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In the session: Crossing national borders: Music in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries

Edvard Grieg - Norwegian and European

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During the period which I am focusing on in this presentation, Leipzig was regarded as the musical capital of Europe. In the year 1858 a small, 15-year old boy from Norway arrived in the town, accompanied by a friend of his family. The boy was left alone in the boarding house where he was to live, and sat down crying brokenheartedly until his host called him for dinner, saying that Leipzig was shone down upon by the same sun, the same moon and the same God as in his home-town of Bergen.

This was Grieg's first encounter with Leipzig, where for the next four years he was to study at the Music Conservatory. While there he received a thorough education in the Austro-German musical tradition. He also used the opportunity to regularly visit the Gewandhaus and listen to concerts of music from the whole of the classical repertoire there. At the graduation concert, he himself performed pieces from his opus 1 in the Gewandhaus.¹ He got in touch with the new head of Peters Verlag in Leipzig, Dr. Max Abraham, who published his opuses 1 and 2. Unfortunately Grieg also became seriously ill while studying in Leipzig; this illness weakened his health for the rest of his life.²

As is well known, Grieg grew up in Bergen, a commercial town that in his time was the only internationally-oriented town in Norway, with its historic Hansa traditions and a harbour that gave easy access to England and the European continent³. One of Grieg's great grandfathers was an immigrant from Scotland. The letters *ei* in his surname were transposed to *ie*, thus to the form in which Grieg's surname is now written. His mother, Gesine, had studied music in Hamburg, and was a leading piano teacher in Bergen. Grieg's father, Alexander, exported lobsters to England, which was a lucrative, but risky business. He also was Norway's consul to England.

Grieg's lifetime coincided with Norway's struggle to dissolve its union with Sweden. This had begun in 1814, when new boundary lines were drawn after the Napoleonic wars. Before it came into force, had Norway managed to write a sovereign constitution, inspired by the French revolution and the constitution of The United States. In earlier times, Norway had, for some centuries, been part of a composite state with Denmark.

¹ More precisely: Op. 1, now. 1,2 & 4 with the title: Drei Phantasiestücke, were performed on 12 April 1862. Op. 1, no. 3 was composed later on, in March 1863.

² He got pleuritt. His left lung collapsed and made his back bend; this greatly reduced his lung-capacity.

³ The population of Norway was a little less than 1 300 000 when Grieg was born in 1843. By 1907, the year of his death, that population had increased by about a million. In addition, more than 600 000 Norwegians had emigrated to the United States in the same period.

This was a time of nation building, where trend-setting and prominent Norwegian men ruled over public debate. They often had strong personalities, were adventurous and possessed great dreams and charisma. Grieg himself became one of them, the leading light of what is called the Golden Era in Norwegian music. Most of the other composers, conductors and musicians who were central here also were educated at the Conservatory in Leipzig. Grieg was well grounded in politics and possessed definite ideas, which he also wrote about in private letters. It has been stated that he probably wrote between 17 thousand and 20 thousand letters during his lifetime.

Another important representative of these nation-building men was the violinist and composer Ole Bull, also from Bergen. In 1850 he founded The National Theatre in Bergen. He wanted Norwegian actors instead of Danish ones, and to encourage and develop Norwegian playwrights. The dramatist Henrik Ibsen and the Nobel laureate in literature Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson started their international careers here. Ole Bull was acquainted with the Grieg family, and took part in the decision to send Grieg abroad to study music.

In spite of the union with Sweden, Copenhagen continued to function as a kind of a cultural capital of Norway for the rest of the nineteenth century, and even into the twentieth. Therefore, it was natural for Grieg to settle there while he worked out what to do with his compositional talents. He decided that Norwegian folk music would be his source for material that he could transform into his own musical language. The Golden Era in Danish art, music and literature was still unfolding. Grieg made lifelong friends, and in 1867 married his first cousin Nina, who had grown up in Copenhagen. His piano concerto in A minor was also composed here, in days of happiness, and close contact with Copenhagen continued throughout Grieg's life, with over half of his first 25 opuses published in the city. Later he favoured Wilhelm Hansen in Copenhagen as the main publisher of his songs, considering that the songs had much market potential in the Nordic region. Nina was a singer, and was Grieg's preferred interpreter of his songs. This was probably the main reason why Grieg's songs represent a very important part of his output, with about 140 songs in all.

Shortly after their marriage, Edvard and Nina Grieg settled in Kristiania (now Oslo)⁴ for some years. Grieg wanted to participate in the development of professional music life in the Norwegian capital. His work towards establishing a music academy failed because of a lack of government support. Nevertheless, he⁵ succeeded in establishing a music society in Oslo, with its own orchestra.

However, the artistic milieu of Kristiania was narrow, and could not nurture a talent like Grieg's. It was therefore important for him to go abroad to where music life flourished, and to meet equals in art and music. For a Norwegian artist it was also crucial to gain recognition from abroad so as to increase interest at home. With recommendation letters from Danish composers Niels W. Gade and J.P.E. Hartmann, from his teacher Ignaz Moscheles in Leipzig and from Franz Liszt, Grieg obtained a travel grant from the Norwegian parliament to go abroad, which he did for a period. Like many others wanting to gain a deeper understanding

⁴ The city's name changed from Christiania/Kristiania to Oslo in 1925

⁵ Together with Johan S. Svendsen (1840-1911)

of European culture, Grieg went to Rome, where he also got the opportunity to thank Liszt for his support. Grieg remembered Liszt's words to him, that talent has to follow its nature if it is to blossom. Later on Grieg got an annual composers salary from the Norwegian government.

Landscape and folk music were particularly significant in romantic nationalism. Hardanger, in the vicinity of Bergen, was a symbol of the original Norway, and Norwegian folk songs and dances have strong roots there. While Grieg lived in Hardanger, he became familiar with the hardanger-fiddle players, and subsequently returned for visits in summertime. The organist Ludvig Mathias Lindeman did tremendous work in collecting folk melodies from rural areas, and these were an important source which Grieg used frequently. Grieg succeeded in creating what is regarded as a particularly "Norwegian" tonal language, advancing the work of members of a previous generation who had worked in the same direction. Immigrants, first and foremost Germans, were also pioneers in attempts to make a foundation for classical music in Norway.

Authors and artists who were active in the nation building, looked back in history to search for the time when Norway was a sovereign state. One result was historical dramas, like the melodrama of the saga woman Bergljot, written by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson with music by Grieg. As many people know, an overwhelming success came with the play *Peer Gynt* by Henrik Ibsen, with music by Grieg. As a basis for his play, Ibsen used the Norwegian landscape and Norwegian tales in which a Norwegian undertone is hidden. In the play, less flattering qualities of the Norwegians were displayed, such as complacency and stubbornness.

Most of the leading Norwegian writers and artists in Grieg's lifetime stayed abroad for a time. The best example is the dramatist Henrik Ibsen, who lived abroad, mostly in Italy and Germany, for 27 years. Further examples are some of Norway's leading painters, who had settled in Düsseldorf in Germany. They were asked to move home and establish a Norwegian Art Academy in Kristiania, but refused on the basis that the success of the enterprise was far from certain.⁶

Musicians, artists and writers from The Nordic countries gathered together in clubs when they stayed abroad. In Rome, the Scandinavian Club was a central meeting point for social and professional needs. There was also a Scandinavian club in Leipzig, consisting mostly of musicians. Grieg liked to meet Norwegians abroad, because, according to him, they left any narrow nationalism at home and displayed other sides of themselves, such as openness and tolerance.

Unlike many other Norwegian artists, Grieg did not want to settle abroad. Visiting Naples and its surroundings, he wrote: "I'm not created to live in the South and would not manage to stay here for a long while. But I am grateful that it was my pleasure to see this glory." He wrote frequently of his longing for Norway in many letters to his best and trusted friend, Frants Beyer, who lived close to Grieg's home Troldhaugen and safeguarded Grieg's interests in Norway when the composer was absent. Grieg introduced Norway to his foreign friends,

⁶ Herresthal, Harald. *Med spark i gulvet og qinter i Bassen*. Oslo : Universitetsforl., cop. 1993, p. 154

inviting them to Trolldhaugen and to the mountains. The Dutch composer Julius Röntgen was another devoted friend of Grieg who often visited Norway.

Grieg wrote that he felt that the mountains of Norway had human characters. "My western mountains draw me continually back with an irresistible force. It is as though they still have so much to tell me." His yearly trips to the Jotunheimen mountains with Frants Beyer and other friends were always a highlight. The following quotation gives an impression of the conditions: "Cognac and glacier-water raised the mood to ethereal heights"⁷. The friends were on good terms with the milk maids who were out in the mountains. These maids sang folk songs and played the characteristic Norwegian hunting horn, called the lur. One of them was Gjendine Slaalien, who sang a lullaby for Grieg which he used in his piano piece "Gjendine's lullaby". As a very old lady, Gjendine was interviewed by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, and she gave a lively portrait of this encounter with Grieg. The interview is accessible at the National Library of Norway, along with other interviews of great value given by people who knew Grieg.

As already mentioned, the contact between Peters Verlag and Grieg started with his two first opuses. From the second half of the 1870s, Peters quickly became Grieg's main publisher. In 1889, a contract (called in German a "Generalvertrag"), was signed between the two parties. That contract gave Peters the option to publish all of Grieg's future works. Dr. Max Abraham of Peters edition also later bought the rights to many of Grieg's other works that originally had been published by other publishers.

For Grieg, the Generalvertrag meant that he got some financial independence, and the connection with a large German publisher like Peters was of major importance for the distribution of his works. At times, Grieg was Peters's bestselling composer. We recognize the Peters edition Grieg scores, with the familiar pink covers designating original works acquired by the publisher. The advertisements on the back of these covers give an impression of the market. Grieg's music matched the demands of the times, which favored the piano. The appetite for piano music seemed endless, and reprints were published in great numbers.

The business relationship also turned into friendship, with Grieg naming Abraham his *adopted father* or his *fatherly friend*. Irene Lawford-Hinrichsen, the grand-daughter of Henri Hinrichsen, argues that this must be "the finest relationship in the history of music publishing between a composer and his publisher."⁸ Hinrichsen took over the management of Peters in 1900. When Max Abraham understood that Edvard and Nina Grieg were longing for their own home, he supported them economically, and in 1885 they built the villa called Trolldhaugen, situated in the outskirts of Bergen. From then on, they lived here in the summers, and, in the winters travelled on concert tours around Europe or stayed for a while in Copenhagen, Kristiania or Leipzig. They lived mostly in hotels during these tours. In Leipzig, where they sometimes stayed several months, Abraham arranged all for their comfort, and convenient accommodation was made available. He cooperated with Grieg

⁷ Grimley, Daniel M. *Grieg: music, landscape and Norwegian identity*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006, s. 80

⁸ Lawford-Hinrichsen, Irene. *Edvard Grieg and his publishers: Dr Max Abraham and Henri Hinrichsen*. London: Edition Peters, 1997

concerning arrangements of his music, set up concerts, gave important advice on difficult financial matters, since the royalty system was not yet developed, and took care of many other practical details.

Peters Verlag in Talstrasse 10 was also an address frequently used by people sending letters to Grieg. Because of his frequent stays in Leipzig, he became part of the top layer of artists and composers of that time, and became friends with Peter Tchaikovsky and Johannes Brahms. A young composer whom Grieg took under his wing was Frederick Delius, from England. Delius was already a true friend of Norway, and continued to visit Norway throughout his life. Grieg forged a similar friendship at the end of his life with the young Australian composer and pianist Percy Grainger. Delius wrote to Grainger: ... “the feeling of nature I think is what I like so much in Grieg’s best things. You have it too and I think we all three have something in common”⁹.

Grieg’s music aroused enthusiasm, and he gained enormous popularity in his lifetime. At concerts he would perform his own works alone or together with his wife Nina. His career as a conductor had started early, and for two years he was also a valued conductor of the Harmonien orchestra in his hometown of Bergen. Eventually, Grieg became one of the most celebrated conductors of his time. Nowhere was the response to him greater than in England and the Netherlands. Grieg wondered if the response he received in England was due to a general fondness for Norway, for Englishmen in particular had discovered Norway as a holiday destination in the 19th century. Guidebooks were written about wild and primitive Norway. Grieg was awarded honorary doctorates both in Oxford and Cambridge.

In 1898 Grieg suggested organizing a music festival in Bergen, the intention being to promote Norwegian music and musicians. But he wanted the best orchestra to perform, regardless of nationality. Therefore, he invited the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, but without first clearing this with the organizing committee. His choice led to much trouble and many complaints, including from the public. Nevertheless, the Concertgebouw Orchestra with their conductor Willem Mengelberg arrived in Bergen, performed, and had tremendous success. The orchestra was of a standard, that had not been heard in Norway before, something that had a great impact on the continuing development of orchestras in Norway.

In spite of the tense political situation between Norway and Sweden, Grieg’s popularity in Sweden was also immense. At the end of 1896 he described his visit to Stockholm as a fairy tale, and his concerts there as a tremendous success. He was celebrated with a big party, and used the opportunity to speak about the union question, emphasizing that Norway’s cultural life was highly regarded among the Swedes. He regarded this journey as a national mission at a critical time for Norway.

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was actively engaged in European politics. When French writer Emile Zola defended the innocent convicted officer Dreyfus in 1898, Bjørnson supported Zola. Bjørnson was central in forming opinions in Germany concerning the Dreyfus case, and this led his close friend Grieg also to become involved. When Grieg received an invitation from

⁹ Boyle, Andrew J. *Delius and Norway*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017, p. 213

conductor Edouard Colonne to visit Paris to give a concert, he declined, saying that he would not come because of the Dreyfus case. Bjørnson's son-in-law, the German publisher Albert Langen, persuaded Grieg to make public his letter in a German newspaper, something that raised awareness throughout the world. But Grieg did not have enough knowledge of French society to truly understand how much his action hurt the French feelings. In the 1890s, Grieg was the most played foreign composer in France. And when composer Edouard Lalo used a melody from Grieg's opus 19 in the belief that it was a folk melody, Grieg took it as a compliment. But when Grieg finally gave a concert in Paris in 1903, it was necessary for him to get police protection.

Obviously it was not always easy for a celebrity like Grieg to judge how to react in the political landscape of Europe. In 1890, he canceled a planned visit to Prague because he was told that there was a risk that he would be used as a flag for the Czech movement. Grieg visited Prague in the spring of 1903, and realized that the public's admiration and homage to him and his music was also directed to him as the representative of a freedom-loving country, and he liked that. He was told that his idol and countryman, Ole Bull, had given concerts in Prague more than 60 years earlier. Ole Bull had played fantasies on Czech folk-songs, participated in patriotic rallies, and stood alongside those people who fought for their country's national freedom.

Grieg's 60th birthday was celebrated in Bergen in 1903. Key persons in Norwegian politics were among the guests, and they used the opportunity to arrange a political meeting with 400 participants before they left Bergen. This was the first time that representatives of the different political parties had talked together and managed to reconcile themselves to a goal which lay two years ahead. Christian Michelsen, also from Bergen, was present at this meeting. In 1905 Michelsen grasped the moment and was declared prime minister of an independent Norway. Grieg was a republican, but he supported the election in 1905 of a new king of Norway, Haakon 7 as a symbol of unity.

Grieg's health deteriorated. While preparing a new concert tour to Leeds, he died in Bergen on the fourth of September 1907. His funeral was a major event, with all the church bells in Bergen ringing out at a certain moment. Tens of thousands were present in the streets when the funeral procession passed by. Grieg had already marked out his last resting place, in a cave below Troidhaugen. One year before he passed away, he wrote in his diary: "The mountain was more beautiful than ever before. I must give thanks. For as long as the mountain seems new and beautiful to me, it is because I have something to compose into it. May it last until my last moment!"¹⁰

¹⁰ Grieg, Edvard. *Dagbøker: 1865, 1866, 1905, 1906 og 1907*. [Bergen]: Bergen offentlige bibliotek, cop. 1993, p. 149

