

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

The Last Spring

Edvard Grieg

Edvard Grieg left his native Norway to study from 1858 to 1862 at the Leipzig Conservatory, a destination for many international music students of the time and a sturdy source of traditional learning when it came to musical fundamentals and composition. Although in his later years Grieg would speak of the Leipzig Conservatory in unflattering terms, the four years he spent there were undeniably important to his development, thanks to his work with such eminent teachers as Ignaz Moscheles for piano and Carl Reinecke for composition. His piano teacher during his upper-class years there was a certain Ernst Ferdinand Wenzel, who had been a friend of Mendelssohn's and Schumann's; he instilled in Grieg a particular passion for the music of the latter.

Songs were a constant in Grieg's output. He wrote to his American biographer Henry Finck in 1900:

How does it happen that my songs play such an important part in my production? Quite simply owing to the circumstances that even I, like other mortals, was for once in my life endowed with genius (to quote Goethe). The flash of genius was: love, I loved a young girl who had a wonderful voice and an equally wonderful gift of interpretation. That girl became my wife and my lifelong companion to this very day. For me, she has been — dare I admit it — the only genuine interpreter of my songs.

Her name was Nina Hagerup — they were first cousins, but she and Grieg did not know each other until they were on the verge of adulthood, since her branch of the family had moved to Denmark when she was a child. They were

engaged in 1864, and just about then Grieg embarked on his remarkable outpouring of art songs.

Between 1873 and 1880 he set 15 poems by the recently deceased Norwegian poet and journalist Aasmund Olavsson Vinje (1818–70), gathering a dozen of them to publish in 1881 as his Op. 33. Vinje was a fervent champion of *landsmål*, a “people’s language” that purged Norwegian of incursions from Danish vocabulary that formed the officially sanctioned *riksmål* (state language) or *bokmål* (book language).

IN SHORT

Born: June 15, 1843, in Bergen, Norway

Died: September 4, 1907, in Bergen

Work composed: May 1880, as the song “Vären” (“Spring”) for voice and piano; Grieg arranged it almost immediately into the string-orchestra piece of the same name, which would eventually become well-known as *Siste vår* (*The Last Spring*).

World premiere: unknown

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 11, 1899, with Frank Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (a New York Philharmonic forebear)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 9, 1940, Rudolph Ganz, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 6 minutes

Landsmål is used widely today, now called *nynorsk* (New Norwegian) and it co-exists with the formal written language. Grieg was drawn to the idea of a literature in *landsmål*, which paralleled his own interest in promoting deeply rooted sounds of indigenous Norwegian music and incorporating such music into a classical framework. He placed his setting of Vinje's poem "Våren" ("Spring") as the second item in his Op. 33 album. A Danish critic predictably lit into the piece on the grounds that the music was too beautiful for such undignified language. For his part, Vinje considered it among the best of his poems, and Grieg obviously admired it, too, enrobing it in one of his most beautiful melodies.

The Op. 33 songs were published in 1881, but in the preceding year Grieg had already seen into print his transcription of "Våren" for string orchestra as the second of his *To elegiske melodier* (*Two Elegiac Melodies*), Op. 34. (The

other was a recasting of another of the Op. 33 songs.) Grieg maintained the title *Våren*, but in Germany the piece was disseminated as *Letzter Frühling* (*The Last Spring*), and that is the title that has stuck. Indeed, the composer seems to have come around to the virtue of that name, and in his letter to Finck he actually refers to it as *Siste vår* (*The Last Spring*). The change clarifies the resigned spirit of the poem. One finds bird-song here, just as one does in Vivaldi's *La primavera*, but in Vinje's poem, hearing "the thrush happily greet the summer with joyous song" is a bittersweet experience because the observer will not live to hear it again next year. Gratitude and sadness are companions in this miniature of melancholy. On the other hand, Beryl Foster, a specialist in the songs of Grieg, worries that "it is a practice that tends to sentimentalize a most unsentimental song."

Instrumentation: string orchestra.

Sources and Inspirations

The text of Aasmund Olavsson Vinje's poem "Våren," here in an anonymous English translation, sets the scene for Grieg's elegiac setting:

Once again I could see,
how winter had to flee into spring,
once again I saw the wild cherry
bloom in spring.
Once again I saw the little mountain
stream flowing,
freed from ice,
heard the thundering stream of melt water
pour into the valley.
Once again I saw the flowers in the green
of the flowering meadow,
heard the thrush happily greet the summer
with joyous song.
One day, I will myself be part of all the
blossoms and foam,
I will refresh myself in the cool fresh breeze with happy dreams.
The flowery garlands, spring's present to me,
woke in me the spirit of the fathers, their sighs and their dancing.
It seemed to me I found one of spring's secrets in the fir tree;
and it was as if my flute began to weep softly.



Apple Trees in Bloom, by Norwegian artist Nikolai Astrup (1880–1928)