Edvard 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 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 Ernst Ferdinand Wenzel, who had been a friend of Mendelssohn and Schumann; 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 that 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 for 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 the 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

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Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16

Edvard Grieg

In Short

**Born:** June 15, 1843, in Bergen, Norway

**Died:** September 4, 1907, in Bergen

**Work composed:** begun in June 1868 and provisionally completed in early 1869; revised substantially in 1872, 1882, 1890, and 1895

**World premiere:** April 3, 1869, in Copenhagen, Denmark, by the Orchestra of the Royal Theatre, Holger Simon Paulli, conductor, Edmund Neupert, soloist

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** January 2, 1879, with Leopold Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), Franz Rummel, soloist

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** March 2, 2019, Herbert Blomstedt, conductor, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, soloist

**Estimated duration:** ca. 33 minutes
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 that composer’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 — both in the key of A minor, both 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 almost three decades.

**Instrumentation:** 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.

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**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 seven times as it cascades downwards:

![Allegro molto moderato (♩ = 84)](image)

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.