

# The life of edvard grieg music essay



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When thinking of the great musical traditions that abound in Europe, it could probably be expected that the main influential cultures that have contributed to these musical traditions are the Germans, Italians, French, and English. From Bach to Brahms and everyone in between, these four cultures seemed to have generated the greatest of composers. Thus, it wouldn't be expected that a man from Norway, a country not at all noted for their musical prowess or persuasion, would produce a composer of the highest quality. But from Norway, a man named Edvard Grieg proved that other parts and cultures of Europe could also fashion composers of the highest quality and contribute to Europe's great musical traditions.

Born on June 15, 1843, Edvard Grieg was born into a successful merchant family who traded dried fish and lobster across the North Sea. His father helped run the family business and his mother was regarded as the best piano teacher in their hometown of Bergen. Since he was not the eldest son, he had the ability to pursue his interests in music and not worry about carrying on the family business as much as his older brother did. From early on, he displayed much interest in music, with his mother teaching him to play the piano from age six.

Grieg would explore different tunes on his own for hours on the piano, though not always the most disciplined of students. He much preferred exploring and improvising his own sounds on the instrument than sticking to the regimented piano method set by his mother. However, despite the certain amount of reluctance, he excelled in his music studies and continued on the path that he was truly destined – to become an artist.

Studying music may have been a chore for the young musician, but he had a greater disdain for his other studies in school. When he was ten years old, Grieg was enrolled at the Tank's School, one of the leading schools at the time with strict and demanding expectations. He would try to find any and every excuse to avoid going to school. During the summer, the family would go to their estate far out in the countryside, which made the daily travel to school even farther. Grieg would sometimes also have to trek in rainy weather, something that he learned to embrace rather than dislike. Students who showed up wet to class were often dismissed so they could return home to change. It's been said that Grieg, in an attempt to avoid school, would sometimes stand under a gutter so as to become much more wet in a lot less time. The trick initially proved effective until the teacher realized that one student was always more wet than the others especially when there hardly was any rain.

Generally, his grades were less than satisfactory. However, when the teacher had asked one time who had composed a work called Requiem, the young Grieg immediately answered, "Mozart." The class was astounded that this student, who rarely spoke up in class, knew the answer that no one else even heard of, earning him the nickname "Mosak." It was obvious where his interests were.

At the family's countryside estate during the summer of 1858, Grieg met the Norwegian violin virtuoso Ole Bull, who was close friends and actually a relative by marriage to Grieg's parents. During the visit, Grieg performed for the violinist which included some pieces the young composer wrote. At the conclusion of the performance, Ole Bull's expression turned serious and went

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to speak with Grieg's parents. When he returned, Ole Bull was thrilled to announce to Grieg that his parents agreed to allow the youngster to attend the Leipzig Conservatory. This moment, Grieg later recalled, was the single most important event in his life.

In the autumn of 1858, Edvard Grieg, then only 15 years old, ended his education in Norway and went to the Leipzig Conservatory in Germany to study music. The Conservatory was founded in 1843 by Felix Mendelsohn, and was reckoned to be the best and most modern conservatory in Europe. Even though Grieg had always aspired to become an artist, he had to adapt to this new environment especially coming from a small city like Bergen to a European metropolis with narrow streets, tall buildings and crowds of people. Due to homesickness and language-problems, Grieg initially had some difficulties adjusting to his new home, but eventually, he became very comfortable in this new place. His teachers were among the most eminent in Europe: Ignaz Moscheles in piano (also the director of the Conservatory at the time), Carl Reinecke in composition, and Moritz Hauptmann, whom Edvard Grieg had the greatest respect for.

During his stay in Leipzig, Edvard Grieg came in contact with the best of Europe's music traditions. He first studied the works of Mozart and Beethoven, but also the compositions of contemporary composers such as Mendelsohn, Schumann, and Wagner. Grieg enjoyed the numerous concerts and recitals given in Leipzig. He disliked the discipline of the Conservatory course of study, yet he still achieved very good grades in most areas, an exception being the organ, which was mandatory for piano students. In the spring of 1860, he contracted pleuritt, a form of tuberculosis, which affected

him for the rest of his life. His left lung collapsed, which made his back bend and greatly reduced his lung-capacity.

Nevertheless, the following year, on August 18, 1861, he made his debut as a concert pianist, in Karlshamn, Sweden. He graduated from the Conservatory with excellent marks in 1862 and left as a full-fledged musician and composer. His first concert after graduating was held in his home town of Bergen, which included a performance of Beethoven's Pathétique Sonata. Among other works performed at this concert was his String Quartet in D-minor, a work that has disappeared without a trace.

Grieg's goal was to compose Norwegian music, but as a realist, he knew that he had to go abroad to get in contact with an environment that could aide him in developing as a composer. In the years up to 1866, Grieg lived in Copenhagen, Denmark, the only Scandinavian city with a rich cultural life on an international level, leaving it only to make brief study trips. In Copenhagen, there were other composers like Niels W. Gade, Emil Hornemann, Winding, and Mathison-Hansen. Probably the most inspirational to Grieg was Niels W. Gade. After having composed his only piano sonata and his first violin sonata, he took them to Gade for his opinion. It's been said that when Gade was really inspired, he drank great amounts of water. That day, the old maestro emptied four huge decanters.

Gade encouraged Grieg to compose a symphony. The work was performed several times, but Grieg later refused to acknowledge it. " Never to be performed," were the words he wrote on the score. However, it eventually was rediscovered in the twentieth century and performed again, and it was

even recorded. This fruit of Grieg's early years was certainly nothing to be ashamed of, and it provides today's listeners with a broader view of the composer's artistic and musical development. The symphony displays Grieg's considerable technical skill, and new works naturally poured forth from his creativity.

Grieg's style was based on the German romantic tradition of music, but eventually, national awareness developed within him, coupled with a growing need to create a typical Norwegian style of music. This further developed through his friendships and discussions with other young composers from Norway. While in Copenhagen, Grieg met another Norwegian composer named Rikard Nordraak, who had a huge impact on Grieg's evolution towards becoming a composer of Norwegian music. Nordraak is probably best remembered as being the composer of Norway's national anthem. As a composer, he had not attained Grieg's level, but he had strong views on how to create music based on the old folk melodies. Even though Grieg was the one with the most solid background from a Conservatory, he looked up to Nordraak as his idol. Nordraak's enthusiasm for everything Norwegian was passed on to Grieg. Grieg later said about Nordraak: " He opened my eyes for the importance in music that isn't music." Nordraak died in 1866, and Grieg composed a funeral march in his honor.

Grieg met several other people in Copenhagen that became his lifelong friends, the most important being his first cousin, Nina Hagerup. They had grown up together in Bergen, but Nina moved with her family to Copenhagen when she was eight years. Nina was an excellent pianist, but it was her

beautiful voice that truly captivated Grieg. Nina's mother was an instructor at the theatre and may perhaps be one of the reasons why Nina became famous for the interpretation and performance of texts instead of being purely technical.

The couple fell in love and was secretly engaged in 1864. This engagement was not well received by either family. Grieg's father warned his son against the commitments of starting a family. He felt Grieg couldn't support a wife and family when his income came from conducting, performing, and composing. Nina's mother was much harsher. She said Grieg had nothing, cannot do anything, and makes music nobody cares to listen to. In the spring of 1865, they officially announced their engagement, and on this occasion, Grieg presented to his fiancée four songs he composed for her with texts by their good friend, Hans Christian Andersen (Melodies of the Heart, Op. 5). In spite of the true love between Edvard and Nina, both of their parents were not present at the couple's wedding on the June 11, 1867.

The Griegs went from Copenhagen to Kristiania (known today as Oslo) in order to participate in the building of a Norwegian environment for music in the Norwegian capital. During this time, Grieg was influenced by the composer Otto Winter-Hjelm. Winter-Hjelm saw clearly how the elements of folk music could be used to create a national type of music along more impressive lines. Another influential composer was Ludvig Mathias Lindeman, whose collection of Norwegian folk melodies formed an important basis for Grieg's further development. Later, Grieg went in search of folk music in its native environment. The written notes of folk music could not reproduce the

special atmosphere and the almost magical rhythms and harmonies that the folk musicians created live from their instruments.

Their time in Kristiania (known today as Oslo) also became a period of hard labor, both concerning the establishing of a Norwegian musical life and concerning their daily income. The family's income came from the various jobs Grieg took as a conductor and piano teacher. Also, their daughter Alexandra was born on the April 10, 1868. The same year, Grieg composed his brilliant Piano Concerto in A Minor, during a stay in Denmark.

With the passing of time, the Piano Concerto has become almost synonymous with Norway. It has become part of the piano music repertoire and is frequently performed throughout the world. The concerto has the ability to call to mind strong associations with Norway in both performers and the audience. Though patterned to some extent on European models, Grieg has succeeded in bringing these together with elements of Norwegian folk music and his own personal conceptions of Norwegian nature and the Norwegian character. His musical style has become identical to the Norwegian intonation.

This masterpiece became Grieg's final breakthrough as a composer, and after this performance, he was considered as one of the greatest composers in his time. The concerto was first performed in the Casino Theater in Copenhagen on April 3, 1869, with Edmund Neupert as pianist and Holger Simon Pauli as conductor. Grieg himself was unable to be there due to conducting commitments in Kristiania.



The joy of the success as a composer was short-lived when on May 21, 1869, their daughter Alexandra died from meningitis while visiting their family in Bergen. The fact that they no longer had a child could be the main reason why Edvard and Nina did not become a normal couple. Instead, they ended up as a two artists that travelled around Europe without a stable home. This situation became more apparent in 1875 when Grieg's parents died. They now did not even have a home in Bergen to return to. In addition to this, Grieg felt that he had stagnated artistically. The situation reached a critical point in 1883 when Grieg left his wife. It was Grieg's friend, Frants Beyer, who persuaded Grieg to reconcile with Nina, and they went to Rome in order to start the reconciling process. Frants Beyer also convinced Grieg that he needed a stable home, something to come home to after long tours abroad. Beyer helped Grieg to buy a place at Hop, in the outskirts of his hometown Bergen, and in 1885, Edvard and Nina Grieg moved into their villa at Trolldhaugen.

In 1868, Franz Liszt, who had not yet met Grieg, wrote a testimonial for him to the Norwegian Ministry of Education, which led to Grieg obtaining a travel grant. The two men met in Rome in 1870. On Grieg's first visit, they went over Grieg's Violin Sonata No. 1, which Liszt immensely enjoyed. On his second visit, in April, Grieg brought with him the manuscript of his Piano Concerto, which Liszt proceeded to sightread (including the orchestral arrangement). Liszt's rendition impressed his audience, although Grieg gently pointed out to him that he played the first movement too quickly. Liszt also gave Grieg some advice on orchestration, for example, to give the melody of the second theme in the first movement to a solo trumpet.

His encounter with Franz Liszt and the artistic circles in Rome gave him fresh inspiration and self-confidence. Fired with new energy and enthusiasm he returned to Kristiania in 1870, where he initiated a productive cooperation with Bjornstjerne Bjornson, who for many years had been waiting for a composer that could write Norwegian music brought life his poems and dramas. In 1871, the poem “ Before a Southern Convent” (for soprano, contralto, ladies’ choir and orchestra) was the first fruit of this collaboration. Inspired by its success, Bjornson, in the same year, started on the dramatic poem “ Bergliot,” which, with its rugged realism, inspired Grieg to attempt a far more daring musical language than previously. In the spring of 1872, Bjornson and Grieg presented the result of yet another cooperation, the scenic drama “ Sigurd Jorsalfar.”

The conscious search for national roots and identity in Nordic antiquity was continued in “ Olav Trygvason.” The idea was to create a monumental musical drama, but Bjornson never completed more than the first three acts. The work remained a fragment, but Grieg’s music gives us some idea of what a magnificent national opera, and as well as perhaps a major opera composer, were lost. The project was abandoned, but Grieg’s dramatic talents were put to a new test when the playwright, Henrik Ibsen, asked him to write the incidental music to the play Peer Gynt.

Edvard Grieg met Henrik Ibsen for the first time in Rome in 1866. Ibsen immediately felt that Edvard Grieg was an artist with unusual musical and intellectual capacities. He and Grieg had the same views on Ibsen’s famous drama Brand. This was one of the reasons Grieg was chosen when in 1874, Ibsen planned a staging of of the story of Peer Gynt with music. Grieg

accepted the task and started immediately with great enthusiasm. But setting music to Peer Gynt was not as easy as he had thought it would be. On the February 24, 1876, the play was performed for the first time in the Kristiania Theater in Oslo and was an immediate success. Alongside the work with Peer Gynt, Grieg also set music to six poems by Ibsen (Op. 25). In 1888 and in 1893, Grieg published respectively the Peer Gynt Suite I and II, which contained the most popular melodies from the play Peer Gynt. These two suites are among the most played orchestral pieces in our time.

Grieg's later life brought him fame. In 1874, the Norwegian government awarded him a pension, and he could support himself without needing to teach or to conduct. He returned to his home town of Bergen. The framework now seemed ideal for a productive period in his life. Instead, it was a time of both personal and artistic crisis. A period of depression, and Grieg's struggle to overcome it led, nevertheless, to the creation of profound and gripping works of a high quality. The ambitious Ballad in G minor for piano and string quartet reflects the turmoil in his soul and his struggle to perfect both form and content.

On his many journeys in Europe, he met, and became a good friend of, other composers like Peter Tchaikovsky, Johannes Brahms, Franz Liszt, Frederic Delius, Camille Saint-Saens, Julius Röntgen, Edward MacDowell, and more. He influenced other composers, such as Bela Bartok, Maurice Ravel, and Claude Debussy. In the spring 1903, Grieg made nine 78-rpm gramophone recordings of his piano music in Paris, which are still accessible today. Grieg also help to create live-recording player piano music rolls for the Welte-Mignon reproducing system, all of which survive today and can be heard.

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In 1906, he met the composer and pianist Percy Grainger in London. Grainger was a great admirer of Grieg's music and a strong empathy was quickly established. In a 1907 interview, Grieg stated: " I have written Norwegian Peasant Dances that no one in my country can play, and here comes this Australian who plays them as they ought to be played! He is a genius that we Scandinavians cannot do other than love."

On September 4, 1907, at the age of 64 years old, Edvard Grieg died in Bergen after a long period of illness. His final words were said to be, " Well, if it must be so." The funeral drew between 30, 000 and 40, 000 people out on the streets of his home town to honor him. Following his wish, his own Funeral March in memory of Rikard Nordraak was played in an orchestration by his friend Johan Halvorsen. In addition, the Funeral March movement from Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 was played. His and his wife's ashes are entombed in a mountain crypt near his house, Troidhaugen.

Grieg's piano works are incredible teaching literature, and had maintained their prominent place in piano teaching throughout the entire first half of the 20th century. The encounter with Grieg for piano students can prove to be a strong and intense experience because to them, Grieg's music is a new musical discovery. At Troidhaugen, a concert hall and museum was constructed in the composer's honor. In the course of a single morning during the summer months, as many as 4, 000 people from all over the world come to Troidhaugen, brought here by the desire to experience the music of Norway's greatest composer. Concert performances of Grieg's music have become an important part of Troidhaugen museum's offerings to the public.

The music of Grieg continues to captivate and inspire listeners around the world. His music has been infused in popular culture as well as in classical music halls. His unique blend of Norwegian folk song with the broader musical styles of Europe creates melodies and harmonies unlikely any other. Indeed, from Norway, a man named Edvard Grieg proved that other parts and cultures of Europe could in fact fashion composers of the highest quality. He truly was a composer of the highest quality and a first-class musician, forever to be remembered.