

## EDVARD GRIEG (1843–1907)

BY CEDRIC H. GLOVER.

THROUGHOUT musical history there have existed composers who preferred one medium for the presentation of their music to any other, and who consequently became identified to a large extent [sic] with the medium of their choice. Violinists would claim as such Corelli, Tartini, Spohr or Max Bruch; organists, Froberger, Buxtehude or Karg-Elert; pianists, Domenico Scarlatti, Field, Chopin, Grieg, Scriabin or Medtner; singers, Hugo Wolf, to mention a few names at random. These composers by no means confined themselves entirely to the voice or to one particular instrument, for instance Chopin wrote some music for the violoncello and Hugo Wolf composed a string quartet, yet it is true to say that the little music which they wrote for other mediums is very largely neglected by the general musical public. In most cases this neglect is justified by the experimental nature of the works in question, but exception must be made in favour of the composer, whom we are now about to discuss.

The bulk of Grieg's music is written for the pianoforte, and it is by this music that he is known to the world at large, But [sic] he is also the composer of many lovely songs, which are almost totally neglected, and of three violin and one violoncello sonata, which maintain a precarious existence among amateurs and are undeservedly overlooked by recital givers. There is also a quartet of unequal merit and several works for string orchestra of great charm which are very rarely heard. Public attention is rivetted, even in the case of the works for pianoforte, on a small group of pieces to the almost total neglect of the rest, but these favoured ones, thanks to cheap editions, now occupy a position in the average English home akin to that once enjoyed by the "Songs Without Words." Apart from this group of pianoforte pieces, Grieg's fame rests on the orchestral suites arranged from

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the incidental music which he composed for Ibsen's "Peer Gynt"; the first suite arranged in various forms, together with a wholly uncharacteristic salon piece by Dvorak and an indifferent prelude by Rachmaninov, enjoys the dubious distinction of inclusion in the repertoire of restaurant and picture theatre orchestras, as a representative of what is miscalled "classical music"; it is at any rate far more worthy than its fellows.

Edvard Grieg was the descendant of a certain Alexander Greig of Aberdeen, who settled in Bergen after the '45. He was born at Bergen in 1843, his mother being a fine pianist; she gave the little boy his first music lessons, but his career as a musician was only definitely settled upon, when he was fifteen years old, in face of the urgent representations of the great Norwegian violinist, Ole Bull, who was an intimate friend of the Grieg family. Acting on the advice of Ole Bull, his parents sent the boy to the Leipzig Conservatoire, where he was a contemporary of Arthur Sullivan. He passed out creditably in 1862, and then proceeded to Copenhagen where he came under the influence of Niels Gade and Nordraak, a gifted Norwegian composer who died at the age of 23; he also renewed acquaintance with Ole Bull.

Grieg finally settled in Christiania, where he spent his days in conducting, playing the organ and giving lessons. In 1867 he married his cousin, a singer, who did much to popularise her husband's works by her interpretation of his songs in the principal European cities. The crowning event in Grieg's life was an invitation to Rome from Liszt, who had seen and admired

some of his music. With that wonderful sympathy, which helped so many young struggling musicians on their way, Liszt spurred him on to greater efforts. Soon after this, the Norwegian Government, which had financed the visit to Rome, gave Grieg a life pension and enabled him to devote his remaining years to composition. From now onwards Grieg's life consisted of concert tours in Europe interspersed with periods of retirement for composition first at Lofthus and afterwards at Troidhaugen, near Bergen. He visited England with his wife on several occasions and received honorary musical degrees from both Universities. He died fifteen years ago, full of honours and universally beloved.

In spite of the strong Scandinavian strain in Grieg's music, he owes much to the German Romantic school of composers of whom Schumann and Mendelssohn are the chief. His music is however intensely individual and the influence of his predecessors is largely a question of structure and form. Like Schumann, he is a tone poet, and sets himself the task of translating into music the emotions of everyday life, or produces little vignettes of the peasant life around him. Grieg cannot be

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regarded as an innovator in form; he was content to accept the principles which were transmitted to him, but he gave his originality full scope in the daring harmonic progressions and sudden modulations into unrelated keys which fill the pages of his music. His influence on the present generation of composers is small, although there are traces in Percy Grainger's work and an occasional flavour of Grieg in much of Delius' music.

It would be idle to pretend that Grieg is a great composer, and the very fact of his intense nationalism and his pre-occupation with the popular musical idioms of his country probably prevented him from giving full rein to his genius. The question of nationalism in music is the subject of a burning academic dispute among musicians. It is however now generally acknowledged that music can know no geographical or political boundaries, and, although it is true that a strongly marked musical environment, such as that subsisting in Hungary, Russia or Scandinavia, must leave its mark on the personality of a composer, his success as such is very largely a question of his capacity for rising above mere territorial idiosyncracies [sic]. There is no characteristically Teutonic quality shared by the great Viennese and German composers, and yet, when contrasted with composers of Slavonic or Latin races, there is some intangible similarity of mental outlook, which is never apparent, when they are considered in relation to one another. On the other hand, the music of Grieg, Glinka, Smetana and other so-called "national" composers is almost wholly cast in the folk song idiom of their respective countries, and can only be distinguished from the original models by the artistic finish, the sense of form and harmonic colouring, which the genius of the composer instinctively grafts upon them. Grieg's powers of assimilation were perhaps more marked than is usually the case, and he has been able to establish his music on a more or less international basis in spite of its local character. The case of Smetana and Glinka is more typical. Both awaken a fervour of intense enthusiasm in Bohemia and Russia respectively, partly no doubt for political reasons, but elsewhere they have never succeeded in maintaining a foothold.

No music is more individual and more easily identifiable than is that of Grieg, and yet its very originality marks its limitations. No more cogent argument could be advanced to convince those people who are trying to push the claims of English folk song on our composers. The folk song idiom is perceptible in much of the recent output of British composers, but any advance in

this direction seems bound to end in sterility.

Of Grieg's immortality it is perhaps too early to prophesy, but it is safe to predict a long life for such works as the pianoforte

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concerto, the Holberg and Peer Gynt suites, and the various books of "Lyrical Pieces," while there are pianists to play them. Few composers have written music fraught with such frail and fastidious charm; so long as men can appreciate tenderness in music, so long will they turn to Grieg. He cannot supply music for every mood in the way that Bach and Beethoven have done, but from time to time one comes back to him and gratefully accepts the sweet pure fruits of his inspiration.

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The syllabus aims at giving a short, comprehensive survey of Grieg's music. It is however necessarily incomplete in view of the exclusion of the composer's chamber music. The violin sonatas in particular would repay study, but they do not lie within the competency of the ordinary amateur, and have therefore been reluctantly omitted. Should a capable violinist be available, the first sonata in F, which is also the easiest to play, may be specially recommended. Those who are fortunate enough to have access to two pianofortes should make the acquaintance of the four Mozart sonatas with Grieg's accompaniment for second pianoforte. Grieg's additions are in the best taste and full of characteristic little turns. Work of this kind is rare in music; Mozart added extra parts to some of the Handel oratorios. The most notorious example however is Gounod's "Meditation" on the first prelude of Bach's "Forty-eight," which brings into high relief the difference between the composer of the B minor Mass and the composer of "Faust," very much to the disadvantage of the latter.

(1) "*In Holberg's Time*": Many modern composers have written music in the style of bygone days, and this is Grieg's attempt at conscious archaism. It is characteristic of Grieg's patriotism that this suite should be designed to do honour to a distinguished fellow townsman, Baron Ludwig Holberg (1684–1754), who eventually settled in Copenhagen and by his writings in the vernacular firmly established Danish literature. Holberg is here described as the "Molière of the North," but this soubriquet only does justice to one side of his versatile nature. Suffice to say that Holberg is accounted the second greatest writer [sic] in Europe after Voltaire in an age which boasts of Swift and Poper [sic] There are no other instances of a great composer thus celebrating a great writer, though composers have written music in honour of other composers, e.g., Ravel's "Le tombeau de Couperin" or the Rachmaninov elegiac trio in memory of Tchaikovsky.

This work is in the old suite form, out of which grew the classical sonata. It consists of a prelude and three dance movements with an "Air" interpolated between two of them.

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Originally conceived for pianoforte solo, Grieg subsequently arranged the work for string orchestra. The prelude is of the orthodox type, but immediately betrays its modern origin by the slow moving bass notes. After the repeat bar there is a good imitation of the harpsichord style of writing. The Gavotte is a very clever imitation and full of memories of other days, e.g., the Handel "Harmonious Blacksmith" tune in bars 10–12. The characteristic of a Musette is the bagpipe drone in the bass; note also the suspensions in the second half, which impart an archaic flavour to the piece. There is a good example of an "Interrupted Cadence" in bars 13–15

of the "Air": the previous bars are working up to a close in D minor, but instead of this there is a sharp transition into G minor; see bar 18 of the B minor Prelude of Chopin's Twenty-four for a similar effect. The other movements of this beautiful work do not call for comment.

(2) *Vinje Song Cycle*.

(3) "*Elegiac Melodies*."

Grieg was fond of arranging his own works, and the case of the Holberg suite is by no means an isolated one. The "Elegiac Melodies" are a transposed adaptation for string orchestra of the second and third songs in the Vinje cycle, the orchestral version in turn being arranged for pianoforte duet by the composer. The originals and the adaptations should be very closely compared, as the orchestral versions far transcend an ordinary arrangement. The song entitled "Springtide" is embellished with rich chromatic harmonies especially during the second presentation of the theme, and the closing bars of the tune are considerably improved. As in the case of the Brahms pianoforte trio in B major (revised version), we are here given a glance into the workshop of a composer—a most instructive experience. The twelve songs in the cycle to words by Vinje contain specimens of Grieg's every mood and exhibit most of his mannerisms, such as the augmented fourth (C major section No. 48) or the repetition of the same musical phrase over a different harmonic scheme (closing bars No. 41). The beauty of the songs is however at once apparent and needs no commendation. Numbers 38, 43, 45 and 47 are perhaps the most immediately attractive, if any discrimination is necessary.

(4) *Five children's songs*: These five songs are to be found in a volume of Children's Songs (op. 61). The "Farmyard Song" with the major ninths in bar 10 seq., the open fifths in the bass and the frequent pedal points or drones stamp the music as characteristic of Grieg. The same is true of the first two bars of the "Christmas Song"; nobody but Grieg could have written them, but this figure, embodying the interval of a descending third,  
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becomes almost tedious owing to its constant repetition in everything he writes (cf. Vinje cycle No. 39 bar 12). The "Fatherland's Psalm" is a fine stirring piece of writing and a model of all that a patriotic song should be. Apart from the strength of the harmonies employed, note the line of the tune and the well marked climax in the fifth bar. No detailed explanation of the other songs is necessary, as the above comments hold good in every case; all goes to justify the criticism that Grieg is a composer of very great originality working in a very small compass.

(5) *Peer Gynt Suite I*: This is the most widely known work of the composer. A very good analysis of it will be found on page 68 of the set book, to which the student is referred. The work was produced in 1876 and is written in Grieg's most charming manner, though, with the exception of "Asa's Death," it is rather slight in character. It is however unfair to judge the music apart from its proper environment, remembering also that unobtrusiveness is a virtue in incidental music to plays. The collaboration between a great writer and a great composer in a work for the stage is uncommon; one might cite as parallel cases the association of Goethe and Beethoven in "Egmont" or that of Debussy and Maeterlinck in the operatic version of "Pelleas and Melisande."

(6) "*Lyric Pieces*," *Book III*: There are ten books of these "Lyric Pieces," of which this is probably the most famous. The little pieces in this volume may be aptly contrasted with Schumann's work in a similar vein. Grieg's music is on the whole more superficial and does not wear so well. The six pieces fall naturally into two groups; Nos. 1, 4 and 6 are nature sketches,

the others deal with the emotions—love and the longing for home. Numbers 1 and 4 are perhaps too descriptive, though no one could deny the ingenuity with which the composer depicts the restless fluttering of the butterfly from flower to flower. Numbers 2 and 3 are both very beautiful, the one sad, the other tender—both betoken a very strong love of home, which we recognize as an outstanding attribute of the composer’s character. Number 5 on the other hand is less successful and seems mannered and unspontaneous. Grieg’s limitations are very apparent when he deals with the deeper emotions to which mankind is subject; there is none of that white heat which makes Schumann’s “Widmung” and “Frühlingsnacht” so inevitable, and it does not appear that either love or hatred entered very largely into the composition of Grieg’s character. In the last piece however we find Grieg at his best again. As a composer of beautiful tunes, few can surpass him, and he has here abandoned the more imitative style of the previous nature pieces. It is

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interesting to note the association of an idea with a special key. The second Vinje song also deals with the Spring and is also in F sharp major (the edition in the syllabus is a *transposed* version, Grieg having written the song a minor third higher). The song likewise contains in bar 24 the same lovely dissonance, E sharp against F sharp, which occurs here in the seventh bar and elsewhere.

#### **SYLLABUS FOR THE SUMMER TERM, 1922.**

##### SET BOOK:

GRIEG, by E. Markham Lee, Bell’s Miniature Series of Musicians, 1/6.

##### MUSIC:

- (1) “In Holberg’s Time,” for solo pianoforte, op. 40: Peters Edition 2151: 4/-.
- (2) Vinje Song Cycle: Grieg Songs, Vol. IV: Peters Edition 467d (low voice) 4/-.
- (3) Elegiac Melodies, op. 34 for pianoforte duet: Peters Edition 2419. 3/-.
- (4)
  - (a) Christmas Song—Augener’s Edition 12510, 3d.
  - (b) Dobbin’s Good-night Song—Augener’s Edition 12508, 3d.
  - (c) Fatherland’s Psalm—Augener’s Edition 12512, 3d.
  - (d) Farm Yard Song—Augener’s Edition, 12511, 3d.
  - (e) Sea Song—Augener’s Edition 12509, 3d.
- (5) Peer Gynt Suite I (for pianoforte solo) op. 46: Peters Edition, 2420. 4/-.
- (6) Lyric Pieces, Book III, for solo pianoforte, op. 43: Peters Edition, 2154, 4/-.

NOTE:—The above music may be obtained from Messrs. Augener Ltd., 63, Conduit Street, London, W.1., the English agents of the publishers. Of the above, Nos. (2) and (4) are both suitable for class and solo singing by children: No. (3) and certain pieces in No. (6) may be used by children learning the pianoforte.

#### **GRAMOPHONE RECORDS.**

- (1) Three of the Lyric Pieces Book III, No. (6) above. B. 1037, 4/-.
- (2) Peer Gynt Suite I, for orchestra, D. 156 and 157. Each, 7/6.

The above records may be obtained from The Gramophone Company Ltd. 363, Oxford

Street, London, W.1.