



BRILLIANT
CLASSICS

Grieg

Complete Piano Works

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Edvard Grieg

From the middle of the 19th and into the 20th century, far away though they may have been from the melting pot of Central European culture, the Scandinavian countries saw the emergence of a group of artists of world class. Figures such as Edvard Munch in painting, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg in drama and Carl Nielsen, Jean Sibelius and Edvard Grieg in music created a new pride in the world of northern culture. While Sibelius and Nielsen established the symphonic form in Finland and Denmark respectively, the miniaturist genius of Grieg placed Norway firmly on the musical map of Europe.

Although his best-known compositions remain the A minor Piano Concerto and the incidental music composed for Ibsen's fantastical play *Peer Gynt*, Grieg's main achievement remains the shorter pieces he wrote both for piano solo and for orchestra, together with a large quantity of lyrical songs that show a remarkable balance between singer and piano accompaniment and some of which have found a firm hold in the Lieder singer's repertoire.

Born in Bergen on 15 June 1843, Grieg received his early musical training from his mother until the folksong collector and violinist Ole Bull heard him playing the piano and suggested to his parents that the budding musician should be sent for further training to the Leipzig Conservatory in Germany - a place he was to come to dislike intensely but which gave him the opportunity to meet up with and hear the music of composers and musicians such as Clara Schumann, Wagner and Mendelssohn. Encouraged now by the folkmusic specialist Rikard Nordraak (composer of the Norwegian National Anthem) and the Hungarian virtuoso and composer Franz Liszt, Grieg set about establishing himself a career as concert pianist and conductor. In 1863 he moved to Copenhagen to study under Denmark's leading composer of the day, Niels Gade who was to persuade his pupil to write the one and only symphony of his life, a marginal failure which to today's audience is proof of Grieg's unsuitability as a composer of large-scale works.

Matters changed rapidly when Grieg took up with his cousin, the singer Nina Hagerup, the inspiration of many of his later songs and after a year-long courtship, the two became engaged. Grieg returned to Norway and found lodgings with his old teacher Ole Bull. Grieg was now back home and his interests returned to the founding of a Norwegian national style of music. By 1867, he had married his cousin and was becoming recognised as a composer, setting up his home meanwhile in Oslo and taking on the dual jobs of teacher and conductor.

Grieg's restlessness and the limitations of local fame in a small country soon found the family moving to Denmark and then on to Italy. Grieg's fame had spread so that the Norwegian Government gave him an annual income in 1874 and two years later, the country's foremost playwright, Henrik Ibsen, commissioned him to write incidental music for *Peer Gynt*. Although the play is hardly seen now with all of Grieg's somewhat complex vocal and orchestral score, the two Suites of purely orchestral pieces are still regular features of concert programmes to this day. Something of an international figure by now, Grieg was invited to England to give recitals both on his own and with his wife and he was awarded honorary degrees by both Universities at Oxford and Cambridge. By now and for the remainder of his life, Grieg had become a well-known figure of the musical establishment and he would continue to compose songs and short pieces for the remaining years of his fruitful life. Perhaps it is fair to say that while his genius was mainly confined to shorter pieces, this limitation in itself allowed him to set standards which were to be influential on contemporaries and later composers far from his own native shores. It is not unreasonable to see Grieg's influence on the emergent nationalist schools that produced composers such as Bartók or the newly emerging impressionist styles of Debussy and Ravel in France as well as Grieg's friend and admirer Frederick Delius. He is a composer of note for the transition from 19th- to 20th-century style.

Piano Works

Grieg was quite a considerably talented pianist in his own right and it is not an overstatement to say that many of his works, even the orchestral ones, were initially conceived for piano. Most of these pieces are suitably short and melodic, drawing on Grieg's natural talent as a miniaturist. Initially though, he attempted a full-scale piano sonata (1865), struggling against the dictates of form which he was always to find so troublesome. His major piano works that overcame these problems to some extent include the Concerto in A minor and the G minor Ballade for solo piano (Op.24). The Ballade is Grieg's most notable full-scale piano work. It was written in 1875-6 and is based on the melody 'The Northland Peasantry', consisting of a theme and set of variations - nine of them character variations followed by a further five which take the piece into darker, more tragic and dramatic regions.

Grieg's other piano works concentrate on lyrical miniatures or ever-increasing transcriptions of folk songs and dances including the Op.72 Peasant Dances (known as *Slatter*) where Grieg seems to pre-echo the folksong world of the Hungarian Bartók. Also significant is the original version of the Suite 'from Holberg's Time' where Grieg playfully takes the old forms of Prelude, Sarabande, Gavotte, Air and Rigaudon in a popular reworking of earlier styles. Composed in 1884 for the writer and philosopher Ludvig Holberg's bicentenary, it is one of Grieg's most popular works.

The vast number of peasant and folk dances and tunes can seem overwhelming but Grieg's finest collection of shorter pieces appear under the title of Lyric Pieces, 66 short works written between 1867 and 1901, divided as they are into 10 books. The pieces are usually short and fairly simple and make a great contribution to the repertoire suitable for amateur pianists.

The Book I (Opus 12) consists of particularly easy pieces technically, basically written in ternary (A-B-A) form, and it first appeared in December 1867 in Copenhagen. Much of the music is based on folk song - particularly the Norwegian Melody and the Folk Melody.

Book II (Opus 38) appeared in Leipzig in 1884, most of the pieces having been

written in Bergen the previous year. These pieces are technically more difficult than those of Book I and as well as the folk pieces, they contain more Romantic works such as the Melody and Elegy and the polyphonic Canon.

Book III (Opus 43), published in 1887, probably dates from the previous year and contains some of the finest of the Lyric Pieces such as the programmatic *Butterfly*, *Little Bird* and *To Spring* (some of Grieg's best-known melodies). There is also a patriotic *In My Native Country* and a love song for Grieg's wife Nina in *Erotikon*.

Book IV (Opus 47) dates from around 1886-8 and was published in 1888. Again, Norwegian folk dances appear in *Halling* and the *Spring Dance*, which are contrasted with the more subtle shades of the Album Leaf, Melancholy and the Elegy.

It is in Book V that Grieg finds his most sustained inspiration. Composed between 1889 and 1891, this selection was first published in 1891 and contains the poetry of *Shepherd Boy* and the Notturmo in contrast to the lively nationalistic Norwegian March and March of the Dwarfs as well as the extraordinary impressionistic tone poem *Bell-ringing*. The following Book (Opus 57) comes from the period 1890-93 and much of it was written while Grieg was on holiday in Menton on the French/Italian Riviera. Something of a disappointment after the previous set, Grieg seems to have been missing his homeland as can be heard in one of the more successful pieces, *Homesickness*.

The pieces that comprise Op.62 make up Book VII of the Lyric Pieces. This selection was published in 1895 and was probably written in that year. By now, the composer was in his early fifties and had reached a maturity which allowed him to compose not only in the national style, but also to attempt more European styles of music such as the *French Serenade*, *Phantom* and the waltz *Sylph*. Still, the Norwegian aspect and folksy type of composition can be heard here in *Gratitude* and the particularly successful portrayals of *Little Brook* and *Homeward*. Here again, Grieg, like his contemporary Dvorák, was praising his own homeland.

Wedding Day at Troldhaugen is one of Grieg's best-known piano pieces and it forms the conclusion to the Book VIII. It is a piece that seems unusually long in

the general context of these pieces. Many of the earlier titles had lasted around a minute or so, some even less, but now Grieg was writing a confident national piece of some seven minutes. The set contains three other Norwegian-style pieces in *From Early Years*, *Peasant's Song* and the Ballad, but then has some other pieces in less than inspired mood. The set was written in 1896 and printed, again in Leipzig, the following year.

The penultimate Book of the Lyric Pieces (Opus 68) dates from the years 1897-99 and was published in 1899. The highlights of this set are the Norwegian-inspired *Evening in the Mountains* and to a lesser extent *At the Cradle*. The simple *Sailor's Song* and *Grandmother's Minuet* are similarly charming and melodious but the *Valse mélancolique* remains in the realm of salon music, a far cry from Sibelius's similarly named *Valse triste*. Finally, Book X (Opus 71) dates from 1901 and was written early in that year at Trolldhaugen. This is a fitting conclusion to the series where the short tone poems of *Summer's Eve* and *Peace of the Woods* show Grieg as a natural bucolic composer whereas *Little Dwarf* or Puck and *Norwegian Dance* show the composer again at his best following the inspiration of the Norwegian folk song. The other pieces are more nostalgic and by a return to the Opus 12 *Arietta* of Book I, Grieg concludes the whole series of these charming and often memorable pieces with *Remembrances*, a glimpse back to the beginning of the project that had taken up so much of his life and added so much to the literature of simple but rewarding piano repertoire for listener and player alike. The Lyric Pieces are a reason for celebrating the small-scale genius of an inspired miniaturist.

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Music for piano 4-hands

During the years leading up to the beginning of the 20th century, Edvard Grieg was the most significant Scandinavian composer. He was educated at the Leipzig Conservatory, where his early influences were Schubert and Schumann. Like all of his fellow countrymen of that generation, he was oriented to Denmark, the Danish language, and Danish culture in general and spent a lot of time in Copenhagen. Later, in his early twenties, he developed an affinity for Norwegian peasant culture thanks to the influence of the great Norwegian musician Ole Bull. This led to a major change in his musical outlook, and for the rest of his life he immersed himself in Norwegian literature and folk music. It became a major part of his artistic philosophy and placed him firmly in the ranks of the nationalist composers that characterised the second half of the 19th century. He was surrounded and fascinated by Norway's breathtaking fjords, mountains, forests and lakes; even when not directly quoting folk materials, the harmonies, rhythms, and melodic nuances of that tradition deeply influenced his musical style and approach. He often used elements of Norwegian folk music appropriating not just melodies but also typical harmonic inflections and rhythmic patterns from folk dance into his musical expression.

He wanted to create a language different from that of the romantic currents of Central Europe, and it is in particular in piano writing that he reveals his originality. A pianist himself, Grieg wrote extensively for his instrument, excelling, in particular, in his ten volumes of *Lyric Pieces* and in other sets of short compositions; they often derived directly or indirectly from Norwegian folk music, and some of them were written for piano four hands.

In the *4 Norwegian Dances* Op.35, Grieg expresses the personal and sometimes daring character of his harmony, often built on a free combination of chords that reproduce the timbres of folk instruments creating a very personal style, even though folk-music transcriptions were already being disseminated in Norway from the beginning of the 19th century. These four dances are arrangements for

piano four hands of old folk tunes that Grieg took from a collection published by the musician and researcher Ludvig Mathias Lindeman. The composition was sketched in Copenhagen in January 1880 and brought to completion in the summer of the following year during a holiday in Lofthus, a small and idyllic settlement on a branch of the Hardanger fjord, where Grieg felt particularly inspired by the unspoiled nature. Grieg rated his *Norwegian Dances* very highly, and regularly performed them in his concerts, the last occasion being at a concert with his friend Julius Rontgen in Oslo in 1907, the year of the composer's death.

For many years, biographies of Grieg left the reader with the 'loose end' that the composer's only symphony languished in a library in Bergen with Grieg's hand-written message on the cover: 'Must never be performed'. This was taken as sacrosanct for 113 years. Scholars could study it but never copy it. After much discussion, it was performed in a televised concert in Bergen on 30 May 1981 (following another performance a year earlier in Russia). The Symphony in C minor, EG119, was composed in 1863-64, when Grieg was 20 years old; the melodies of the second and third movements were later arranged for piano duet as 2 *Symphonic Pieces* Op.14. The pieces, an Adagio cantabile in A-flat major followed by an Allegro energico in C minor, contain some underlying Norwegian folk rhythms and melodic turns of phrase but otherwise there is no strong similarity to other music of the period except that it clearly lies within the Romantic era.

Grieg's name is also related to important stage works: he collaborated with the dramatist Bjornson in the play *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, for which he provided incidental music, and still more notably with the five-act play in verse *Peer Gynt*, one of the most performed plays in Norway, written by Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen and published in 1876. *Peer Gynt* chronicles the journey of its title character from the Norwegian mountains to the North African desert and back. Ibsen asked Grieg to compose incidental music for the play; Grieg composed a score that plays around 90 minutes, and then extracted the most beautiful pieces to form two orchestral suites and arranged himself these versions for piano solo and piano four hands.

Published in 1888, Suite No.1, Op.46 consists of four movements, and it's interesting to note that the last one, *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, was one of the sung parts of the incidental music. Another curiosity concerns the Suite No.2, Op.55. Published in 1893, it originally had a fifth movement, *Dance of the Mountain King's Daughter* (included on this album as *Appendix*), but Grieg withdrew it declaring that it was easier for him to make music without following all of Ibsen's suggestions.

In June 1867, Grieg married his first cousin Nina Hagerup, a Danish-Norwegian lyric soprano in Copenhagen. During the years 1875-83 their marriage underwent a series of crises. Both Edvard and his wife were strong-willed individuals and often quarrelled. In 1883 Edvard abandoned Nina for several months, leaving her in Norway with their friends, the Beyers, while he toured in Germany. Through the mediation of Frants Beyer, the couple was reconciled. Nina joined Edvard in Germany, and they later performed together in Rome where they ended up staying for four months. The same year, 1883, the composer wrote the 2 *Walzer-Capricen* Op.37 for piano four hands. Soon after the Griegs built 'Trolldhaugen', their home in Bergen with view of a fjord, and in 1887 Grieg decided to arrange the 2 *Walzer-Capricen* for solo piano.

The 2 *Nordic Melodies* Op.63 were originally written for string orchestra in 1895 and published the following year, at the same time as the arrangements for piano solo and piano duet. The work is dedicated to Frederik Due, the then Norwegian and Swedish ambassador to Paris who was an enthusiastic amateur musician and composer, and a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. Due sent Grieg some compositions for violin and piano, and one of his melodies, *In Folk Style*, was used in the first piece. The second piece is a reworking of two numbers from Grieg's Op.17 (25 *Norwegian Folk Ballads and Dances*): No.18, Peasant Dance, and No.22, Cow Call.

Due in part to a breathing problem that plagued him all his life, Grieg had a predilection for miniature pieces and kept most of his music short. He proved, however, that he was a master in the musical arts, and his music acted as an inspiration for future composers like Ravel and Debussy.

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