

Peer Gynt Suite No. 1, Op. 46 (incidental music for play 1874 – 1875, *Suite No. 1* published 1888)

Edvard Grieg (1843 – 1907)

Norway's most celebrated composer, Edvard Grieg, started on the path to Norwegian nationalism at an early age. His mother, Gesine Hagerup, was a gifted pianist and his first music teacher. She was advised to include Norwegian folk music in Grieg's education by Ole Bull, a radical Norwegian composer and violinist. Grieg left Norway at age 15 for Germany where he studied at the Leipzig Conservatory. It was not a happy experience but he stayed for four years. He then began his way back to Norway with a stop in Copenhagen which was the most musically cosmopolitan of the Scandinavian cities. He studied briefly with the Danish composer Niels Gade and became friends with Rikard Nordraak who was writing music based on Norwegian folk tunes. Grieg became committed to the cause of Norwegian nationalism and the important role music could play in establishing a national identity. Soon after Nordraak's sudden death, Grieg returned to Norway which was his home for the rest of his life.

In 1874 Grieg was contacted by the famous Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen was Norway's most significant literary figure although his countrymen were slow to recognize that fact. He could not achieve success in Norway so he moved to Italy where he stayed for 27 years. In Italy he wrote *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *A Doll's House*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler*. Ibsen asked Grieg to write incidental music for the stage adaptation of his epic poem *Peer Gynt* for a performance in Christiania (now Oslo). Grieg was happy to take on the project but soon found it to be a burden. He spent 18 laborious months on the music: "It is a terribly difficult play for which to write music. *Peer Gynt* hangs over me like a nightmare. It is the most unmusical of subjects." Even Ibsen considered his five-act dramatic poem to be "reckless and formless."

Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* is a massive work based on a Norwegian fairy tale. Peer Gynt is a reckless and irresponsible peasant who swaggers his way through a wide variety of exotic and fantastic adventures. His travels take him from Norway to North Africa and back. Everything he does is tainted by his inability to consider anyone's needs but his own. Grieg wrote 26 separate pieces for the play which amounted to about 90 minutes worth of music. The premiere in 1876 was praised for both the play and the music. One critic thought that Grieg's music expressed "bold originality." Grieg later realized that this music might never be heard again unless he published it in a different form. He created two suites of music that are designed to work together musically rather than follow the chronology of the play.

Morning: allegretto pastorale

Morning is one of the best depictions of the sunrise in music and is extremely familiar in part because of its use in numerous cartoons. Removed from the play, it has been associated with the sun rising over cold fjords and snowy mountains. In the play, Peer is in a grove of palms on the coast of Morocco. He is an affluent man who now associates with foreigners rather than his traveling companions. He exclaims: "Ah, what a glorious

morning it is. It touches the world with gold!” He is also cutting a reed pipe which explains the bucolic, shepherd-pipe sound of the main melody.

The Death of Åse: andante doloroso

Peer, a wanted man in Norway, returns home after his encounter with the trolls only to find his mother on her death bed. Åse blesses him and he entertains her with stories both true and fanciful. At a point in his stories, Peer turns to find her dead. This is the only scene where Peer acts unselfishly by putting himself in danger to see his mother. The music ends as gently as his mother’s words: “Yes, Peer, it will soon be over. When you see my eyes cloud over, then you must close them gently.”

Anitra’s Dance: tempo di mazurka

Anitra, a voluptuous Bedouin princess, has mistaken Peer for the Prophet. Eager to please him, she dances a seductive belly dance while Peer, dressed in Oriental robes, rests in the tent of an Arab chief, drinking and smoking a hookah. Although the dancer is seductive, the music is a mazurka which is not that sensuous and is certainly not Arabic. The touch of triangle adds a bit of exotic color (for the 1800s) to the strings.

In the Hall of the Mountain King: alla marcia e molto marcato

Norway, home to trolls of all types, is the setting for Peer’s pursuit of a “Woman in Green” who is the daughter of the hideous Troll King. The two of them ride into the Royal Hall on the back of a huge pig where they cause a huge uproar. When Peer refuses to marry the daughter, he is tormented and threatened with death by the king’s supernatural subjects. He barely escapes being torn to pieces and eventually is found asleep in a mountain pasture. Grieg wrote of this piece: “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.” The most sinister use of this tune was in the German movie *M* of 1931. Peter Lorre played a child-murderer who frequently whistled this melody. The tune was also played whenever he was close to the scene. After this movie Lorre, formerly a comedian, was cast almost exclusively as a villain.