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Johan Halvorsen's music to the "Troll-play" Fossegrimen – a conversion with Grieg as well as Norwegian Folk music

Although Halvorsen was 21 years younger than Edvard Grieg, he was still one of his closest friends and colleagues in the later years of the latter. The friendship started when they both were staying in Leipzig 1887, and when Halvorsen married Grieg's niece Annie 1894, they were also close related by marriage. After the turn of the century, Grieg spent most of the winter seasons in the Norwegian capital, in which Halvorsen held the position as Norway's leading conductor of Norway's largest professional symphony orchestra at the National Theatre, opened 1899.

During his first years in Kristiania, Halvorsen was writing substantial amounts of music for dramas such as *Gurre*, *Tordenskjold* and *The King*. Despite considerable success these dramas were all overshadowed by *Fossegrimen*, which was to be one of the most performed dramas ever on Norwegian stages. *Fossegrimen*, by the author, Sigurd Eldegard, called a "troll-play in four parts," had its premiere at the National Theatre in January 1905. By this occasion Halvorsen was not just composer and conductor, but also soloist on the Norwegian "national instrument" Hardanger fiddle, which for the first time in history was used as solo instrument with symphony orchestra.

Halvorsen was quite familiar with music for the Hardanger fiddle. In 1894 he visited local fiddlers during his honeymoon in Hardanger in order to be acquainted with their manner of playing traditional Norwegian dance tunes. The following year he obtained a Hardanger fiddle himself, and on three occasions acted as juror at *Vestmannalagets kappleiker* in Bergen, a traditional Norwegian music and dance contest at which Edvard Grieg was present as listener several times during the 1890's.

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In 1901 Edvard Grieg commissioned Halvorsen to transcribe Hardanger fiddle tunes played by the old Telemark fiddler Knut Dahle. In his youth Dahle had learned tunes from famous folk musicians such as Gibøen and Myllarguten, and he now wished to preserve them for future generations. For Grieg and Halvorsen it was of special importance to "save" material from a fiddler of the "old", traditional school, since many folk musicians at this time had incorporated newer features in their playing.

Grieg's usage of Dahle's tunes as source of his *Slåtter* op. 72 (1903) is well known. From Halvorsen he received the 17 tunes written down with the two voices using a drone technique called "*vekselbordun*", i.e. using more or less "dissonant" loose string – some times over, some times under the melody note – as second voice (actually in the same manner as those of Carl Schart, a Bohemian-Norwegian musician who had transcribed and given out tunes of Myllarguten

some decades earlier). The usage of the loose strings *a* and *d* is clear throughout the following example, Halvorsen's transcription of the beginning of the sixth slått, "Gangar after Myllarguten":



Halvorsen's transcription of Gangar after «Myllarguten», beginning

A characteristic feature of the $\frac{6}{8}$ gangar in Norwegian folk tradition is the use of hemiola. In the example this is evident in the first and third measure as a result of the accents and the bowing pattern, which more or less will force the dotted half note (*a*) to be accentuated as three quarter notes, as in Grieg's piano arrangement of the same slått. In this Halvorsen's highly ornamented transcription of the fiddle is retained nearly without changes in the right hand of the piano,

Gangar etter Myllarguten

Folkdance after Myllarguten

Edvard Grieg op. 72 No. 6

Allegretto e marcato ♩ = 76

p

senza ped.

cresc. poco a poco



Grieg: *Gangar* after «Myllarguten», Op. 72 No. 6, beginning

regardless of the very different sounds, idioms and traditions of the two instruments. Grieg's mastery is to be found in his way of joining an accompaniment in the left hand of the piano to the structure given by Dahle and Halvorsen. In some of the slåtter this is written out in a rhythmical pattern to indicate a certain dance character. In others, like this one, the left hand of the piano simply makes use of single tones, open fifths or chords to accentuate the stressed beats of the $\frac{6}{8}$ metre in contrast to the three quarter notes in measure 1 and 3. The fascinating result could be seen as a dialogue between different styles and traditions on at least three levels:

- 1) The different traditions and rhythmical "feelings" of folk and "classical" music.
- 2) The very different sounds and ornamentation style of the piano descant and the fiddle from which they originate
- 3) The archaic and partly "dissonant" drone (*vekselbordun*) taken over from the fiddle in contrast to the chord schemes added by Grieg in the left hand.

To the third of these points I will add that the real challenge for Grieg was to design an interesting harmonic scheme and at the same time keep the continual repetition of the same two-bar phrase in different alterations, a characteristic feature of many traditional hardanger fiddle dances. Stating the simultaneousness of the tones *d* and *a*, corresponding with the loose strings which alternate in the original, Ståle Kleiberg has pointed out that "Grieg manages the master-stroke of creating an idiomatic piano style ... by building on those principles which generate the characteristic harmonies in the original material".¹ The fifth *d-a* is replaced by the fifth *a-e* in

1 Kleiberg, Ståle: "Grieg's 'Slåtter'. Op. 72: Change of Musikal Style or New Concept of Nationality?" in *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 121 (1) 1996, p. 50-1.

measure 7, another sound which more or less could be said to be adapted from loose string on the hardanger fiddle. At the same time, both these sounds fit well into functional harmonic schemes as tonic and dominant. Then the harmonic progress *F sharp–B–E–A* in measure 11-12 (repeated in measure 13-14) unquestionably must be regarded as functional harmonic in using a succession of four falling fifths which lead strongly back to the tonic D major in measure 15. The fiddle motif is forced into this rather rigid system, resulting in an even more dissonant musical language than in the original. The ambivalence in the principles of harmonization shows clearly the Grieg-slåtter's unique position at the turning point to a rougher style of folk tune arrangements which was to be developed by composers like Bartók few years later.

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Halvorsen's daily use of the Hardanger fiddle during the transcription of Dahle's slåtter made him very capable for the task of writing music to Eldegard's play "Fossegrimen" during the summer and autumn of 1904. The play is partly based upon a story of Norway's most famous fiddler, "Myllarguten", who was said to have learned to play from Fossegrimen, musical master of underground creatures. Due to the decisive role that the folk music was to play in the dramatic context, *Fossegrimen* was a fascinating assignment for Halvorsen, still having the inspiring collaboration with Knut Dahle fresh in his mind.

In general Halvorsen did not use the transcribed music from Dahle directly in his music to *Fossegrimen*, as Grieg did in his *Slåtter*. His most important contribution was rather the incorporation of the Hardanger fiddle and its sound in various settings:

- 1) As soloist with full orchestra (Ouverture and "Bridal March", in "Finale" even with a choir of "trolls")
- 2) Together with the violins of the orchestra ("Fanitullen")
- 3) As part of smaller ensembles (e.g. "Nisserne paa Laaven" og "Kjøkemeistarens vise")
- 4) Alone on the stage (two "spring dances")

In the following example, which shows of the third of these techniques, the setting is a peasant wedding in which "Kjøkemeistaren" ("the Master of ceremonies") is announcing that the food is ready. Special attention should be drawn to the first bar, in which the Hardanger fiddler plays the first motif from the Grieg slått discussed above, probably the only time Halvorsen makes direct use of the Knut Dahle material in his own music:

I gangartempo

hf. solo
p
fz
mf
sf

obo (bukkehorn)

vl. I solo
p
fz
mf
sf

slag på bordi er sette. For brudlaupet stende i dag hjå kaksen, den rette. Guds

gå - ver dei strå - la og gli-ma: No lyt me til mat-stova sti-ma!

tutti str.
p
hf. solo
vl. I solo
fz

Halvorsen: Piano arrangement of Kjøkemeistarens vise (Fossegrimen No. 10), mm. 1–22

Except for the instrumentation, Halvorsen uses the same technique as Grieg in the initial four measures, but the sound of string instruments makes it more “realistic” and “picturesque” than Grieg’s transformation of the same material onto the piano. The song of the master of ceremonies starts with the same fiddle motif as does the introduction. He sings without accompaniment during the first half of the song, while the on-stage ensemble ties together his phrases using the initial gangar-motif, which – not unlike Grieg’s slått – is harmonized with the empty fifths *d–a* and *a–e* played by one single violin. Towards the end of the song the musical material acquires a more stylized character, accompanied by the orchestral strings and with a more “traditional” harmonization.

By bringing the sound and playing style of a Hardanger fiddle into unconventional contexts, including a late-romantic, “wagnerian” style in some of the sections for full orchestra (most notably in the Overture), Halvorsen’s music to *Fossegrimen* should be regarded as a set of dialogues between different styles and traditions, not to a lesser degree than Grieg’s *Slåtter*, but in other ways.