

**Scandinavian art in the period studied owes its influential role to the ability of writers, composers, and visual artists of the period to embrace and transform local/regional themes or symbols in their work. Discuss with reference to two practitioners of either of the art forms studied during the module.**

The term 'Scandinavian' encompasses five separate countries: Norway; Sweden; Finland; Denmark and Iceland. In common with other European countries, each of the five has artistic characteristics which reveal themselves in different ways in the musical output of each country. In this study, the music of Norway and Finland will be considered with specific reference to the influences on, and the subsequent influences of, Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius.

Unlike other countries such as Germany, England, and France, Scandinavian 'classical music' only dates back to the Romantic Age when it "flourished in an atmosphere of national sentiment". However, to compensate for this short history Norway in particular has "folk-music of a great age and variety" (Lange & Östvedt, 1958:10), the earliest collection of which was first published by Lindeman in 1841. Benstad & Schjelderup-Ebbe describe Lindeman's collections as acting as a "kind of musical Bible to generations of Norwegian musicians" (1993:11). Alongside the heritage of folk music itself with its particular rhythms and tonalities, there is a legacy of specific musical instruments of which the country's youngest folk instrument, the earliest example only dates from 1651 (Remnant & Goertzen 2001:1), the *hardingfele* (Hardanger fiddle) is the most prominent and the drone of its sympathetic strings and particular tuning can readily be seen to have influenced Norwegian composers. Indeed its influence is not limited to the nineteenth century as Remnant and Goertzen report that more recently it has become an important part of late twentieth century "folk revival [...] contests" (2001:1).

Folk songs are intrinsically linked to the "folk beliefs in the Nordic region" (Kent, 2001:210) which are evident in all the artistic forms with fairies, nymphs, trolls, and many other aspects of mythology regularly occurring in local nineteenth century literature, visual art, and music. As with Lindeman's preservation of folk music, an interest in the conservation of the wider folk heritage is also evident in

literature as the Finnish epic collection of folk tales, the *Kalevala*, was first published in 1835 and went on to provide a rich source of inspiration for many artists (Asplund & Mettomäki 2000:1).

Horton describes the “remoteness, mystery, and grandeur of the Scandinavian peninsula” as being another crucial factor in influencing the countries’ composers as it “kindled the romantic imagination” (1963:87), and the natural world can clearly be seen to be an essential element in music from each country. It was not only the physical nature of the country that was important to the national pride of the artists, but the political aspirations, and subsequent tensions, of the Scandinavian countries’ bids for independence: indeed, Norway did not become independent of Sweden until 1905, and Finland had to wait another twelve years until it got its independence in 1917. The issue of each nation’s independence created an inherent element of patriotism, exaggerated by each country’s comparative isolation, which can be witnessed in all of the art forms.

In short, the folk music, mythology and folklore, geography and topography or scenery, and patriotism brought about by the political situation within Scandinavia are all vital themes which appear to varying degrees in the artistic output of the Romantic era throughout the Scandinavian countries.

Edvard Grieg (1843 – 1907) is widely recognised as the “foremost Scandinavian composer of his generation” (Horton 2001:1) and his music can be seen to have been influenced by all these factors, and although he was not the first composer to do so, he used them “much more imaginatively [and made them] part of the expression of a forceful creative language” (Schlotel 1986:9) setting himself apart from his contemporaries.

Grieg’s national instrument, the *hardingfele*, features in various forms across the gamut of his works. The lower, sympathetic, strings were most often tuned to the tonic, supertonic, mediant and dominant notes of the major scale, and it is the inverse of this pattern that Grieg uses as a motif throughout *Morning* from the *Peer Gynt* suite (Lange & Östvedt 1958:16).



opening of 'Morning' from Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite*

It is slightly confusing to note that although the atmosphere and mood of this movement conjure up an impression of a Northern landscape, within Ibsen's play the morning scene which is depicted is in fact set in the Arabian desert. When a *hardingfele* is played the sympathetic strings produced a drone-like effect behind the melody being played on the upper strings; Grieg used drones in many instances, but the earliest example can be found in the left-hand of the first *Humoreske* (opus 6) for piano (Schlotel 1986:12).



*Humoreske Number 1: Tempo di Valse*

In 1865 a collection of *hardingfele* melodies was published in Bergen, and Grieg uses one of these in the coda of his concert overture *In Autumn* (opus 11) written just one year later (Abraham 1979:689 & Horton 1974:150ff).

On a wider scale Grieg's use of folk music was encouraged by the composer Rikaard Nordraak, who is seemingly often over-credited for his influence, as Grieg wrote in 1881 that his enthusiasm for it had already been awakened before meeting Nordraak who only served to strengthen his view of it (Schlotel 1986:12). Grieg frequently used dance rhythms from folk music and the *springar* rhythms<sup>1</sup> can be seen, not exclusively, in the "first violin sonata (second movement), in the second violin sonata (first and third movements), and in the unfinished string quartet (second movement)" (Benstad & Schjelderup-Ebbe 1993:185), while rhythms from the *halling*<sup>2</sup> are found in the third movements of the string quartet in G

<sup>1</sup> The *springar* rhythm is in triple time, and Grinde writes that the "western springar has three beats of equal length [...] but in many other districts a kind of rubato is used giving beats of unequal length" (2001:1)

<sup>2</sup> The *halling* is in duple time and can be notated in either 2/4 or 6/8 time (Grinde 2001:1)

minor, and the violoncello sonata (*ibid* 185). Grieg's use of folk melodies continued throughout his life, and the *Slåtter* (opus 72) written towards the end of his 1902/3 was a set of arrangements for piano of folk melodies transcribed from the "playing of Knut Dale, one of the exponents of the traditional style of playing on the Hardanger fiddle" (Horton 2001:§3). Indeed, his final work was *Fire Salmer* (opus 74) written in 1906 for unaccompanied Baritone and mixed choir and it was entirely based on folk melodies.

Although local mythology was not the most influential element on Grieg's output, it can clearly be seen in his music written to accompany Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* as it draws its actions and characters straight from Norwegian folklore. It is interesting to note that what is now arguably the most well-known of Grieg's compositions was a commission that Grieg was unenthusiastic about as "he considered *Peer Gynt* the most unlikely musical subject he could imagine" (Lange & Östvedt 1958:39). In the music Grieg portrays the nationally iconic grotesque trolls (*In the Hall of the Mountain King*), and Peer's fantastic adventures which are themselves based in local legends. As portions of *Peer Gynt* are set in Norway, the Nordic landscapes are presented to the listener by Grieg nowhere more clearly than in the *Halling's* "wild, free harmonies [...] giving the feeling of the deep, remote Norwegian countryside" (Schlotel 1986:18) which incidentally also uses a *hardingfele* drone throughout. Grieg's portrayal of the country's unique scenery can also be seen in other works, and Schlotel goes on to suggest that his fifth book of Lyric Pieces (opus 54, composed in 1891) is an "outstanding example of Grieg's art" (1986:19), with four of the six pieces creating differing scenes of the Norwegian natural world: the immense open spaces viewed by the *Shepherd Boy* are indicated by "irregular rhythms" (*ibid*) including rarely found octuplets in bars 20 and 24; the "crisp effect of sunshine on sparkling snow" (*ibid*) in the *Gangar*; the "magic of a warm summer night" (*ibid*) in *Notturmo*; and the beauty of the verdant valley once the Trolls have marched through it with their plodding fifths and octaves (*The Trolls' March*).

Expressing the natural world in music was a not a new idea for Grieg at this stage, the earliest explicit portrayals of nature were written in 1877 when he was staying at Lofthus where he set Aasmund Olavsson Vinje's poem *Langs ei å* (*Beside the River*) (Horton: 2001:§2). However, Grieg did not only see

nature as a beautiful thing, in *Peer Gynt* he “conjured up an orchestral storm at sea” (Schlotel 1986:90)

with dotted rhythms and the motif being tossed between the instruments, as the boat onto which Peer is clinging in the play would have been tossed about at sea.

As well as having two contrasting moods, nature was not always a source of inspiration. The setting of Vinje’s poem was one of Grieg’s last original compositions until 1880, during which time he wrote of his time in Lofthus that “The mountains no longer have anything to say to me” (Horton: 1974:60). Four years later he wrote from Lofthus, apparently in poor spirits, that “though I am writing bad music I am on the other hand catching good fish” (Horton 1974:65); although this seems a light-hearted view of his work, it shows an aspect of Grieg’s personal relationship with nature.

It was not until 1905 that Norway gained independence, and in the years before that there was a great patriotic fervour in which Grieg was one of several composers to be involved. As early as 1866 Grieg had organised a public concert in Christiania with an “all-Norwegian programme” (Horton 1974:26) which was well received, and made Grieg a profit. The other principal supporters of musical nationalism were Ole Bull, Halfdan Kjerulf and Rikard Nordraak who maintained “that it was the task of a Norwegian composer to build his personal style on elements derived from the folk music of his homeland” (Bernstad & Schjelderup-Ebbe 1993:182). Having received his formal training in Leipzig Grieg had been equipped with the knowledge of the standard European musical forms and structures, but as his friend, it was Nordraak that was the “catalytic agent that brought about the transmutation of Grieg from a disciple of the Leipzig school into an ardent nationalist” (Horton 1963:106) through his “love of Norwegian folk music, and passionate belief in the future of Norwegian music” (Michelson 2001:1). Grieg acknowledged the overall importance of everything Norwegian to him in a letter to his biographer, Henry T Finck:

The traditional way of life of the Norwegian people, together with Norway’s legends, Norway’s history, Norway’s natural scenery, stamped itself on my creative imagination from my earliest years. (Schlotel 1986:8)

The same set of influences can be seen to have been behind Sibelius's work too, although unlike Grieg the principal influence is not his country's folk music. While Plantinga acknowledges Finland's "rich and varied tradition in folk music" (1984:390), Layton describes Sibelius as taking "little scholarly interest in collecting folk music [and making] no attempt to absorb folk melodies consciously" (1980:279), although he goes on to suggest that the folk rhythms and modality "coloured his own melodic thinking and became part of him" (1980:280). A contrasting view of Sibelius's interest in folk music is provided by Hepokoski who details Sibelius's visit to the "remote Korpiselkä region" of Finland in 1892 to "note down numerous melodies" (2001:§3), his co-editorship of a collection of Finnish folk tunes for the Finnish Literary Society in 1895, and his 1896 lecture entitled *Some perspective on folk music and its influence on the Art of music*. Despite this involvement in folk music, Sibelius's use of elements of folk music in his compositions is rare, and the earliest example can be found in the *Andante* of his Violin Sonata in F (composed 1889) in which a set of variations is based on a "folk-like tune" (Hepokoski 2001:§1 & Kilpeläinen 1995:1).

Rather than the folk music forming the basis of much of Sibelius's output, it was the publication of the *Kalevala* that was to provide inspiration throughout his composing life. The *Kalevala* is a compilation of Finnish ancient oral poetry and is generally considered to be the national epic. It was undoubtedly the nationalistic feeling of the age that brought about the collection of the ballads and songs, but it was made accessible to Sibelius when he attended the Normaalilyseo, Finland's only "Finnish-language secondary school" (Hepokoski 2001:§1) at which Finns were able to rediscover their own language.

The first of Sibelius's many works to draw on the *Kalevala* was *Kullervo* which was composed in 1892, just a year after he returned from studying in Germany and Vienna to a country where patriotic feeling was at fever pitch due to the Russian oppression. In Vienna Sibelius had immersed himself in the *Kalevala* describing it as embodying "elemental Finnish culture" and being "extraordinarily modern"; he felt the rhythm of the language, the images and atmosphere of the text to be "pure music" (Hepokoski 2001:§2). *Kullervo* was regarded by critics as being "a landmark in Finnish music" (Layton, 1965:10) and

Sibelius had had similar personal intentions when he started writing it as he wanted to create his “‘Finnish-culture’ self-image [by] capturing the essential feeling that animated such music” (Hepokoski 2001: §3), rather than quoting folksongs directly.

*Kullervo* is a five movement symphonic work of “Mahlerian proportions” (Layton 1980:276) and its central movement, *Kullervo and his sister*, is the climax of the work. Both this and the final movement feature vocal writing, the text of which is directly from the *Kalevala*, with the third movement employing a male voice choir and soprano and baritone soloists. Using the male voice choir is typically Scandinavian, indeed Grieg wrote much music for male voice student choirs, but in *Kullervo* it serves not only as a patriotic aspect but it also reflects the principal genre of music that was available to the Finnish populace at the time.

Sibelius’s next major work to be directly influenced by the *Kalevala* was *The Swan of Tuonela*, and a direct quotation heads the original score which describes Tuonela as the land of death surrounded by a large river on which The Swan floats majestically, singing (Layton 1965:66). Horton refers to the Wagnerian writing of the cor anglais melisma, and the Griegian string writing, but also acknowledges its “atmosphere of the brooding mythology of the *Kalevala*” (1963:130). The music also creates a distinct impression of the Nordic landscape, and the tremolando string writing forms an “arctic sheen” (*ibid.*) on which the swan’s song floats.

The inspiration for the tone-poem *Tapiola* written much later in 1926 (opus 112) is again drawn from the *Kalevala*, in which Tapio is the god of the forest, and Sibelius creates the vastness of the Scandinavian forests with their “loneliness, their magic, terror and majesty” (Layton 1965:79), and the terrifying storm towards the end has been seen as “the impersonal forces of Nature threaten[ing] to destroy the human personality” (Harman & Mellers 1968:941). Although nature is not the primary influence on this work, the landscape being portrayed in *Tapiola* could be that of no other country.

Sibelius's patriotism has already been alluded to, but the clearest example of this must be the tone-poem *Finlandia* written in 1899 as a protest piece against the Russian's February Manifesto. Originally written as part of the incidental music for a history of Finland, it rapidly became a symbol of Finnish nationalism, even its original title *Suomi herää* ('Finland Awakens') has strong nationalistic stirrings, and the 'hymn' melody is borrowed from an earlier patriotic choral work by Genetz called *Herää Suomi!* ('Awaken, Finland') a fact which would probably not have been lost on contemporary listeners:



*Herää, Suomi!* – Emil Genetz (bars 36-8), published 1882



*Finlandia* – Sibelius, published 1899 and 1900

(Hepokoski 2001:§4)

As the Finnish authorities made substantial payments to Sibelius, it is unsurprising that a patriotic thread can be seen through so much of his output. However, Sibelius's sincerity must be questioned when his symphonies are considered as it was in these that "purely musical considerations [could] predominate" (Layton 1965:116) and, although unquestionably by Sibelius, it is the style that sets them apart rather than their inherent themes. As such, it is interesting to wonder whether his extensive use of the tritone in the Fourth Symphony of 1911, as noted by Layton (1980:284), owes anything to the sharpened fourth found in the modal scales of folk music and Grieg's compositions.

Both Grieg and Sibelius became internationally recognised composers during their life time, but as they became international commodities on the back of their nationalistically informed work, ironically they get "more and more cut off from [their] cultural background and roots" (Kent 2000:375). However in their music their writing was to inform future composers, and so assuredly did Grieg write in the style of folk music, "Edourard Lalo borrowed the opening melody of Grieg's *Mountain Tune* for his *Rhapsodie Norvégienne* in 1881 thinking erroneously, that it was folk-music" (Schlotel 1986:22ff). The English composer, Percy Grainger, acknowledged the importance of Grieg's work with folk-music in that each of

his own folk song arrangement is dedicated “lovingly and reverently to the memory of Edward Grieg” (Schlotel 1986:43), and Grieg’s adaptations of folk songs in his *Slåtter* (opus 72) are seen to have influenced Stravinsky, Bartók, and Delius (Levin 2002:1). As with Lalo’s borrowing, although the themes in *Finlandia* were original, as they had become so embedded in the Finnish musical psyche they have been treated as folk tunes by composers such as Uno Klami.

It is illustrative of the fact that Grieg and Sibelius were both experimenting with new musical ideas successfully that they have been recognised as anticipating the Impressionist composers. In Grieg’s fifth book of Lyric Pieces (opus 54), the final piece, *Bell-Ringing*, has a repeated open fifth throughout “imitating the harmonies of bells deep in a stark and lonely countryside” (Schlotel 1986:19) which is immediately reminiscent of the opening of Debussy’s prelude *La cathedrale engloutie* with the bell tolling over the water.



Opening of 'Bell-Ringing' – Grieg (Opus 54, Number 6)

Sibelius’s tone poems have also been compared to Debussy, and Layton suggests that the portrayal of the natural world in *Tapiola* is unparalleled “except possibly in Debussy’s *La Mer* and *Nuages* [where] the feeling for nature is so intense as to amount to complete identification” (1965:78).

Overall, the work of Grieg and Sibelius can clearly be seen to have been strongly influenced by elements of their countries, but their work was not isolated and the success they enjoyed in the lives is enviable. Despite their international acclaim they were both individualistic composers and much of their music is therefore readily identifiable. To achieve international fame for work based on, what were at the time, unknown local themes, while also developing their own radical styles which would in turn influence future generations of composers is an accomplishment which only seems to have been recognised in

academe relatively recently. Considering his own work in 1881, Grieg wrote a description which neatly

summarises their nationalistic and patriotic achievements:

As a modern artist what I am striving for is that which is universal – or, more correctly, that which is individual. If the result is national, it is because the individual is national.

(Bernstad & Schjelderup 1993:11)

(3125 words)

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