

## Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

### Music for String Orchestra · Lyric Suite

Edvard Grieg, unlike many later composers, composed his string music not for chamber orchestra or for specialist string orchestras, but for the string section of a full symphony orchestra. He was inspired by the rich spectrum of colours and the fusion of different sounds in such a large body of strings. He often included the works in symphonic programmes he conducted himself – certainly this was true of the *Holberg Suite* and the *Two Elegiac Melodies*. We have many statements in which he said that the string orchestra should be large: ‘the bigger, the better’. Several times he named the number of 60 strings as being ideal. Each section is often divided into many lines, either tutti or solo, with sometimes as many as 12 separate parts in all, so this is another reason why the orchestra should be large. We have therefore used a full symphonic string section for this recording.

In the 1870s Grieg and his composer-colleague Johan Svendsen (1840-1911) had performed some string music in Christiania (as Oslo was then called) with the newly founded Music Association orchestra. Svendsen composed a number of pieces for string orchestra during that decade, and Grieg joined in what was an international ‘trend’. His close contemporaries, the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) and the Russian Peter Tchaikovsky (1840-93), each wrote a *Serenade for Strings*, in 1875 and 1880 respectively. Most of Grieg’s string orchestra music dates from between 1880 and 1899. Of twelve works in total, ten are arrangements: six of these started life as piano pieces and four as songs.

Grieg’s first string orchestra works were the *Two Elegiac Melodies*, Op. 34 (1880), based on two songs to texts by Aasmund Olavsson Vinje (1818-70): *Wounded (Den Særdede)* and *Spring (Våren)*. Vinje’s poetry and his entire attitude to life had made a great impression on Grieg, giving him new inspiration to compose following a long crisis. Grieg himself often performed these two string pieces together. He gave them new titles to

underline the meaning of the original words: *The Wounded Heart (Hjertesår)* and *The Last Spring (Siste vår)*. Harmony, melody and instrumentation reflect the text practically line for line, subtly yet powerfully.

*The Wounded Heart* is in the key of C minor, but belongs to the same family of dark, dramatic G minor works as the *Ballade* for piano, Op. 24 (1875-76) [Naxos 8.550883; orchestration by Geirr Tveitt: Naxos 8.557854], and the String Quartet, Op. 27 (1877-78) [Naxos 8.550879]. The lonely open G string at the beginning has almost symbolic weight. The poem has three sad lines before the fourth line brings a change, and the music changes too at this point: from C minor to D flat major. The heart has been through the struggles of life and has suffered many wounds, but has survived. Even if the wounds could easily reopen, something positive can come from experience.

*Spring* is frequently played and sung in Norway, not least at funerals. There is also a version of the song for voice and orchestra [Naxos 8.570236]. Vinje’s poem, full of nature-description, is a contemplation of this transitory life, hanging by a thread, of the intense joy of being part of the ‘great game’, and of the certainty of death. This spring will probably be the last the protagonist will ever see: the sound of the primitive flute that he carved for himself ‘seems to lament’. The nuances of colour, so typical of the way Grieg uses the large string orchestra, are especially clear in the second verse. It begins with the ice-cold sound of four groups of violins playing near the bridge (*sul ponticello*). The double basses only enter towards the end, for the crescendo to the climax.

The *Two Melodies for String Orchestra*, Op. 53 (1890), are based on songs to texts by two very different poets: Vinje’s *Fyremål* (The Goal) and *Det første mødes sødme* (The Sweetness of the First Meeting) by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910). The two melodies are therefore extremely different from each other too.

The words of *Fyremål* – renamed *Norsk*

(Norwegian) in this string orchestra version – have a strongly national ring: the wisdom of the Norwegians will prevail in the teeth of the storm: ‘We take the true path, through twists and turns, travelling forward to our journey’s end: we must hold fast to our goal, or we will fall by the wayside.’ This is Norwegian nationalism with the aim of a democratic struggle for freedom. Language was also important in nation-building: ‘Confident and constant, we speak our Norwegian tongue’. The original text of the steadfast, serious middle section has solidarity and sympathy as its theme: ‘Come, kind friends! We work side by side.’

*The First Meeting* also exists in a version for voice and orchestra [Naxos 8.570236]. Bjørnson’s poem is a nature idyll: the enchantment of the first meeting fuses nature and human emotions in quiet ecstasy. Grieg described a similar atmosphere in his diary in 1865: ‘Little by little the sun disappeared, as if it sank to sleep in the bosom of the sea; night drew its veil over nature all around us, and a wonderfully gentle, mournful mood took hold of me.’ One feature of the song is an imitation of a call to the animals, and the many shifts between major and minor intensify the feeling of magic. The piece closes in an elysian soundworld, ‘where we with nature unite in wonder’.

For the celebrations in 1884 of the 200th birthday of Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), ‘Norway’s Molière’, both Grieg and Svendsen composed cantatas, and in Denmark Niels Wilhelm Gade (1817-90) wrote his four-movement suite *Holbergiana*, Op. 61 (1884). But it is the suite Grieg wrote the same year, *Fra Holbergs tid*, Op. 40, that is still frequently performed today. Its title literally means ‘From Holberg’s Time’, though it is usually known in English just as the *Holberg Suite*. For Grieg this was an exercise in ‘concealing his own personality’. He had worked especially hard to find his own voice; now he needed to adapt to completely different styles – as if donning a Rococo wig! So much of his music grew from the ambience of the natural world, but here the background is historical and cultural.

The mixture of styles in the suite gives the performers room for different interpretations: how much ‘Grieg’

and how much Baroque and Rococo should there be in different performances? There are other tensions in the music too: between French and Italian models, and inspiration from a wide range of composers such as the Scarlattis, J.S. Bach, Handel, Couperin and Rameau. To my mind this is a case of pastiche where the composer’s own identity is not lost. The distance between Baroque music and Norwegian folk music is not so great, and Grieg had worked a lot with dance forms, so he was by no means in completely unfamiliar territory. The suite shows his international side while at the same time the musical language is extremely ‘Griegian’. The original version, written in July and August 1884, was for piano. In the string orchestration he made later the same year, much of the idiomatic piano writing was completely changed and reimaged for the strings, and with different metronome markings.

The *Prelude*, thanks to its positive energy, has become one of the most often played of all Grieg’s pieces. In the second movement, *Sarabande*, the solemn tread of the Baroque dance, with its emphasis on the first two of the three beats in each bar, is well captured by Grieg, though there is also a great deal of Romanticism in its expression. The central section of the *Gavotte*, called *Musette*, is underpinned by a drone on an open fifth, as in folk music. The *Air*, in the key of G minor, is the longest movement in the suite, and is particularly inspired. The middle section of the *Rigaudon*, also in G minor, is rather elegiac in its chromaticism, while the main body of the movement has subtle, feather-light instrumentation accompanying a duet between a solo violin and solo viola.

Grieg had a special love for Norway’s mountain areas, where he often went hiking, for example among the country’s highest peaks in the Jotunheimen region. A particular memory from one of those walks lies behind *Aften på høyfjellet* (Evening in the Mountains), orchestrated from one of the *Lyric Pieces* for piano, Op. 68 (1897-99). The scoring adds an oboe and a horn to the string orchestra, with the oboe placed offstage. In a letter to his close friend Frants Beyer (1851-1918) Grieg talked about a performance in Amsterdam in 1906: ‘It

conjured up a real mirage. Even I was thrilled. I had positioned the oboist right at the back of the platform, so that nobody could see him. He played so perfectly, so freely, so like an improvisation that when the great orchestral strings came in, it was as if they were under the spell cast by the oboe, and they continued in exactly the same conception.’ The strings repeat the oboe’s material, but with a quintessentially Griegian harmonisation.

Grieg’s only child, Alexandra, died when she was very young. Later he wrote several cradle songs. *Bådnlåt* (At the Cradle), also from Op. 68, is a cheerful lullaby in which we can perhaps imagine the singer, full of parental love, alternately hushing the child and telling stories of mysterious lands and faraway kingdoms. In my opinion the piece works best when played with the steady pulse of folk music, quietly and hypnotically, as if lulling the child to sleep. The close of the song is long-drawn-out, until the child is finally sleeping soundly.

*I folketone* (In Folk Style) from the *Two Nordic Melodies for String Orchestra*, Op. 63 (1895), is based on a tune by Fredrik Due, who was at that time the ambassador of the Norwegian-Swedish Union in Paris. Grieg’s piece is an inspired variation-work with a wide range of expression and great structural depth, but it is played surprisingly rarely. The introductory phrase has a chord-progression similar to that in the orchestral song *Den Bergtekne* (The Mountain Thrall, Op. 32 (1877-8) [Naxos 8.570236]), and towards the end of the fourth variation there is a long chord, marked to be played as loud as possible, with ‘many bowstrokes’ – again, just as in *The Mountain Thrall*: an exceptionally dramatic moment, where the troll’s daughter has the protagonist in her power. Despite the fact that *I folketone* is divided into variations it develops an epic sense of line, not least by means of transition passages between the variations. As in his other works for string orchestra, Grieg also gives special prominence to the quiet dynamics: the contrasts between *p*, *pp* and *ppp*.

The miniature called *Kulokk* (Cow-Call) is very folksong-like; its characteristic short motifs could have a text like, for instance, ‘Kom kyra!’ – ‘Come, cattle’. The accompaniment may bring to mind the ‘Serenade

Vénétienne’ (‘Venetian Serenade’) form used by some of Grieg’s composer-contemporaries, including Svendsen. The piece also has a lot in common with the *Shepherd Boy* movement of the *Lyric Suite*. *Stabbelåten* (Peasant Dance) is based on a piano piece, which itself uses a dance from the Valdres region of central Norway, northwest of Oslo. The introduction sounds like a folk-fiddler’s typical warm-up on the open strings, to check their tuning. This is certainly the wildest of all Grieg’s string orchestra works, a kind of Norwegian precursor of the string orchestra music of the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók (1881-1945). In a long letter to his biographer Henry Theophilus Finck (1854-1926), Grieg said that ‘The essential feature of Norwegian folksongs, as compared with German ones, is a deep melancholy, which can suddenly veer into wild, uninhibited humour. Mysterious darkness and unbridled wildness – these are the two sides of Norwegian folksong.’ The ‘rough’ aspect of Grieg, which partly grew from the influence of the folk music, did not go down well with some foreign critics, who accused him of ‘Norwegifying’. In writing this kind of music Grieg was quite consciously trying to be radical: as he put it in his 1866 diary, ‘if true art – which is pure spontaneity, a torrent of poetry – is to advance, then we must get rid of philosophy, and the sooner the better, in my view.’

In 1903 Grieg got hold of the score of the *Norwegian Suite*, an orchestration of four of the *Lyric Pieces* for piano from his Op. 54 set, which the Hungarian-born conductor Anton Seidl (1850-98) had made for the New York Philharmonic in 1894. On 3 June 1905 Grieg wrote to Seidl’s widow: ‘This orchestration is excellent in itself; nevertheless, in accordance with my own intentions, I have made many revisions in some of the pieces, while others I have left out altogether or orchestrated afresh.’ In this way Grieg created his *Lyric Suite*, Op. 54 (1905). In the final version he replaced the sound-experiment *Klokkeklang* (Ringing Bells) [Naxos 8.557854] with *Gjetergutt* (Shepherd Boy) and changed the order of the movements. He included the *Lyric Suite* in many concerts he conducted towards the end of his life.

The musical language of *Shepherd Boy* is pure, natural and extremely expressive. This really is a young shepherd, and the music's supple undulations sound almost improvised. The instrumentation is for harp and strings, and Grieg's harmonisation of the simple folkloristic melody is filled with fantasy. The piece culminates in an epic, dramatic buildup to a climax, with a quiet epilogue. The traditional duple-time Norwegian *Gangar* – 'walking dance' – has a weighty feel: danced close to the ground, with flexibility in the knees, but proud strength. Grieg catches this perfectly. Through typical sequences in crescendo the dance reaches its full power at the climax. The nocturnal atmosphere of *Notturmo* was a genre all of its own at that time: for example, the Norwegian writer Sigbjørn Obstfelder (1866-1900) sought to express similar moods – erotic and mystical – under the title *Notturmo*. Grieg's piece also includes bird-imitations. Grieg then used *Trolltog* (March of the Dwarfs) to give the suite an impressive conclusion. Here we are in the realm of the 'Mountain King' [*Peer Gynt* – complete: Naxos 8.570871-72; suites: 8.570236], with rasping, hand-stopped horns and big burlesque climaxes. The central section could express the longing of a princess held captive by the trolls – as in many Norwegian folk tales.

Anton Seidl had studied in Leipzig, and for six years from 1872 he worked with Richard Wagner (1813-83) at Bayreuth. In the following period he conducted Wagner's operas all over Europe, and after some years in charge of German opera performances at the New York Metropolitan Opera he became conductor of the New York Philharmonic from 1891 until his death in 1898. Daniela Thode (1860-1940), who helped Grieg to obtain the score of Seidl's orchestration, was the daughter of Wagner's wife Cosima Liszt (1837-1930) by her first husband Hans von Bülow (1830-94), himself a conductor and composer. The score of the *Norwegian Suite* is now part of the Seidl Collection at Columbia University Library, so we can compare it with Grieg's version. The changes Grieg made provide an interesting illustration of how greatly his orchestration differed from the recent German Romantic tradition:

Grieg draws with much sharper outlines. Instead of blended colours he prefers well-defined alternations between different instrumental groups, and he employs many different methods to create a brighter, clearer, freer sound. The big *fortissimo* tuttis are more intense and effective. Grieg often removes flowing accompanimental figures and replaces them with, for example, long held notes. He also avoids polyphony. I find Grieg's accompanimental ideas more subtle and varied than Seidl's. His revisions are often highly imaginative, original and inspired: they say a lot with a little, they have a strongly dancelike character and great dramatic power. The music becomes more folkloristic and 'barbaric'. Grieg, like Seidl, was influenced by Wagner's orchestration, but here his models are just as much French and Russian. Johan Svendsen, too, was an important influence on Grieg in the field of instrumentation.

The inspiration of folk music is clearly audible in almost all the works on this recording: Grieg wanted to 'give expression to the hidden harmonies in our folk melodies' – as he put it in his long letter to Finck. He aimed not merely to quote folksongs and dances, but to enrich them with a kind of harmony that he felt lay latent within them. As time went on, Grieg came to an ever deeper understanding of the aesthetic of folk culture, and of its distinctive qualities. For me, his contact with Norwegian folk music was especially important for his compositional personality because it released in him a powerful artistic vitality, something both individual and universal. It is unfortunate that this has sometimes been overshadowed by the way his music became part of the political project of nation-building. Grieg's unique harmonic and timbral creative genius transcends nationality, and in both the string orchestra works and the *Lyric Suite* we can experience it to the full.

**Bjarte Engeset**

*Translated by David Gallagher*

## Malmö Symphony Orchestra



Photo: Klas Andersson

The Malmö Symphony Orchestra (MSO) consists of a hundred highly talented musicians who demonstrate their skills in a wide range of concerts. In the summer of 2008 the MSO founded a youth orchestra the MSO Ung (MSO Young) with talented young string musicians, entrusted in the 2009/2010 season with the chamber music series with MSO musicians as soloists. The record labels Naxos and BIS have brought the orchestra to a worldwide audience and several of its recordings have gained international awards such as the Cannes Classical Award and the Diapason d'Or. The MSO's recording of Berwald's *Symphonies*, under the direction of Sixten Ehrling, was nominated for the *Gramophone* Award, and a release of music by the American composer Charles Ives (Naxos) was Editor's Choice/Recording of the month in October 2008 in *Gramophone*. The recordings of Franz Schmidt's *Symphonies* (Naxos) with former principal conductor Vassily Sinaisky has won similar praise in *Gramophone* and *BBC Music Magazine*. Sinaisky is now honorary conductor of the MSO, and Marc Soustrot becomes principal conductor from the season 2011/2012.

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## Bjarte Engeset



Photo: Ulf Palm

The Norwegian conductor Bjarte Engeset completed his training with Jorma Panula at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki in 1989. In 1990 he was a prize-winner in the Nordic Conducting Competition and since his participation in the 1991 Tanglewood Seminar he has conducted leading orchestras throughout Scandinavia, as well as in Britain, Germany, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Estonia and the United States. He made his London debut with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1997. At home he continues to play a leading part in festivals throughout Norway, working both in the concert-hall and in the opera-house. He has frequently conducted the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra and shared conducting duties with Mariss Jansons during the orchestra's three-week tour of Asia. He has been music director of the Tromsø Symphony Orchestra, the Norwegian Wind Ensemble, artistic director of Northern Norway's Northern Lights Festival and Opera Nord, and permanent guest conductor of the Flemish Radio Orchestra. Since 2007 he has served as chief conductor of Sweden's DalaSinfonietta. His acclaimed recordings for Naxos include works by Svendsen, Tveitt, Grieg, Irgens-Jensen, Sibelius and Sinding.



# GRIEG

## Music for String Orchestra From Holberg's Time • Lyric Suite

### Malmö Symphony Orchestra • Bjarte Engeset

