

Edvard Grieg

Piano Concerto in A minor, Opus 16

EDVARD GRIEG was born in Bergen, Norway, on June 15, 1843, and died there on September 4, 1907. He began his (only) piano concerto in June 1868, completing the score early in 1869. The first performance took place in Copenhagen on April 3, 1869, with Edmund Newpert as soloist and Holger Simon Paulli conducting the orchestra of the Royal Theater. Grieg made revisions to the concerto in 1872, 1882, 1890, and 1895; he sent the last set of revisions (which included the addition of third and fourth horns) to his publisher on July 21, 1907, six weeks before his death.

IN ADDITION TO THE PIANO SOLOIST, the score of Grieg's Piano Concerto calls for an orchestra of two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

Grieg's familiar and popular piano concerto was one of the most important steps on his path toward the creation of a national Norwegian music. After completing his course at the Leipzig Conservatory, he returned north and settled in Copenhagen, the only Scandinavian city to have an active musical life. There he met Rikard Nordraak, another Norwegian composer just one year his senior, whose influence on him was to prove decisive, especially after Nordraak's premature death at the age of twenty-four. He spent several years in the musical backwater of Christiania, Denmark, where he was the director of the Philharmonic Society, fighting the good fight for music of real substance on his programs. He was later to look on these years as "entirely unproductive," since his time was almost totally taken up with performance rather than composition.

Following the birth of a daughter on April 10, 1868, Edvard and Nina Grieg spent a pleasant and productive summer in a cottage at Søllerød, Denmark, where he experienced a creative outburst that resulted in the Opus 16 concerto. From the very first it has been regarded as Grieg's finest large-scale accomplishment (he generally found the small keyboard miniature to be more congenial to his temperament) and as the fullest musical embodiment of Norwegian nationalism in romantic music.

The winter following this splendidly fruitful summer was discouraging, as Grieg found himself once again trapped in the indifference and philistinism of Christiania. He had applied for a state traveling grant and had been rejected; it seemed unlikely that any new application would be favorably received. Then, suddenly, he received a gracious letter from Franz Liszt, apparently unsolicited, in which Liszt expressed the pleasure he had received in perusing Grieg's Opus 8 sonata for violin and piano and invited the young composer to visit him in Weimar should the opportunity arise. This letter opened doors that had up to then been firmly shut; not long after, Grieg received his travel grant, which allowed him to take Liszt up on his invitation a year later.

In the meantime there was the first performance of the new concerto to be attended to, as well as repeat performances to introduce the work to Denmark and Norway. At about this time, too, he discovered a treasury of Norwegian folk music transcribed into piano score. He delved avidly into the collection and began to realize how a skilled musician could make use of folk elements in his works. From this time Grieg's interest in the formal classical genres began to decline—of that type, he produced only a string quartet and two sonatas after this date.

It took until February 1870 for the Griegs to catch up with Liszt, not in Weimar but in Rome. When they did, though, the result was highly gratifying for the young man. Liszt promptly grabbed Grieg's portfolio of compositions, took them to the piano, and sight-read through the G major violin sonata, playing both the violin and piano parts. When Grieg complimented him on his ability to sight-read a manuscript like that, he simply replied modestly, "I'm an experienced old musician and ought to be able to play at sight." At a later visit, in April, Grieg brought his piano concerto, and this time Liszt's sight-reading was even more fabulous: he played at sight from the manuscript score the entire concerto, both orchestral and solo parts, with ever-increasing enthusiasm. Grieg recounted the incident in a letter home:

I must not forget one delightful episode. Toward the end of the finale the second theme is, you will remember, repeated with a great fortissimo. In the very last bars, where the first note of the first triplet—G-sharp—in the orchestral part is changed to G-natural [five bars before the end of the piece], while the piano runs through its entire compass in a powerful scale passage, he suddenly jumped up, stretched himself to his full height, strode with theatrical gait and uplifted arm through the monastery hall, and literally bellowed out the theme. At that particular G-natural he stretched out his arm with an imperious gesture and exclaimed, "G, G, not G-sharp!"

Splendid! That's the real thing!" And then, quite pianissimo and in parentheses: "I had something of the kind the other day from Smetana." He went back to the piano and played the whole thing over again. Finally he said in a strange, emotional way: "Keep on, I tell you. You have what is needed, and don't let them frighten you."

Though the concerto was popular from the start, and was published in full score only three years after its composition, Grieg himself was never entirely satisfied with it, and he continued to touch up details of both the orchestral and solo parts for the rest of his life. A few critics have attacked the work—notably Bernard Shaw (writing as "Corno di Bassetto") and Debussy—and it has certainly been overplayed and mistreated, especially in a popular operetta, *Song of Norway*, very loosely based on Grieg's life, but it retains its freshness and popularity nonetheless. The basic architecture is inspired by Schumann's essay in the same medium and key, though the piano part is of Lisztian brilliance, blended with Grieg's own harmonic originality, which was in turn influenced by his studies of Norwegian folk song. One Norwegian analyst has pointed out that the opening splash of piano, built of a sequence consisting of a descending second followed by a descending third, is a very characteristic Norwegian melodic gesture, and that this opening typifies the pervasiveness of the folk influence. For the rest, the first movement is loaded with attractive themes, some obviously derived from one another, others strongly contrasting, a melodic richness that has played a powerful role in generating the concerto's appeal. The *animato* section of the first movement includes figurations of the type used by folk-fiddlers; the lyric song of the second movement is harmonized in the style of some of Grieg's later folksong settings; and the finale consists of dance rhythms reminiscent of the *halling* and *springdans*.

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