

Watts Plays Grieg

Sunday, August 16, 2009 • 8 p.m.

Edvard Grieg

(born June 15, 1843; died September 4, 1907)

Lyric Suite (Op. 54, Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4; 1892, orchestrated 1904)

Edvard Grieg, a Norwegian, was the foremost Scandinavian composer of his generation. He also was an accomplished pianist and conductor. He possessed an uncanny ability to depict his native Norway in his music. His most well-known works are his Piano Concerto in A minor (more on that later) and his incidental music for Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* (which includes *In the Hall of the Mountain King*).

Grieg's *Lyric Suite* is an orchestration of four small piano pieces from his collection of piano miniatures entitled *Lyric Pieces*. There are 66 of these miniatures, published in ten separate volumes, and the ones you are about to hear are from volume five. Grieg composed these pieces throughout his life, and based them on various themes and ideas, from Norse mythology, to depictions of landscapes and scenes, to strictly musical inspirations. The opus 54 set (volume five of the *Lyric Pieces*) contains six short pieces, and the *Lyric Suite* uses four of them.

The first movement, entitled "Shepherd's Boy," is of a pastoral hue. It is scored only for strings and harp, and is somewhat rhapsodic in nature. A nostalgic tune opens in the violins, and the entire movement is somewhat small in dimension, but quite charming.

The second movement, the "Norwegian Rustic March," includes the full orchestra. It consists of a cheerful theme, first heard in the clarinets, and repeated in the violins. This theme then gets developed, and the feeling of rustic permeates the movement. The third movement is actually the fourth piece from the piano version. It is entitled "Nocturne," and carries with it the general feeling of night music, much in the manner of Chopin. Scored for the woodwinds, timpani, harp and strings, this movement is also small in its scope. We hear a sustained melody in the violins alternating with a more animated theme. Eventually, the players hit a diminished chord, which dies away and leads to the final movement.

The "March of the Dwarfs" again calls for the full orchestra. It is comparable in nature to the finale of Grieg's *Peer Gynt* suite. A quick theme is stated in the strings at the beginning, and a contrasting section is introduced. There is a brief violin solo, and the music builds to a strong conclusion, one of Grieg's strong points as a composer.

Piano Concerto in A minor (op. 16, 1868)

I. Allegro molto moderato

II. Adagio

III. Allegro moderato molto e marcato

Among Grieg's most famous works, this piano concerto is one of vast majesty and magnificence, much like the fjords of Norway. It was premiered in Copenhagen in 1869 to a highly receptive audience. Grieg also took the piece to Italy, where he met Franz Liszt, the virtuoso pianist and composer. Liszt asked Grieg if he would play the concerto for him, but Grieg said he could not, as he had not practiced the part. Liszt then took the score and sight read the entire work. According to Grieg, Liszt played the score brilliantly, and at every opportunity he expressed his pleasure with the piece. At one point, Liszt became so excited that he stood up from the piano and strode about the room, arms raised, singing the main theme of the concerto at the top of his voice, then sat back down and finished the piece. He then told Grieg, "You carry on, my friend; you have the real stuff in you. And don't ever let them frighten you!"

The concerto opens with a drum-roll, and the soloist has a lengthy flourish, which is followed by a fairly simple theme in the woodwinds. The piano is never far from the fore, as the cellos take over with a second theme. Just before the end of the movement, the pianist plays a cadenza that will surely leave you ecstatic and ready for more.

The second movement is a simple Adagio that is quite beautiful. It begins with muted strings, with the piano playing over the top. Listen for the trills in the orchestra that indicate entrance of the piano. Grieg then inserts a sharp and angular version of the theme from the first movement that temporarily interrupts the calm of the beginning of the movement. Soon enough, calm is restored, which leads to a quiet ending that bridges the music straight into the third movement, without pause.

The final movement contains many Norwegian folk elements, most notably allusions to a Norwegian folk violin (called the Hardanger fiddle). Drones, open fifths and slides into dissonances allude to this folk tradition, yet in such a subtle way that it still sounds symphonic in nature. A more elaborate second theme is then introduced, which leads to a more tranquil section with a solo flute. The music then transforms from a minor key to a major key, and yet another folk dance accelerates the tempo. We then hear the section that Liszt probably stood up for, as the pianist plays a very virtuosic cadenza. This cadenza contains the bravura of Liszt, and will surely impress all who listen. The orchestra then rejoins for the final theme that harkens back

to the first movement. It is no coincidence that Grieg's only major work for orchestra is a piano concerto, as he himself was a gifted pianist. This concerto is a perfect example of Grieg's unique style, one which incorporates both his own heritage and the heritage of European music in a very intelligent manner.

Igor Stravinsky

(born June 17, 1882; died April 6, 1971)

Four Norwegian Moods (1942)

If ever there was a composer of the world, Stravinsky was the one. Born in Russia, Stravinsky lived in France and the United States at various points in his life, in addition (of course) to being raised in Russia. While all these places certainly influenced his music, he never lost touch with his heritage. His music is so varied that it is nearly impossible to fit him into a particular group or movement of composers of his time. He wrote in virtually every style and with every method that was in existence at the time, from Neo-classical works to serial pieces of extreme difficulty. He is certainly one of the most influential composers of the 20th century, as he revolutionized art music with his ballet scores, dramatic works, orchestral pieces and much more.

When Stravinsky lived in America, he made Hollywood his home; oddly enough, he never composed a film score while living there. This is not to say he didn't try, but each project he signed up to write the music for fell through before they were completed. *Four Norwegian Moods* was originally intended as a film score for *The Commandos Strike at Dawn*. This film was about the Nazi invasion of Norway, and would certainly have painted the Norwegians as the innocent victims of Nazi oppression. Before the film was produced, the project fell through, but Stravinsky completed the score anyway, holding the premiere in Boston in 1944.

The material of this piece comes from a collection of Norwegian folk tunes Stravinsky found in a second-hand book store in Hollywood. He commented later that the title arose from a "poor understanding of English; I prefer to call it Four Pieces in the Norwegian Style." This work is far more than mere settings of folk songs; Stravinsky's character is evident throughout the work. Stravinsky also said, "Although based on Norwegian folk tunes, the title 'Moods' must not be interpreted as 'impression' or 'frame of mind.' It is purely a mode, a form or manner of style without any assumption of ethnological authenticity."

The opening march is led by the woodwinds, with some signature dissonant harmonies and interplay between the clarinet and bassoon. The second "mood" is more of a song, which begins and ends with a mournful tune in the English horn. Stravinsky's sense of humor is on display in the Wedding Dance, where the outer sections aren't as happy as they ought to be, and the middle section would make even the best dancers trip over their own feet. The final section, a Cortège, invokes procession of a noble sort. In all, it makes for a vividly entertaining work in the unmistakable style of Stravinsky.

The Firebird Suite (1919)

- I. Introduction - The Firebird and its dance - The Firebird's variation
- II. The Princesses' Khorovod (Rondo, round dance)
- III. Infernal dance of King Kashchai
- IV. Berceuse (Lullaby)
- V. Finale

The Firebird was originally a ballet commissioned by the Russian ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev in 1910. This was the first of many commissions Diaghilev gave to Stravinsky, including the ballets *Petrushka* (1911), *The Rite of Spring* (1913), *Pulcinella* (1920), and *Les Noces* (1923). With *The Firebird* and *The Rite of Spring* in particular, Stravinsky truly revolutionized the way in which people thought about music. There is the ever-famous story of the riot caused by the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, with its vivid depictions of pagan Russia, but *The Firebird's* subject matter was a bit tamer. The story behind *The Firebird* is about Prince Ivan, who unwittingly enters the forest of the immortal King Katschai. The prince happens upon an enchanted garden, where he captures the Firebird, half-bird, half-woman. He is then startled by her beauty and releases her in exchange for a magical feather.

Prince Ivan then sees thirteen princesses and falls in love with the most beautiful one, Elena. After an all-night party, he follows the women back to their palace, where he is promptly captured by the guards. Unsure of what to do, he uses his magical feather to summon the Firebird, who then casts a spell on the King and his court, which forces them to perform an "infernal dance" until they are completely exhausted. Ivan then learns from the Firebird about King Katschai's immortality. His soul is contained in a magical egg. With this knowledge, Ivan is able to free the princesses from the King. Next, a celebration of the union between Elena and Ivan occurs, and all is well.

Tonight, we will hear a suite as prepared by Stravinsky himself. There are three versions of this orchestral suite: one from 1911, another from 1919 (the one we'll hear tonight) and yet another from 1945. The first version uses the same "wastefully large" (Stravinsky's own words) orchestra as the original ballet. The second version reduces the size of the orchestra substantially, and changes some of the movements (omitting some from the original, while adding a *Berceuse* and *Finale* to the end). The 1945 version is in a way a merger of the two previous versions.

This work contains numerous brilliant orchestral effects. Stravinsky studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov, a master of

orchestration. In some ways, it seems that Stravinsky was attempting to outdo Rimsky-Korsakov; for instance, the glissando harmonics in the strings toward the beginning of the work is there simply for the affect, not as a structural element of the music. The tempo then quickens, harkening the arrival of the Firebird. *The Firebird's Variation* is a brilliant dance and orchestral tour-de-force. The next section, *The Princesses' Khorovod*, is another dance, but isn't nearly as forceful or jarring as the previous one. A strong rhythmic pulse and intense orchestral hits give the *Infernal Dance of King Katschai* an almost demonic quality. The *Berceuse* features a prominent bassoon line accompanied by strings and harp. *The Finale* is heralded by the horns, and builds up to substantial climax that ends the suite. The majestic and heroic ending of *The Firebird* provides a wonderful way to end the Britt Classic Season.

Program notes by Mark Knippel

