

## Mozart in Romantic Guise

Mozart was without a doubt one of Edvard Grieg's favourite composers. When his mother gave lessons or entertained family and friends for an evening of music, it was the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart which made the greatest impression on him. As he grew older, Mendelssohn and Schumann became his idols – without usurping Mozart's prominence among his favourite composers. The thirteen-year-old Edvard Grieg, a pupil at the Tanks school in Bergen, was given a Mozart biography by his Czech music teacher Ferdinand Joseph Schediwy on the occasion of Mozart's hundredth anniversary in 1856. In the course of his four years of studies at the music conservatoire in Leipzig, Grieg was required to write a string quartet. He felt that his tuition so far had not adequately prepared him for such a task, and approached the assignment by first studying the quartets of Mozart and Beethoven.

At a concert he gave on returning to Bergen as a graduate musician he performed piano trios by Mozart together with his cellist brother John, and the famed violinist Ole Bull.

As a student Grieg listened to a lot of Mozart's music, and later programmed many of his works as a performer and in his capacity as orchestra director in Oslo and Bergen.

During the winter of 1876/77 he arranged four of Mozart's nineteen piano sonatas for two pianos by adding his own, newly composed part. In a letter of April 23, 1877 to his friend, the Danish composer August Winding, he wrote about his composing: "My free evenings I have spent composing a 'Piano secondo' to Mozart's Piano Sonatas, and have tried them out with Mrs Lie-Nissen. Much of it sounds excellent; so good, in fact, that I have reason to hope that Mozart will not turn in his grave".<sup>1</sup>

Certainly there was no reason to be afraid. Erika Lie-Nissen, one of the first to include Grieg's piano concerto in her repertoire, was one of Norway's foremost pianists.

The trial run-throughs of the sonatas with her gave Grieg the confidence to believe that he had succeeded in melting Mozart's musical idiom with his own, although he still maintained a fear of having violated the music of his classical hero.

One might be surprised that Grieg chose to give so much time to such a project, but music history shows that he was far from alone in doing so. There are many examples of composers borrowing ideas from colleagues' music, or reworking it into something new. In such instances the idea and intention is almost always to express admiration and respect. In some cases composers used the note-names of the great masters, such as BACH, GADE or SCHUMANN, as musical motifs in their work; in other cases they borrowed musical material which they worked into their own music. In short, we find the whole spectrum of compositional possibilities, from the borrowing of familiar themes to reworking of entire pieces, such as with Grieg.

What is special about Grieg's adaptations of the Mozart sonatas is that he has not reworked them in the traditional – and perhaps derogatory – manner. Grieg's unusual achievement lies in the fact that he has retained Mozart's text unchanged<sup>2</sup>, adding an entirely new part which can be performed together with the original. When both parts are played, they interweave and become something entirely new. To create an amalgamation of the two pianos, they must be placed close to each other so that the performers can see and hear each other and thus achieve the desired compositional unity. What, then, is the artistic motivation behind such a project? Two different musical styles meet in dialogue, ending up in a symbiosis of colour and texture. Mozart's music expands in time and space. Grieg's additional piano part is a romantic's respectful embrace, a romantic commentary: Mozart in romantic guise.<sup>3</sup>

When Grieg inserts a pedal-point under the theme of the first movement of the C-major sonata he veils the clear Alberti bass accompaniment, giving the music a romantic colour. What was originally a simple, innocent “Sonata facile” is filled out and transported to a new dimension through Grieg’s intervention.

On May 27, 1877 Grieg wrote to his publisher in Leipzig:

“This winter I have been working on something which has interested me; I have composed a separate second part to several of Mozart’s sonatas. This work was first intended for use in teaching, but came to be played in concert where Mrs Lie-Nissen gave a masterful rendition of my part to the first sonata (in F). Mozart’s part was played by Miss Rytterager (a student at the conservatoire in Leipzig); the entire “narrative” made such an impression that the ladies had to return twice to receive applause. As soon as I have finished some more sonatas, I will dedicate them all to Prof. Kullack. Then with any luck the publishers Peters might take them on.”<sup>4</sup>

Grieg’s hope that Peters would publish the Mozart adaptations came to nothing, and it was not until 1879-1881 that they finally appeared individually in a E. W. Fritzsche edition. Grieg found it hard to accept the puritan attitude expressed by Peters and a reviewer in a Swedish music periodical.

Grieg received the following reply from Peters:

“The world expects original compositions from you and not, if you will excuse my mentioning it, second piano parts to Mozart’s sonatas! Such work, however diligently executed, I would not, if I were you, publish at all; at least not in the immediate future.”<sup>5</sup>

It is possible, of course, that Max Abraham of Peters was merely following the publisher’s policy and that he nonetheless recognized Grieg’s achievement. The same cannot be said, however, of the Swedish music critic Adolf Lindgren. In 1886 he made the following comment on Grieg’s adaptation of the C minor fantasia:

“Grieg’s setting for two pianos of Mozart’s fantasia is a complete blunder, a part-Norwegian version of Mozart, for which a genuine musician ought to have more respect.”<sup>6</sup>

One can say what one will of Grieg’s intentions; the Mozart adaptations were certainly not written out of any lack of respect for Mozart. In January 1906 he was asked by the “Neue freie Presse” in Vienna to write an article in conjunction with a series of commemorative concerts marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mozart’s birth. Grieg considered this request a great honour, writing in his diary:

“What a joy to be able to honour my immortal master, my childhood’s love!”<sup>7</sup>

In 1896 Grieg had written a long Mozart article which was published on several occasions. In the article he mentions his Mozart adaptations several times:

“The author of this article has himself attempted, with the use of a second piano, to introduce to Mozart’s piano sonatas a sound and colour which directs itself to our modern ear; in his self-defence he would also like to add that he did not change a single one of Mozart’s notes, thus showing the master the piety that he is due.” Grieg wrote elsewhere that he had attempted “a modernization to show my admiration for an old master.”<sup>8</sup>

At the end of the article Grieg counters the vain criticism of his puritan contemporaries by referring to Mozart himself:

“Mozart, to us, is the very incarnation of childlike joy, amiable goodwill and unpretentiousness. He was capable of putting on his Magic Flute in Schikaneder’s shed of a theatre without compromising his artistic dignity. If he were able to look down on us now, he would be bound to say: ‘You modern masters, why all this fuss? Why do you put on such airs? It has nothing to do with art; it simply destroys basic human sensitivity, the true salt of art.’”<sup>9</sup>

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Jeg har i mine senere Fritimer beskjæftiget mig med at komponere «Piano 2<sup>do</sup>» til Mozartske Klaversonater, og prøvede for nylig med Fru Lie-Nissen. Meget klinger virkelig svært bra, ja, så bra, at jeg har Grund til å håbe, at Mozart «ikke vender sig».” *Edvard Grieg, Brev i utvalg, 1862-1907*, (ed. Finn Benestad), Bd. II, Oslo 1998, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> As a basis for his transcriptions Grieg used the 1867 Peters Edition edited by Louis Köhler (since reissued). In the first edition of his adaptation of four Mozart sonatas, published by Ernst Wilhelm Fritsch (Leipzig 1879/80) Grieg added the footnote: “In order to obtain the correct ensemble, it is essential that each player has a copy of the full score. Failing this, a copy of the Peters Edition can be used by one of the players. Care should be taken however, to enter correctly all the revised dynamics and expression marks beforehand.” Grieg stressed that he had not altered one note of Mozart’s music. It must be said, however, that this strict approach did not apply to Mozart’s dynamics, which were amplified in the interests of greater contrast.

<sup>3</sup> In his essay “*Eine Norwegisierung Mozarts?*” “*Zu Edvard Griegs Bearbeitungen Mozartscher Klaviersonaten*” Peter Jost examines some characteristics of Grieg’s own compositional style. Of particular interest is the use of the “Grieg Motif” in the second couplet of the Rondo of the C major sonata KV 545 bar 29. Jost’s harmonic analysis of the bridge passage to the second subject of the first movement of the F major sonata KV 333 seems more questionable, however, failing as it does to take account of the harmonic rhythm, a central feature of any harmonic analysis. However, one can only applaud his conclusion that Grieg’s transcriptions are a “historical and period document of the first order”. Jost positions Grieg historically midway between the transcription tradition, characteristic of the early and middle 19th century, and the adherence to the original text which characterised the latter part of the century, culminating eventually in the emergence of the “Urtext” idea. Peter Jost “*Eine Norwegisierung Mozarts?*” “*Zu Edvard Griegs Bearbeitungen Mozartscher Klaviersonaten*”, in „Im Dienst der Quellen zur Musik“, (ed. Paul Mai) commemorative edition Gertraud Haberkamp, Tutzing 2002, pp. 595-607, in particular pp. 604, 605 and 607 (with acknowledgement to Dr Ernst Günter Heinemann from Henle Publishers for his invaluable assistance).

<sup>4</sup> *Edvard Grieg, Briefwechsel mit dem Musikverlag C. F. Peters, 1863-1907*, (ed. Finn Benestad and Hella Brock) Frankfurt/M., Leipzig, London, New York 1997, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> “Griegs sättning af Mozarts fantasi för 2 pianon är endast ett förfuskande, till en del förnorskande af Mozart, för hvilken en verklig musiker bör ha mera aktning.” Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg, mennesket og kunstneren*, Oslo 1980, p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> “Hvilken Glæde, at kunne få Lov til at hylde min udødelige Mester, min Barndoms Kjærlighet, Mozart i hans eget herlige Wien!” *Edvard Grieg Dagbøger*, (ed. Finn Benestad) Bergen 1993, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> Edvard Grieg, *Mozart*, in: *Edvard Grieg. Artikler og taler* (ed. Øystein Gaukstad), Oslo 1957, pp. 146-161, here p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., p. 160.