

Jean-Michel Nectoux:

Grieg. The Paris stay of 1903

To my friend Harald Herresthal

April 1903, Edvard Grieg is in Paris for the fourth time of his life. He was on his sixtieth year and this French sojourn was to be the last. Paris was still one of the few Mecca's in European music and the Norwegian composer was at the top of his glory in Europe. In Paris, his work was very popular among music lovers since the years seventies, when his concerto, *Peer Gynt* and especially his piano pieces and songs became favourites both of concert stages and of many amateur singers and pianists. The favour encountered by the composer and his music with French public was a part of an important movement of interest for Scandinavian arts and culture in general, and for Norwegian artists especially. During the two last decades of the nineteenth century, many Norwegian painters, writers and musicians passed months, some times years or decades in Paris and were quickly introduced in cultural circles of this cosmopolitan town. It was the time of the sojourn of the charming Harriet Backer who painted musical scenes, probably on inspiration of the concert life of her famous sister : Agathe Backer-Grøndahl, composer and pianist who played with great charm and authority the A minor concerto at a Norwegian concert of the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1889. It was the time of the impressive series of productions of Ibsen, Bjørnson and Strindberg plays staged by Lugne-Poë at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre ; among the most famous was the French première of *Peer Gynt* in 1896, with large parts of Grieg's music played, a lithography by Edvard Munch as a programme and scenarios painted by two Norwegian artists Munch and Fritz Thaulow.

The Scandinavian circles of Paris were especially rich of talents and open to the arts. One of the most interesting was the studio of William Molard, an amateur composer and cellist who spoke Norwegian, learned from his mother, and was married to a Swedish sculptor, Ida Ericson. In their large studio of 5, rue Vercingetorix, the Molards welcomed many artists like Paul Gauguin, the British composer Frederick Delius, August Strindberg, Alfdan Jebe, violinist at the Concerts Colonne. It was in that circle that Grieg had been introduced by Delius during his stay in April 1894.

“While the bright-eyed company discussed music, Ravel quietly went over the Molard's piano and began to play one of the master's Norwegian Dances, reports Gérard-Arlberg¹. Grieg listened with a smile, but then began to show signs of

impatience, suddenly getting up and saying sharply: ‘No, young man, not like that at all. Much more rhythm. It’s a folk dance. You should see the peasants at home, with the fiddler stamping in time with the music. Play it again!’ And while Ravel played the little man jumped up and skipped about room, to the astonishment of the company.

It was perhaps on a rather later occasion, when Delius was in company of Ravel and some other French musicians, that the question raised: to what sources modern French music was especially indebted. The French consensus view was that it was to Rameau, Couperin and Lully, etc. but Delius felt differently: ‘Nonsense! Modern French music is simply Grieg, plus the third act of *Tristan*’ To which Ravel, replied: ‘That is true. We are always unjust to Grieg’.²

Young Ravel, like his close friend the pianist Ricardo Viñes, was fond of Grieg music. Ravel had studied years ago the piano concerto with his teacher at the Conservatoire, Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot, the French pianist to play the work in Paris as far as 1877. An unpublished two variations for piano on the “Death of Aase” have been found among the early manuscripts archives of Ravel.

Ravel was one of the rare faithful admirers of Grieg among French prominent composers at the turn of the century. The fact is remarkable: when Grieg music was in great favour among the Parisian public, the main composers of the time were reluctant or hostile to his work. The Parisian stay of the Norwegian musician in April 1903 offers to verify acutely this topic that seems interesting to explore and try to analyse.

The main musical event of the sojourn was the Grieg Festival given at the Théâtre du Châtelet on Sunday 19 April, with the orchestra of Concerts Colonne. Edouard Colonne had been the main conductor to support Grieg’s music for twenty years. The programme, conducted by the composer offered various orchestral pieces : the overture *In Autumn*, the *Two Elegiac melodies* and *Peer Gynt Suite number one*, the piano Concerto, with Raoul Pugno as soloist and vocal works : *At a southern convent’s gate = Foran Sydens Kloster* (Björnson) op. 20 and few songs with orchestra : *Solveig’s song* (Ibsen) op. 23 No. 18, *Fra Monte Pincio* (Björnson) op. 39 No. 1 and *A Swan* (Ibsen) op. 25 No. 2, sung by Ellen Gulbranson, a soprano who as a soloist of Bayreuth Festival had the curious idea to sing at the very end of the concert the final scene of *Götterdämmerung*³. Colonne had very carefully prepared his orchestra that had

¹ Gérard-Arlberg, "No. 6, rue Vercingétorix", *Konstrevy* (Stockholm), 35, No. 2, 1958, p. 67. Cité par Lionel Carley, *Delius, the Paris Years*, London, Triad Press, 1975, p. 56.

² Conversation with Delius, in the Grainger Papers, University of Melbourne ; cited by Lionel Carley, *ibid.* ; both texts cited by Arbie Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 237.

³ Ellen Gulbranson had sang the part of Brünnhilde in the revival of the Ring, in Bayreuth Festival 1896. An amusing photo of her exists, taken in Trolldhaugen about 1900 ; her massive aspect suggested to the photograph to have the singer kneeled in front of Nina and Edward Grieg. Cf.

certainly good remembrance of the successful concert the composer conducted quite exactly nine years ago. In spite of his very short stature and of his quite shy character as a man and as an artist, Grieg seems not to lack of authority as conductor, he was nervous and his gesture were sharp, but he gave many accurate indications of nuance. Louis Schneider noted that he was conducting with the two hands doing the same movement⁴ and Debussy writes “he conducts the orchestra with painstaking care and great vigour, underlining all the nuances and controlling the expression with unflagging attention.”

When Grieg appeared on the stage, each of the three thousands seats of the Châtelet was occupied with the Colonne concerts subscribers, completed for the occasion by a large part of Scandinavian community of Paris and many French admirers of Grieg. The turmoil was immediate, mixing applause, whistles of keys - like in the famous *Tannhäuser* scandal - and shouts “A la porte” and “A bas Dreyfus”. Grieg had to leave the podium and wait that the police push the more excited of the agitators, but there were new protests when Grieg decided bravely to start the concert beginning, fortunately with a fortissimo on the first piece ; the effervescence was still perceptible as the music was developing, and it was difficult to listen to the overture really. The subsequent and quiet songs and the virtuoso performance of the concerto by Pugno finished to pacify the public: the concert turned to be a triumph for the composer whose courage in such situation was admired. His attitude turned finally to a manifest in favour of liberty, truth and justice and he was proud to leave the Châtelet between lines of policemen.

This scandal had been clearly prepared by a group of people from the anti-dreyfusard clique. The famous letter written by Grieg to Colonne four years ago, refusing to appear in France as a protest in favour of Dreyfus was not at all forgotten. Grieg had received the Colonne invitation in September ninety nine at the very moment of the announcement of the ignominious second condemnation of Captain Dreyfus, with extenuating circumstances. “Like all foreign countries, he wrote, I was so upset by the disdain of justice demonstrated in France that I don’t feel the possibility to be in touch with French public in such circumstances.”

This manifest in favour of justice is of a noble spirit ; in a text written few weeks ago about the sense of his position in Dreyfus Affair, Grieg had written superbly : “It’s evident that the interest of the State cannot be more important that the innocence of a man.”⁵ Grieg thought was clearly based on public morality and general rules of

Sigmund Torsteinson, *Troldhaugen. Nina og Edvard Griegs Hjem*. Oslo, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1962, p. 51.

⁴ Louis Schneider, “Edvard Grieg”, *Musica*, No. 62, November 1907, p.166.

⁵ Letter to Jules Combarieu, 22 June 1899, quoted in Harald Herresthal and Ladislav Reznicek, *Rhapsodie norvégienne. Les musiciens norvégiens en France au temps de Grieg*, Caen, Office franco-norvégien, 1994, p. 222, a very well informed book to which we are largely indebted.

conduct. He did not suspect that his letter accusing in general the French people as denial of justice could chock terribly many of his admirers enrolled in the fight for Dreyfus. Unfortunately, Grieg was convinced to let have his letter to Colonne published, and published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*: that was an enormous mistake in term of diplomacy : for French people, still sensible to the shame of defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, to receive from a foreign and most admired artist a lesson about honour and justice by the voice of a German newspaper was difficult to accept. On receiving full tip-cart of injuries by the press or letters poor Grieg understood, but too late, that the way he had expressed his high thoughts was not the best he could have chosen.

With such a difficult background, the reappearance of Grieg on the Parisian stage was reported on very different ways by the press. The review published by Gabriel Fauré in *Le Figaro* was very comprehensive, as we will see later, but in *Gil Blas*, Debussy used a some times ironic, some times disdainful but always vitriolic approach in his long review of the Châtelet concert. First, he suggested eagerly the reasons for Grieg to return to France, but the bitter part of the article was for the music itself. About *The Swan* he writes: “It is a piece of orchestral cookery in which the aroma of the harps mingles with the lemon flavour of the oboes. All is then blended with the juice of the strings section, interspersed with highly emotional silences, which cause the audience to catch its breath. Just the right tricks to secure an encore. These are songs which are very sweet, very pale-music to soothe convalescents in well-to-do neighbourhoods.”; in others parts, Debussy’s article is full of wit : “When Pugno appears on the scene you can be sure the Grieg Concerto is not far away. He plays it with tremendous effect ; nobody can draw more from it” but then Debussy properly assassinates the work : “ I have never been able to understand why there are fragmentary interpolations of fanfares of trumpets, which generally announce the arrival of a little cantabile section at which we are meant to swoon. (Trumpets! it’s an abuse of your usual frankness.)”. The only piece that Debussy found to his taste was *Peer Gynt* : “The ideas in this are charming and the rhythms fine, and its spirit is more truly Norwegian”⁶ .

It seems that Grieg’s music took, with some others, in Debussy’s mind the place of a musical scapegoat, that is to say the kind of music to mock in every occasion. The French composer Charles Koechlin writes that his first recollection of Debussy in the nineteen was at a dinner during which “I listened to him pronouncing severe judgement on Grieg, then at the height of his celebrity” and Koechlin adds an

⁶ “Edvard Hagerup Grieg”, *Gil Blas*, 20 avril 1903 ; quoted from *Debussy on Music*, edited by François Lesure, translated and edited by Richard Langham Smith, London, Secker & Warburg, 1977, p. 177-181.

indication, interesting to a just appreciation of the composer opinion that Debussy was severe “even on the first movement of César Franck’s Violin Sonata ; he spoke of its ‘facile sentimentality’.”⁷ I have to remark that Debussy was so self-confident in his superiority that he was generally ferocious with his fellow composers. About Fauré he wrote that he was the “music-stand of a group of snobs and fools” and of Ravel that he was “like a charmer fakir having flowers to grow around a seat.”!

The Debussy review had terrible effects on Grieg. He wrote to Calvocoressi about it : “I am positively amazed at the tone which he, an artist, dares to adopt when speaking of a fellow artist. Of course, I likewise deplore his utter lack of comprehension of my art ; but this is not the main point. The main point is his venomous and contemptuous tone. A genuine artist ought to strive to maintain a high level in all things of the mind, and to respect the point of view of other artists.”⁸

But Grieg was so generous and indulgent that he took great interest in the Debussy scores that Calvocoressi lent him during his Paris stay. “I am fortunate enough not only to remain uninfluenced by his utterances on me, he wrote to him, but to be able to feel in sympathy with his music. I read his three *Nocturnes* with great interest. They show a fine sense of colour, and high imaginative qualities. I thank you very much for having given me the opportunity to become acquainted with this work. I hope to conduct a performance of it in the North. As regards *Pelléas et Mélisande*, I hardly feel that I can form an opinion on the strength of the vocal score only. I hope to hear it performed in Berlin. But of course there again I acknowledge the earnestness, and genuineness of his outlook. And it is this earnestness, which he denies, wrongly, to my musical outlook, that attracts me towards him, because it is my own ideal.”⁹

To close this quite sad chapter of the last stay of Grieg in Paris, I have to add that, in spite of his bad opinion of Grieg music, Debussy performed it, on at least two occasions : eleven years after his severe review, we surprisingly find Debussy playing the Sonata op. thirteen with the violinist Arthur Hartmann, in a public concert given in Paris (5 February 1914)¹⁰ ; at that time, Debussy was at the highest point of his fame in France and that public performance of Grieg music was of importance and may be analysed as a manner of reparation of his previous bitterness against the Norwegian composer ; that is confirmed by a short comment of Grieg folks songs arranged as choir for men voices performed in Paris we pick up from the last review written by Debussy : “There were children’s songs - most amusing - and Norwegian dances in which one

⁷ Charles Koechlin, *Debussy*, Paris, Laurens, 1926 ; quoted from Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, London, Faber and Faber, 1992, p. 99.

⁸ Michel Dimitri Calvocoressi, *Musicians Gallery. Music and Ballet in Paris and London*. London, Faber and Faber, 1933, p. 91.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 92.

¹⁰ François Lesure, *Claude Debussy*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1994, p. 377.

noticed something of the striking melancholy of Edvard Grieg. Then by Grieg himself, “Voyez Jean”, perhaps rather more instrumental than vocal, but all the same it won us over by its use of the men’s voice alone. This music has the icy coldness of the Norwegian lakes, the transient ardour of her sharp and hurried spring.”¹¹

But twenty years ago when three songs of Grieg were to be performed at the “Société nationale de musique”, Debussy, a member of that important society accepted to work with the singer, choosing the pieces and rehearsing them with her. Debussy wrote to Pierre de Bréville, a composer who had paid a visit to Grieg in Bergen in eighteen eighty seven:”I have rehearsed with Melle Sidner to day ; she will sing three Grieg songs - the others are really not Norwegian enough !

Here are the titles:

- 1) *Guten*
- 2) *Våren (Printemps)*
- 3) *Ragnhild*

These three songs are not works of genius but they are unknown and contain a little of the soul of Norway. (You know much that is appreciated in France.)”

From the programme printed for the concert given in Paris (March 1894), it’s not clear to know who was the accompanist of Miss Sidner; it’s not impossible that it was Debussy.

Grieg songs seem to have been especially appreciated by French public, because of their attractive expression, not so far from the very French tradition of songs and *romances*. The Grieg pieces had to be translated in French to be sung in France, as it was the tradition until the second world war. Between 1890 and 1894 Peters published three volumes of Grieg songs in French versions by Victor Wilder, a poet of little fame. But, since the years of the first Grieg concerts in Paris, the French adaptation of Grieg vocal works was discussed by some critics. The composer consulted Gabriel Pierné, a young French composer, pupil of Franck, he had met during his stay in Rome, on the spring of 1884. Having sent to him his score of *At a Southern Convent’s Gate* Grieg received from Pierné two proposals of prosodic changes in the text of the final choir as established by the Belgian composer Frank Vanderstücken, a friend of Grieg. The composer approved the ideas of Pierné and it’s that revised version which is printed both in the vocal and full score published by Peters¹². In an unpublished letter to Pierné written in French, Grieg notes : “C’est bien triste pour un compositeur d’être parmi les

¹¹ “Pour la musique”, *S.I.M.*, 1st March 1914 ; *In : Debussy on music*, cited ed., p.315 ;

¹² Cf. two unpublished letters by Pierné (13 February and 8 March [1887]) in the Grieg archives of Bergen. The passages are situated at the end of the final choir of nuns “Là-haut plus de crainte, de larmes, de plaintes ; Jésus te convie au joyeux banquet divin ; éternelle vie et bonheur sans fin !”The vocal score of *Foran Sydeus Kloster* op. 20 was published in 1890 and the full score about 1901.

non initiés de la langue dont il faut employer les paroles, car les mystères de la prosodie touchent aux cordes les plus sensibles de la *musique*.”¹³

From Debussy writings and the many critics and articles published during the last decades of the century it's evident that Grieg was to the main part of French public the composer expressing with high accomplishment Norwegian landscapes, songs and moods : his success was clearly of curiosity, his music appreciated mainly as delicate expression of his country and praised as a piquant, unusual, charming but exotic production. It was the time in which picturesque music was highly praised: Saint-Saëns composed a *Suite algérienne*, *Nuit à Lisbonne*, *Jota aragonaise*, Lalo *Rhapsodie norvégienne*, Massenet his *Scènes alsaciennes*, Smetana *Moldau* and Richard Straus *Aus Italien*. After Svendsen, Grieg brought the lights and pale colours of the North. For a large part of the Parisian public and critics, the important place of national musical elements in his inspiration was the main source of interest in his music, for others it was a reason for disdain, folk music being not serious enough in comparison with pure classical music and that the use of folk songs as sources for melody and rhythms could be appreciated as bad taste or contemptible facilities.

In France, the interest for folk music had emerged in the eighteen fifties and many popular songs were published, generally in harmonisation done by musicologists and composers of classical tradition, like Vincent d'Indy and Maurice Emmanuel ; but there was no collective publication of popular poetry and music like *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, in Germany or the *Ancient and New Songs From the Mountains* compiled and published by Ludvig Mathias Lindeman in Norway, an important source for Grieg inspiration. In spite of the real interest for folk songs, the greatest French composers remained noticeably on the sidelines where these sources of inspiration were concerned. Viewed from Paris paved streets, such sources no doubt seemed too picturesque, too 'regional'. Debussy interest was limited to a few affectionately ironical quotations from children's nursery rhymes. As for Fauré, he remained even more firmly in the background of the folklorist movement: a great advocate of "pure music", he considered it was too simple to win success by the composition of works of popular inspiration. In a letter Fauré wrote: "in general terms, I cannot accept such distinctions as far as this art called music is concerned, the prime quality of which is that it is a universal language or rather the language of a country so far above all others that it demeans itself when it expresses feelings or characteristics belonging to one or another nation in particular.[...] I believe on the contrary that a truly gifted musician makes music without a mask of his nationality. This is not the case, however, and this is the point I was making, with the Russian school and with Tchaikovsky in particular, who

¹³ Letter from Bergen 23 February 1887 (in French, private collection). On that occasion Grieg congratulates Pierné about the piano works of him he received, appreciating them as the expression of an "exquisite talent".

for fear of not being Russian enough usually borrows popular themes, which he then develops with a greater or lesser degree of art. I would say the same things of Brahms regarding his use of Hungarian themes and of Grieg, who has made a fine reputation for himself with the songs of his country. But don't you find that the works of these artists are for the most part no more than piquant curiosities, interesting in much the same way as a pretty Hungarian costume or a gilded image like a Moscow Christ?"¹⁴

This opinion did not prevent Fauré to write in *Le Figaro* a very favourable review of the Grieg festival of nineteen o three : referring first, without comments and very delicately, to the demonstrations arose by the entrance of the composer, he adds : “ Among the most famous living musicians, I know no one approaching the popularity of Mr Grieg in our country, no one of which the works entered so well in the intimacy of our musical culture, works, by the way charming, delicate, curious, always original, and for many, quite easy to perform, even by modest talents, helping especially for their dissemination.”¹⁵ In his article there was not a word of his reservation about the folk sources of Grieg music.

In that question of the interest of folk elements in music, among the main French composers, only Ravel seemed really interested by folk songs; with the brilliance and perfection that were his hallmark, he produced a number of harmonisations, like *Mélodies hébraïques*, *Chants populaires* and *Mélodies populaires grecques* who gained the concert repertoire. But we must note that these works seem in a separate part of his catalogue, his main work being free from folk elements, except in his late style, the influence of jazz which is not really folk, but popular source.

Ravel had to remain a great admirer of Grieg all along his life. His pupil, Manuel Rosenthal report that the composer in his maturity was always unanswerable about Grieg music, adding the explanation he gave one day to his reluctant pupil : “ You can't imagine, you, the power Grieg music had in Paris. Suddenly, windows were open on country and we measure, yet, that we had lived in flat, with closed doors and windows, ignoring what are rivers, trees and birds... Then came a musician who had knowledge of all that and, naïvely, used it in his music. It did us a lot of good and everyone was grateful to him. After that we could perceive the mountains and the sea, gnomes and giants, a world that the town had made us to forget.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Gabriel Fauré, letter to Paul Poujaud, (3 September 1885) ; quoted from *Gabriel Fauré. His life through his Letters*, ed. by Jean-Michel Nectoux, translated by J.A. Underwood. London, Marion Boyars, 1984, p. 124.

¹⁵ “Les Concerts. Association artistique du Châtelet”, *Le Figaro*, 20 April 1903, p. 5. On the occasion of a concert given in Paris as an homage to Grieg, on 11 April 1908, Fauré wrote a short and interesting article “Ed Grieg” in *Le Figaro*, 1st April 1908.

¹⁶ *Ravel. Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal recueillis par Marcel Marnat*. Paris, Hazan, 1995, p. 175-176.

Many musicians of classical tradition shared the reserve of Fauré about folk inspiration. Grieg himself declared to Arthur Abell about the sources of his music: “Ole Bull was my good angel. It’s he who opened my eyes on the beauty and originality of Norwegian music. It’s through he that I learned many forgotten folk songs and, first of all, to understand my own personality.” and Grieg is reporting the bad appreciation of his national style as expressed to him by Jadassohn, a fellow of his Leipzig years as a student, become a teacher of composition of the most severe orthodoxy: “I would like to see you writing in a more international manner, declared Jadassohn to Grieg. Your music is locked in a cage whose bars are Norwegian mountains and fjords [...] Music is an art too high to be locked in the straight frontiers of your native land. Edvard, you are your own prisoner.”¹⁷

Grieg replied: “Salomon, you may be right in your opinion about my music [...] In a century, my music will be probably forgotten. However, it seems to me that I have not loosen my time writing the one that bring joy to millions of men in all the civilized countries, using the very musical style you disagree with.” then Grieg gives for his interviewer, Arthur Abell this excellent and too modest conclusion: “One day, Liszt said to Thalberg: ‘his manner is small, but he is great in his manner. That could be applied to me as a composer.’”¹⁸

And Grieg recited in English the poem about Ole Bull written by Longfellow in his *Tales of a Wayside Inn*:

Fair-haired, blue-eyed, his aspect blithe
 His figure tall and straight and lithe
 And every feature of his face
 Revealing his Norwegian race;
 A radiance, streaming from within
 Around his eyes and forehead beamed;
 The angel with his violin
 Painted by Raphael he seemed.

Before the blazing fire of wood
 Erect the rapt musician stood;
 And ever and anon he bent
 His head upon his instrument,
 And seemed to listen, till he caught
 Confessions of his secret thought -

¹⁷ Arthur M. Abell, *Entretiens avec de grands compositeurs*, translated from German and English (in French) by Marthe Sung. Paris, Editions du Dauphin, 1982, p. 188.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.. 187-188.

The joy, the triumph, the lament,
The exultation and the pain;
Then, by the magic of his art
He shot the throbbings of his heart
And lulled it into peace again.