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Grieg and Violins: An Immersion into the String Orchestra

Rytis Urniežius

Vilnius University Šiauliai Academy

ABSTRACT

Violin was Edvard Grieg's favourite orchestral instrument. This affinity expanded to other string family instruments and a string orchestra. The article aims to characterise Grieg's two-movement cycles of miniatures for string orchestra, emphasizing the features of their orchestration. The analysis revealed that these cycles should be considered as original and creative orchestral compositions where the composer efficiently employs the possibilities of string instruments.

Keywords: Edvard Grieg, string orchestra, orchestral miniatures, two-movement cycles, orchestration

IZVLEČEK

Violina je bila najljubši orkestralni instrument Edvarda Griega, naklonjen pa je bil tudi drugim inštrumentom iz družine godal in godalnemu orkestru. Članek želi opredeliti Griegove dvostavčne cikluse miniatur za godalni orkester, s poudarkom na značilnostih njihove orkestracije. Analiza je pokazala, da bi te cikluse morali obravnavati kot izvirne in ustvarjalne orkestralne kompozicije, pri katerih skladatelj učinkovito izkorišča možnosti, ki jih ponujajo godalni instrumenti.

Ključne besede: Edvard Grieg, godalni orkester, orkestralne miniatures, dvostavčni ciklusi, orkestracija

Introduction

Edvard Grieg considered orchestration a very important component of his music. His articles and letters contain, although sparse, yet insightful outgivings about the orchestration of other composers, such as Johan Svendsen, Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Claude Debussy.¹ But almost throughout all of his creative life, Grieg complained about the lack of his own orchestration knowledge. He referred to the Leipzig conservatoire (Grieg studied there in 1858–1862) as the first and foremost culprit of such imperfection. In his autobiographical essay, *My First Success*, Grieg wrote:

In my last year at the Conservatory I had lessons in composition from Carl Reinecke. [...] As an illustration of how things went on in these lessons, I will mention just the following: I, who had presented myself as one who did not have the slightest understanding of either musical form or of string technique, was immediately required to write a string quartet. [...] What Reinecke failed to teach me I tried to pick up from Mozart and Beethoven, whose quartets I diligently studied on my own initiative.²

Further experience was even more perplexing:

After the negative success that proved to be the lot of my first string quartet, Reinecke said: "Now write an overture!" I, who had no knowledge of orchestral instruments or of orchestration, was supposed to write an overture! [...] It seems incredible, but there was no class at the Conservatory in which one could get a grounding in these things. [...] It was fortunate for me, however, that in Leipzig I got to hear so much good music, especially orchestral and chamber music. This made up for the knowledge of compositional technique which the Conservatory failed to give me.³

It can be stated that Grieg was self-educated in the sphere of orchestration. Yet this education was grounded on music by the greatest European masters.

Only occasional remarks about individual musical instruments appear in Grieg's writings. Violin is the only exception: numerous pages written by Grieg

1 See Finn Benestad and William H. Halverson, eds., *Edvard Grieg: Letters to Colleagues and Friends* (Columbus, Ohio: Peer Gynt Press, 2000). See also Edvard Grieg, "Johan Svendsen's Concert," 280–283; id., "My First Success," 67–89; id., "Richard Wagner and The Ring of the Nibelung," 290–320, all published in *Edvard Grieg: Diaries, Articles, Speeches*, eds. Finn Benestad and William H. Halverson (Columbus: Peer Gynt Press, 2001).

2 Grieg, "My First Success," 83.

3 Ibid., 84.

are devoted to this instrument.⁴ But an affinity for violin was overshadowed by the lack of self-confidence concerning his skills in writing for it. Grieg mentions his assumed inability to compose for the violin even in the mature period of his creative life. In 1878 he wrote to violinist Robert Heckman: “Just think if I had been able to play the violin a little!!! Damn that Leipzig Conservatory! What I am able to do I did not learn there – that is a fact.”⁵ Of course, this outburst of emotions cannot be taken as a manifestation of undisputed truth, however, Grieg’s words once again certify that Leipzig conservatoire staff neglected orchestration discipline. Such lack of self-confidence in writing for strings lasted for many years and had its positive side: Grieg made every attempt to gain knowledge of writing for violin and other string instruments, and eventually, his mastery in this field became prominent. Perhaps string parts in Grieg’s scores could be treated as the most obvious indicator of his progress in orchestration technique.⁶

It appears natural that Grieg’s fondness for violin extended to other string family instruments. Consequently, this liking evidently manifested in a) chamber compositions for strings, b) treatment of the string section of a symphony orchestra, and c) compositions and arrangements for string orchestra.

Subtle individuality of string instruments technique and expression is vividly implemented in *chamber compositions for strings*. Grieg wrote five such works: three violin sonatas (op. 8, 1865; op. 13, 1867; op. 45, 1886–1887), Cello Sonata (Op. 36, 1882–1883) and String Quartet No. 1 in G minor (Op. 27, 1877–1878). In a letter to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (16 January 1900), Grieg noted that his violin sonatas could be treated as landmarks of his creative biography: “[...] these three works are among my best compositions and represent periods in my development: the first, naive, reflecting many antecedents; the second, national; and the third, with its wider horizons.”⁷

The place of the String Quartet among Grieg’s chamber works is equally important. In his letter to Gottfred Matthison-Hansen (13 August 1877) referring to String Quartet Grieg once again expressed doubts in his ability to write for string instruments: “The next composition that you will see from me will be a work for string instruments. I’m in the middle of it, but God knows when I will finish. Just now I am once again experiencing numbing incompetence that

4 Affinity for violin (and string instruments in general) likely came to Grieg in his early years. The world-famous violinist and a relative of Grieg’s mother Ole Bull had a significant and diverse influence on the future composer. Grieg admired Bull as a virtuoso violinist and as a performer of Norwegian folk melodies. However, the instrumental folk music performed on Hardanger fiddle is a specific chapter in Grieg’s creative legacy and will not be discussed here.

5 Benestad and Halverson, *Edvard Grieg: Letters*, 371.

6 It seems strange that Grieg mentioned woodwind and brass instruments very seldom and never complained about insufficient knowledge of these instruments.

7 Benestad and Halverson, *Edvard Grieg: Letters*, 137.

must be violently attacked.”⁸ But the work on *Quartet* became a significant step towards successful handling of strings and a higher self-confidence in composing for them. The intention to accomplish all technical details of his *Quartet* perfectly is reflected in Grieg’s correspondence with German violinist Robert Heckmann. This correspondence discloses how diligently and particularly Grieg worked on every part. Heckmann’s consultations were helpful from a practical point of view and psychologically encouraging. The violinist was very fond of the *Quartet* and expressed his high opinion concerning Grieg’s competence in composing for string instruments: “[...] one can hardly talk in terms of failure of your power of inventive imagination, such as for example any lack of experience in handling string instruments. You have a correct sense of the various instruments’ tone-colour that is the main thing; practical considerations, bowing and the like, can easily be adjusted.”⁹

Namely, the work on the *String Quartet* preceded a creative period during which many of Grieg’s compositions for string orchestra were created. In a letter written to Heckmann on 4 July 1878, Grieg made a remark, which discloses an important feature of his manner in writing for strings: “It irritates me that the chords in the whole pizzicato passage have to be played arpeggio. If I had been writing the piece for string orchestra, I would have divided the parts (*divisi*).”¹⁰ This remark is important for understanding the specificity of another important layer of Grieg’s creative legacy – his *compositions for string orchestra*.

The further analysis is focused on Grieg’s miniatures (piano pieces and songs) arranged for the string orchestra and merged into two-movement cycles.¹¹

General Characteristics of String Orchestra Two-movement Cycles

String orchestra was not a very widely used medium in the nineteenth century. In this regard, Grieg stands out against the majority of contemporary composers. The share of compositions for string orchestra in Grieg’s creative legacy is significant. Some of Grieg’s contemporaries, late-Romantic composers, created occasional works for string orchestra. For example, at least five composers of that time – Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Antonín Dvořák, Edward Elgar, Carl Reinecke (Grieg’s teacher at Leipzig conservatoire) and Mieczysław Karłowicz composed cyclic works named *Serenade for Strings*. However, compositions for string orchestra by Grieg’s contemporaries

8 Ibid., 500.

9 Bjarne Kortsen, “Grieg’s *String Quartet* and Robert Heckmann,” *Music & Letters* 49, no. 1 (1968): 22.

10 Benestad and Halverson, *Edvard Grieg: Letters*, 370.

11 The usage of the string section in symphonic creations is a specific subject and will not be discussed in this article. Also, the most important string orchestra work, suite *From Holberg’s Time* will not be analysed: this suite would demand special attention because of its scope and exceptional stylistic features.

appear as solitary experiments within their vast musical legacy. Meanwhile, Grieg was much more attracted to string orchestra by its multiple possibilities: technical flexibility, variety of timbre tinges, and at the same time, homogeneous sounding of the whole.

Grieg's first compositions for strings were "Aase's Death," "Anitra's Dance," and "Solveig's Cradle Song" (scored for voice, strings, and harp) from *Peer Gynt*, Op. 23, (1875); also, a short cantata *The Mountain Thrall*, Op. 32 (1878) composed for string orchestra, two horns, and baritone. These works already manifest orchestration features peculiar to Grieg's compositions of later years. The most significant creations for string orchestra were composed between 1878 and approximately 1895.¹² Suite *From Holberg's Time*, Op. 40 (1885) is the largest-scale work for the string orchestra of this period and Grieg's legacy in general. Accompaniments for two out of *Six Songs with Orchestra*, EG 177 (1895) are also scored exclusively for strings. The orchestral version of "Shepherd's Boy" (1905) that became the first movement of *Lyric Suite* (four orchestrated movements from *Lyric Pieces V*, Op. 54, 1891) is scored for strings and harp: this is the latest Grieg's composition for string orchestra.

Four two-movement cycles of songs and piano pieces arranged for string orchestra (opuses 34, 53, 63, and 68) were created between 1880 and 1898. The first cycle, *Two Elegiac Melodies*, Op. 34 (1880), contains pieces "The Wounded Heart" and "Last Spring," which are the transcriptions of Grieg's songs on poems by Aasmund Vinje. The cycle *Two Melodies for String Orchestra*, Op. 53 (1890), is also based on transcriptions of two songs: the first piece called "Norwegian" is an arrangement of a song *The Goal* (text by Vinje) meanwhile the second piece retains the actual name of the song "The First Meeting" (text by Bjørnsterne Bjørnson). Cycle Op. 63 (1895), is titled *Two Nordic Melodies*. Its first movement, "In Folk Style," is a composition based on a melody that Grieg received from Swedish-Norwegian ambassador Fredrik Due.¹³ The second movement consists of two pieces: "Cow Call and Peasant Dance" is based on Grieg's piano pieces "Cattle Call" (No. 22) and "Comic Dance" (No. 18) from his cycle *25 Norwegian Folk Songs and Dances*, Op. 17. This cycle could be treated as an original composition but not an arrangement: there is no predecessor (piano piece or song) of the first movement. On the other hand, themes of the second movement were significantly elaborated and thus became more complex than short pieces on folk tunes from Grieg's early work op. 17. *Two Lyric Pieces* for piano from album IX Op. 68, "Evening in the Mountains" (its score includes oboe and horn) and "At the Cradle," were orchestrated in 1899.

12 Rytis Urniežius, "The Development and Periods of Edvard Grieg's Orchestral Style," *Studia UBB Musica* 2 (2018): 165–186, <http://studia.ubbcluj.ro/download/pdf/1190.pdf>.

13 Benestad and Halverson, *Edvard Grieg: Letters*, 643.

Table 1: Compositions for string orchestra by Edvard Grieg¹⁴

Name of the composition	Created	Orchestrated	Instrumentation
<i>Peer Gynt</i> , incidental music to Ibsen's drama, Op. 23.	1875		"Aase's Death" and "Anitra's Dance" are scored for string orchestra, "Solveig's Cradle Song" for strings and harp.
<i>The Mountain Thrall</i> , Op. 32.	1878		Baritone, string orchestra, and two horns.
* <i>Two Elegiac Melodies for String Orchestra</i> , Op. 34.	1880**		String orchestra.
<i>From Holberg's Time</i> , Op. 40.	1884	1885	String orchestra.
* <i>Two Melodies for String Orchestra</i> , Op. 53.	1890**		String orchestra.
<i>Six Songs with Orchestra</i> , EG 177.	1894–1895**		Accompaniments of songs arranged for string orchestra ("Solveig's Cradle Song" – from Op. 23, No. 26).
* <i>Two Nordic Melodies</i> , Op. 63.	1895**		String orchestra.
* <i>Two Lyric Pieces</i> from <i>Lyric Pieces IX</i> , Op. 68.	1898–1899	1899**	String orchestra (the score of the first piece "Evening in the Mountains" includes oboe and horn).
"Shepherd's Boy" from <i>Lyric Pieces V</i> , Op. 54.	1891	1905	The first movement of the <i>Lyric Suite</i> (1904–1905), for strings and harp.

American musicologist Henry Theophilus Finck describes Grieg's compositions for string orchestra as works of exceptional orchestration:

*There are several other works in which Grieg has revealed his rare gift for refined orchestral colouring. They are Two Elegiac Melodies for String Orchestra ("The Wounded Heart" and "Last Spring"), Op. 34; Two Melodies for String Orchestra, Op. 53 (versions of his songs "Norwegian" and "First Meeting"); and Two Nordic Melodies for string orchestra, Op. 63 ("Im Volkston" and "Cowkeeper's Tune and Peasant Dance"). These songs have become more widely known in their beautiful orchestral garbs than Lieder, yet they ought to be played ten times oftener in concert halls than they are. There is more substance and beauty in them than in most symphonies.*¹⁵

14 The dates in the third column indicate the instances when the original work was initially not composed for orchestra and was orchestrated later. The dates of the works orchestrated immediately after the creation of the piano version coincide with the date of their creation (second column). – *Cycles analysed in this article are marked with an asterisk. – **Two asterisks mark the date when the orchestral cycle was created: the predecessors of these cycles (piano pieces or songs from various opuses) were composed earlier in different periods.

15 Henry Theophilus Finck, *Edvard Grieg* (New York: John Lane Company, 1906), 94–95.

Strangely, Finck did not mention op. 68 that had been already composed before he wrote his book about Grieg. Also, it is arguable if the original song *The First Meeting* is now less popular than its orchestral transcription: this song is among Grieg's best-known vocal compositions. But in general, Finck's assertions seem correct even nowadays.

As early as 1888, the anonymous author of *The Musical Times* specified the *Elegiac Melodies* as an expressive conveyer of the Nordic spirit: "There is in it a sombre northern tone, a grave northern utterance which, somehow, appears to bring up before us the pineclad hills and deep-shadowed fiords of Norseland."¹⁶ Obviously, even during Grieg's lifetime, these compositions attracted not only Norwegian but also foreign (English in this particular case) musicologists.

On 17 October 1883, Grieg wrote to Frantz Beyer about the great success of "The Wounded Heart" and "Last Spring" in Weimar. According to Grieg, Franz List, who attended the concert, expressed strong satisfaction while listening to the compositions.¹⁷ Grieg described the same performance in a letter to Johan Christie (28 December 1883) more explicitly and personally:

*The first time I conducted this music for a German audience was in Weimar, and I do not remember many times in my life when I have been so moved. I hardly knew where I was, in the palace theatre in Weimar or out in the sombre, brooding Norwegian mountains. The truth is that I was in neither of these places but rather on the ethereal wings of harmony in outer space. And what a performance! The eyes of the musicians followed my every movement, and I saw this strangely supportive cast in their expression that let me know what they were thinking and feeling.*¹⁸

Obviously, Grieg was very fond of these arrangements and willingly included them in his concert programmes. In a letter to Finck (17 July 1900) Grieg characterised the same *Two Elegiac Melodies*:

*Of the songs I have mentioned, No. 38, "Spring" [Op. 33, No. 2] and No. 39, "The Wounded One" [Op. 33, No. 3] have also been published in a version for string orchestra under the title Two Elegiac Melodies (Op. 34). In this form they have achieved wide popularity outside my homeland. The profound wistfulness in these poems is the background of the solemn character of the music, and this led me in the arrangements for string orchestra, where the poems are not readily at hand, to clarify their content by giving them more expressive titles: "Last Spring" and "The Wounded Heart."*¹⁹

16 "Edvard Grieg," *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 29, no. 540 (1888): 73–76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3359405>; <https://doi.org/10.2307/3359405>.

17 Benestad and Halverson, *Edvard Grieg: Letters*, 34.

18 *Ibid.*, 194.

19 *Ibid.*, 232.

Presented comments show that Grieg himself highly estimated his mini-cycles for strings; other prominent musicians and the audience also were fond of them. The advantages of these pieces are grounded in their orchestration manner alongside other means of expression.

Features of Texture and Orchestration

Louis Coerne briefly and precisely characterized Grieg's orchestration: "Grieg's instrumentation is not conspicuously influenced by modern tendencies. Though he cannot be ranked as a great orchestrator, his writing for strings alone is of surpassing beauty, nor does his deployment of larger forces lack novelty and effectiveness."²⁰ Indeed, Grieg's music is seldom represented in earlier and modern orchestration textbooks. Their authors usually took scores of prominent masters of orchestration (Berlioz, Wagner, Rimsky-Korsakov, Richard Strauss, Ravel, and others) as examples. However, Henry Theophilus Finck indicated that Ebenezer Prout presented at least two examples from Grieg's works in his treatise *The Orchestra* (1899).²¹ Prout noted two versions of the "Prelude" from *Holberg Suite* as a demonstrative example of idiomatic writing for both piano and string orchestra and of accommodation of the texture to the specificity of each medium: "a comparison of two versions will show how much alteration may sometimes be necessary in orchestral transcription of pianoforte music."²² Prout characterized a climax passage from "Aase's Death" in another chapter: "Here we have five-part harmony; and a strange and very unusual effect is obtained by the *f* and *ff* of the muted strings. The mutes are almost invariably employed only for quiet passages. [...] the volume of tone, even with a large orchestra, will be very greatly diminished, first by the division of the parts, and secondly by the employment of the mutes."²³ "Aase's Death" is the first piece created by Grieg for purely string orchestra however it appears as an already mature attempt of writing for strings.

The Mountain Thrall is another Grieg's early work in which the features of his string orchestra manner began to reveal themselves. The division of string parts, which later became an indispensable trait of Grieg's string orchestra works, is fully represented. The texture is diverse and freely handled. As Beryl Foster noted, "The string writing throughout, as so often with Grieg in this medium, is excellent, and the *divisi* chords [...] are particularly effective."²⁴

20 Louis Adolphe Coerne, *The Evolution of Modern Orchestration* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908), 180.

21 Finck, *Edvard Grieg*, 86–87.

22 Ebenezer Prout, *The Orchestra* (London: Augener, 1903), 2: 254.

23 *Ibid.*, 20–21.

24 Beryl Foster, *The Songs of Edvard Grieg* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2007), 120.

Grieg exploits string orchestra in diverse ways. His works reflect most achievements of orchestration technique and variety of expression of string instruments in the nineteenth century. First of all, the means of creating texture are remarkable: all grades of textural richness from the exposition of the theme in a single voice to dense combinations of multiple layers can be found even within one composition (“In Folk Style,” “Evening in the Mountains”). Homophonic texture is certainly predominant in Grieg’s creations,²⁵ but in some episodes voices are fairly individual and move by conditionally independent lines (Example 1). Changes in the texture are dynamic and flexible: episodes of polyphonically combined melodic lines are in many cases followed by progressions of chords (“In Folk Style,” successive episodes from measure 63). Thus, although the general sounding of Grieg’s string orchestra is predominantly homogeneous, the flexible contexture of parts is lively and expressive in many places.

Example 1: Edvard Grieg, “In Folk Style” from *Two Nordic Melodies*, Op. 63, mm. 63–66.

In his scores, Grieg concentrates the melodic voices mostly in one particular tessitura. The most common conveyers of melody are the first violins: they play either in unison or are divided in octaves. In the latter case, the upper voice (sometimes the lower as well) of the divided second violins often interferes between the melody octave, but in all cases, melody in the first violins remains concentrated and prominent (Example 2).

25 Fin Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 401.

[Andante ♩=69]

Violins 1
pp l' arco nel modo ordinario

Violins 2
pp l' arco nel modo ordinario

Viola
pp

Viola
pp

Example 2: Edvard Grieg, “Last Spring” from *Two Elegiac Melodies for String Orchestra*, Op. 34, mm. 43–46.

Melodies in cellos appear much less frequently and are usually not doubled in an octave (an exception could be seen in measures 49–52 of “In Folk Style”). The usual role of violas and second violins is filling the middle voices (often fairly expressive), short episodes of the main melody appear only in “In Folk Style.” These middle voices are usually distributed according to tessituras by juxtaposing divided second violins parts over divided violas parts. The practice of dividing the parts of the second violins to play in octave and interlock with violas parts (similarly doubled in octave) is not typical. As a result, middle parts are most often placed in similar registers of instruments thus increasing the cohesiveness of the texture and homogeneity of the whole.

Grieg was not fond of appointing the main melody to the first violins in octave with cellos – an expressive mean well-liked by many other composers (e.g., Sibelius). There are only several short passages of such doubling: in “Norwegian,” measures 35–46 and in climax episode of “In Folk Style,” measures 94–97. The melody of first violins in octave with violas appears only in several measures of “Peasant Dance.” But violas, second violins, and cellos are employed as parallel voices of the violins’ melody at different intervals.

Intense tuttis are often interchanged with transparent sections of divided violins (rehearsal mark B in “The Last Spring,” central episode of “The First Meeting”). “Peasant Dance” contains a short but vigorous violin solo. Altogether different, soft, and smooth solos of *con sordino* violin and violoncello succeed one after another in the middle episode of “Norwegian.” Grieg

efficiently employs the possibilities of the string orchestra: effective crescendos from soft *pianissimo* to powerful *fortissimo* appear during a short period of 2–3 measures (e.g., “The Wounded Heart,” mm. 10–12 and 39–41). Sometimes *crescendo* is achieved by crystallization of the texture, adding parts one after another in descending order, thus covering lower tessituras step by step from violins to double-basses (“Last Spring,” episode from measure 35) or in the opposite direction (first measures of “Norwegian,” see Example 3).

Allegro risoluto ♩ = 100

The musical score for Example 3 is a condensed score for a string orchestra. It features five staves: Violins 1, Violins 2, Violas, Violoncellos, and Double Bases. The tempo is marked 'Allegro risoluto' with a quarter note equal to 100 beats per minute. The music is in 2/4 time and begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. In the second measure, Violins 1 and 2 enter. In the third measure, Violas enter. In the fourth measure, Violoncellos and Double Bases enter. The dynamic markings are *p* at the start, *cresc.* in the second and third measures, and *f* at the end. The score shows a clear crystallization of texture as instruments are added in descending order.

Example 3: Edvard Grieg, “Norwegian” from *Two Melodies for String Orchestra*, Op. 53, mm. 1–4. Condensed score.

Means of timbre expression are also diverse. Dark, sombre mood demands low strings, e.g., sustained low G of the second violin and low strings of all other instruments at the beginning of “The Wounded Heart.” The darker hue of the second sentence of the theme is deepened by indicating *sul G* in measures 8–11 of “The First Meeting” (also see melody *sul G* in violas, measures 3–6 of “In Folk Style”). On the contrary, the subtle soft colouring of “At the Cradle” is enhanced by applying *con sordino* for instruments playing in middle and

higher registers. Eight measures of *sul ponticello* in the “Last Spring” provide the melody with a chilly Nordic hue (mm. 35–42). *Sul ponticello tremolo* of accompanying second violins divided into four parts is equally effective (“Norwegian,” rehearsal mark D, mm. 87–108). Of interest is the fact that although Grieg frequently used string tremolo in his symphonic creations, “Norwegian” is the only composition among all four mini-cycles (measures 25–28, 30–33 and 87–108) containing tremolo. It could be explained by the character of the piece that it is the most energetic and goal-oriented (remember the title of the original song!) of all movements of mini-cycles. Grieg uses tremolo not only in *forte* level: he employs sweeping crescendo and *subito piano* (slight diminuendo is used only once), thus creating effective dynamical waves.

Luxuriant means of expression used in Grieg’s creations for string orchestra demanded a large number of players. Bjarte Engeset indicates that Grieg’s “string works were conceived for a large group of musicians, around 60, with the special fullness, fusion, power and depth of sound this brings.”²⁶ These expectations are reflected in numerous letters to concert organizers. Before the upcoming performance of *Two Elegiac Melodies* in Warsaw, Grieg corresponded with the director of the Warsaw Philharmonic Alexander Rajchmann to ensure a sufficient quantity of strings:

*“their discussion turned to the makeup of the string orchestra for the 22 April concert, which according to Rajchmann included fourteen violins I, ten violins II, eight violas, seven cellos, and seven contrabasses. Evidently, Grieg preferred a different distribution: in his response on 20 March, he added two each additional violins I, violins II, and violas, as well as one each additional cello and bass.”*²⁷

Grieg understood that dividing of each part into two or even more voices diminishes the strength and intensity of each of these voices. Consequently, only a large number of performers could ensure sufficient massiveness and expressiveness. Obviously, Grieg’s compositions for string orchestra would not have the intended impact if played by a “chamber” orchestra.

Division of each part (except double-basses) in two and even more voices is an especially characteristic trait of Grieg’s orchestration for strings. Louis Coerne wrote that “his writing for strings alone is of surpassing beauty, with its multiple division of parts, its polyphonic voice-leading, and its impassioned deployment of violas and violoncellos.”²⁸ In the *forte* episodes, multiple stores

26 Bjarte Engeset, “Edvard Grieg’s Orchestral Style: Conductor’s Point of View,” Keynote Presentation at the Grieg Conference in Copenhagen, August 13, 2011, 3, <http://griegsociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Paper-Bjarte-Engeset-2011.pdf>.

27 Anna E. Kijas, “A Suitable Soloist for My Piano Concerto: Teresa Carreño as a Promoter of Edvard Grieg’s Music,” *Notes* 70, no. 1 (2013): 57, http://opencommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=libr_pubs.

28 Coerne, *The Evolution*, 151.

of *divisi* create a broad multi-layer texture. For example, in measures 59–60 of “Norwegian,” the number of simultaneous sounds is thirteen; multiple stops add even more density (Example 4). In most scores, each string orchestra section (the first and second violins, violas, and cellos) is supplied with two staves from the beginning. This fact does not imply that these parts are always divided. However, if any of them merges into unison, the notation is not changed to one staff. It shows that *divisi* is an inherent quality of the composer’s concept but not a temporary deviation from the usual assignment of parts.

[Allegro risoluto $\text{♩} = 100$]

The musical score is arranged in five systems, each representing a different string section. Each system consists of two staves. The sections are: Violins I, Violins II, Violas, Violoncellos, and Double Basses. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo is marked as [Allegro risoluto] with a quarter note equal to 100 beats per minute. The dynamics are consistently marked as *fff* (fortissimo). The notation includes various string techniques such as *divisi* (indicated by 'V' above notes) and *staccato* (indicated by 'stacc' above notes). The score shows the initial notes and dynamics for each section in the first system, and the continuation of the notes in the second system, with some sections having rests.

Example 4: Edvard Grieg, “Norwegian” from *Two Melodies for String Orchestra*, Op. 53, mm. 59–60.

Grieg was concerned about the particularity of the performance. Preparing for the concert in Paris in 1903 and being aware that only one rehearsal with the orchestra would be available, Grieg wrote to the French conductor Édouard Colonne: “I would be very grateful if you would arrange to have my bowings marked in the orchestral parts and used in the preliminary rehearsals.”²⁹ Apparently, Grieg’s experience in writing for strings and his consultations with Robert Heckmann while writing *String Quartet* helped him develop a deep understanding of string instruments’ specificity.

Relationship with Original Compositions

String orchestra versions of analysed compositions differ from original piano pieces and songs in various aspects. Not only texture and timbre but also harmony and form of the pieces are sometimes modified compared to original compositions. For example, in measures 19–21 of the “Cattle Call,” the piano original (measures 15–17) is reconsidered and diversely elaborated, including modification of harmony (see Examples 5a and 5b; measure numbers in these two excerpts do not coincide because of the four-measure introduction composed for the string orchestra version).

[Andante con moto]

Piano

[mp]

dim.

Example 5a: Edvard Grieg, “Cattle Call,” No. 22 from *25 Norwegian Folk Songs and Dances*, Op. 17, mm. 15–17.

29 Benestad and Halverson, *Edvard Grieg: Letters*, 202.

[Andantino ♩ = 126]

Violin 1
Violin 2
Viola
Vlc.

f *ben ten.* *ff* *ffz*

Example 5b: Edvard Grieg, “Cow Call and Peasant Dance” (“Cow Call”) from *Two Nordic Melodies*, Op. 63, mm. 19–21.

In most cases, the form of string orchestra versions is modified. In “The Wounded Heart,” there are three differently scored stanzas, while the original song contains two stanzas with almost identical material. The single stanza of “The First Meeting” is expanded to two differently orchestrated stanzas. Other pieces are also expanded and sometimes complemented with additional conjunctive and conclusive episodes. “Peasant Dance,” “Evening in the Mountains,” and “Norwegian,” in general, correspond to the structure of originals. Indicated features of Grieg’s string orchestra arrangements of his piano compositions and songs show that these works should be regarded as creative transcriptions but not as merely orchestrations of piano and vocal pieces.

Probable Influences and Relationships

Likely, complex texture, multiple divisi, and some other features of orchestration in Grieg’s works for strings emerged and developed under Johan Svendsen’s influence. Grieg’s constant interest in Svendsen’s music and particularly in his orchestration began early and was confirmed more than once. As early as 1867, in his essay *Johan Svendsen’s Concert*, Grieg mentioned the performance of Steenberg’s *Minuet* arranged by Svendsen, who “allows the full string orchestra to sing out the beautiful, melodic secondary theme.”³⁰ This concert (as well as many other occasions to hear and admire Svendsen’s orchestration for strings) had a significant impact on Grieg’s manner. Svendsen’s *Two Icelandic Melodies* for string orchestra were composed in 1874, i.e., approximately a year before

30 Grieg, “Johan Svendsen’s Concert,” 282.

Grieg finished *Peer Gynt*.³¹ It is most likely that he was familiar with these pieces and took them as an example of proper string orchestra style. Merging compositions for string orchestra into mini-cycles was perhaps also influenced by Svendsen's "pairs" – *Two Icelandic Melodies* (1874) and *Two Swedish Melodies* (1876–1878). Of course, Grieg's mini-cycles could be regarded merely as a manifestation of the general Romantic tendency to merge miniatures into cycles. Yet, it was difficult to identify any other predecessors of Grieg's two-movement opuses except Svendsen's analogue. Svendsen divided each part of string orchestra (except double basses) in the same way Grieg later did in his scores. Delicate four-voice texture passages of divided violins typical of Grieg's scores can be found, for instance, in Svendsen's first *Icelandic Melody*, the second *Swedish Melody*, and arrangement of *The Herdgirl's Sunday* by Ole Bull (1879).³²

When comparing Grieg's "In Folk Style" and the first of *Two Icelandic Melodies*, similar features can be traced (despite a time gap of twenty years that separates these cycles). Both pieces are composed in the form of variations on a sustained melody. Neither Grieg nor Svendsen modulates the theme: all five expositions of Grieg's melody are in D minor; similarly, Svendsen's melody is constantly in A minor (with a strong flavour of the Phrygian mode). The sombre colouring that conforms to the general mood of melodies is created by using low tessitura and low strings of instruments. Similar traits of Svendsen's *Icelandic Melodies* and Grieg's "In Folk Style" allow presupposing the influence of the former upon the latter. However, Grieg's piece is more variably elaborated using polyphony, rhythm, and harmony.

It would be interesting to compare the compositions for string orchestra by Grieg with the works for the same medium written by his contemporaries. For example, *Serenade for Strings*, Op. 22 by Antonin Dvořák was composed in 1875.³³ Thus, Grieg could have quite possibly been acquainted with this work before writing his first mini-cycle op. 34 in 1880. Some similitude between music by these two composers can be indicated: both preferred homophonic style and both were outstanding creators of expressive melodies. Yet, the manner of orchestration does not show any influence. Dvořák's orchestral polyphony usually manifests as simultaneous juxtapositions of the melodies or imitative responses. Grieg usually superimposes the main melody over the accompaniment based on reservedly polyphonic (and therefore dynamic) but essentially homophonic voice leading. Dvořák applied multiple divisi mostly in episodes of complex texture (both *forte* and *piano*) and climaxes, whereas other episodes contain

31 However, it is most likely that the effect of *forte tutti con sordini* (also noted by Prout) was "invented" by Grieg himself.

32 The arrangement of the folk song *Last Year I was Tending the Goats* (Op. 31, 1874) and also the arrangement of *Evening Song* by Robert Schumann (1892?) are also examples of Svendsen's orchestration for string orchestra.

33 *Nocturne* Op. 40 for string orchestra was composed in the same year.

many succeeding measures of transparent texture spread out in the usual five-stave score. This is especially typical of the fast tempo episodes. Grieg, in turn, used multi-layers even in his pieces of lively character (“Norwegian,” “Peasant Dance”). Finally, Dvořák usually did not appoint separate staves for divided parts at the beginning of the composition, while this was customary for Grieg. Grieg thus preferred dense sounding versus light. Apparently, serenades and other string orchestra works by Dvořák (as well as by Tchaikovsky, Elgar, and Reinecke) could be performed by smaller orchestras than Grieg’s compositions.

Tracing how Grieg’s string orchestra treatment influenced contemporaries and successors is problematic. The scoring technique for string orchestra and the string section of a symphony orchestra eminently developed at the end of the nineteenth century – orchestration of other composers of that time (especially those considered virtuosos of orchestration) was more noticeable and influential than Grieg’s.

Conclusion

*Grieg’s special talent was such that it was precisely in small piano pieces, songs and short orchestral works – preferably with some connection to folk-music idioms – that he himself experienced the greatest satisfaction. The simple and concise – which nonetheless allow room for formal nuances of a most delicate kind – are embodied in these genres, and with such works he aroused a powerful response in his listeners.*³⁴

Works by Grieg composed for piano and later arranged for symphony orchestra are predominantly compositions of a larger scale (e.g. *Old Norwegian Melody with Variations*, Op. 51). Works for the theatre stage (*Peer Gynt*, *Olav Trygvason*) or related to it (*Bergliot*, Op. 42) were initially composed for piano but conceived as compositions for symphony orchestra: they would have sooner or later become orchestral. Meanwhile, small-scale piano compositions and songs, which Grieg decided to convert into orchestral pieces, are scored for string orchestra. The exception is *Lyric Suite*, yet three out of its four small-scale movements are re-orchestrated versions of earlier created Anton Seidl’s scores.³⁵ The fourth movement – “Shepherd’s Boy” – was orchestrated

34 Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man*, 396.

35 The Austro-Hungarian conductor Anton Seidl (1850–1898) worked as Richard Wagner’s copyist in Bayreuth and conducted at several European opera theatres. Since 1885 Seidl became a conductor of the German opera company in New York and later at the New York Philharmonic. Approximately in 1895, Seidl created orchestral versions of four movements from Grieg’s *Lyric Pieces* V, Op. 54. This cycle was called *Norwegian Suite*. In 1904–1905 Grieg reconstructed the cycle naming it *Lyric Suite*. For more data see Rytis Urniežius, “Two Orchestral Embodiments of *Three Pieces* from Op. 54 by Edvard Grieg,” *Muzikološki zbornik* 56, no. 1 (2020): 101–132, <https://doi.org/10.4312/mz.56.1.101-132>.

only by Grieg; Seidl's version of this piece does not exist, which is why it is not surprising that it was orchestrated only for strings and harp. Here Grieg remained faithful to his principles: to orchestrate miniatures for string orchestra. For Grieg, the string orchestra (sometimes supported by oboe, horn, or harp) was the most suitable medium for small-scale pieces, personal, lyrical landscapes. Yet, the question of why Grieg chose these particular piano pieces and songs to orchestrate for string orchestra is intriguing but difficult to answer.

Paradoxically, Grieg envisioned these small compositions to be performed by a large string orchestra. Only a medium that is of considerable size and contains a large number of performers would ensure a sufficiently powerful sound to convey the expression of Grieg's creations. Thus, Grieg's works for string orchestra are designed rather for a string section of a large symphony orchestra than for a chamber string group. In other words, these pieces could be treated as compositions for symphony orchestra, excluding the wind instruments.³⁶

Modifications and complements of music material Grieg made while arranging songs and piano pieces for string orchestra do not expand these pieces to the category of large form compositions. Presumably, these complements were necessary to make original short piano pieces weightier and proportionate for performances by a large string orchestra. For example, "Cow Call and Peasant Dance" is a kind of "mini-cycle inside mini-cycle": merging these two melodies allowed displaying folk tunes of different moods inside one composition that is more voluminous than each of these melodies taken separately. The renewed and complemented structure of Grieg's string orchestra arrangements endorses the viewpoint that these works should be regarded as creative transcriptions, not merely as orchestrations of piano and vocal pieces.

Grieg's string orchestra compositions are deeply profound in many senses. They contain broad, lush textures and multi-voice layers. The episodes of moderate polyphony serve as a complement to a generally homophonic entirety. These compositions, of course, cause a significant emotional effect. It seems that Grieg treated string orchestra as a kind of peculiar piano with expanded technical abilities. It is generally monochrome but embraces a wide range of subtle timbre nuances. It can produce continuous sound, increase it in crescendo and expand the texture far beyond the capabilities of a pianist's ten fingers, thus filling all tessituras with the necessary quantity of voices. Idiomatic writing for strings and attention to their technical details reveal a deep absorption into the peculiarity of the medium. Grieg's mastery in writing for strings developed as years passed and ultimately manifested itself as fully mature and impressive art.

36 It can be assumed that Grieg's most significant work for strings, suite *From Holberg's Time*, also demands a similar type of string orchestra. Therefore a common practice of performing this work by chamber string orchestras seems disputable.

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POVZETEK

Grieg in violine: poglobitev v godalni orkester

Violina je bila najljubši orkestralni inštrument Edvarda Griega. Vse svoje ustvarjalno življenje si je po svojih najboljših močeh prizadeval kar se da dovršeno skladati za violino. Naklonjen je bil tudi drugim inštrumentom iz družine godal. Njegovo ustvarjalnost so seveda spodbujale tudi godalne sekcije simfoničnih orkestrrov in godalni orkestri kot samostojni medij.

Članek želi opredeliti Griegove dvostavčne cikluse miniaturne za godalni orkester, s poudarkom na značilnostih njihove orkestracije. Te kompozicije sicer ne spadajo med skladateljeva najbolj priljubljena dela, kljub temu pa velja omeniti njihova raznolika in učinkovita izrazna sredstva, izvirnost in umetniško vrednost. Griegovi ciklusi za godalni orkester odražajo dosežke orkestracije v 19. stoletju; po drugi strani pa ponazarjajo posebnosti Griegovega glasbenega jezika.

Analiza je pokazala, da teh ciklusov ne bi smeli obravnavati zgolj kot priredb Griegovih klavirskih del in skladb, temveč kot izvirne in ustvarjalne orkestralne kompozicije, pri katerih skladatelj učinkovito izkorišča možnosti, ki jih ponujajo godala. Umetniška izrazna sredstva v teh delih so raznolika. Partiture vsebujejo obširne in razkošne teksture ter večplastne glasove. Zmerna polifonija služi kot obogatitev sicer homofone celote. Sredstva za ustvarjanje teksture so izjemna: v eni sami kompoziciji lahko najdemo vse stopnje teksturne bogatosti, od enoglasne ekspozicije teme do zgoščenih kombinacij mnogih plasti. Grieg na genialen način izkorišča registre inštrumentov in specifičnost njihovih zvočnih barv. In, seveda, ta dela sprožijo močne čustvene odzive.

Grieg si je zamislil, da bi te skladbe izvajali veliki godalni orkestri. Le zasedba z mnogimi nastopajočimi bi zagotovila takšno jakost zvoka, da bi lahko prenesla izraznost Griegovih stvaritev. Grieg je svoja dela zasnoval za godalni orkester, ne pa zgolj za sekcije velikih simfoničnih orkestrrov ali manjše zasedbe. Griegovo mojstrstvo v skladanju za godala se je skozi leta razvijalo in kulminiralo v idiomatskem pisanju za godala, prav tako pa se je izmojstril v tehničnih podrobnostih, kar kaže na skladateljevo razumevanje specifičnosti godalnih inštrumentov.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RYTIS URNIEŽIUS (rytis.urniezius@sa.vu.lt) studied wind band conducting at the Klaipėda Faculties of Lithuanian Conservatoire (now Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre). In 1993, he gained a doctoral degree in Musicology at this institution. He was a lecturer at the Music Academy of the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas and is currently a professor at the Vilnius University Šiauliai Academy, Institute of Education. He was founder of the peer-reviewed scholarly journal *The Spaces of Creation* and was until 2016 also its editor-in-chief. Urniežius is also a member of the International Society of Research and Promotion of Wind Music (IGEB). His research interests are focused on wind band music, instrumentation, orchestration, and music history.

O AVTORJU

RYTIS URNIEŽIUS (rytis.urniezius@sa.vu.lt) je na fakulteti Litvanskega konservatorija v Klaipėdi (sedaj Litvanska akademija za glasbo in gledališče) študiral dirigiranje. Leta 1993 je prav tam doktoriral iz muzikologije. Med letoma 2012 in 2018 je poučeval na Akademiji za glasbo Univerze Vytautasa Magnusa v Kaunasu, trenutno pa je profesor na Pedagoškem inštitutu Akademije v Šiauliaiju, Univerza v Vilni. Je ustanovitelj znanstvene revije *The Spaces of Creation* Univerze v Vilni, bil pa je tudi njen glavni urednik (2004–2016). Je tudi član Mednarodnega društva za raziskovanje in promocijo godbeništva (IGEB). Njegova interesna področja zajemajo glasbo za pihalne orkestre, inštrumentacijo, orkestracijo in zgodovino glasbe.