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THE MYTHOLOGICAL AND SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN EDVARD GRIEG'S MUSIC

Edvard Grieg's first encounter with Norwegian folk stories and legends took place during a stay in Denmark (1864–1865), 'when I [as the composer wrote] – in association with Nordic art and Nordic artists, in the process of studying Nordic sagas and Nordic folk life – began to understand and to find myself'.¹ From that time on, his life's dream was 'to be able to express Nordic nature in music'.² Grieg began studying the epos *Edda* and acquired a profound knowledge of Nordic mythology. He remained strongly influenced by the epos throughout his life, but he did not compose any works strictly devoted to it.

Anyone who reads the Elder Edda soon becomes aware of its wonderful power and pithiness of expression, its remarkable ability to say much in a few words. Such a reader will admire the simple, plastic formulation of the sentences. The same is true of the sagas about the Norwegian kings, especially those written by Snorri Sturluson. The more deeply the heart is moved, the more condensed and enigmatic is the mode of expression. The language is constantly bold, serious and dignified. One senses more than one sees the stormy ocean of the passions. The mode of expression is as brief as it is chaste. This saga literature is the foundation on which Bjørnson and Ibsen built.³

¹ From a letter to Aimar Grønvold of 25 April 1881. *Edvard Grieg: Letters to Colleagues and Friends*, ed. Finn Benestad (Columbus, 2000), p. 305.

² From a letter to Gottfred Matthison-Hansen of 10 April 1869. *Edvard Grieg: Letters*, p. 497.

³ From a letter to Henry Theophilus Finck of 17 July 1900. *Edvard Grieg: Letters*, pp. 230–231. During the 1850s, Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson started writing historical plays inspired by the time of the Old Norse sagas. Ibsen's first historical play was *Fru Inger till Østeraad* [Lady Inger of Ostrat] (1855), and Bjørnson's first historical drama was *Mellem Slagene* [Between the battles] (1857).

Grieg's interest in Nordic legends and stories arose during the 1870s and became stronger under the sway of his friendship with the most famous Norwegian dramatist, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910). Their collaborative works are based on the Old Norse *Sagas of the Norwegian Kings* by Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241): *Foran Sydens Kloster* [Before a southern convent], Op. 20 (1871/1890), the melodrama *Bergliot*, Op. 42 (1871/1885), *Sigurd Jorsalfar* [Sigurd the Crusader], Op. 22 (1872), *Landkjenning* [Land-sighting], Op. 31 (1872/1881) and the unfinished opera *Olav Trygvason*, Op. 50 (1873/1888).

VØLVE AND THE UNFINISHED OPERA *OLAV TRYGVASON*

Olav Trygvason is the sole example of direct reference to the *Edda* in Grieg's works. When working on the libretto, it is likely that Bjørnson not only used Sturluson's stories but also assimilated myths from the *Edda*. Bjørnson wrote his text to just three scenes full of references to Nordic mythology and pagan gods, imitating the literary style of ancient Nordic sagas. Grieg was aware of this tendency when composing the music, and he tried to create an 'Old Norse' style like the Danish composer Johan Peter Emilius Hartmann (1805–1900) in his *The Valkyrie*, *The Legend of Thrym* and *The Völve's Prophecy*.⁴ When he began working on the music to *Olav Trygvason*, in 1873, Grieg had already acquired his first experiences of Wagner's dramas. Although impressed by Wagner's music, judging by what we read in the reports Grieg sent from Wagner's festival in Bayreuth to the Bergen daily newspaper *Bergensposten*, he was very critical of the way in which Wagner used the Nordic *Edda*.⁵

But I think that if a Scandinavian of Wagner's talent were born, and if he treated the myth of Sigurd Fafnersbane, we would hear more echoes of the *Edda* in the music. It's a shame that Wagner is obviously unfamiliar with such works as Hartmann's *The Valkyries* and *The Legend of Thrym*, for these are brilliant examples of the Nordic spirit that a man with Wagner's view would have to find gripping.⁶

⁴ Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg. The Man and the Artist*, tr. William H. Halverson and Leland B. Sateren (Lincoln, 1988), pp. 168–169.

⁵ *Edvard Grieg: Diaries, Articles, Speeches*, ed. William H. Halverson and Finn Benestad (Columbus, 2001), pp. 290–318.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 309. About the beginning of the third act of Wagner's *Siegfried*, Grieg wrote: 'The whole scene, as it stands, is in all essentials the *Edda's Vegtamskvida*. The tone color is predominantly

He also expressed his dissatisfaction with the way in which Wagner used the *Edda* material in a letter to the American composer Edward MacDowell: 'For the Edda material that was employed by Wagner is not only Germanic: It is above all Nordic (Norwegian-Icelandic), whereas Wagner was exclusively German and not a Scandinavian at all'.⁷

Grieg's dream was to compose a true national opera referring to Norwegian history and mythology. In the three scenes that he wrote to Bjørnson's text, he used a musical language that we can call Romantic-Historic. In his treatment of arias in the soloists' parts, he applied a declamatory song style 'that might indeed remind one of the Wagnerian Sprechgesang'⁸ and 'might be regarded as a stylization of tone-inflected speech', but he also wanted to create a pseudo-ancient style of Nordic music. In fact the text of the three scenes that Bjørnson wrote deals with pagan Nordic rituals and prayers; it takes place in an ancient Norse temple and is full of magic. It is Grieg's first composition referring so strongly to Nordic mythology in both text and music. However, the opera was not finished, because Bjørnson became interested in writing plays about contemporary problems. Grieg's music to the three scenes can be regarded as a perfect embodiment of his ideas about the national-mythical style of his music. In my opinion, it is an important key to understanding his further compositions referring to mythological and supernatural worlds and characters. My hypothesis is that the opera *Olav Trygvason* introduces mystical categories into Grieg's output using special techniques to represent them, and all of them can be detected in further Grieg works concerning mythical creatures or themes related to them.

In the first scene of *Olav Trygvason*, 'two soloists – a priest-chieftain (baritone) and a woman (mezzosoprano) – alternate with a male chorus and a female chorus in progressively louder shouts to the Norse gods for help in their struggle'.⁹ Here Grieg used a minor key and a raised fourth – the tritone, which, according to John Horton, 'is exploited to produce all the diablerie attributed to it in medieval times'.¹⁰ My suggestion is that this interval in Grieg's output represents not only the *diabolus in musica*

tragic, but the music cannot be said to reflect the tone of the saga'. Ibid., p. 304

⁷ From a letter to Edward MacDowell of 30 June 1900. Edvard Grieg: *Letters*, p. 484.

⁸ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, p. 168.

⁹ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, p. 168.

¹⁰ Horton, 'Works for the Stage', p. 100.



but everything connected to magic and primitive nature. This interval has a very important role in representing supernatural worlds in Grieg's compositions.¹¹ In the first scene from *Olav Trygvason*, he used it in the vocal line of the priest-chieftain and in the orchestral accompaniment (bars 21–24, 40–43, 59–62) to create an effect of mystery and antiquity (see Example 1). He must have listened to Weber's *Der Freischütz*, because this effect of tremolo with tritone is very similar to the frightening Wolf's Glen scene from Weber's opera.

Example 1. Edvard Grieg, *Olav Trygvason*, first scene, piano reduction, bars 20–22



Diagram 1. Hexachords and 'hexatonic poles'

HEXACHORD	PROGRESSION ASSOCIATED WITH ALL THINGS UNCANNY
I C Eb E G G# B	(E–Cm)
II C# E F G# A C	(F–C#m)
III D F F# A A# C#	(F#–Dm)
IV Eb Gb G Bb B D	(G–Ebm)

The tritone plays a similar role in the second scene in the vocal line of the prophetess Vølve, the character transposed by Bjørnson from the *Edda*. In Old Norse mythology, Vølve is 'a woman who practiced witchcraft and had the ability to foresee the future'.¹² In the *Edda*, the most important Vølve lives in Jötunheim, and the god Odin visits her to learn

¹¹ Some examples of the use of a tritone or raised fourth in a minor key in Grieg's compositions referring to trolls: 'In the Hall of the Mountain King', Op. 23 No. 8, 'Peer Gynt Hunted by the Trolls', Op. 23 No. 10, 'Peer Gynt and the Böyg', Op. 23 No. 11, 'Gnomes' Procession' EG 111, 'March of the Trolls', Op. 54 No. 3, 'Little Troll', Op. 71 No. 5.

¹² Edvard Grieg: *Letters*, *ibid.*, p. 315.

of the future through her songs. However, the prophetess's melodic line is not so monotonous as the vocal lines of the priest-chieftain in the previous scene, and it is much more emotional (observe the tritone in the second scene in bars 7–8, 48, 61–62, see Example 2). Several repetitions of short phrases create a character of incantation and prophecy – a ‘runic atmosphere’.¹³ The choir concludes Vølvé's statements, and the orchestral accompaniment of this passage uses interesting progressions of chords. The most striking is the progression of a *fortissimo* C major chord and, after a short pause, a *piano* F sharp major chord (bars 35–37, see Example 3). This is a feature which Richard Cohn has called a ‘hexatonic pole’: two chords following each other where one chord is in one key signature and the other shares no notes with the first and does not exist in its key (see Diagram 1).¹⁴ In the same scene, Grieg used the tritone not only as an interval in vocal and orchestral lines but also as a tritone relation between two chords.

Example 2. Edvard Grieg, *Olav Trygvason*, second scene, piano reduction, bars 60–64

60 *cresc.*

Blod E-der lys-ter! Hos Hel ej an-den Mad E-der mæt - tel
 Blut euch ge-lüs-tet! Bei Hel kein an-dres Mahl soll euch sütt - gen!

p

¹³ Horton, ‘Works for the Stage’, p. 100.

¹⁴ Richard Cohn, ‘Uncanny resemblances: Tonal Signification in the Freudian age’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 57 (2004/2), pp. 285–323. This effect is very typical of most of Grieg’s music referring to mythical creatures and supernatural worlds and can be observed also in compositions referring to trolls: ‘Peer Gynt Hunted by the Trolls’, Op. 23 No. 10, ‘Gnomes’ Procession’ EG 111, ‘March of the Trolls’, Op. 54 No. 3, ‘Little Troll’, Op. 71 No. 5. I have discussed it in the article ‘Musical Categories of the Uncanny in Edvard Grieg’s “Troll Music”’, *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, 38 (2012), pp. 46–64.

Example 3. Edvard Grieg, *Olav Trygvason*, second scene, piano reduction, bars 30–37

30 *Poco lento* ♩ = 48

S. Er - vær - di - ge Völ - ve, rejs dig og gal - dre! Rensk Him - mel og

A. Ebr - wüir - di - ge Wöl - wa, auf, auf und zau - bre! Füll' Him - mel und

T. Ær - vær - di - ge Völ - ve, rejs dig og gal - dre! Rensk Him - mel og

B. Ebr - wüir - di - ge Wöl - wa, auf, auf und zau - bre! Füll' Him - mel und

p *cresc.*

p *cresc.*

p *cresc.*

p *cresc.*

p *cresc.*

In the third scene from the opera, the composer introduces another element that describes magic and mystery. The whole scene is a sacrificial dance, where the most important aspect is the role of the mixed, male and female choruses singing praise to ancient Norse gods. The constant repetition of the main phrase (bars 12–27, 62–77, 112–127) creates a primitive and barbarian atmosphere. Horton noticed the similarity of this scene to Borodin's *Prince Igor*, especially to the boy's dance in that opera.¹⁵ The construction of this passage is very clear: eight bars of an antecedent phrase at the end the dominant chord and eight bars of a consequent phrase with the tonic chord. Apart from their endings, these two phrases are the same, based on the progression of chords G minor, E flat major, G minor, A major, C minor, G major, G minor and D major (bars 12–19, see Example 4). In the melodic line of the top voices (sopranos), there is a chromatic descending line from D to A (bars 16–18). C sharp, as a raised fourth, appears as a kind of Lydian flavour, and B natural as a major flavour, yet there is no interval of a tritone or tritone relation

¹⁵ Horton, 'Works for the Stage', p. 101.

between two chords as in the previous scenes. The note of C sharp is harmonised by an A major chord and C natural by a C minor chord. In fact, the main key signature of the scene is G minor, and the A major chord does not belong to that key. The progression of an A major chord and a C minor chord is another example of the 'hexatonic pole' which composers 'very often use to express magical, supernatural, metaphysical and mystical categories in music'.¹⁶ One can certainly interpret this progression also as a shift from a double dominant chord (A major) to a sub-dominant chord (C minor), but it is still a mediant chord progression.

Example 4. Edvard Grieg, *Olav Trygvason*, piano reduction, bars 10–22

The musical score for Example 4 is a piano reduction of Edvard Grieg's *Olav Trygvason*, bars 10–22. It is written in G minor, 2/4 time, and marked 'Allegretto marcato' with a tempo of quarter note = 92. The score consists of two systems of staves. The first system (bars 10–16) begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking. The second system (bars 17–22) starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The music features a mix of chords and melodic lines, with some notes marked with accents.

Example 5. Edvard Grieg, String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27, first violin, bars 12–29

The musical score for Example 5 is the first violin part of Edvard Grieg's String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27, bars 12–29. It is in 6/8 time, G minor, and marked 'Presto al Saltarello'. The score consists of two systems of staves. The first system (bars 12–19) begins with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic and includes a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second system (bars 20–29) starts with a fortissimo (*f*) dynamic and includes a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking. The music is characterized by a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some notes marked with accents.

¹⁶ Stępień, 'Musical Categories', p. 52.

FOSSEGRIM AND THE STRING QUARTET IN G MINOR, OP. 27



Grieg applied the same effect that he had used in the last scene from *Olav Trygvason* to the main theme of the last movement of his String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27, written in 1877–78. The saltarello is based on the same key signature of G minor, and the progression of chords is also the same: G minor, A major, C minor and D major (bars 20–27, see Example 5). The theme consists of an antecedent phrase and a consequent phrase, as in the last scene from *Olav Trygvason*. Helena Kopchick has shown a hidden programme in this quartet that refers directly to the poetic content of Grieg’s song ‘Fiddlers’, Op. 25 No. 1, based on a text by Henrik Ibsen.¹⁷ We know that Grieg used the theme from this song as a motivic kernel for his quartet, but Kopchick argues that the whole structure of this chamber work reflects Ibsen’s poem. The poem ‘Fiddlers’ is based on a familiar Norwegian legend of a musician who is taught great powers of interpretation by a water-sprite, a *fossegrim*, only to find himself having to repay the debt with his own happiness.¹⁸ Kopchick argues that the finale of this composition is strictly related to the music of the *fossegrim*, the violin-playing male water troll of Norwegian folklore. Here, the saltarello becomes a frenetic dance and emphasises the supernatural aspects of that dance, the demonic style of playing alluded to in the poem ‘Fiddlers’. This exuberant dance is played first by the first violin with viola accompaniment; the second time, the viola joins the first violin, while the second violin and cello together provide the accompaniment. This is a perfect representation of the idea of enchantment, which is so popular in Norwegian folklore.

Everywhere in the North we find among the people tunes that are ascribed to the devil, the Nix or the subterranean spirits. The player offered up a lamb to the river, and thus induced the Nix to teach him such tunes. But when he subsequently played them, he was unable to stop, but played on and on like a madman, until someone could come to the rescue by cutting his fiddle strings.¹⁹

¹⁷ Helena Kopchick, ‘Memory, Enchantment and a Hidden Program in Edvard Grieg’s *String Quartet in G minor* Op. 27’, an article from the programme of the Grieg Festival at Rollins College, Winter Park Florida, 2009.

¹⁸ Beryl Foster, *The Songs of Edvard Grieg* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 100.

¹⁹ Henry T. Finck, *Grieg and His Music* (New York, 1922), p. 120.

Enchantment has a central place in Daniel M. Grimley's book *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity*. Grimley argues:

The idea of enchantment or bewitchment, of abduction by supernatural powers or literally of being 'taken into the mountains', is a recurrent theme in Nordic mythology, not least among the tales collected by folklorists such as Asbjørnsen and Moe. Enchantment is also fundamental to much of Grieg's landscape music.²⁰

It is interesting to compare the finale of the String Quartet in G minor with the last scene from *Olav Trygvason* and note that these two passages are almost identical (compare Examples 4 and 5). In 1891, when Bjørnson and Grieg wanted to work on the *Peace Oratorio*, Grieg wrote to Bjørnson: 'The text will lose for me that which is best, that which is inexpressible, that which creates the trembling of enchantment (as it did in *Olav Trygvason*)'.²¹ So Grieg admitted that the idea of enchantment was also crucial for him when he was composing *Olav Trygvason*. Grimley says at the beginning of his book that: 'It invokes one of the most powerful images in Norwegian folk culture, which Grieg often felt drawn towards in his work: the myth of a subterranean supernatural music that enchants or bewitches passers-by'.²² Unfortunately, Grimley does not write anything about *Olav Trygvason* and the String Quartet in G minor, which in my opinion are important to an understanding of further compositions referring to Nordic myths. However, he considers two crucial Grieg works connected with the idea of enchantment: the cantata *The Mountain Thrall*, Op. 32 (1877–78), with a text from Landstad's *Norwegian Folk Ballads*, and the song cycle *Haugtussa* [The mountain maid], Op. 67 (1895–98), with a text by Arne Garborg.

JOTUL AND THE MOUNTAIN THRALL

The text of *The Mountain Thrall* tells the story of a young man bewitched or enchanted by the daughters of a *jotul* mountain giant. The theme is close to the story of a musician enchanted by the playing of the *fossegrim* from Ibsen's poem 'Fiddlers' and its transposition in the String Quartet

²⁰ Daniel M. Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 81.

²¹ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, p. 313.

²² Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity*, p. 1.

in G minor. Grimley observes that the two first chords, G minor and B major, draw the listener into the world of fairies and fantastical creatures (see Example 6).²³ These two chords have no common notes and are good examples of the hexatonic pole. Moreover, they remind one of a similar progression of A major and C minor chords in the finale of the String Quartet and the third scene from *Olav Trygvason*. So once again there is the idea of enchantment created by Grieg's music. Let us recall the tritone progression of C major and F sharp major chords in the second scene from *Olav Trygvason*: the C major is marked *fortissimo* and the F sharp major *piano*, like the G minor and B major in *The Mountain Thrall*. In this song, Grieg used this effect not only at the beginning, but also in the final climax (in bars 101–103) – a *fortissimo* D flat major chord that passes into a *piano* F major chord and is another example of the hexatonic pole (see Example 7).

Example 6. Edvard Grieg, *The Mountain Thrall*, Op. 32, piano reduction, bars 1–3

Example 7. Edvard Grieg, *The Mountain Thrall*, Op. 32, piano reduction, bars 93–109

²³ Ibid., p. 82.

HULDRE, SÆTERGIRLS AND HAUGTUSSA

When Grimley writes about landscape as an ideology, he quotes a passage from Christian Tønsberg's *Norske Nationaldragter* [Norwegian national costumes] (1852) about the fairytale creature the *huldre*. 'Everyone wants to dance with the strange attractive girl in the blue skirt and white headscarf, as long as they do not notice the hateful cow's tail that hangs under the skirt'.²⁴ This mythical character of the *huldre* is closely connected to the scene of the *sætergirls* ('Peer Gynt and the Herd-Girls', Op. 23 No. 5) and the scene of the mountain king's daughter ('Dance of the Mountain King's Daughter', Op. 23 No. 9) from the music to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.²⁵ In the former, three *sætergirls* are calling to trolls (Trond, Bård, Kårë) to sleep with them in the hut ('For want of boys we play with trolls!') and Peer Gynt says that he is a three-headed troll, just the one for three girls. The vocal line of the *sætergirls* contains a raised fourth, so it has a characteristic Lydian flavour, like the melody in the first scene from *Olav Trygvason*. Moreover, the similarity between this scene and *Olav Trygvason* was noticed very early by Horton, who writes that 'Grieg was to make use of much the same effect in the scene with the *sæter girls* in *Peer Gynt*'.²⁶ The same effect is applied by Grieg, albeit in a completely different manner, in his first song from *Haugtussa*, which 'becomes a more universalized expression of bewitchment, musically the process of enticement'.²⁷ There is an internal similarity between some phrases of this song and the scene with Peer Gynt and the Herd-Girls. The tritone in the vocal line of 'Det Syng' [The enticement] fulfils the role not of a raised fourth but of a major seventh but the closeness of these two passages is very clear (compare bar 22 in the scene with Peer Gynt and the Herd-Girls in Example 7 with bars 7–8 and 12–13 in 'Det Syng' in Example 8). The Herd-Girls in *Peer Gynt* and Veslemøy in *Haugtussa* share the same attitude: close to nature and supernatural beings (especially trolls: Trond, Bård, Kårë in *Peer Gynt*; the blue mountain troll in *Haugtussa*).

²⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

²⁵ There are many unreal scenes in Grieg's music to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, such as 'In the Hall of the Mountain King', Op. 23 No. 8, 'Peer Gynt Hunted by the Trolls', Op. 23 No. 10 and 'Peer Gynt and the Böyg', Op. 23 No. 11.

²⁶ Horton, 'Works for the Stage', p. 100.

²⁷ Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity*, p. 28.

Example 8. Edvard Grieg, 'Peer Gynt and the Herd-Girls', Op. 23 No. 5, piano reduction, bars 22–23

22 (macht ihm lange Nase) 2. (ebenso) 3. (ebenso) *poco rit.*

kön - nen nicht kom - men! Die kön - nen nicht kom - men! Die kön - nen nicht kom - men!...

p *poco rit.* *cresc. molto*

Example 9. Edvard Grieg, *Haugtussa*, 'Det Syng', Op. 67 No. 1, piano reduction, bars 9–13

9

gil - ja det for deg so mang ein Gong, rett al - dri so kan du det gloy - ma... *dolce*

f *p*

CONCLUSION

My aim was to demonstrate that there exists a strict correlation between Grieg's works referring to mythology and the supernatural world and that they share a similar musical representation: minor key, raised fourth (Lydian flavour) and hexatonic pole. In conclusion, I would like to agree with Grimley's statement that the idea of enchantment is connected not only with mythical creatures and supernatural powers but also with nature itself. This is best exemplified by the final chords of the piano work 'Peace of the Woods', Op. 71 No. 4, namely F major and B major, in the relation of a tritone, which surprised and enchanted listeners; they enchant one with the beauty of untouched Norwegian nature.

Example 10. Edvard Grieg, 'Peace of the Woods', Op. 71 No. 4, bars 72–77

72

pp *morendo* *piu lento* *ppp*