

Notes on the Program

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Peer Gynt Suite No. 1, Op. 46 Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16

Edvard Grieg

Edvard Grieg stands as the most essential composer in the history of Norwegian music, a distinction he already clinched during his lifetime and would not relinquish in posterity. When he was growing up, his native country could offer a composer only limited opportunities for advanced study; and so he left Norway to enroll, 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. Following his conservatory studies, he spent a period in Copenhagen, which was enjoying the most cosmopolitan musical life of any city in Scandinavia. There he developed a friendship with Rikard Nordraak, a compatriot who was spearheading nationalistic sentiments among artists in Norway. Immediately following Nordraak's early death, in 1866, Grieg returned to his native land, which would be his home from that point on.

Norway's most significant literary figure during that time was Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), although his countrymen were slow to recognize that fact. Unlike Grieg, he enjoyed a strictly Norwegian upbringing. During his early years as a writer, he scraped by with the slight income he derived from work as

IN SHORT

Born: June 15, 1843, in Bergen, Norway

Died: September 4, 1907, in Bergen

Works composed and premiered: incidental music to the play *Peer Gynt*, composed May 1874–September 1875, with additions and revisions continuing through 1902; the four movements of *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1*, assembled for publication in 1888; Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* premiered in Christiania (later known as Oslo), Norway, on February 24, 1876, with incidental music conducted by Johan Hennum; *Suite No. 1*, premiered January 24, 1889, at Chickering Hall in New York City, with Theodore Thomas leading his orchestra. *Piano Concerto* composed June 1868 to early 1869; revised substantially in 1872, 1882, 1890, and 1895; premiered April 3, 1869, in Copenhagen by the Orchestra of the Royal Theatre, Edmund Neupert, conductor, Holger Simon Paulli, soloist

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances: *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1*, premiered June 23, 1901, in Philadelphia Pennsylvania, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928); most recently performed July 23, 2003, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Roberto Minczuk, conductor. *Piano Concerto*, premiered January 2, 1879, with Leopold Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony, Franz Rummel, soloist; most recently played July 24, 2015, at Bravo! Vail, Bramwell Tovey, conductor, Jon Kimura Parker, soloist

Estimated durations: *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1*, ca. 14 minutes; *Piano Concerto*, ca. 29 minutes

a playwright, director, and administrator at theaters in Bergen and Christiania (later named Oslo). Success eluded him, and he grew so disenchanting that in 1864 he left for Italy, where he mostly remained in self-imposed exile for 27 years. While on the continent he penned a succession of admired plays: *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Hedda Gabler*.

When Ibsen began sending parts of his **Peer Gynt** manuscript to his publisher, he explained the work's starting point in an accompanying letter:

Peer Gynt was a real person who lived in the Gudbrandsdal, probably around the end of the last century or the beginning of this one. ... Not much more is known about his doings than you can find in Asbjørnsen's *Norwegian Fairy Tales*. ... So I

haven't had much on which to base my poem, but it has meant that I have had all the more freedom with which to work on it.

Left to his own devices, Ibsen came up with a meandering tale about an anti-hero (as described by Rolf Fjelde, who translated the play into English) "with no ruling passion, no calling, no commitment, the eternal opportunist, the charming, gifted, self-centered child who turns out finally to have neither center nor self." In the course of 40 scenes, the title character has a variety of adventures and travels as far as North Africa before arriving back in Norway for a hallucinatory finale in which he is faced with the strands of his life that have gone awry. He probably ends up dying, although one can't be sure.

The verse-play met with reasonable success when published, in 1867, but it didn't

The Work at a Glance

Grieg extracted two concert suites from his **Peer Gynt** music, the first being published in 1888, the second in 1893. Suite No. 1 is far the more famous, and for many decades it was a staple of music education curricula for the young. Most people probably assume that its opening movement, "Morning Mood," depicts the sun of dawn playing among the fjords, but in the play [it falls in Act IV] it accompanies a sunrise in the North African desert. "Åse's Death" (from Act III) involves the death of Peer's mother, whom he treated ungratefully but whose passing he mourns deeply. "Anitra's Dance" falls shortly after "Morning Mood" in Act IV of the play, where it serves as a seductive waltz for a dancing girl in the tent of an Arab chief. "The Hall of the Mountain King" harks back to Act II, where Peer matches wits with a menacing troll king.



Peer Gynt and the Troll Witch, illustration by Arthur Rackham, 1936

receive a staged production until 1876, when it was produced in Christiania with accompanying music by Grieg. Neither the playwright nor the composer was in attendance on that occasion. Ibsen had written from Italy to ask Grieg to provide music for the production, and the composer had accepted, misjudging the amount of music that would be required. “*Peer Gynt* goes very slowly,” he wrote to a friend in 1874, while he was enmeshed in the project:

It is a horribly intractable subject except for a few places And I have something for the hall of the troll-king that I literally can’t bear to listen to, it reeks so of cow-pads and super-Norwegianism.

In the end he would provide 26 separate items for the play (a few having been added for revivals), totaling about 90 minutes of music.

Grieg was not at his most comfortable when writing in large forms. His Four Symphonic Dances are as close as he came to a proper symphony (apart from a very early student exercise) and he composed only five sonatas (one for piano, one for cello, three for violin) and two string quartets (of which the first, a student work, is lost; of a third string quartet he finished only two movements). Grieg’s **Piano Concerto** therefore stands as an exception in his catalogue, but even its very protracted creation testifies to his difficulty coming to terms with large-scale structure.

He was certainly trained in the textbook forms through the curriculum of the Leipzig Conservatory, which resolutely instilled in its pupils an appreciation for tried-and-true ways of creating music. 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;

Listen for . . . Grieg’s Fingerprint

Grieg’s **Piano Concerto** opens with a crescendo roll on the timpani that leads to a forceful A-minor chord from the orchestra and then a flourish from the piano that descends through several octaves, repeating its motif six times as it cascades downwards:



The three-note melodic germ behind this is widely viewed as Grieg’s melodic fingerprint, the falling interval connecting the tonic to the fifth below by way of the seventh — “do-ti-sol” for the solfeggists among us. This motif plays a prominent role in Norwegian folk music, and it certainly was part of Grieg’s musical DNA, showing up — sometimes in the foreground, sometimes not — in a great many of his compositions.

he inspired in Grieg a particular passion for the music of the latter. Grieg heard Clara Schumann perform her husband's Piano Concerto and for decades he continued to cite it as a deeply affecting musical experience. In a 1903 article in *The Century* magazine, Grieg wrote of that concerto:

Inspired from beginning to end, it stands unparalleled in music literature and astonishes us as much by its originality as by its noble disdain of an "extravert, virtuoso style." It is beloved by all, played by many, played well by few, and comprehended in accordance with its basic ideas by still fewer — indeed, perhaps by just one person — his wife.

In an article published in 1905 by the American journal *The Independent*, Grieg recalled that he was so captivated by that piece that he traded the only manuscript of his early string quartet (which he considered mediocre) to acquire a copy of the Schumann score:

One day a fellow student who admired my creative efforts led me into temptation. He had a complete score of Schumann's Piano Concerto, which he had written out himself, and which at that time had not yet been published except for a piano reduction and separate orchestral parts. "If you will give me your quartet," he said one day, "I will give you the score of Schumann's concerto." I could not resist the offer. I still think with secret dread about the fact that my abortive early work very likely still exists somewhere in one of the countries of southern Europe.

Possibly Grieg was embroidering his tale, or at least he had his chronology off, since shortly after he returned to Bergen as a newly

minted conservatory graduate he rented a performance space in which to present a concert that included his own String Quartet in D minor. In any case, his reminiscence accurately conveys his infatuation with the music of Schumann and, specifically, with Schumann's Piano Concerto. It is perfectly normal for audience members hearing Grieg's Piano Concerto to remark on how very much it reminds them of Schumann's — in both cases in the key of A minor, in both cases representing the composer's only entry in the genre. The similarities continue at the level of specifics: both begin with a wallop from the orchestra and a descending flourish from the piano, leading to the hushed enunciation of the principal theme by the orchestra (stressing woodwinds) ... and on and on.

And yet, it would not be accurate to characterize Grieg's Concerto as a mere parody of Schumann's. Without trying to hide his admiration of its model, Grieg produced a work of considerable originality that displays the uniqueness of his own voice, nowhere more than in the folk-inflected finale, the details of which were particularly admired by Liszt and Tchaikovsky. Liszt offered Grieg some advice about orchestral scoring; and although Grieg adopted some of those suggestions, he ended up weeding out most of them as he returned to revise this concerto over nearly three decades.

Instrumentation: *Peer Gynt* Suite No. 1 calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, and strings. Piano Concerto employs two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.