

Grieg's Transcriptions and the 19th Century Piano Piece: op. 17 Reflecting Typologies¹

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This article deals very briefly with the following questions: How are Grieg's transcriptions for piano (op. 17) using their original or earlier musical material? How do they treat form, harmony, melody, and texture? And finally, how do they reflect – if at all – some associations of 19th century piano genres in general?

Edvard Grieg published his *25 Norske Folkeviser og Dandser* in 1870. In the year 1868 he completed his *Piano concerto A minor* op. 16, and he was working on the songs of op. 18 *Romancer og Sange*, when he in the summer of 1869 first came across a recent copy of Ludvig Lindeman's historic folksong collection *Ældre og nyere Norske Fjeldmelodier* (items 1–592 published in 1853–1867, and items 593–636 posthumously in 1907). Grieg chose to transcribe or rearrange some pieces from the numbers between 292 and 522 in the Lindeman collection (publ. 1858–1863). One has to bear in mind that Lindeman had already transcribed his collected field notations for the piano.

Here we have the following process: the original tunes as heard on the field → Lindeman's field notes → Lindeman's piano arrangements → Grieg's transcriptions based on Lindeman's work. The term *arrangement* is used here to refer to the *change of medium*. Grieg's pieces could then be called *transcriptions* of Lindeman's versions.²

Edvard Grieg was not the first Norwegian composer who employed folk music either directly or as a source of inspiration. Influences from folk music can be traced in the works of the preceding generation of composers as well: Ole Bull (1810–1880), Thomas Tellefsen (1823–1874), Ludvig M. Lindeman (1812–1887) and Halfdan Kjerulf

(1815–1868). Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe points out that during the 1860s and 1870s Grieg had still occasional associations with Ole Bull, particularly in the summer 1864 when the violinist “may have contributed greatly to stimulating Grieg’s awakening interest in Norwegian folk music. It seems significant in this connection that Grieg in 1869–1870 dedicated to him his first arrangements of folk melodies”, that is op. 17.³

Nils Grinde calls the period from 1860 to 1890 *the golden age* of Norwegian music.⁴ Grieg’s creative work covers that period. His awareness of his relationship with the national, on one hand, and with the European, mainly German cultural heritage, on the other hand, becomes more focused later on. His identity as a Norwegian composer took gradually shape. He was at the same time both national and cosmopolitan.⁵

One might classify piano transcriptions in categories such as:

1. A *literal* transcription aims to be as faithful as possible to the original notation.
2. An *imitative* transcription *imitates the sound* of the original despite the new medium.
3. A *pianistic* transcription is characterized by the instrument. This type may be intended for a concert performance, and added pianistic effects may be found. This also refers to certain specific instrument figurations, so called *Spielfiguren*.⁶
4. Fantasies, rhapsodies, and paraphrases make another group that could be called *new compositions* (e.g. 19th-century popular opera fantasies and paraphrases).
5. *Practical needs*, including hints of instrumentation, are visible in transcriptions used in substituting the full score, and helping for example the co-repetition of an opera.

Grieg’s transcriptions, in his *Norske Folkeviser og Dandser*, seem to fit mostly in the second (*imitating* the sound) and third (*pianistic*) categories. Sometimes Grieg uses pedal points imitating the open strings of a violin (e.g. no.1 *Springdands*, no. 4 *Nils Tallefjorden*). In some cases, he decides to use variation technique (e.g. no 8 *Grisen*, no. 1 *Springdands* or no. 16 *Ich weiss ein kleines Mädchen* (the theme appears also in the left hand). Grieg may add a bridge or change one section, usually near the end of the transcription, into a concert piece style (no. 5 *Jölstring*).

How does Grieg treat the previous material he chose to use in his op. 17?

His treatment of melodies is practically *literal*. He hardly changes them at all. The melodies are originally either instrumental or vocal. Thirteen of the total of 25 melodies have a text. The instrumental ones are different kind of dances (*slåtter*) that were originally played by *Hardingfele*, or violin. Ludvig M. Lindeman did not specify which instruments were used in the original pieces. However, he gives the name of the village or the district where he collected the music. The question of faithfulness to the original folk tune is somewhat irrelevant. Lindeman based his arrangements mostly on his own fieldwork, whereas Grieg relied basically on Lindeman’s piano arrangements. In this capacity Grieg may have felt freer to emphasize or depart from certain harmonic and modal characteristics he felt differently.

The influence of folk instruments and dances is an interesting question as well. Certainly Grieg uses folk rhythms, underlines some modal features, imitates the open strings of the violin, and uses drones. But does the use of keys reflect something of importance? A total of 76% of the *used keys* – nineteen of the twenty-five pieces – are based on a tonic in G, D, or A, i.e. they seem to be connected with the open strings of a violin. Is that a coincidence? Looking for example at all the 66 *Lyriske Stykker* we may find that forty-nine of them (63,7%) are related to the keys with a tonal center of G, D, A or E. Perhaps, it is worth doing some more research around this question.

How do Grieg's transcriptions treat form, harmony and texture?⁷

In terms of *form* Grieg often adds an *introduction* (in 21 cases) the length of which is 1–4 measures, thus establishing the accompanying figuration. In 16 transcriptions he adds a *coda* of 1–16 measures. In four cases (numbers 1, 8, 12, and 16) the transcription is a set of *variations*, but in 10 pieces Grieg simply repeats the melody or a part of it as such (nos. 4–7, 9, 11, 15, 17, 18 and 23). In some cases he adds a short *transitory* passage (nos. 5, 8, and 18). These additions, of course, change the structure of the piece. One can see this especially in some cadential passages or in cases where Grieg rounds off irregular phrases. Lindeman's transcriptions are 7–36 measures long, whereas Grieg's pieces are between 13–60 measures in length.

The question of *form* can be clarified with three examples (a–c):

(a) *Springdands* (no. 1) consists of four variations and a short coda. Each variation has its basic musical idea, and the harmonic ideas as well as the intensity of the texture are growing along with the piece.

The first variation is a plain melody (with the lydian fourth) above the repeated drone (tonic-dominant). The second variation has the same tune, but the organ point is on the tonic, and the left hand creates a complete scale in two additional voices. The triple meter in melody is contrasted with a clear duple accentuation in the left hand. The third variation is technically a duet, but the organ point and the chromatic descending melody are both to be found in the left hand. The fourth variation is a brilliant pianistic version with full harmonies and heavy accentuation.

(b) In *Solfager og Ormekongen* (no. 12) the melody is repeated twice, both times with bold harmonies and rich chromaticism.

(c) In *Nils Tallefforden* (no. 4) the melody is repeated literally, but has a rather surprising coda. Unfortunately this addition takes away the obvious modal character.

The above examples (*Springdands*) and (*Solfager*) are illustrative in showing Grieg's originality in his early harmonic practice. According to Geirr Tveitt, instead of using the folk influences, Grieg here suggested his own harmony.⁸

Grieg uses the same *keys* as Lindeman. However, in no. 5 (*Jölstring*) he changes the meter (3/8, 2/8 and 3/8) in the end of the coda. The new texture in the end of the tran-

scription sounds like a brilliant concert piece. This is the case in the humoristic dance no. 18 (*Stabbelaaten*) as well.

Lindeman sometimes creates duets with contrapuntal writing, but in some cases he also adds richer harmonies. Grieg uses greater harmonic possibilities than Ludvig M. Lindeman in general. Lindeman's no. 319 (*Niels Talleffjoren*) is mostly a duet, whereas Grieg begins with a triple organ point and continues with full harmonies. Grieg solves the "problem" of dominant cadence by adding a coda whereby he changes the modal character of the cadence. Thus the dominant cadence turns into V→I. Grieg changes both the *harmony* and the *texture* of this piece in a rather personal manner as well.

Nicholas Temperley refers to an interesting idea of typology for piano pieces and their associations with 19th-century piano genres, such as *musical function* (e.g. prelude), *dance* (e.g. saltarello), *state of mind* (e.g. caprice), *verbal reference* (e.g. dithyrambe), *vocal* (e.g. Air or Lied ohne Worte), *visual idea* (e.g. arabesque), *action* (e.g. march), etc.⁹ Are they of any use here?

The twenty-five pieces that Edvard Grieg decided to transcribe are mostly *songs* and partly *dances*. In terms of musical function the first group has a vocal and verbal background. They are, in a way, songs without words for piano. Some have a short story to tell (e.g. *Nils Talleffjorden*), but they all have the Norwegian colour that one might call *exotic*: quite different from that of the musical capitals of 19th century Europe. The dance pieces could be classified into several overlapping categories. They may be *exotic functional dances* with almost *visual action*. The same designations could be used for mazurka, tarantella or bolero, all of which represent different cultures. The associations may help us in the general approach or in the orientation of the music, and it is in this respect I give a glance into this idea as well.

As a composer Grieg became more aware of his style. In a way he gradually, in the course of his career, expressed his thoughts in ways that can be understood as some kind of aesthetic attitude or program. He knew he was making his own guesses of the "hidden harmonies" of folk music. He knew that in transcribing folk melodies for the piano (e.g. *Slåtter*) he might "commit a sin which he could not resist". He knew his background was always in Norway, and he "could never therefore find the heart to violently tear out the roots", even if he was taught into the "German romanticism of the Schumann school". Grieg preferred the "sincerity in expression" and "sharing" of the "artistic experience". He in fact had a rather clear aesthetic vision of his creative work.¹⁰

Grieg's op.17 *Norske folkeviser og dandse* reflects in a charming style, with a personal and non-imitative way, and with Norwegian colour, the rich typology of the 19th century piano piece. This influence extends well into the 20th century, reaching such composers as Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Jean Sibelius and Selim Palmgren. As an example, Palmgren's Prelude op.17 no.10 (*I folkton*) was played here.

Notes

- 1 This short paper was presented in the conference arranged by The International Grieg Society in Bergen, Norway, 30 May–2 June 2007 under the theme: *Beyond Grieg – Edvard Grieg and his Diverse Influences on Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries*.
- 2 I find quite practical the definition by Evelyn Howard Jones: “Arrangements I would call a playing of the notes in another medium, transcriptions a recreation or making-over with regard to their imaginative and creative content.” Jones, 1935, p. 305. In general, the use of these terms is not always consistent.
- 3 Schjelderup-Ebbe 1964, p. 94.
- 4 Grinde 1971, see pp. 158–216.
- 5 Monrad-Johansen 1945, p. 269.
- 6 Bessler 1957, pp. 12–38.
- 7 Some of these comments have been published earlier in Saari, 1996, pp. 386–399.
- 8 Tveitt 1943, p. 129. Liv Greni (1954) has a somewhat different view on this point.
- 9 This idea was presented in a seminar on 19th century piano pieces in 1987 held by professor Nicholas Temperley (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).
- 10 See e.g. Kortsens (ed.), 1972 and 1973, and Saari 1989, pp. 161–176, based on Grieg’s letters, essays and articles. When Grieg finally found his own voice, that was his “first success”, as he himself wrote.

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Summary

This article deals briefly with following questions: How are Grieg’s transcriptions for piano (op.17) using original or earlier musical material? How do they treat form, harmony, melody, and texture? And how do they reflect – if at all – some associations of 19th century piano genres in general?

One might classify transcriptions in categories

such as (1) Literal, (2) Imitative, (3) Pianistic, (4) New compositions, (5) Practical needs (e.g. piano score for opera). Grieg seems to favor, perhaps, the second and third types.

Grieg sometimes adds an introduction or a coda. Occasionally he builds the transcription into a set of variations, and sometimes he just adds short bridges.

The influence of folk instruments is also a valid question. Does the use of keys reflect something of importance? Are they connected with folk instruments, e.g. the open strings, the use of drones?

An interesting idea of typology for piano pieces

and their associations of 19th-century piano genres exists, such as musical function (e.g. prelude), dance (saltarello), vocal (air), exotism (halling), visual (arabesque), action (march) etc. These can be useful mental or musical approaches.

Key words

Transcription, folk music, form, genres, typology

Biography

After graduating from Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration, Seppo Saari continued his music studies at Helsinki Conservatory and Sibelius Academy where he took his diploma (music theory) and teacher exams in piano, theory, solfège and music education. He also studied musicology at the Universities of Helsinki and Utrecht, and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and completed Master of Music and

Philic. degrees in musicology while continuing his studies in the Ph.D. program. Seppo Saari also held teaching assistantship during 3 years at the University of Illinois. In Finland he has been manager of Turku Philharmony and Assistant Director of a conservatory, and most recently lecturer of music and musicology at the University of Turku, Teacher Training Department 1998–2004.