

GRIEG, BJØRNSON AND MONTE PINCIO

Lecture for International Grieg Society Conference, Rome, June 2004

“All roads lead to Rome,” so the saying goes, and this has certainly been true over the years for the many Scandinavians who have escaped for a while from their cold and frosty countries to enjoy the warmer, sunnier climes of Italy. Rome became an important location for those on the Grand Tour, and in the latter part of the 19th century there was quite a colony of Scandinavians in the city, including Hans Christian Andersen, the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen and later Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and, of course, Edvard Grieg.

Bjørnson’s arrival in Rome on Christmas Eve 1860, “his first encounter with antiquity”, as Edvard Beyer put it¹, coincided with the later stages of the ongoing struggle for Italian unification. He took an apartment at 95 Piazza Barberini, and although he moved to Ariccia in June 1861, he came back to Rome in mid-September, where he remained until Whitsun 1862. Apart from the two long periods he spent in Rome, Bjørnson also travelled around Italy a number of times during his life, often spending the winters in Rome, but moving to more rural areas in the summer. One of his happiest summer holidays was spent in Monterenzio in the Bologna province in the north-east. This town has recently established a cultural exchange with the Norwegian town of Molde, where Bjørnson went to school, and in August 2003 Monterenzio opened its Bjørnson Library.

Bjørnson was, of course, much more than a writer. Even while preparing for entry to university, he found time to involve himself in Marcus Thrane’s workers’ movement and to campaign for a Norwegian Theatre in Christiania and he became renowned as a public speaker, political activist, theatre director, editor and reviewer. Helped by his imposing appearance and a powerful voice, he was a natural leader, referred to by some of his contemporaries as “the uncrowned king of Norway”. Indeed, after his death in Paris in 1910, his body was brought back to Norway by a Norwegian warship, while his funeral cortège, the route of which passed the Storting, and his burial in Christiania were conducted with almost regal ceremonial.

The mid-19th century saw a powerful and still growing national consciousness, which, according to Professor James McFarlane, “had been gathering strength since Napoleonic times in a conviction that the destiny of Norway – a new country but an ancient kingdom – was intimately yet subtly

¹ Article written for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo 1996.

related to its great and heroic past.”² Bjørnson himself, in a speech 50 years later, stated that “The life of our nation should be built on our history”.

Bjørnson’s life and works are intimately linked to the political and social history of Norway. His first book in the genre now known as *bondefortelling* (peasant tales), *Synnøve Solbakken* (published in 1857) was an artistic breakthrough in style and has been described as inaugurating “a programme in national pride”.³ It and its successors certainly showed concern for the fate of ordinary people. Bjørnson lived in an age of upheaval and innovation, when Norway was changing from a rural culture to an industrial society and “from a subservient role in Scandinavia to equal status” (E. Beyer). He didn’t approve of the revolutions in other parts of Europe and hoped that Norway could achieve its independence peacefully, but he championed the cause of the small nations in their fight for cultural and political rights. According to Edvard Beyer, Bjørnson considered that “national independence, social and cultural liberation and political democratisation were all aspects of the same issue”.

Small wonder, then, that the troubled history of Italy in the 19th century should have awakened echoes in Bjørnson’s mind and perhaps indirectly led to the writing of the historical drama *Kong Sverre* (1861) during his first sojourn in Italy, the *Sigurd Slembe* trilogy, and not least the poem *Fra Monte Pincio*, and although Italian unification was a long drawn-out affair, we should take an overview, so as to place Bjørnson’s and Grieg’s visits and reactions to the country in context.

Unity of a kind was established in 1796, when French troops under Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Italy and the whole peninsula came under French rule for almost twenty years. Napoleon even went so far as to have himself crowned King in Milan in 1805. After his fall in 1814, and following the settlements reached at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 which restored Austrian domination, Italy once more became a divided country, a patchwork of duchies, principalities and kingdoms. Trade wars set city against city, state against state: Genoa fought for maritime supremacy with Venice; Pisa fought against Livorno, while quite ignoring the fact that the shores were being invaded by pirates. Towns also vied in the arts, with many of the finest artists being drawn to Rome, although Florence was a leader in artistic inspiration – the city of Dante and Giotto, of Michelangelo and da Vinci, and of the Medici family, who patronised the arts for centuries.

² James McFarlane, “Norwegian Literature 1860-1910” in *A History of Norwegian Literature*, ed. H.S.Næss. University of Nebraska Press 1993, p.132.

³ *Ibid.*

The strength of feeling in each of the great cities kept them independent, together with the ethnic variations between, for example, Piedmont and Lombardy in the north, Tuscany in the centre and Naples and Sicily in the south. The Papal States were wedged in the middle and made unity well nigh impossible. The power of the pope and the regions around Rome was supported by the wider Catholic world. There were also powerful military nations to the north, beyond the Alps, in Austria, which overran Venice and held northern Italy in a stranglehold for many years.

Napoleon had at least linked the south with the rest of Italy and, even after he was gone, Naples aspired to belong. The north was more vigorous; the royal house of Savoy, which ruled Sardinia and the Piedmont area around Turin, gathered strength. There were insurrections in Lombardy, Venice and Rome and all the free countries in Europe were being won over to an interest in Italian freedom. Vittorio Emanuele, who ruled Piedmont and Sardinia, gained the goodwill of England and France by allying with them in the Crimean War. The taste of liberty under the French, however, led to the Risorgimento, a movement for the unification of Italy, whose supporters ranged from liberals who believed in unification for economic reasons, to conservatives who looked to the papacy to unite the country. The most prominent were the idealistic republicans of the *Giovane Italia* (Young Italy), headed by Giuseppe Mazzini.

Between 1823 and 1846, the popes Leo XII and Gregory XVI established a network of spies and used them and harsh censorship to put down any opposition. Many famous visitors continued to arrive, including Shelley and Dickens from England, who were horrified at the repressive regime. Hans Christian Andersen wrote from Rome to his friend Henriette Wulff in October 1834, “the filth and dirt exceeds one’s dirtiest imagination”.

In 1846 the new Pope, Pius IX, gave an amnesty to over 400 political prisoners, but two years later the spate of revolutions in other parts of Europe changed his attitude, and when his chief minister was assassinated, he had to flee in disguise. A republic was declared by a popular assembly and Mazzini became one of the ruling triumvirate. Giuseppe Garibaldi, having freed Naples and Sicily and handed them over to Vittorio Emanuele, arrived in Rome with 500 followers. Thus all Italy, apart from Venice and Rome, became united in 1860 – the year of Bjørnson’s first visit - with Vittorio Emanuele as king. Venice was regained from Austria in 1866 through an alliance with Prussia, and Rome was relinquished when Napoleon III was defeated in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, his French army was withdrawn and Italian troops took the city. During these changes, the capital of Italy was first Turin (Torino), then Florence and finally Rome. Vittorio Emanuele entered

Rome in state on 2 July 1871 to an enthusiastic welcome. The Pope, however, shut himself up in his palace and until 1929, all the popes refused to leave the Vatican.

The changes were not to the liking of all the visitors, however: as a writer, Henrik Ibsen found the campaign stirring, but he was very annoyed by the inconvenience, for example when the railway connections to Rome were closed down for ten days in November 1867. And in 1870 he complained to Georg Brandes, “so now they’ve taken Rome from the people and given it to the politicians”.

Grieg had not yet met Bjørnson when he first visited Italy in 1865. They met in Christiania during what Grieg later called his “empty years”, between 1868 and 1872, and they became good friends. Although they fell out over Bjørnson’s tardiness with the libretto for the ill-fated opera *Olav Tryvason*, they were eventually reconciled and Grieg later acknowledged his great debt to his friend, writing to the conductor and composer Iver Holter: “It is my sacred duty to point out the great influence my association with Bjørnson, from the autumn of 1866 to the spring of 1873, exerted on my art. He formed my personality in so many ways – that is to say, contributed enormously to it. He made me a democrat, artistically and politically. He gave me courage to follow my instincts. That time (the 1870s) was a wonderful time with his abundance of courage and faith!”⁴

At the end of 1865, Grieg travelled south from Leipzig by train to Dresden and Vienna, coming first to Venice, then Padua, Ferrara, Bologna, Pisa and Livorno, finally arriving in Rome on 11 December 1865. He rented a room on the second floor of 100 Via Sistina, the street which leads from the top of the Spanish Steps to the Piazza Barberini, so not very far from where Bjørnson had stayed five years before.

Grieg’s diary for 10 December 1865 records that he nearly didn’t make it to Rome: “The proprietor of the hotel assured us that we would be turned back at Rome’s borders, as we lacked a passport endorsement from the Papal Nuncio in Livorno”, so the final stage of the journey was postponed by a day. Settled into his room, he then set out to explore: “... the Vatican. The first impression almost too overpowering even to think of enjoyment. The Laocoon Group⁵ lovely, similarly Raphael’s frescoes. Café Greco [at the bottom of the Spanish Steps on the Via Condotti, which was the

⁴ PS to letter, 9 February 1897

⁵ Ancient sculpture variously dated between 2nd century BC and 1st century AD. Laocoon was the priest of Apollo in Troy who warned the Trojans to destroy the Wooden Horse. Poseidon sent two serpents to kill him and his two sons, this scene depicted in the sculpture.

meeting place for the Scandinavian colony] ... dinner. Encountered German painters and archaeologists *en masse* ... Café Roma. The Spanish Steps. Monte Pincio, evening tour”.

Although he, like Bjørnson, enjoyed the freedom of life in Rome, describing Italy as “the land of colour”,⁶ he still had reservations, writing in his diary on 18 March 1866 after a visit to an exhibition of painting by Roman artists held in the Piazza del Popolo, “I became convinced in a new sad way that Rome is the ruin of a vanished greatness, nothing more. ... It is dangerous for a people, in a political as well as an artistic regard, to have a great past.” He felt that the current generation of Italians had a “total lack of respect” for art and that, therefore, they could not have a real longing for freedom. Grieg was also very critical of the splendour of the churches in such a poor country, just, as he put it, “to please God”.

Italian unification led to a mass of new building in Rome. Roads such as the Via Nazionale and the Via Cavour linked the old city with the new Termini station, while the Corso Vittorio Emanuele was driven through the historic centre. New ministries arose, housed in massive buildings, and the huge Vittoriale, the marble monument to Vittorio Emanuele, was erected in the Piazza Venezia.

The French influence on Roman architecture was at its height during the French occupation of the city between 1809 and 1814. One of the most significant architects was Giuseppe Valadier (1762-1839), who, in spite of his French ancestry, was born and died in Rome. He was very involved with its antique architecture and became one of the foremost exponents of Roman neo-classicism. Among his greatest achievements were the reorganisation of the Piazza del Popolo between 1816 and 1820, and the Pincio garden in 1814.

The garden, now an integral part of the grounds of the Villa Borghese, is one of the oldest in Rome, having originally been commissioned by the Pinci family in the 4th century. It became a favourite haunt of Roman citizens, where there was music and dancing in the evenings, and is best known for the sunset view of the Vatican, when the dome of St. Peter’s can be seen silhouetted in gold. The paved area is still popular now with cyclists, skaters and walkers.

Many people, other than Bjørnson and Grieg, have been taken with Monte Pincio. Hector Berlioz came to Rome early in March 1831, having been awarded a Prix de Roma, and was based at the Académie de France, which is housed in the Villa Medici on Monte Pincio. In his *Memoirs*, Berlioz

⁶ Diary, 1st January 1866.

wrote of “Monte Pincio, which overlooks the city of Rome, from where one can enjoy one of the most beautiful views in the world”.⁷

The Danish writer Vilhelm Bergsøe wrote a novel called *Fra Piazza del Popolo*, a series of linked short stories about life in the Scandinavian community in Rome, based on his time there in 1863. He also produced a poem entitled *Paa Monte Pincio*⁸, in which he describes the stillness and the sunset, “gilding the dark green pines” and writes of the city’s “døde Storhed” (dead greatness), while the English poet William Wordsworth wrote of

“the whole majesty of Rome
(Then first apparent from the Pincian Height)
Crowned with St. Peter’s everlasting Dome.”⁹

Bjørnson was very fond of music and counted many musicians amongst his friends, and a number of his characters are also musicians. His poetry shows a good sense of rhythm; it uses euphonic vowel sounds (the long *a*, for example: *Ja, vi elsker*) and repeated phrases and lines that invite musical setting. Indeed, many of the poems refer to singing. As Edvard Beyer has pointed out, “No other Norwegian poet has had so many of his words set to music by so many composers”.

“Her stod Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson den første kvelden han tilbrakte i Rom, en opplevelse han satte ord på i det kjente dikt: Fra Monte Pincio.” So said Adam Skapes, a teacher at the Kirkeparken Videregående skole on a school trip to Rome in March 2004. “Here stood Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson the first evening he spent in Rome, an experience he put into words in the well-known poem: From Monte Pincio.” Bjørnson’s family album contains a photograph of the view from Monte Pincio, down the steps to the Piazza del Popolo. In the foreground it shows some of the statues from the Pincio Gardens.

The poem was certainly inspired by the view from Monte Pincio, which evoked thoughts of the ongoing struggle for Italian unification in 1860, when Bjørnson first came to Rome. The first line, “The evening comes, the sun is red” (*Aftenen kommer, Solen står rød*) refers to Rome’s famous sunsets and one of the best loved of them, from Monte Pincio across the city to the dome of St. Peter’s. At the end of the first stanza, Bjørnson makes reference to the statues of famous people that decorate the Pincio gardens: “The great ones of the past are all around, scarcely known,/ bound in marble, waiting” (*Fortidens Store står rundt om, knap kjente,/ bundne i Marmor og vente*). He

⁷ Berlioz, *Memoirs*, Chapter 32.

⁸ Published in the collection *I Ny og Næ*, 1887.

⁹ *Memorials of a Tour in Italy II*, “The Pine of Monte Mario at Rome”.

writes, too, of the Sabine Hills and the Campagna, and compares the lights coming on in the darkening city to the sagas emerging from the night of history.

The last stanza also refers to the longed-for unification of Italy: “the sky watches and waits under the past that dreams and the future that approaches, an uncertain flame in the brooding grey” (*Himmelen våker og venter; - oppunder/fortid som drømmer, og fremtid som stunder,/ usikre Bluss i det rugende Grå!*). In Grieg’s setting, “drømmer” (dreams) is replaced by the word “blunder” (sleeps), so “the past which sleeps”, giving a slightly different connotation. Bjørnson goes on: “But ...Rome will emerge bright – lit one night for Italy’s kingdom: the bells will ring, the cannon roar...” (*Men ...Roma [vil] fremstige lys – tent en Natt for Italiens Rige: Klokkerne kime, Kanonene slå,/ Minnene flamme på Fremtidens Blå!*)

Music is also very much to the fore in this poem, from the “fiery brass music” (“*glødende Hornmusikk*”), through a saltarello, a mandoline and plainsong (“*munkesang*”), to the singer accompanied by zither and flute. Mention is also made of street games, a parade, dancing, “flowers and amorous glances” (“*Blomster og brune Blik*” – translated in a certain CD booklet as “flowers and tanned faces”), all giving the flavour of this popular meeting place and the city it overlooks, and in spite of its evocation of past and future, the mood of the poem is principally one of light and sound.

Scarcely surprising, then, that Grieg, having visited the same spot on his own first evening in Rome, should decide to set his friend Bjørnson’s poem to music after his second stay in the Eternal City from November 1869 to April 1870, just as Rome was being liberated from the French and Italian Unification was almost complete. Bjørnson’s poem was published in the collection *Digte og Sange* (Poems and Songs) in 1870; Grieg’s setting was also composed in 1870, but not published until 1884, when it appeared as the first song in the album *Romancer Ældre og Nyere* (Songs Old and New) opus 39.

Bjørnson’s poem is in four long stanzas, of which Grieg set only the first and last, also exchanging the last two lines of the first stanza for those of the second for his setting. He thus replaces Bjørnson’s mention of the marble statues with “Thoughts stream in colours and music/ faithful to that which reconciles” (*Tankene streber i Farver og Toner/ trofast mot det som forsoner*), probably preferring to keep the imagery universal rather than specific.

Each of the stanzas falls into two distinct sections, the first comprising eight long lines, the second four short lines followed by two long. These sections are also distinguished by their subject matter: the first describing scenery and aspirations, the second people and more earthly pleasures, and these distinctions are matched in Grieg's music. However, one of the most remarkable aspects of the song for us now, is the piano introduction, which appears to anticipate the famous opening of the slow movement of Dvorák's *Symphony no.9, "From the New World"*, written some 23 years later. Grieg undoubtedly meant the chords here to represent the sun setting over the city.

The opening vocal melody (bars 5-13) is in a very broad 4/4, ranging over an octave and a half in the first three bars, and again in bar 9 alone. It exudes warmth and freedom, but is kept in check by the pedal tonic fifth for the first six bars. Note, too, the piano echo of the vocal phrase in bar 12, unusually for Grieg in the lower register of the piano.

In the second half of this first section (bars 18-23) there is a chromatic change in every chord and a partly chromatic melody. At the words "*lengere borte*" (farther away) there is a wonderful discord: B flat in the vocal line against B natural in the left hand and A natural in the right. The tonic G flat is then altered enharmonically to F sharp, which in turn becomes the mediant of the new key of D major for the second section.

This, the more worldly half of the strophe is in 3/4 and marked *Vivo*, a dancing rhythm which matches the change of pace and content of Bjørnson's poem. The B natural (in bar 29) chromatically alters the chord to an apparent dominant seventh in G, which in turn gives way to a dominant seventh in D flat major, shortly to return us to the original tonic key of G flat.

Then occurs the second most remarkable thing about this song: the coda, marked *Presto* and built on material from the *Vivo* section. As in his setting of Vinje's *Langs ei Å* (op.33, no.5), this is pure invention on Grieg's behalf, only indirectly inspired by Bjørnson's poem, but it certainly justifies the subtitle "Nocturne" found in the Scandinavian editions of the song. The music dies away into the night, before a reprise of the opening chords leads us into the second strophe:

The song has become a great favourite with singers, not least in the orchestrated version, which after a performance in Copenhagen in 1895 Grieg described to Frants Beyer¹⁰ as "*fin og sydlandsk*"

¹⁰ Letter from Copenhagen, 29 March 1895.

(fine and southern, that is, exotic). In the new *Norges Musikk Historie*, it is also described as having “*blussende, sydlandsk klangkoloritt*” (a flushed, southern colour).¹¹

From both poet and composer *Fra Monte Pincio* is an interesting evocation of a city. Apart from a mention in Bjørnson’s second stanza of “vespers”, “the holy half-darkness of a church” and “evening prayer”, there are no real thoughts here of Rome as the cradle of Christianity, home to St. Peter and all subsequent popes; but then neither Bjørnson nor Grieg had orthodox religious views. Instead they were inspired by a more universal idea and a place which, even today, is very popular and where one can still remember past glories while enjoying the present.

© Beryl Foster 2004

¹¹ *Norges Musikk Historie*, vol.3, p.52