

Peer Findeisen:

Musical Ethnofolklorism As Expression of National Cultural Independence

In Grieg's closest proximity an ethnofolkloristic movement begins, forming a Nordic counterpiece to Bartok's and Kodaly's (in Hungary) southeast-European research in folk music. What Grieg and Bartok have in common are the compositorial premise and the will to form a national music on the basis of popular musical folklore. Both were pianists, and in Grieg's late piano cycle *Slåtter* op. 72 we find treatments of musical primitivism, which Bartok, some 9 years later – i.e. one year before his trip to Norway – takes to its extreme in his scandalous *Allegro Barbaro* in an anti-romantical fashion.

It might seem preposterous to declare Grieg's op. 72 as inaugurating musical Modernity. (However, I shall try to prove this thesis throughout this paper/presentation). To this end, I would like to mention some backgrounds, circumstances and consequences of this adventurous project, which are interesting in the context of ethno-folklorism.

The notion “classical music” signifies a, however vague, yet pragmatically valuable formula for the totality of a musical *Esperanto* normative of central Europe. Contrary to this, folk music seems to be a musical dialect – parallel to regional language peculiarities – in the eyes of modern ethno-folklorism, which to this day is indebted to the pioneer achievements of Bartok and Kodaly. The humanistic guiding idea of folk songs in Herder and Goethe's vicinity consisted in the concept of educating the people with simple, yet artistic songs. However, musical field research produced a picture quite contrary to this idea: highly complex by no means commonly understandable melodies of “noble simplicity”, written in strong dialect, which testify to the experience of a world not graspable by bourgeois (*bürgerlich*) attitude and lifestyle.

In 1930, Kodaly writes in an article on folk music in the Hungarian Dictionary of Music:

“Viewed from the highest artistic standpoint, it (= folk music) means more to us than to those peoples, which for centuries have developed their own independent musical style. In them folk music and artistic music have mingled in a way that a German will find in Bach and Beethoven what we in our villages still have to search for: organic life of a national tradition.”

Grieg as well as Bartok had to endure the conflict between their German education as composers and their native folklore with its own laws, the latter serving them as basis for the acquisition of their musical “native tongue”. The way in which Bartok's composition teacher Koessler principally treats musical dialects in a condescending manner (in the example of

Debussy's *Pelleas*) is indicative of the same arrogance which Grieg was to experience in Leipzig and later, in the encounter with Gade, when he was charged with "Norwegianization" ("*Norwegerei*").

To Grieg and Bartok, the aesthetically "principal of native tongue" is the expression of a strife towards cultural independence which since the time of national romanticism runs parallel to political movements of independence in Hungary and Norway. This understanding of cultural autonomy I meant to indicate in the title as "national cultural independence". Bartok and Kodaly saw their life's task in researching into regional music dialects. Other than Bartok, Grieg – however seeing the necessity for such a science – left this task to future generations.

The *Slåtter* Op. 72 are Grieg's strongest and most modern contribution to musical folklore. When Johan Halvorsen transcribed the music of the Telemark Hardanger fiddler Knut Johannessen Dahle in the fall of 1901 – music explicitly conceived as "peasant's folklore – a tradition of contests in folk music (*Kappleik*) for Hardingfele had just begun to emerge.

A few facts:

- The *Slåtter* were a completely new project in ethno-music, since for the first time transcriptions of authentic folk music formed the basis for internationally renowned Norwegian concert music. Without exception, Halvorsen transcribed from hearing (!) dances from the repertoire of the Hardanger fiddler Knut Johannessen Dahle, in all 17 pieces, in which the traditional link of generations of peasant's music from teachers to pupils and to pupils' pupils becomes apparent. The primary source of information regarding circumstances and contents of this musical "field research" is the most insightful three-way correspondence between Dahle, Halvorsen and Grieg, edited by Øyvind Anker.
- From Halvorsen's letters to Grieg we know that the ornaments and rhythm of music for the Hardingfele (S) were the most difficult to transcribe. In the case of the Telespringar – i.e. a skipping dance in the Telemark tradition – the shift of rhythm (by prolonging single beats with a corresponding radical cutting of the oftentimes triolic third part of the beat) poses a serious problem of Rubato. As a result, in Nr. 13 (among others), which is a typical example of the eastern-Norwegian Telespringar, the time of the primal beat and the full beat (?) have been confused: All beat strokes are set one beat too early; they would have had to be set one quarter beat further to the right. The examples of Halvorsen's

rhythmical disorientation are not at all to be understood as a lack in competence but as an authentic problem in musical dialects.

- Grainger, Grieg's ideal interpreter, idealised with quotes from Parzifal, writes on August 2, 1907 – thus few weeks before Grieg's death, from Trolldhaugen, where he had been cordially received:

“Grieg so likes our British Folksongs. I have collected a whole lot of them with the help of the phonograph. Grieg is very interested in the phonograph, and next year I am travelling up here again in order to collect songs in the Norwegian dialect (sic!), with the help of the phonograph, together with Grieg's good friend Frants Beyer.”

- Grainger maintained friendly contacts to Arne Bjørndal, the master student of Hardingfele player Ola Mosafinn (the *Kappleik* winner of 1908), who as of 1911 became one of the most important collectors of folk music. The date is marked by his receiving a scholarship by the Norwegian government. Without governmental financial assistance, Bjørndal would never have disposed over the necessary funding for travel and lodging. A year before, in 1910, the application had been rejected, despite excellent public recommendations of Arne Garborg, Johan Halvorsen, Frants Beyer, and others. Not until Grainger congratulates Bjørndal for his transcription work in a letter, which was published on October 15, 1910, in the *Bergens Tidende*, does the international pressure, apparently needed for such a project, become so strong, that the scholarship application is reconsidered in the Norwegian Parliament and is awarded this time around.
- The folk music contests (*Kappleik*) had been established by Grieg and his closest collaborators in 1896. Among the jury were Grieg's best friend, Frants Beyer, and his brother John. The first winner of the *Kappleik*, Hardingfele musician Sjur Helgeland, remained a lifelong friend of Grieg.

This sketch of facts provides – I hope - a minimal but plausible chain of arguments for my thesis stated at the outset. In this sense, at the latest in his *Slåtter* op 72 one can herald Grieg regarding Norwegian ethno-folklorism as Harald Herresthal once fittingly put it: He was “the prophet everybody had been awaiting.”

Peer Findeisen, translated by Dr. Sebastian Luft

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