time a fair popularity. Then in 1871 reports from Leipzig of Johan Svendsen's works began, if sporadically, to appear in London's musical presses. *The Monthly Musical Record*, a magazine published by George Augener, who was the London representative of Max Abraham's C. F. Peters company in Leipzig, told us of how 'a new symphony by a young Norwegian, Johann [sic] Svendsen' had been performed at a Gewandhaus Concert.¹ This favourable, if brief, report was soon succeeded by an *unfavourable* critique of 'a new violoncello concerto by Swendsen [sic]', also given at the Gewandhaus.² Halfdan Kjerulf, too, was occasionally represented in London's concert halls.

Naturally enough, in England it is in the pages of Augener's *The Monthly Musical Record* that first references to Grieg begin to appear. The earliest that I have been able to find comes in 1874, with the sudden breakthrough in London of the Concerto in A minor.³

Two Danish brothers, now settled in London, were by this time making their names in the capital's musical circles. They were Frits and Anton Hartvigson, both of them fine pianists. Frits was described as 'one of the most accomplished among the pianists resident in London' – accomplished enough indeed to have played Liszt's first piano concerto at a Philharmonic Society concert in May 1872, and later that year giving Anton Rubinstein's Concerto in D minor at a Crystal Palace concert. In 1873 he would be officially appointed pianist to the Princess of Wales, mother of the future Queen Maud of Norway.

However, where Grieg is concerned it is Frits's brother Anton Hartvigson who seems to have been the spur to Grieg's music beginning to figure in the concert halls of London. He wrote to Grieg at the

beginning of March 1874 to tell the composer how he had introduced, ‘the other day’, together with the distinguished violinist Henry Holmes, Grieg’s first Violin Sonata. This had been at a concert given by the New Philharmonic Society in London. It had enjoyed considerable success, he reported, sending to Grieg, together with a copy of the programme, a favourable press critique of the concert.

He also gave a thumbnail sketch of Grieg’s present standing in England, having, as he reported, taken a great deal of trouble himself to extend the knowledge of Grieg’s music: ‘Your *Humoresques* are, following my own recommendation, being used by a number of our leading teachers here.’ But there was a problem: ‘It is only a shame that so many of your things have been published in Copenhagen, for music dealers here do not have any links with Copenhagen.’

In propagandising for Grieg, Hartvigson’s most significant act was, however, to have shown his copy of the Concerto to what he described as

a majority of the most prominent musicians here; they all liked it very much and I am hoping to have the opportunity of playing it here in public.⁴

Among the pianists to whom he will have shown the work was Edward Dannreuther, one of Grieg’s fellow-students at Leipzig; and Dannreuther – yet another of those many immigrant musicians domiciled in England – convinced August Manns, the Crystal Palace conductor, to programme the Concerto at a concert on 18 April 1874. Here was the most significant date of all in the story of Grieg’s introduction to British audiences. The reviews were positive, stressing Grieg’s originality, the ‘melodious charm of its leading themes’ and its ‘striking harmonic combinations’. It was noted too that – like the other very few works of his that were known – it bore the stamp of his nationality. The reviewer pointed to the fact that apart from the Concerto those few works known to us consisted simply of the *Humoresques*, opus 6, and the Piano Sonata in E minor, opus 7.⁵ The Concerto was, in other words, for England, very new music indeed. Indeed, the *Musical Times* proposed that it was

a work of much originality, the young Norwegian composer having evidently dared to think for himself, instead of imitating the style of those who have preceded him.⁶

And, for the first time, we hear of a work by Grieg being received in England ‘with the warmest applause’.

Some three months later London was treated to a quite exceptional and ground-breaking ‘Scandinavian Concert’, which included the Scherzo from Svendsen’s first Symphony, billed as ‘First time in England’ – this following a recent concert performance of this same

composer's String Octet. 'We were favourably impressed' was the press verdict on this first hearing of just the one movement of the Symphony. But the concert's major attraction had nevertheless been Grieg's Concerto, once again given by Dannreuther

in a most masterly manner... that he will have it all to himself cannot for a moment be expected, for other pianists are sure to take it up.⁷

It had taken several weeks for Grieg actually to hear of the first of these two performances of his Concerto in England, and he was mightily – if happily – surprised, commending his friend Dannreuther for having brought it forward. Another work played in London in that same year of 1874 was the second Violin Sonata, given by Wilma Norman-Neruda, accompanied by the man who would later become her husband, Charles Hallé. Early in 1875 the first Sonata reappeared at one of London's Popular Concerts. Prosper Sainon was accompanied by Hans von Bülow and the work met with 'so warm a reception' that the concert organisers were encouraged by *The Monthly Musical Record* to follow it up with a performance of the second Sonata as soon as possible.⁸

From now on these first two violin sonatas were to enjoy frequent performances. And notices of publications – together with critiques – of Grieg's works began to figure in the musical papers. Grieg had finally arrived in England, in print and in performance, even if England still had long to wait actually to see and hear the man himself interpreting his own music.

Meanwhile, in July 1875 a fresh stamp of authority was given to Grieg's music, in that a young student at the Royal Academy of Music, Lindsay Deas, chose to programme the Concerto's final movement at the Academy's annual Prize Concert – this being perhaps among the earliest mentions in the press of Grieg's name being bracketed with one of the senior educational institutions in England.

Early in 1876, and there come more and more mentions of the latest publications. The *Funeral March [for Rikard Nordraak]* is quoted as having 'an immense amount of originality of matter, harmonisation, and general treatment', with the composer being congratulated on his 'striking individuality'.⁹ Now come, too, first mentions of Grieg's songs, in connection with the publication of the two albums just issued by Peters, 'in which his remarkable individuality as a composer is strikingly apparent... we are especially pleased', intoned *The Monthly Musical Record*.¹⁰ We have to wait for nearly two years, though, to find a record of a public performance of any of the songs, with Antoinette Sterling giving 'Beim Sonnenuntergang' at one of London's Popular Concerts. Here, wrote one of the critics, were 'three beautiful songs', the other two

being by Schubert and Robert Franz.¹¹ With the *Funeral March* having been written of as a worthy counterpart to those of Beethoven and Chopin, Grieg's rapidly growing reputation is indeed by now confirmed.

What I find particularly fascinating is the fact that the British friends and contemporaries of Grieg at the Leipzig Conservatory had now achieved startling success in their own country. In his memoir of his time at Leipzig, Grieg writes with envy and admiration of these budding composers and executants – of Franklin Taylor, of John Francis Barnett, of Walter Bache, of Arthur Sullivan – for all of whom he would seem to have been predicting a glowing future. Yet of course it is only Sullivan who today is seen as having fulfilled – more or less – his early promise, while the others have been forgotten, apart from by people like myself who have become intrigued, if not actually astonished by the unexpected richness of music-making in Victorian England.

More signals of a growing interest in the North come early in 1877, when, under the rubric 'Music in Norway', Johan Svendsen's conducting in Christiania is saluted, as is the playing of two younger Norwegian women who had studied in Leipzig, Cathinca Jacobsen and Johanne Rytterager. At the end of this report – in which Grieg himself is not mentioned – the editor of the journal noted that: 'We shall be glad to hear more of Herr Svendsen and his doings, particularly of his compositions.'¹² Grieg is, however, noted in brief separate comments on the *Poetic Tone Pictures* and the *Ballade*, opus 24. Of the latter work, *The Monthly Musical Record* wrote:

That Grieg has by no means stood still, though it is some time since we have received a work of importance from his pen, it seems to afford a welcome proof.¹³

And just a month later an edition of the *Zwei Symphonische Stücke* is hailed as 'a valuable addition to our library of piano music for four hands'.¹⁴

Oddly, only the third full performance of the Concerto occurred in London at a Philharmonic Society concert in February 1877 – remembering that the first two were given in 1874 – and once again the soloist was the devoted Dannreuther, who was accorded 'liberal' applause. At least one reviewer was puzzled: 'we cannot but feel surprise that it should not ere this have been more frequently heard'.¹⁵ He should not have been worried, of course, because the Concerto's future popularity with audiences was by this time guaranteed.

It is in this same year of 1877 that Grieg gives us a first indication, while at Børve in the summer, of his strong feeling that at last he should go to

London. By now he would have been aware of how his works were being received in England, although I feel it more likely that initially Peters, rather than Augener, would have been directly informing him. The great Polish violinist Henryk Wieniawski had performed with him in Christiania a couple of months earlier and had urged him to get to London in the coming winter season so as to present his music himself to paying audiences in the city. Money however was a recurrent problem, and with Grieg's failure to obtain the Government grant that he was at the time seeking, the idea had to be put aside.

Over the succeeding years, more and more attention was given in the English musical press to Grieg's latest publications, while in July 1879 came the first major critical piece on him. Entitled 'Edvard Grieg, the Norwegian Composer', it was subtitled 'A critical study, preceded by a short chapter on folk-music and nationality considered in their relations to art-music', and it was by Frederick (originally Friedrich) Niecks, the German-born but Edinburgh-based violinist and critic – a particularly familiar name in British musical circles.¹⁶ Niecks's piece, spread over three issues of *The Monthly Musical Record*, included a short biography based on the modest amount that was yet known of Grieg's background. Excusing himself for only mentioning one or other of the orchestral compositions, which he can hardly have had the opportunity to hear, Niecks usefully commented instead on a number of the piano works, including the Concerto, at the same time offering a fair number of illustrations. There are also brief comments on the songs and on *Before a Southern Convent* – as well as on the String Quartet. In respect of the latter, Niecks is stringently and negatively critical. He tells us that Grieg does not know how to write for the string quartet:

...the work is poor in thoughts, and superabounds in mere playing with sounds. A narrow-minded, exclusive nationalism makes itself too conspicuous.

As to the last movement alone, for Niecks it 'furnishes some excellent examples of how not to write string quartets' – this, on what would come to be accepted in England as a much-loved and much-played work and a splendid example of its genre. As for the piano pieces, they are mostly much liked by Niecks. But this comment on 'Bridal Procession passing by' well illustrates at this early date, the dichotomy between the odd critic and on the other hand the audiences for Grieg's music. The work, according to Niecks,

degenerates into a mere jingling of sounds. In justice to the composer, however, I must say that this piece is much admired by some people, and has even been encored by cultivated audiences.

Well, just two years later, at the close of 1879, Dannreuther, Joachim and Clara Schumann were happy to send letters of recommendation for London, with Grieg fully intending to come over early in 1880. He didn't come, though. What happened? A breakdown in health – the kind of breakdown that was to bedevil his concert planning for the rest of his life. A further eight long years had to pass before Grieg at last appeared in London, but in the intervening period the invitations had started to roll in – from the Philharmonic Society, from the Birmingham Festival, and from the Bach Choir wanting to feature the Piano Concerto in one of their concerts.

Among the people pressing Grieg at last to get himself over to London was the young Delius, who had become a real friend in Leipzig by the end of 1887. And Grieg came, finally, in April 1888. His reception was overwhelming, and his own astonishment at the way he was greeted by his first English audience has been well documented in the major biographies. London's premier concert venue was at this time St James's Hall, in Piccadilly. All 2,500 seats were rapidly sold out. One of the daily newspapers told us that this, Grieg's first audience in England, included 'perhaps the largest assemblage of professional pianists in this country'.¹⁷ The most personal and lively account of the occasion is given by Grieg himself in a letter to Frants Beyer:

When I showed myself at the door opening onto the orchestra, the applause that broke out in the huge hall..., filled to the last seat, was so intense and interminable – I think for more than 3 minutes – that I didn't know what to do. I went on bowing in all directions, but it just wouldn't stop. Isn't that astonishing? In a foreign country... the impression that that reception made on me was all too overwhelming, in that it was so unexpected. I was perfectly aware of the fact that I was well known, but not that my art was held in such high regard here.¹⁸

A second concert was rapidly arranged. Norman-Neruda would perform the first Violin Sonata and, for some reason, just the Romance and Finale from the recently-published third; Nina would sing a number of her husband's songs; and Grieg would play several piano solos. Again, the public's response was overwhelming, with Nina – obliged to sing no less than three encores – writing to her friend Hanchen Alme:

You simply cannot imagine the ovations of which he has been the object. We have never experienced anything like it before. To me they were remarkably kind too... They called me back time after time.¹⁹

The love-affair with the music had long flourished. Now the couple themselves who took centre-ground in the affections of English audiences. It needs hardly to be said that the papers, both daily, weekly and monthly, were just as enthusiastic.

Grieg was soon back in England at the end of the summer, this time for the great Birmingham Triennial Festival, rivalled in its day only by the Lower Rhine Festival in the quality of its music-making and the international stars it was able to attract. He was to conduct there the first-ever performance of *In Autumn* for orchestra, and his friend Didrik Grønvold, also attending the festival, reported – for Norwegian readers of *Dagbladet* back home – on Grieg's arrival to rehearse the work a few days earlier in London:

When he showed himself for the first time at rehearsals... there was already great excitement in the hall, and all eyes were fixed on him. When he mounted the conductor's rostrum he was greeted with hearty applause by the orchestra and by the audience of artists, journalists and those who had been specially invited to be present.

In Birmingham itself the work was 'rapturously received', with the audience 'warmed to unwonted expressions of delight, the composer being recalled again and again'. 'I shall never forget the applause that followed', wrote Grønvold. He continued:

The next evening Grieg performed the [orchestral] Holberg Suite which had an equally great success. Each movement was followed by warm applause. At the end Grieg was called forward and received a tremendous ovation. They were great days.²⁰

'Each movement was followed by warm applause'. I think the applauding of individual movements was a fairly regular occurrence in those long-distant days. In England the habit has, I fear, made a reappearance only in recent years, something that was extremely rare in my concert-going youth. I remember being distinctly shocked, for example, when in Stockholm's Konserthus in the early 1960s I found the audience breaking the spell of Tchaikovsky's 4th symphony by applauding wildly at the end of the Scherzo. A clearly reluctant Pierre Monteux turned to take a bow.

Grieg had arrived in England, then, and he had shown himself in the three guises that would characterize all his future appearances in my country: as a pianist – on this occasion in the Concerto; as a conductor – of the *Two Elegiac Melodies*; and as accompanist to the singing of his songs. He was never to perform in England any work other than his own.

Quite extraordinarily Grieg would return to England just five and a half months later. Three times he had come, then, within the compass of just eight months. I think there is no doubt that, having set this particular standard, he would have come over to perform many more lucrative times in England but for the two special problems that faced him. One of them was his frequent bouts of ill health, but almost equally important was his fear of the open sea. After that first concert-giving visit, he decided that it would never be again by the North Sea – where he had been fearfully seasick – but that it would have to be – as he himself put it – ‘across six realms’ by rail to the English Channel coast. This was hardly an attractive prospect.

However, he did return of course. In 1889, when he gave concerts in London and Manchester, star-struck audiences filled the halls to see and hear him, with the press writing of a veritable ‘Grieg fever’ now raging in the capital. Grieg was by this time even becoming worried about his inordinate popularity with English audiences: ‘We are beginning to be lion and lioness here now’, he wrote, ‘... it’s time to get away while we can still remember who we really are.’²¹

By now, too, the British royals had started to take an enthusiastic interest in him. The Princess of Wales took her children to one of his London concerts and invited him home. Nina went to Marlborough House too, and it was there that they first met the child Princess Maud, whom they could not possibly have imagined would become their Queen within the space of two decades. And at a huge party at the French Embassy the Griegs were the main attraction. Among other of the country’s high and mighty the Prime Minister dropped in for a while and listened to Grieg’s playing and Nina’s singing. The Griegs had arrived with a vengeance.

However, it would take five more years before they returned, in spite of many plans to do so sooner. Cambridge had offered the composer an honorary doctorate, and Grieg came over to accept it in 1894. *The Musical Times* wrote of how

Grieg’s remarkable popularity with all sections of cultivated society – of those whose proclivities are not exceptionally musical as well of the inner circle of musical enthusiasts – was shown by the warmth of his reception, both in the Senate House and at the Concert in the Guildhall, at which he was afterwards present.²²

Then too there came, during the course of this particular visit, the British premiere of the *Three Pieces from Sigurd Jorsalfar*, at a Philharmonic Society concert in London. We learn of how the composer/conductor was ‘enthusiastically applauded and repeatedly called to the platform’.²³ And we furthermore read that

the extraordinary enthusiasm which marked the reception of Edvard Grieg... was a tribute of acknowledgement justly due to one who, in wealth and charm of poetic inspiration, stands foremost among living composers.²⁴

The audience, it was said, had accorded him ‘as hearty a welcome as we can remember being offered to any composer for years’. For quite some time – for the British at least – Dvorak had been the most popular of living composers. Now it was – without question – Grieg.

The longest visit to British shores came late in 1897. Among his admirers by now was Queen Victoria, and Grieg and Nina were invited to Windsor Castle to meet her and to perform for her. Of how she was ‘full of enthusiasm’ for Grieg, and how she ‘asked for more’, Grieg himself has written. There were at the same time a range of concerts in London, in the Midlands, the North-West, the West and the South, and just one concert in the land of his forefathers, Scotland. That his reputation was firmly cemented is shown around this time in a comment in *The London Musical Courier*: ‘Of all living composers, Grieg is undoubtedly the most popular, but also the most original and poetic’.²⁵

Over eight years then went by before Grieg came on his last visit to England. It was probably the one he enjoyed the most, hosted royally at Claridge’s Hotel in London and then for most of his stay in one of the most exclusive homes in Mayfair – a party being given in his honour for no fewer than 200 guests. There were visits to Buckingham Palace to meet and play to King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra – the Prince and Princess of Wales of former years – and to Oxford, where Grieg collected the second of his English honorary doctorates.

At his second (and final) concert, his performance of one group of solo pieces, according to the critic of one of the daily papers,

roused the audience to a frenzy of delight, and he was compelled to accord a double encore... At the conclusion of the concert, the crowd remained applauding until the eminent composer conceded another solo.²⁶

Well, that final encore was ‘To Spring’, and these were the last notes to be played in public by Grieg in England. His detractors had been rare – even if they had included that influential, if sniffy critic, George Bernard Shaw. But his fan base – if I may use the term – had been immense, loyal, and overwhelmingly enthusiastic in their love and appreciation for the man himself, no less than for his music.

The final two star admirers whom he met on this last visit were the conductor Henry Wood, founder of the Promenade Concerts, and Percy Grainger, the brilliant young Australian pianist. Grieg in his turn admired Grainger’s extraordinary pianism and found in him the perfect interpreter

of his music: ‘There is no Norwegian pianist at the moment’, he wrote in his diary, ‘who can touch him.’ Grainger played with extraordinary power and, as we know, rehearsed with Grieg at Trolldhaugen the Piano Concerto that was to feature on Grieg’s next visit to England just a little later in 1907. Sadly, the perfect combination was not – as we know – to happen, but Grieg’s enormous admiration for Grainger’s dynamic and bravura style of playing must surely give us a clue to how he wanted much of his music to sound on the piano.

By the time of Grieg’s death the some of the music of Christian Sinding and of Johan Halvorsen had reached the ears of our concert-goers. But of all Norwegian composers Edvard Grieg would never be supplanted in the affections of the English.

NOTES

¹ *The Monthly Musical Record*, March 1871, p.31

² *Ibid.*, May 1871, p.94

³ *Ibid.*, May 1874, p.74

⁴ Anton Hartvigson to Grieg, 2 March 1874

⁵ *The Monthly Musical Record*, May 1874, p.74

⁶ *The Musical Times*, May 1874, p.479

⁷ *The Monthly Musical Record*, August 1874, p.117

⁸ *Ibid.*, March 1875, p.41

⁹ *Ibid.*, January 1876, p.10

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, February 1876, p.24

¹¹ *Ibid.*, December 1877, p.195

¹² *Ibid.*, January 1877, pp.11-12

¹³ *Ibid.*, January 1877, p.12

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, February 1877, p.28

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, March 1877, p.48

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, July 1879, pp.98–101; August 1879, pp.113–14; September 1879, pp.129–30

¹⁷ *The Daily News*, 4 May 1888

¹⁸ Grieg to Frants Beyer, 4 May 1888

¹⁹ Nina Grieg to Hanchen Alme, 20 May 1888

²⁰ Didrik Grønvold, *Diktere og Musikere: Personlige erindringer om noen av dem*. Oslo, Cammermeyers Boghandel, 1945, pp.46–9; reproduced from articles originally published in *Dagbladet*

²¹ Grieg to Sigurd Hals, 8 March 1889

²² *The Musical Times*, June 1894, p.386

²³ *The Times*, 26 May 1894

²⁴ *Musical Opinion*, July 1894, p.621

²⁵ *The London Musical Courier*, 9 December 1897, p.361

²⁶ *Musical News*, 26 May 1906, p.526