

# The Young Grieg

---

by Patrick Dinslage:

The first part of this talk on “The Young Grieg” deals with the musical life of Bergen. It was here Grieg spent his childhood, which together with his schooling and family life was the basis for his first musical inspiration. The second part focuses on Grieg’s writings during his studies in Leipzig.

1

The greatest influence on Edvard Grieg’s musical development as a child was undoubtedly his mother Gesine Hagerup Grieg, who had studied with the well-known pedagogue Albert Methfessel in Hamburg. Ferdinand Giovanni Schediwy, his music teacher at Tanks School, which Grieg attended before leaving for Leipzig in 1858, should also be mentioned. Schediwy, a Czech musician who had arrived in Bergen in 1825, was also Cantor and organist at Bergen Cathedral, as well as a composer and conductor of several choirs. An important part of the social life of Edvard Grieg’s parents was their 19th century-style musical salon; in the friendly and hospitable atmosphere of concerts held here, Edvard had the opportunity to listen to all kinds of classical music. In fact the concert life in Bergen was not inconsiderable, as one can see from leafing through the back issues of the *Bergens Adressecontoirs Efterretninger*. Another important organ of musical propagation was the *Musikalsk Løversdags-Magazin*, a periodical which appeared every second Saturday and included small pieces for voice or piano. It was superseded in 1853 by the *Musikalsk Nyhetsblad*, which covered the same ground on a larger scale. It was through these two periodicals that the Norwegian public was introduced to new German piano music. In all likelihood the composers that were to have such a formative influence on Grieg in Leipzig were already known to him before he left Bergen. Many of Mendelssohn’s *Songs without words* and Schumann’s *Album for the Young* became known in Norway in this way. These composers, who were to have a strong formative influence on Grieg in Leipzig, were already known to him before he left Bergen.

There was an enormous wealth of material available through the lending libraries of Bergen. During Grieg’s childhood years, both *Giertsens musikalske Leiebibliotek* and *Musikalske Leie-Institut Carl Rabe* advertised regularly in *Bergens Adressecontoirs Efterretninger*. The catalogue of the *Musikalsk Leie-Institut* shows it to have had an outstanding collection of

European music of the time. Much of Chopin's piano music was included, as well as the complete Mendelssohn *Songs without words* and Schumann *Scenes from Childhood* and *Album for the Young*.

Not much is known about Grieg's youthful attempts at composition in Bergen; indeed, the documentation is limited to four small piano pieces – the so-called *Larvik's Polka* (EG 101) and the *Three Piano Pieces* (EG 102). These latter were included by Grieg in a collection entitled *23 Short Pieces for Piano* (EG 104) published in Leipzig in 1859, a volume of his first successful work dedicated to his parents. Two other compositions can be added to Grieg's "pre-professional" output; although written in Leipzig in 1858, his first year of study, they were as yet uninfluenced by his study of music theory. One year later Grieg included these two pieces as numbers 17 and 20 in his *23 Short Pieces for Piano*. Altogether then, we are dealing with six pieces from Grieg's earliest period.

#### **Example 1 – Lengsel / Sehnsucht/Longing (EG 102, nr. 1/EG 104, nr. 2)**

One of them is especially worth examining a bit more closely – the second piece from the *23 Short Pieces for Piano*. It illustrates quite well what musical vocabulary the fifteen-year-old boy managed to use, without ever having had any proper training in theory or composition. We immediately notice the form – a ternary song form. Each section is composed, with two exceptions, of four four-bar phrases. Equally striking is the sense of period style illustrated by Grieg's use of – admittedly rather primitive – major-minor parallelism in a contrasting baroque idiom. In contrast, the harmonic aspect is rather disorganised, devoted mostly to the emotional tension of the sound. Grieg's manuscript style seems rather high-handed. If seen as functional harmony, the harmonic progression which supports the melodically broken triad in bar 2 to 4 is rather strange. This triad, which also occurs in the piano sonata op. 7, could be a play on Grieg's initials. The chord C-E-G-A sharp in bar 3, when notated in this way by Grieg, is to be seen as an augmented six-five chord. Here, however, it cannot enjoy its usual role as a modified dominant of the dominant, as the succeeding dominant is missing.

We might more accurately describe the harmonic event of the first four bars as a variant of a plagal cadence, in which the subdominant chord is imbued with emotional meaning, exactly in the spirit of the *desiderio* marking in the score. The C major chord is a parallel to the fourth-step A minor. The plagal cadence was always to play an important role in Grieg's compositions; it is, in fact, a fundamental element of Norwegian folk music. Already as a young man Grieg had come into contact with a great variety of European music. Since the

plagal cadence was hardly common in European music of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries, we may probably assume that this was the first sign of Norwegian folk music influencing Edvard Grieg.

The plagal cadence also appears at other formal gravitational points in this piece. The harmonic movement in bars 10 to 13 is governed by the same kind of progression. The first eight bars of the contrasting middle section conclude in bars 24 and 25 with a plagal cadence. Bars 32 and 33 of the same contrasting section have a similar cadence. The only harmonic event of the epilogue in bars 58 to 64 is a plagal progression. Another example of particular harmonic tension occurs in bar 29; the symmetrical eight-bar phrase which runs from bars 26 to 33 reaches its climax precisely in this bar. Grieg writes a dominant-seventh chord on B flat, which in this context can also be considered as an augmented six-five chord. That Grieg writes the augmented sixth as A flat instead of G sharp, only goes to show how slender his acquaintance with enharmonic notation still was.

What is most striking in this piece, however, is Grieg's instinctive use of metre. By extending the final phrase at bars 5 to 9 from four to five bars, Grieg manages to alternate the weighting of the bars. The leading strong bar character is then maintained throughout the contrasting section, and then transforms itself seemingly effortlessly back to the opening characteristic rising metre at the beginning of the recapitulation (bar 41).

## 2

Grieg's teachers in music theory at the Leipzig Conservatory were Ernst Friedrich Richter, Dr. Robert Papperitz and Moritz Hauptmann. Richter was to stay with him throughout his study, although he initially also had lessons with Papperitz; after Grieg suffered his severe lung disorder, he was also taught by Hauptmann, the head of the music theory teachers in Leipzig.

Grieg's lecture notes, and the homework in harmony and counterpoint he did for his various teachers seems to have come down to us almost complete. The *Grieg Collection* has in its possession three hefty volumes entitled "Exercise Books", in which Grieg wrote the fine copies of his harmony and counterpoint exercises. The *National Music Collection*, at the National Library of Norway in Oslo, has a further three volumes, which are more in the nature of rough sketchbooks. Especially interesting is a 176-page oblong book which

contains *Exercises in Counterpoint*. In addition to his exercises in counterpoint and harmony, this book contains sketches for new compositions which cast an interesting light on Grieg's earliest works. There are also two more oblong *Music Sketchbooks* in the *National Music Collection*. Each contains eight black cardboard pages with red stavelines probably intended for multiple use.

In these six books we find all the notes that Grieg made on music theory as a student. The books are a real treasure, providing a perfect record of music theory as it was taught by the leading teachers in the first decades of the Leipzig Conservatory, which was founded in 1843 – and this, moreover, in the hand of Grieg, who was to become one of the Conservatory's most famous alumni.

Grieg's study of music theory began with an introduction to elementary musical theory, a sort of *Propaedeutikum*, given by Papperitz. Then followed theoretical exercises in four parts, with progressions and figured basses. In contrast, Richter's lessons began at once with four-part exercises. There soon followed exercises from both teachers in four-part harmony using the C-clef. Exercises with a *cantus firmus* running through the voices are harmonically oriented towards a chorale. In the middle of this work for Papperitz, we find a piece of work which Grieg has called "Selbstversuch".

### **Example 2 - Selbstversuch**

Here, Grieg breaks away from the constricting rules of the former exercises. His "Selbstversuch" sounds completely unlike anything seen in his previous exercises, and it is obviously an attempt at a new contrapuntal sound. Figure 7 in bar 2 of the figured bass requires a suspended seventh before the six-chord of the seventh degree. Grieg however, intensifies the chord by inserting a B flat as a minor ninth over the A fundamental; the result is that the first four bars is a perfect example of the "question and answer" harmony, in which the dominant appears as chord of the diminished seventh.

The second four-bar phrase is harmonically dominated by the subdominant, with an unprepared suspended ninth in bar 6. The second chromatic event of this exercise is the continuation of the subdominant over the altered dominant of the dominant in the final cadence. This harmonic movement goes completely against the harmonic language that Grieg had used up to now in his harmony exercises. The pencil corrections to his exercises are in Grieg's own hand. His proposal to lower the tenor voice by an octave can hardly be seen as an improvement. The way in which Grieg notes the bass of the dominant of the

dominant as A flat shows that he was thinking horizontally rather than vertically. The rough sketch at the end of the exercises shows his train of thought, inasmuch as he writes the chord of the altered dominant of the dominant as E – G sharp – B flat – D – F.

This is the first time that Grieg uses the same exercise both for Papperitz and Richter. The “Selbstversuch” eight-bar phrase that had been prepared for Papperitz appears in Richter’s book under the title “Chorale”. We can assume that the Papperitz version was the earlier of the two. In the Richter version the tenor voice is indeed an octave lower. There is no longer any uncertainty in the notation of the bass of the altered dominant of the dominant. The syncopation in both middle voices in bars 5 to 6 are more marked here than in the Papperitz version.

Grieg’s awareness of contemporary music is evident from the way he treats a modulation exercise. Strange to say only Papperitz gave instruction in modulation. Grieg handles a modulation from A minor to D minor in the following way:

### **Example 3: Modulation**

In the last two bars we find an almost exact quote from Schumann’s *Scenes of Childhood* "Fürchtenmachen", here transposed from E minor to A minor.

### **Example 4: Fürchtenmachen**

The theory exercises in chorale-style with the wandering *cantus firmus* were to be developed by Richter into full chorale arrangements. Each chorale melody was to be developed into a sort of *contrapunctus simplex* (note against note) and then for a second time harmonised like a choral prelude. In all exercises the aim was to develop a harmony in a contrapuntal style.

In the autumn of 1859 Richter started a new chapter in his instruction, which Grieg now expressly described as counterpoint. The new material is presented in a traditional manner in two-part style. The teaching traditions of music theory at the Leipzig Conservatory can be seen even more clearly in the lessons of Hauptmann. This was the tradition based on the work of Johann Joseph Fux and his system for teaching counterpoint. Extraordinarily enough, as Hauptmann began his teaching of two-part counterpoint one and a half years later than Richter, Grieg was to find himself, an already more advanced student, beginning once again at the beginning.

It was a matter of great good fortune for Grieg scholars everywhere that the *National Music Collection* in Oslo was able to acquire his *Exercises in Counterpoint* at a Sotheby's auction in London. In addition to rough ideas and preparatory notes, the book contains compositional sketches made by Grieg during his Leipzig years. We find, for instance, disconnected thematic jottings for two of the *Three Piano Pieces* that Grieg composed in April 1860 (EG 105).

The two *Music Sketchbooks* are something of a curiosity. The difficulty in deciphering the sketches makes it almost impossible to place them. For instance, the two volumes contain attempts at fugues that are mostly abandoned after a two-voice exposition. Here we are dealing with thematic response, that of the relation between Dux and Comes.

But there are also other, more amusing notes, to be found here. Grieg was well-known for his fondness of playing cards with his fellow students, and indeed he kept records of who won and lost. If the initial **G** stand for Grieg, then on this day Grieg was hardly enjoying a winning streak. He won only the first and last games.

I would like to express my warmest thanks to the Musicological Institute of Oslo University, where I spent eight weeks as a guest lecturer this Spring. Their co-operation and technical help was first-class. No less thanks are due to the *Grieg Collection*, who with the help of the State Record Office and their wonderful technical resources made a great deal of material available to me on CD-ROM, and to the *National Music Collection* in Oslo for the gift of additional material on photocopy and film. Thanks to this concerted action, I was able to peruse about 500 pages of Grieg's manuscript.