

EDVARD GRIEG

(1843-1907)

Sonata in G Major, Op. 13

(19:48)

- 1 I. Lento doloroso; Allegro vivace (8:32)
- 2 II. Allegretto tranquillo (5:52)
- 3 III. Allegro animato (5:15)

Sonata in F Major, Op. 8

(18:23)

- 4 I. Allegro con brio (6:25)
- 5 II. Allegretto quasi Andantino (5:01)
- 6 III. Allegro molto vivace (6:49)

Sonata in C minor, Op. 45

(23:10)

- 7 I. Allegro molto ed appassionato (8:52)
- 8 II. Allegretto espressivo alla Romanza (6:18)
- 9 III. Allegro animato (7:51)

Gerald Tarack, violin
David Hancock, piano

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Total Time: 63:33

The three sonatas for violin and piano represent the major portion of Grieg's chamber music output, for, in addition to the works recorded here, he completed only a single string quartet and a cello sonata. This apparently small production is not out of scale with that of other Romantic composers, who found the classical forms either unnecessary or uncongenial to their expressive goals. Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) approached these forms with trepidation: his only symphony was a juvenile work subsequently disavowed. Sometimes in fits of discontent he blamed his supposedly defective academic training, his isolation in Norway, or his ill health for the absence of "major" works among his compositions. His shrewd musical instincts must have told him, however, that his unique gifts for the lyric phrase and the exotic turn of harmony found their supreme realization in song and imaginative works for solo piano.

Grieg's formal education in composition took place in Leipzig, an academic stronghold to be sure, but not one in which his adventurous experiments were discouraged or his personality stifled. The reigning divinities at Leipzig were of course Mendelssohn (d. 1847) and Schumann (d. 1856). Grieg, an accomplished pianist, had a particular fondness for the music of Chopin, a composer whose harmonic daring bore a notable affinity to his own inclinations. On his return from Leipzig, the young Norwegian settled in Copenhagen, then the musical capital of Scandinavia and the home of its leading composers, Niels Gade and J.P.E. Hartmann.

Although primarily a composer and performing musician, Grieg was also a perceptive and judicious critic of contemporary music; he proved to be ahead of his time in assessing the true greatness of Mozart. At Bayreuth for the first complete performance of the *Ring* in 1876, he expressed his great admiration for Wagner but refused to be overwhelmed and thus blinded to musical and dramatic flaws. Grieg's assessment of his own violin sonatas could not be surpassed for its clear insight into the character of each: "they represent periods in my development—the first naïve, rich in ideas; the second national;

and the third with a wider horizon." Naturally there are qualities common to all three, but by 1900 (when the statement was made) Grieg realized that the sonatas documented successive stages in his artistic life: the overflowing imagination of youth, his commitment to musical nationalism, and a determination to confirm his stature in the cosmopolitan language of European Romanticism.

The Sonata in F, Op. 8, was written rather quickly during the summer of 1865 while Grieg was staying at an inn on the coast north of Copenhagen. Despite the unquestionably picturesque surroundings there, this Sonata is not exactly outdoor music, for it bears the imprint of the new conservatory graduate enamored of Schumannesque solidity. Even in this early work, however, Grieg's idiosyncratic treatment of harmony—his "dream world" as he called it—breaks through. Modal effects and a foretaste of the folk idioms which were later to take on a sharper profile make this Sonata an individual and thoroughly characteristic work.

The first few chords of the Sonata give notice that the experience will not be an ordinary one: e minor, a minor, then the dominant of the principal key (coinciding with the first note of the violin) create the sensation of a beginning in full flight. The expectations aroused by this exhilarating start are not deceived by the ensuing succession of fresh and delightful tunes filled with authentic sentiment and illumined by novel chromatic and modal harmonies. As in the other sonatas, the exposition of the first movement falls into three tonal areas. The development, turbulent but straightforward, begins with a reharmonized version of the first theme in a slower tempo. For his recapitulations Grieg prefers a fairly literal restatement of the exposition. In the light of Grieg's future development, the middle movement of Op. 8 (*Allegretto*) is the most personal, both for the evocative unison figure with which it begins and for the Hardanger fiddle motives and drones of the A-major middle section. (The Hardanger fiddle is a Norwegian folk violin with sympathetic strings, a flat fingerboard and a nearly flat bridge which facilitates drone playing. Its music remained a constant inspiration and a challenge to

Grieg.) The finale of the Sonata offers a wealth of attractive and vital ideas.

Niels Gade reacted favorably to the violin sonata and its companion, the Piano Sonata, Op. 7, offering advice and encouragement. Publication of the Sonata prompted a letter to the composer from one of Europe's musical luminaries: Franz Liszt, who prophesied that Grieg "had only to follow his natural path to achieve high distinction." When he finally met Liszt at Rome in 1870, Grieg had another Violin Sonata (Op. 13) in his luggage. Liszt again waxed enthusiastic about the new Sonata and the recently completed Piano Concerto.

The G-major Sonata, Op. 13, was written in Christiania (present-day Oslo) in 1867, shortly after the composer's marriage to his cousin Nina Hagerup, subsequently a celebrated interpreter of his songs. In this "national" Sonata the evolution of a personal style runs in tandem with the absorption of folk elements. Its composition followed closely on a short but momentous friendship with Rikard Nordraak, a Norwegian composer whose premature death in 1866 Grieg considered a profound tragedy. Although possessed of only modest gifts, Nordraak was imbued with a sense of mission to create music with a national character depending more on inspiration and emotion than technique. Grieg considered the encounter with Nordraak a revelation and the turning point in his own career. Indeed Grieg's sensitivity to musical folk art, songs and dances, never ceased to grow and to enrich his original piano compositions and arrangements of Norwegian folk melodies. He described the main features of his native music as "a deep melancholy, which may suddenly change to a wild and unrestrained gaiety. Mysterious gloom and indomitable wildness—these are the contrasts of a Norwegian folk song."

Precisely these qualities are juxtaposed with a lyric serenity in the first movement of Op. 13, their combination adumbrated in the slow introduction, which also anticipates the first theme of the following *Allegro vivace*. Brittle Hardanger motives and drones lead to an expressive second theme in b minor, which receives an exalted restatement in D major to close the exposition. In the development a fragment of the first theme gives way to a lyrical mood and

then a stirring preparation for the recapitulation.

An unmistakable *Volkston* pervades the poetic e-minor *Allegretto* with its charming middle section in E major. The oft criticized resemblance between the themes of first and last movements of this work was obviously intended by the composer; a sensitive performance brings out the more relaxed, less rustic mood of the finale.

A decade went by before Grieg approached the chamber music idiom again, completing his only String Quartet in 1878. The next year, elated by successful concert tours and the growing recognition they implied, Grieg decided to return to the sonata for violin and piano, this time with a work in a "serious" key. This was to be his final chamber composition, the Violin Sonata in c minor, Op. 45, a view toward the "wider horizon" he always longed to conquer: the large forms inherited from the Classic masters.

One notices immediately the greater security and technical mastery which Grieg now brings to the sonata. The motives are terse and easily manipulated; the thematic contrasts are strong. Integration of solo instrument and piano shows more textural variety, and the gap between structural and coloristic use of harmony has been bridged. Grieg catches the initial motive of the first movement in a sweep which leads directly to the delicate second theme in E flat. The development is introduced by a plaintive phrase over rippling arpeggios: this turns out to be the initial theme in augmentation. The same device later announces the arrival of the recapitulation.

The serene melody in E major which opens the second movement is interrupted by a furious dance in the tonic minor. It returns in varied fashion to round out the movement. In the finale (*Allegro animato*) Grieg regains the intense drive heard in parts of the first movement, breaking its force with a lyrical theme destined to undergo a grandiose transformation at the close of the Sonata.

The violinist Johannes Wolff, who interpreted the Sonatas with the composer at the keyboard, once wrote to Grieg's biographer H.T. Finck: "His

sonatas are *grand*; they are much played, but very few know how to play Grieg; you must know him, his beautiful country and the Norwegian character. His works are full of passion and poetry; the more I play them the more I love them, and I always find freshness and beauty." The listener who moves beyond the familiar Piano Concerto and *Peer Gynt* into the world of the Violin Sonatas will discover these pleasures and many others besides.

Notes by Joseph Dyer

Gerald Tarack, violinist, has served as concertmaster of many New York orchestras. He has been a regular guest artist at the Casals Festival, and has made solo and chamber music recordings for Monitor, Vanguard, Atlantic, Nonesuch and Dover.

The violin employed for this recording was made by George Hudson, a distinguished British luthier, in 1891.

David Hancock, pianist, was born in Washington D.C. He studied privately with Sascha Gorodnitzki, and holds a diploma at the Juilliard School of Music, where he was a student of Rosina Lhevinne. His recordings include works by Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, Franck, Debussy, Ravel and Poulenc.

The piano used on this recording was a Mason and Hamlin AA, length six feet two inches, Boston-made in 1927.

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