



Helge Evju Concerto sopra Grieg

Introduction

Norwegian composer Helge Evju's **Piano Concerto** has taken up the challenge to compose a work based on incomplete concerto fragments by Grieg, creating a romantic and beautiful companion.

“The concerto by Helge Evju, which is based on the fragments Grieg left for his unfinished second piano concerto, is a work to which I have become seriously committed.

The piece fills me with awe for Helge Evju and his subtle orchestration: he handles this Grieg orchestra with deftness, showing sensitivity to Grieg's essential strength as a miniaturist; nothing in the accompaniment overwhelms... Evju and Grieg are well matched.

The resultant tone is completely Nordic, with its contrast of singular melancholy tempered with bursts of unbridled joy.”

– Carl Petersson (piano)

In the composer's own words:

“This is beautiful, but I wonder, what comes next?”

Such were my thoughts upon hearing the first of three sketched themes for Grieg's planned Second Piano Concerto. The question unfortunately remains unanswered, as the theme is unfinished and left suspended in mid air. We will never know why the plans for the concerto were abandoned so early, but it is possible that in 1883, aged forty and dedicating an ever-increasing amount of his time to the study and collection of Norwegian folk music, Grieg felt increasingly out of his depth in the larger musical forms.

It is certainly a great pity that such a universally beloved concerto as Grieg's A Minor is without a companion piece, and the discovery of the existence of the 1883 B minor fragments piqued my curiosity. However, it was not until February 1997 that I first saw the fragments, published by the Oslo Grieg Society and accompanied by an invitation to create a new concert piece using the pre-existing fragments, or elements from them. Notwithstanding that I do not consider myself a composer, and with no extensive history of orchestral writing, I felt this was a challenge not to be missed and gladly took up the baton! Despite being sure that the jury in this competition would be looking for an advanced, contemporary work, I chose instead to compose what I was sure Grieg would have intended; a – hopefully – romantic, beautiful piece full of 'noble passion' (to quote Evelyne Crochet). Of course though, I had to strike the delicate balance between using the original broken fragments (which, let us not forget, Grieg himself had chosen to discard or at the very least store for later revisions) and finding my own individual voice. Once I had hit upon the right beginning – the four notes B, A, D and F# from the opening theme – the whole work seemed to come to me in a near-continuous flow, assuming its form in the process: four through-composed movements forming a cyclic sonata structure with a spatial symmetry around the third movement, the E major Adagio, where the first theme is re-introduced a third above the tonic. With help from Grieg, I found my own 'big tune' by weaving together the four-note motif from the opening with the gorgeous theme from the middle movement from his Third Violin and Piano Sonata.

The main theme of the Scherzo stems principally from Grieg's second sketch, with a change of metre to 6/8 and it also embodies a secondary theme in C major recalling *Vesti la giubba* from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. Additionally, there is a strong similarity between that opera's Prologue and Grieg's original theme. Rachmaninoff, whose favourite piano concerto was the Grieg A minor, was also a source of inspiration.

The finished entry was awarded neither a prize nor an honourable mention by the Oslo Grieg Society, but nevertheless the British critic Sir Stanley Sadie, editor-in-chief of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, having heard a two piano version performed by myself and Neil Dodd, gave it a warm recommendation. This led to a première in Oslo's Freia Hall on June 18 1998, with the Norwegian Opera Orchestra conducted by Dejan Savic and soloist Geir Henning Braaten playing on Grieg's Bechstein Grand from 1893. Despite its being well received in concert, the lack of press coverage caused the work to

remain unperformed for the next eleven years (although I frequently played my own transcription of the Adagio for piano solo in concerts, and even on one occasion the whole work in its two piano version at the Norwegian Opera and Ballet in Oslo in July 2009). In 2009 the young Lithuanian pianist Lina Krepsstaite chose the work for the opening concert of the Grieg/Ciurlionis Festival in Kaunas, Lithuania, on March 4, performing a revised version with changed orchestration and a cadenza extension with the City of Kaunas Symphony Orchestra conducted by Petras Bingelis. This time the work was critically as well as publicly acclaimed, and gradually found more champions including conductor/violinist Tobias Ringborg, pianists Wolfram Schmitt-Leonardy and Misha Dacic, composer/pianist Wilfried Lingenberg, and above all Carl Petersson and Kerry Stratton, who have worked together with great enthusiasm and thoroughness to prepare the Concerto for recording. The present recording has seen a few minor alterations, the most important being a more note-faithful first presentation of the main theme.

I feel immensely honoured to have had this piece of whimsy recorded together with the magnificent A minor Concerto, and by the very best orchestra, conductor, soloist and technicians. I wrote it to commemorate my long-departed friend Bjarne Holten, to whom Grieg's music was an inexhaustible source of comfort during years of illness and suffering. May it be a fitting tribute!