

BERYL FOSTER

‘THAT GLORIOUS LANGUAGE [...] THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MUSIC!’¹
EDVARD GRIEG’S RELATIONSHIP WITH *LANDSMÅL*

It is well known and well documented that much of Grieg’s instrumental music evokes the Norwegian landscape. By his own admission, in a long letter to his American biographer Henry Finck,² everything Norwegian had ‘a profound influence’ on his creative work and he took great delight in the ‘obscure depth’ and ‘undreamt-of harmonic possibilities’ of Norwegian folk music. A genuine Norwegian language, however, was to add another dimension.

I believe it is still true to say that, outside Scandinavia, few people are aware that Norway has two official languages: *bokmål*, the standard language, and *nynorsk*, or New Norwegian, developed from the *landsmål* or ‘rural language’ synthesised from the dialects of western Norway. Language was at the centre of debates on nationality and a crucial element in the struggle for Norwegian independence. After all, as Grieg himself remarked, four-fifths of the population spoke a dialect. Although brought up speaking Danish – albeit the Norwegian version – Grieg protested strongly when he was described in the newspaper *Politiken* as a Danish artist: ‘I am a Norwegian and cannot go along with my nationality being misrepresented. My love of Denmark is great, but not *that* great’.

Unlike his popular image as a homely composer of miniatures, Grieg was always something of a rebel, from playing truant from school to his unorthodox religious views and his republicanism. He was a keen

¹ ‘det herlige Mål! [...] den skjønneste Musik’, Grieg in a letter to Anders Hovden, 12 February 1895.

² Edvard Grieg to Henry Finck, Troidhaugen, 17 July 1900; *Edvard Grieg. Letters to Colleagues and Friends*, tr. William H. Halverson, ed. Finn Benestad (Columbus, 2000), pp. 225–239.

supporter of *landsmål* as a means to Norwegian identity, believing that the dialect writers were trying to create a national language just as he was trying to create a basis for national music. However, as he wrote to the writer and orator Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910), ‘since the language issue has become a matter of political power, I have distanced myself from it. I will continue to love the rural language as before, but all this stuff about forcing it on people is against nature’.³

Bjørnson was born and brought up in Østerdal, some 90 km south of Trondheim, and presumably spoke the local dialect, at least in his youth. However, he felt that the nationwide adoption of a rural language was unwise. Much as Grieg loved *landsmål*, he did object to those he called the ‘language fanatics’, who ‘look down on those of us who only love the language but cannot speak it!’⁴ And he complained to *landsmål* writer Arne Garborg about ‘we poor folks [...] who have only received the gift of *loving* the language, but without being able to write or speak it’.⁵

Landsmål was developed in the 1840s and 1850s, principally by Ivar Aasen (1813–96). Like earlier researchers, he was aware that Norwegian dialects were not just versions of Danish, but more directly akin to Old Norse, and he produced three books, including a grammar and a dictionary, laying out ‘a suggested form for a Norwegian common language’ built largely on western Norway’s ‘mountain and fjord’ dialects. So, as the literary historian Edvard Beyer remarked, ‘while Norway in 1840 did not have any language of its own, fifteen years later it had two’.⁶

The title of this paper is taken from a letter from Grieg to Anders Hovden (1860–1943), a poet and priest from Sunnmøre, the area of western Norway around Ålesund. Hovden had sent the composer a copy of his first poetry collection, *Sunnmøringen*, and Grieg wrote, ‘write more in that glorious language! It sounds to me like the most beautiful music’.

Grieg acknowledged that Danish had been forced on Norwegians through school and the Church, and explained his own position to Bjørnson: ‘I think that we who live in western Norway are more favourably disposed towards the rural language because it is so much more

³ Edvard Grieg to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Copenhagen, 16 May 1907, *Edvard Grieg. Letters*, p. 146.

⁴ Edvard Grieg to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Copenhagen, 16 January 1900, *ibid.*, pp. 136–137.

⁵ Edvard Grieg to Arne Garborg, Stockholm, 9 November 1899, *ibid.*, pp. 254–255.

⁶ Edvard Beyer, *Utsyn over norsk litteratur* [Survey of Norwegian literature] (Oslo, 1971).

beautiful [...] If, like me, you had lived in Hardanger for a year and a half [...] you would find it easier to understand me'.⁷ He expanded on this to his friend Frants Beyer: 'By a lucky stroke of fortune I was thrown into Hardanger not having the slightest inkling of the beauty and Norwegian-ness of the language—and I became so enthralled that I will never let go of it again'.⁸ He described the whole sound of the rural language as softer and 'in most cases *lighter* than Danish'.⁹ As he wrote to Garborg, 'I think a musician ought to be permitted to speak a little about the beautiful sound of the language', and to the author's wife he expressed the wish to be living a few generations later, 'simply to be speaking the Norwegian language I love'.

While a number of arrangements of Norwegian folk music had been made and some elements introduced into art music – for example by Thomas Tellefsen (1823–74) and Ole Bull (1810–80) – Grieg was the first major composer to embrace the folk *language*. His contemporary, the pianist and composer Agathe Backer Grøndahl (1847–1907), arranged some sixty folksongs, but amongst her art songs, over 190 in number, there are only two settings of dialect poems. Halfdan Kjerulf (1815–68), a composer of many superb art songs, set only one dialect text. Later, however, two other great song composers, Eyvind Alnæs (1872–1932) and Christian Sinding (1856–1941), were to make a number of settings of Vinje, Aasen and Hovden.

For Grieg, it was as if this new language compounded his already profound love of Norway and freed his imagination, as it was to do for the writers. His first forays into non-standard forms were settings of two poems by Kristofer Janson (1841–1917): 'Vesle gut' [Little boy],¹⁰ in 1866, and 'Millom rosor' [Amid roses], in 1869.¹¹ The English singer and Grieg specialist Astra Desmond (1893–1973) commented that Grieg always turned to *landsmål* when he was most unhappy.¹² This was certainly true of 'Millom rosor', which tells of the death of a child, a tragedy Grieg

⁷ Edvard Grieg to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Copenhagen, 16 January 1900, *Edvard Grieg. Letters*, p. 136.

⁸ Edvard Grieg to Frants Beyer, Copenhagen, 25 November 1899, *ibid.*, p. 87.

⁹ 25 November 1900.

¹⁰ EG 129; not published in Grieg's lifetime.

¹¹ Op. 39 No. 4, published 1884.

¹² Article in Gerald Abraham (ed.), *Grieg. A Symposium* (London, 1948).



himself had experienced that same year, when the thirteen-month-old Alexandra died from meningitis.

He wrote to Bjørnson: ‘To depict Norwegian nature, Norwegian folk life, Norwegian history and Norwegian folk poetry in music stands for me as the area in which I think I can achieve something’.¹³ The twelve folksongs he ‘freely arranged’ for male-voice choir and baritone soloist in 1877–8 (*Album for Mandssang*, Op. 30) were taken from *Fjeld Melodier* [Mountain melodies], the great collection by L. M. Lindeman (1812–87). Grieg’s handling of them is remarkable, in that he neither embellishes nor glamorises them, but retains the dialect texts and frequently uses chromatic harmonies to bring out their strangeness or beauty.

Grieg was always receptive to the inherent quality of the texts he set: to the aphoristic verse of Henrik Ibsen, he produced tautly constructed music; to Bjørnson’s euphonic lines, free-flowing melody. To dialect poetry, he reacted not only with the pedal notes and ornamentations of the Hardanger fiddle players and the echoing calls of the mountain herders that he had already begun to explore in his piano music, but also with the folk-dance rhythms implied in the words. For example, in Vinje’s ‘Eit syn’ [A vision], Op. 33 No. 6, the young man’s breathless description of the lovely girl he has seen is largely set to a brisk triple-time *springar*:

Example 1. Aasmund Olafsson Vinje, ‘Eit syn’ [A vision], Op. 33 No. 6

Allegro agitato

Ei Gjen-te eg såg som gjør-de meg fjåg, det var, som eg det skul-de drøy-ma.

(I saw a girl who made me really happy; it was as if I were dreaming)

As Norwegian has a preponderance of disyllabic words, the ends of lines in musical settings frequently engender feminine cadences, and this can also suggest a *springar* rhythm.

¹³ Edvard Grieg to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Leipzig, 21 February 1875, *Edvard Grieg. Letters*, p. 120.

Grieg has often been criticised for writing so many strophic songs, but in that he is only reflecting the folksong form. Many of his best songs are strophic, not least settings of what a Danish critic called 'that unappetising language' by the writers Vinje and Garborg. Aasmund Olafsson Vinje (1818–70) was the first great exponent of *landsmål*, writing in sophisticated verse forms with alliteration and internal rhymes, but using familiar images to present deeper concepts. Grieg described his verse as being filled 'with the profoundest wistfulness'¹⁴ and told Finck, 'I became very excited in the spring of 1880 when I became acquainted with Vinje's poetry'. To his Bergen friend, the writer John Paulsen (1851–1924), he wrote that his Vinje settings 'were written one after the other [...] in the spring of 1880. [...] In addition to the purely spiritual element, the mountainous terrain of Hardanger also lies hidden in these songs [...] It [...] put its stamp on everything I wrote at that time'.¹⁵

Grieg has been accused of romanticising Vinje, perhaps because his fifteen settings include one of his most beautiful songs: 'Våren' [The spring], Op. 33 No. 2.¹⁶ The poem is at once pensive and hopeful, and Vinje's long, elegant lines are set to one of Grieg's most expressive melodies, while the wistful repetition of 'Enno ein gong' ('Yet once again') must have appealed as much to his musical ear as to his heart. The high tessitura of the piano accompaniment at the beginning of the third line of each strophe takes the music – and the listener – into the high mountains.

To Finck, Grieg had also expressed his fascination with 'the chromatic lines in the harmonic texture' of folk music, something he frequently employs, not least in 'Den særde' [The wounded one], Op. 33 No. 3. This presents a quite different image of spring: a season that reopens all the wounds that life has inflicted. Grieg responds with an opening dissonance (F $\sharp\sharp$ against G \sharp) and many chromatically altered notes.

In another elegiac song, 'Ved Rundarne' [At Rondane], Op. 33 No. 9, the nostalgia in Vinje's lines for the mountains and valleys and, in particular, the *language* of his youth once again resonated with the composer. The haunting chromaticism in the accompaniment and particularly the transition in bar 6 from the tonic D \flat to F major (see example) conjure

¹⁴ Edvard Grieg to Finck, Trolldhaugen, 17 July 1900, *ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁵ Edvard Grieg to John Paulsen, Christiania, 4 June 1905, *ibid.*, p. 570.

¹⁶ Twelve of Grieg's Vinje settings were published as Op. 33, one posthumously and two left in manuscript.

up the mountain landscape that Grieg also loved; he who, whenever he needed recuperation, went to Hardanger or Jotunheim, or just to the top of Løvtakken in the south of Bergen:

Example 2. Edvard Grieg, 'Ved Rundarne' [At Rondane], Op. 33 No. 9

(as those I saw in my early youth, and the same wind)

It is supremely ironic that, on his own admission, Grieg should have set 'Fyremål' [The goal], Op. 33 No. 12 under a misapprehension. Vinje meant the poem as a rousing cry for the countrywide use of *landsmål*; Grieg thought it was extolling companionship and 'addressed either to a friend or even to the poet's wife'.¹⁷ Fortunately, his crisp duple-time *halling* matches the short alliterative lines of the verse, while in the sequential rising phrases at 'Fjell og Fjøre' ('mountain and shore') and 'Flod som fløymer' ('rivers that flow') (bars 25–34) we hear 'the tremendous symphonies of the waterfalls' in Hardanger that Grieg described to his Danish friend August Winding:¹⁸

Example 3. Edvard Grieg, 'Fyremål' [The goal], Op. 33 No. 12

¹⁷ Edvard Grieg to Finck, Troidhaugen, 17 July 1900, *Edvard Grieg. Letters*, p. 232.

¹⁸ Letter from Troidhaugen, 28 June 1896.

Grieg often quoted Vinje's poetry in his letters, particularly lines from 'Våren'. Frequently plagued by ill-health, he too sometimes asks whether this year might be his last, but also a number of times quotes the lines that end the third stanza: 'Meire eg fekk enn eg hadde fortent' ('I have received more than I deserved').

If he had been enthusiastic about Vinje, Grieg was to be truly enamoured of the work of Arne Garborg (1851–1924). He obtained a copy of the verse-novel *Haugtussa* immediately on its publication, in May 1895, and was at once spellbound. If Vinje had been concerned with the universal human condition, Garborg takes the reader into the landscape along with the rural population, their lives and superstitions. Grieg wrote to the German pianist and composer Oscar Meyer about this 'beautiful, versified story': 'It is a masterwork, full of originality, simplicity and depth, and possessing a quite indescribable richness of color. Therefore, it will not escape your fine expert eye that these songs are essentially different from my earlier ones'.¹⁹ In a letter to Garborg's wife, he described *landsmål* as a 'world of unborn music' and goes on: 'Reason enough for me to be crazy about the language even if I were not enthused out of national sentiment'.²⁰

In *Haugtussa*,²¹ Garborg uses a wide range of verse forms, full of nature imagery, alliteration and onomatopoeia. Grieg's cycle (Op. 67) sets only eight of the book's seventy verses, and these concentrate solely on the unhappy love story of Veslemøy, the 'haugtussa' of the title, although he also set or sketched twelve more and had originally considered a large-scale work for chorus and orchestra. However, he almost completely ignores the mystic, other-worldly elements of Garborg's story and its implied analogy to contemporary life.

Nonetheless, those eight songs – 'the best I have written',²² as Grieg wrote to the singer Thorvald Lammers (1841–1922) – form an exquisite entity. Again there are dance rhythms: a *springar* in 'Blåbær-Li' [Blueberry Hill], the third song of the cycle, and a sprightly *halling* in the sixth, 'Killingdans' [Dance of the little goats]. The accompaniment figure in the latter also features the sharpened fourths and flattened

¹⁹ Edvard Grieg to Oscar Meyer, Troidhaugen, 7 June 1898, *Edvard Grieg. Letters*, p. 528.

²⁰ Edvard Grieg to Hulda Garborg, Troidhaugen, 18 August 1898, *ibid.*, p. 257.

²¹ Literally 'a girl of the hill spirits'.

²² Edvard Grieg to Thorvald Lammers, Leipzig, 10 March 1898, *Edvard Grieg. Letters*, p. 464.

sevenths associated with Norwegian folk music. The *nystev* verse form, with its three-syllable upbeat, occasions the three-note anacrusis in ‘Elsk’ [Love] (see example) and its antithesis ‘Vond Dag’ [Evil Day].

Example 4. Edvard Grieg, ‘Elsk’ [Love] from ‘Haugtussa’, Op. 67

Allegretto con moto
(I Stevtoner.)

Den gal - ne Gu - ten min Hug hev då - ra, eg fan - gen sit

(The crazy boy has ensnared my mind, I am caught [like a bird in a trap])

‘Ku-Lok’ [Cow Call], one of the songs not included in the cycle, sounds like an authentic *lokk* (calling song), with its arpeggios, ornamentation and alternating major and minor modes:

Example 5. Edvard Grieg, ‘Ku-Lok’ [Cow Call] from ‘Haugtussa’, Op. 67

Å ky - ri mi ve - ne, å ky - ri mi!_____

Og vin - den stry - ker så ljuv og linn_____

(Oh, my pretty cow, oh my cow)
(And the wind strokes so kind and gentle)

Each unaccompanied vocal phrase is echoed by the piano, as if the melody really were ringing round the mountains.

In his letters, Grieg frequently expresses his regret that his correspondents cannot read *landsmål*. No translations can ever do justice to the original; it is, for example, almost impossible to reproduce the names which Veslemøy gives her little goats or the alliterative descriptions of

the stream in the cycle's final song, 'Ved Gjætle-Bekken' [By Gjætle Brook].

By the 1890s, Grieg had an international reputation as a composer and conductor and was the 'face' of Norwegian music. He was delighted when, in June 1905, the Storting (Parliament) finally declared independence from Sweden, and he makes several references in his letters to 'the new Norway'. He also hoped that now Norway's music – and not least his own – would be more appreciated abroad. While Grieg's music would scarcely merit a description of 'cannons buried in flowers', as Schumann wrote of Chopin's works,²³ nevertheless his advocacy of Norwegian folk music and the new Norwegian language had a great influence on his successors and was an important contribution to Norway's view of its own nationality.

²³ In a review of Chopin's piano concertos. See Schumann, 'Pianoforte. Concert (Schluß)', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 4 (1836), p. 138.