



Helge Evju Concerto sopra Grieg

Performer's Guide

By Helge Evju

I wrote the work simply because I could not see an alternative: firstly, it was the chance of a lifetime and not to be missed on any account; I would rather regret something done than something not done. Secondly, it was a fantastic opportunity to commemorate my great and unique friend who had died an early death in 1983, and whose long sufferings were strangely eased by the music of Grieg, in whose natural and cultural landscape he had grown up.

It was not my main concern to “reconstruct” the second Grieg concerto from the fragments, nor was it to emulate his style to the letter. I wanted rather to write a Romantic concerto with – hopefully – a Nordic flavour to it, based on the fragments, but not using them too literally, as he had actually given them up. Grieg has been criticized, justly or unjustly, for constructing his music in two-bar periods, which may be better suited to smaller than larger formats, so I tried to avoid this and take longer and deeper breaths, as it were. These longer lines may have pushed my style a bit towards Rachmaninoff, who is certainly foreshadowed in the A minor concerto (his declared favorite!), and pianistically I have to admit I come close at least to his early style in this concerto. But there are other influences, like Saint-Saëns, Liszt, Chopin, even opera composers like Puccini and Leoncavallo, and of course to a large extent Grieg.

To the different points in the interpretation:

The introductory cadenza is not a hugely dramatic contrast to the quiet opening, as in e.g. the 2nd MacDowell, but one still has to take center stage. Slow gradually down after reaching the top and bring out the descending line in the right hand; there is an echo here of a great sequence in Rachmaninoff's famous B minor prelude. Observe the dim as you go up at the end; this is not the Liszt A major!

In bar 14 an important counter-melody starts in the tenor with the F# in the left thumb, and important is also the conclusion of Grieg's theme in the alto (14-15) before it receives an "extra" conclusion in the upper octave. In the following bars, listen to the inner voices. Observe the dim in right hand as you go up from bar 24 to 25.

In the whole "Più mosso" section keep the right hand very light, the 8th-notes not accentuated but merely held. Do not slow down excessively in the downward scale in bar 44, keep an alla breve feeling at "molto tranquillo" to make a smooth transition to the orchestral tutti (in 4/4).

The pianistic inspiration behind the following solo (2nd theme) is the D major theme in the 1st movement of Chopin's B minor sonata, with its gentle polyphony ("weiche Polyphonie"). Here again, listen to the "inner voices". Be generous with rubato as you are on your own, and sober up a bit with the cello. At the entry of the full orchestra I would, after some consideration, favor the original left hand over the "ossia", which I wrote to give pianists a real challenge. But I discovered that the original carries better through the orchestra. (As for Grieg inspiration, you can actually play the 2nd movement theme of his third violin/piano sonata along with this theme – it's one of Grieg's longest melodies anyway!). The tempo should be strict to ensure that you are together with the orchestra.

In the concluding cadenza bar 74 I have the image of a flock of birds taking to the sky, a rustle of wings. A very slight crescendo may be unavoidable, but make as little as possible. Go just a little slower over the top and pace the downward arpeggio in the 4/4 of the main tempo.

The Scherzo is probably my most Grieg-like movement, despite the fact that I allowed myself to change the rhythm of his theme. My image is of lambs and goat-kids playing on a green "setervoll" (the space outside a mountain summer chalet); I once drove past a farmyard with children playing on a trampoline with the scherzo in my car player and found out it was just as well suited to that scene!

The main theme accompaniment is very "à la Grieg" with the diminished 5th in front. The harmonic scheme of the continuation is also much used by him: a rising sequence of minor keys a minor third above each other. Play as secco as you can, with a little pedal on the accented 2nd beats. At poco sostenuto bar 117 take the pedal, but vibrate it away as you go chromatically up, and rattle down to the orchestra in bar 121-122, pedal only with the orchestra. The

arpeggi from bar 141 won't need much pedal, only when the music again softens, and you can do as before. Play with humor as you reach the scherzo variant of the Moderato's 2nd theme, and amuse yourself with the passing quotation of the A minor concerto's famous opening.

The C major episode from bar 173 is to be taken just a nuance slower in order not to sound stressful. The theme in the violins is borrowed from Leoncavallo's "I Pagliacci" (thematically related to Grieg's concerto fragments!) but changed to a sunny major mode, and pianistically this episode may constitute the greatest challenge to the performer, something like an advanced "slalom piste" to a skier! Stay tightly in the keys and work slowly to put it in your hands and fingers. My image is of a playful mountain stream rushing downwards and growing, becoming a thundering waterfall in the end. It is important that the conductor will give you an allargando in bar 194; you need a little extra time here. When you reach the bottom D 2 bars later, take time to give it a huge accent before you go up as fast as possible, in tempo.

After the big all-stops-out reprise of the main theme, the rising sequence comes back for a last time, this time starting forte and losing dynamic and tempo intensity, "evaporating", as it were, into the liquid cadenza that brings us to the Adagio. I can only ask the performer to put all his/her imagination into this Chopin/Liszt-like cadenza, which should not start too slowly but neither sound rushed. The second group, on the bass B, should be slower on the whole but also quite freely played. Pace the rest of the cadenza carefully, don't let it lose its momentum but take time when you can. (If anything in the work is pure Grieg, this bit is).

The Adagio follows, nearly to the end, the pattern of the A minor concerto Adagio, but this movement is, more than Grieg's, touched with tragedy, and so rather more complex, and I am again pulled towards Rachmaninoff. In the first two solos, really get the "inner voices", search for them. In my solo arrangement, I permit myself a bit more rubato than with the orchestra, which has a complex accompaniment with several syncopations, so better play just about at a straight tempo. The fermata notes in bars 264 and 280 must have the necessary weight and staying-power, so you may give them an accent. The middle sequence (development) has a model in the last song from "Haugtussa" (the "Mountain Maid" cycle), with its modulation through darkening keys. It is easy for the pianist to lose contact with the orchestra here, so practice in cold blood and straight tempo, tightly in the keys. There is a rhythmical contrast, as

the orchestra plays 16th-notes while you play sextuplets subdivided in 2+2+2. Still you need a little time on the top before each new modulation.

The climax needs a round and full forte to fortissimo in chords. At the very top, bar 298-299, with the trumpets and trombones coming in, the mood is one of pure despair. Still, never hit the keys from your elbow but play with the whole arm, from the shoulder, applying your body weight.

The big cadenza comes at the very dramatic climax; you must feel as if your world has collapsed around you. Be “appassionato” all the way. Don’t take a too big ritardando at the end of the octave passage, avoid heaviness, and play the variant of the opening cadenza at full and risky speed, hardly, if at all, slowing down at the end. At the last statement of the introductory motive, keep the appassionato, but relax gradually to the sudden exhaustion point on the long, accented f sharp.

The actual Grieg quotations: think of his first theme as if played by someone else at a long distance: as slow and pianissimo as you can make it, and bathed in the sound of the two pedals. Sit absolutely quiet, don’t move at all! A tiny crescendo towards the top will be fine. Then it’s “your turn”: play his second theme hesitantly, as a half-forgotten melody you try to recall. Be totally free with the tempo; I would recommend the groups of 16ths suddenly faster than the rest, so that a tiny smile creeps into the music. You might pick up a little more tempo in the last four bars, but stay a long time on the hesitant fermata before the third theme.

Grieg’s third sketch is mysterious, and I have come to think that it really has two tempi: a very quick march at the beginning (and end) and a considerably faster tempo in the soloistic bit that recalls the finales of both Beethoven’s sonata op. 31#3 and Schubert’s posthumous C minor, and even more the second concerto by Saint-Saëns. (Possibly there is a third, rather slower tempo, at the F# minor motif halfway through, not included here). So I should want both tempi in the excerpt of the third sketch, in which you “wake up”; that is you accelerate up to a real Presto, like the coming Finale, at bar 342 etc., always allowing for a slight broadening of the tempo as noted. At bar 368 etc. I give the option to put in two horns, as this is Grieg’s only specifically stated instrumentation, but if more practical you can play everything on the piano. If the horns play, you don’t, except at the end of bar 373 where you go an octave up. Be sure to put the bass C in bar 371 in the pedal, it will make all the difference!

The remains of the cadenza is tentative, as if you test the water of a cold fjord, not daring to jump in, but the orchestra gives you the final push!

The finale certainly recalls that of Saint-Saëns' no. 2 pianistically, but the tempo should be slightly more rustic, as it has elements of the Norwegian "stev" – an improvised, short folksong of derisory content, ending with an accentuated "sann" on the afterbeat. It's very important that you take care of these accents (bars 390, 394 and others). At 415, stick to your tempo and don't fly into Saint-Saëns; you may get into trouble in the following, difficult passage. Finish it very secco, rattling down to the bass.

Now there comes a quick reprise of the Scherzo in the tempo and rhythm of the Finale. Be careful that you don't rush the chromatic triplets; think just a slight accent on the 4th beat. Take a slightly slower tempo for the C# minor episode and the following "Pagliacci" bit; in the latter you must play very lightly not to cover the wind players' melodies. At the very end accelerate to the main tempo with a quick crescendo.

If you take care over your forte tone production, the final solo and coda play themselves really, but don't exaggerate the Maestoso. This part is the obvious reason why my concerto has been described as a Rachmaninoff piece, but what other way did I have of concluding it? Didn't even Grieg foreshadow the Rachmaninoff coda in his A minor concerto?

A final word about the metronome markings: I have nearly always had difficulties finding an exactly right tempo on the metronome, but on the whole I like the tempi of the Naxos Grand Piano recording, so you can take your departure from that. In any case, don't think of the metronome markings as more than a general indication.