



What Else Can Grieg's Historical Recordings Tell Us?

Performance Practice as Musical Poetry

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Abstract

Between 1903 and 1906, Edvard Grieg recorded several of his most popular pieces on piano rolls and gramophone discs for commercial use. Like many of his peers, Grieg, as a composer and virtuoso, grasped the opportunity of the new century's technology for disseminating his music outside concert halls for broader audiences. The remastered release of Grieg's collected recordings from 1992 by the label SIMAX offers a unique access to Grieg's performances of his own works. The overall issue, what a modern listener might learn from a historical audio document like this, will be addressed in the examination of a selected track on the historical recording: the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' (Brudfølget drar forbi), No. 2 in *Pictures from Folk Life*, Op. 19, belonged to his most popular pieces and was recorded by Grieg both on piano roll and gramophone disc. Opus 19 is a cornerstone of Grieg's 'national romantic' aesthetic, and marks the beginning of a fruitful period of music-dramatic cooperation with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, from the 1870s on. Grieg's recordings have, as any other mechanical sound reproduction, their interpretive limitations. However, they provide unique insight into what is the most emergent of all historical sources, musical performance, when analysed carefully and combined with other sources of information, such as musical sketches, scores, the composer's and his contemporaries' testimonies, or concert reviews. Moving from generic features of Grieg's performance style to the individual peculiarities of his interpretation, the aim of this inquiry is to enable a new understanding of Grieg's performance *practice* as deeply related to the aesthetic conception of music as musical *poetry*.

Keywords

Edvard Grieg, historical performance practice, historical recordings, history of mentality, musical poetry

I. Grieg, Romantic virtuosos, and modern technologies of sound recording

When Edvard Grieg, at the beginning of the 20th century, was the first Norwegian to record his music for commercial use, he was far from an exception among his contemporary famous pianists and composers (Vanberg 1999, 15). With the advent of the new recording techniques, an ancient dream came true: to be able to reproduce a concert performance, as a perfect rendition

of the composer's intentions, which then could be distributed to an audience larger than ever before. Taking the limitations of natural sound rendition, and the often rather awkward experience of the recording session into account, these new possibilities of mass distribution outside concert halls were met with enthusiasm among successful virtuosos and composer-performers pursuing international careers around the turn of that century (Philip 2004, 26ff).

Several competing technologies of sound recording existed during the first half of the 20th century: wax cylinder phonographs, gramophone recordings on discs, and piano rolls for self-playing piano.¹ Grieg, as many others, made use of all the available technologies, not least in order to derive optimal commercial benefit from them.

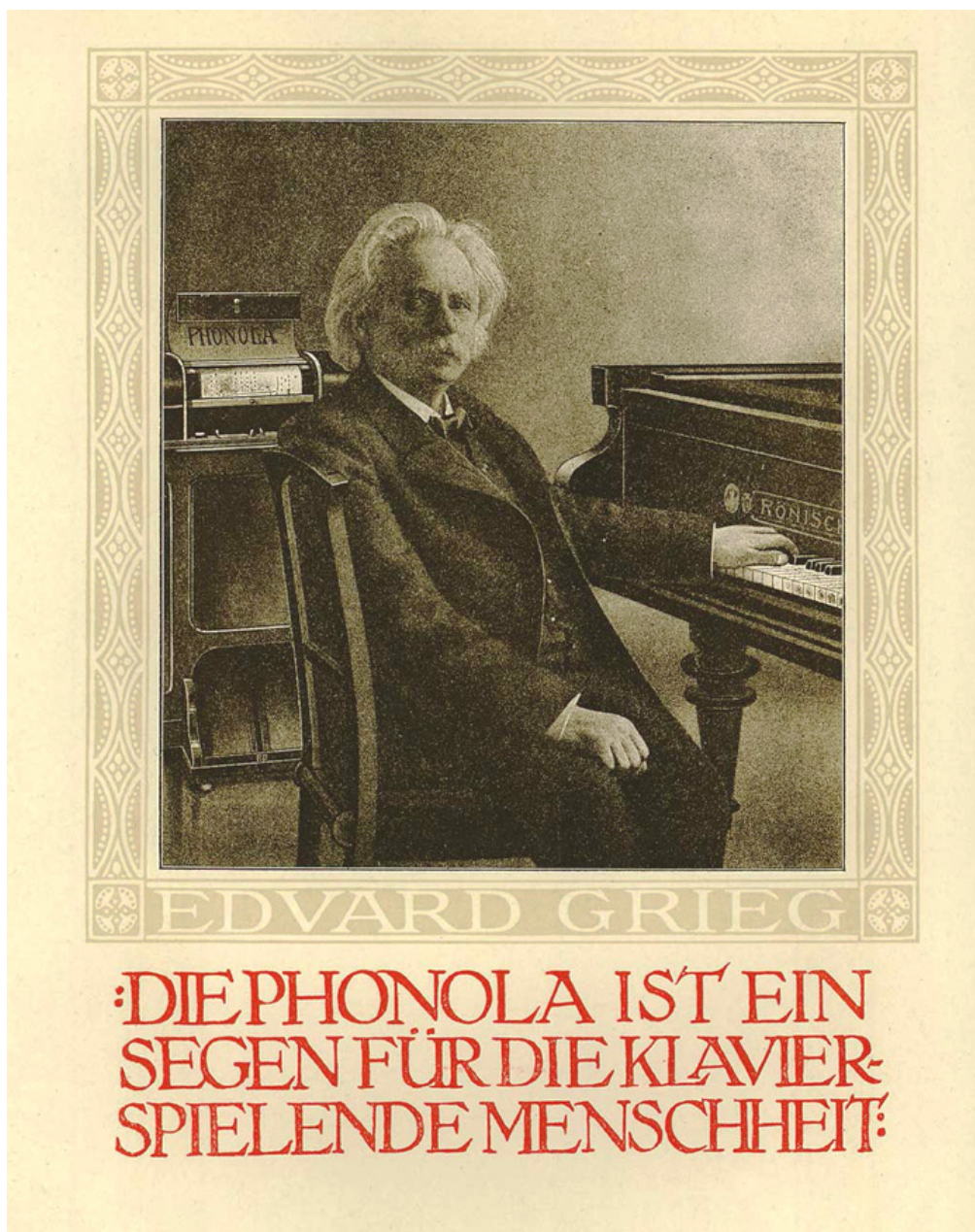


Illustration 1: Grieg advertising for the player piano brand Phonola produced by Hupfeld in Leipzig (1907)

1. Grieg, on 11 April 1906 in his diary, praises Hupfeld's electrical piano for its incredible performance, recording six of his piano pieces during his stay in Leipzig (Grieg 2001, 116). See further comments on Grieg's praise of piano roll recordings, their endorsement, and limitations (Da Costa 2012, 25).

Besides gramophone discs, between 1905 and 1925 tens of thousands of recordings of works for piano rolls were produced for the manufacturers Welte, Hupfeld, Ampico, and Duo Art. Among the recording artists were some of the most prominent virtuosos and composer-performers: Carl Reinecke, Ferruccio Busoni, Alfred Cortot, Edwin Fischer, Walter Gieseking, Alexander Glazunov, Alfred Grünfeld, Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Camille Saint-Saëns, Max Reger, and Arthur Rubinstein.²

So, when Grieg selected the music for his recordings, he was well advised to choose among pieces which could compete with the most popular on the market, such as Chopin's popular Nocturnes, Polonaises, Waltzes, and Etudes, which from early on were recorded by numerous famous pianists.³ Another important criterion for the selection of the recorded music was that the pieces had to be shorter than three minutes, which was the maximum space on the standard 10-inch 78 rpm gramophone disc used in 1903 in Grieg's Paris recordings.

Between 1903 and 1906, Grieg recorded the following pieces, both on gramophone discs and piano rolls (Table 1). As we can see, too, he re-recorded the same pieces for different piano roll labels in 1904 and 1906:

Table 1: Grieg's recordings 1903–1906

Paris, 2 – 3 May 1903: for the Gramophone & Typewriter Company	Bergen, Trolldhaugen, September 1904: for the Aeolian Company 65-note Metrostyle System	Leipzig, April 1906: for the Hupfeld Company and Welte Mignon System
10" inch single-sided discs: Butterfly Op. 43.1 To Spring Op. 43.6 Remembrance Op. 71.7 Piano Sonata in E minor Op.7 Third movement and Finale Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen Op. 65.6 Humoresque Op. 6.2 Norwegian Bridal Procession Op. 19.2	Humoresque Op. 6.1 to 4 Norwegian Bridal Procession Op. 19.2 From the Carnival Op. 19.3 Album Leaf Op. 28.3 Butterfly Op. 43.1 To Spring Op. 43.6 Peer Gynt Suite Op. 46.1 to 4 (Morning Mood, The Death of Aase, Anitra's Dance, In the Hall of the Mountain King) March of the Dwarfs Op. 54.3 Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen Op. 65.6	Erotikon Op. 43.5 Album Leaf Op. 28.1 and 2 Cradle Song Op. 38.1 Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen Op. 65.6 Humoresque Op. 6.2 (Hupfeld) Butterfly Op. 43.1 Norwegian Bridal Procession Op. 19.2 The Little Bird Op. 43.4 (Welte Mignon)

Grieg's recordings on shellac discs and piano rolls were distributed all over the world during the first decades of the new century. Piano rolls began to vanish from the homes of consumers in the 1920s, and the rapidly increasing popularity of the vinyl long-playing record in the early 1950s lead to shellac discs disappearing from the market too. Besides some occasional reissues by private labels, most of the remaining gramophone records on shellac discs and piano rolls became either destroyed or forgotten, stored in attics and cellars of private homes and the archived stocks of recording companies.

In the decades to come, there were some rare occasions, when commercial recording companies made use of the old piano rolls or disc records, such as in 1971, when the German Telefunken label published the first stereo recordings of Welte Mignon piano rolls with famous artists of the turn of the century' as an LP set.⁴ Among the recordings issued on this collection appeared also Grieg's piano roll recording of the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession'

2. In recent years, projects such as the Player Piano Project at Stanford University Library have begun to provide online access to collections, inventories, and catalogues. See the Denis Condon Collection of Reproducing Pianos and Rolls: <https://purl.stanford.edu/fd566zk7403> [accessed 10 June 2020].

3. See the discography by Armand Panigel (1949); see also the Chopin collection at the British Library's sound archive: <https://sounds.bl.uk/classical-music/chopin> [accessed 8 June 2020].

4. Released as a 5 LP Box-set by Telefunken in 1971.

Op. 19, No. 2 from 1906, as the very first track. For decades, it was mostly up to a small and quite dedicated group of amateur collectors to save the historical material from the scrapyard. This was the case with Grieg's recordings, which exist only thanks to collectors such as Arne Dørumsgaard and other sound historians from the US, England, and Germany.⁵

For a long time, there was little interest in the old recordings, most of all due to their poor sound quality. From the 1980s, things began to change, as improved techniques of noise reduction became developed. Moreover, recording companies began to see the commercial value of making their historical 'back catalogues' available again, now on the new CD format. This led to the massive re-issuing of forgotten historical recordings, both by small specialised labels and by commercial newcomers like Naxos.

In the beginning, this revival of historical recordings did not attract much attention. The quite idiosyncratic playing style of the historical performers was at odds with present-day norms and tastes. Historical recordings might be appreciated as interesting historical documents, but aesthetically they were considered outmoded: generations of performers and listeners have grown up with the ideals of clarity, regularity, and accuracy, which have made the improvisatory 'old style' of Romantic virtuosos sound eccentric, and the flexibility of their interpretations have become considered contrary to the ideal of fidelity to the work; 'werktreue' has become the norm for modern, mainstream performance practice, and for the perfectly edited new recordings of great masterworks.

For a long period, it seemed unthinkable that historical recordings capturing the authentic voices of the composers could reach a status equal to the notated score, considered the superior source and point of reference in art music. Moreover, there were several further reasons for why historical recordings were denied the status traditionally given to musical scores, related to the issue of composer's intentions. Who controlled the performance during the recording process, the composer or the engineer? How did acoustic conditions influence the artistic choices (choice of tempo, articulation, dynamics etc.)? How to compensate for the limitations of the early phonographic recording techniques to capture the full range of frequencies and dynamics of the instrument, compared with concert hall acoustics? In some cases, there might occur the issue of the source's provenance: the master cylinders or master discs occasionally got lost or became unavailable, which made it difficult to prove what the original of a shellac copy or a piano roll was. However, in most cases the identity of an original recording was traceable and identifiable by means of the matrix numbers engraved in the master discs or cylinders when recorded for the first time. These matrix numbers were usually reproduced on copies (Liliedahl 2002).

II. Grieg the performer: remastered and reviewed

In 1993, on the occasion of Grieg's 150th anniversary, the time was ripe to relaunch Grieg's historical recordings, in cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of Recorded Sound.⁶ Collected with other historical performances – among them the very first recording ever of a piece of Grieg, the gramophone recording of 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' by Sir Landon

5. With the foundation of the Norwegian Institute of Recorded Sound in 1984 in Stavanger, one of the largest private collections of historical recordings is made available to the public: <https://www.norsklydinstitutt.no> [accessed 10 June 2020].

6. Released by SIMAX in 1992, the 3CD box set contains recordings from 1900 to 1953 by Grieg, Landon Ronald, and Norwegian performers such as Eva Knardahl and Robert Riefing, and internationally renowned pianists such as Wilhelm Backhaus, Walter Gieseking, Percy Grainger, Sergei Rachmaninov, and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli.

Ronald (1873–1938) from 1900 – Grieg’s prevailing historical recordings for the first time were presented complete. Thanks to SIMAX’s effort, the ‘composer’s voice’ eventually re-entered the auditory scene and was brought to the attention of performers, listeners, and critics. The reissue of Grieg’s historical recordings, unavailable for many years, has been celebrated as a major event of the Grieg anniversary in 1993, according to Per Dahl, one of the pioneers of historical sound studies in Norway.⁷ Not surprisingly, the international response was enthusiastic, too, illustrated here by Will Crutchfield’s article in the *New York Times*:

These are dashing, spirit-filled, tremendously rhythmic performances. ... In a way it is more important that Grieg recorded these pieces than that he wrote them. The minuet is a fine mid-century statement in a well-worn form, one among many; ‘Butterfly’ is a delectable dessert, but the kitchen has plenty. If they had been lost, our understanding of Grieg and his time would not suffer perceptibly. But if the records had not survived (and they barely did!), our understanding of how music sounded in the 19th century would be quite significantly diminished. Only six pianists born before 1850 made surviving records, and apart from Brahms (just 59 seconds of whose playing can be heard), the Leipzig-trained Grieg was the only one of them who had any connection to German traditions of performance. (Crutchfield 1993)

This is a quite remarkable statement which calls for a further, critical discussion.⁸

Taking Crutchfield at face value, historical recordings can provoke new questions, and motivate us as performers and listeners to re-visit established interpretive patterns and to re-assess our aesthetic response to the works. To verify Crutchfield’s proposed revolutionary effect of Grieg’s recordings, we have to re-listen to these tracks: are they making us reassess our aesthetic responses and established interpretive patterns? A closer look at one of the pieces Grieg recorded, ‘Norwegian Bridal Procession’ (Brudefølget drar forbi), Op. 19, No. 2, might be a suitable point of departure for further assessments. This piece was published in 1872 by Horneman and Erslev in Copenhagen as part of the *Pictures from Folk Life* (Folkelivsbilder) Op. 19.⁹ This work is, according to Einar Steen Nøkleberg, one of Grieg’s great solo works for piano, a major challenge, a complex, demanding work in the style of Lisztian pianistic bravura, with ‘many technical and interpretational aspects’ to it (Steen Nøkleberg 1997, 88).

Grieg recorded the piece several times between 1903 and 1906, both for the gramophone and the piano roll. The differences between the gramophone recordings and the piano rolls are evident. However, both represent consistent features of Grieg’s playing style.

7. See Dahl’s liner notes in the SIMAX edition.

8. The reception was not unanimously enthusiastic according to Volioti, who interprets responses such as the Norwegian Grieg specialist Einar Steen Nøkleberg’s comment as an expression of a ‘wary attitude’ to let the composer’s recordings ‘inform their interpretation’ (Volioti 2015, 180).

9. This work was composed between 1869 and 1871, and it is most probably based on sketches made by Grieg during his stay in Italy 1869/70. The full original title of the work is *Folkelivsbilder. Humoresker – Aus dem Volksleben* (‘Pictures from Folk-Life. Humoresques’). The dedicatee is the famous Danish composer Johan Peter Emilius Hartmann. Piece No. 1: ‘Fjellslått’ (In the mountains), Piece No. 2, ‘Brudefølget drar forbi’ (Bridal Procession), also published in a version for piano four hands, and piece No. 3 ‘Fra karnevalet’ (From the Carnival). The first edition was published by Horneman & Erslev (S. A. E. Hagen), Copenhagen, January 1872. Pl. no. 831. See the entry in the work catalogue and the commentary in *Grieg Research Guide*, edited by the Grieg Research Centre, University of Bergen: <http://grg.uib.no/works/ef4fe38e-19f7-4f27-9fb8-0048b1cc3325> [accessed 12 June 2020].

Quartett
Bundfjögel dragon folio 7 29 Jul. 71.

1. Marschtempo

pp

mp

molto leggiero e marcato

p

cresc.

BERGEN OFF. BIBLIOTEK, GRIEG-SAMLINGEN

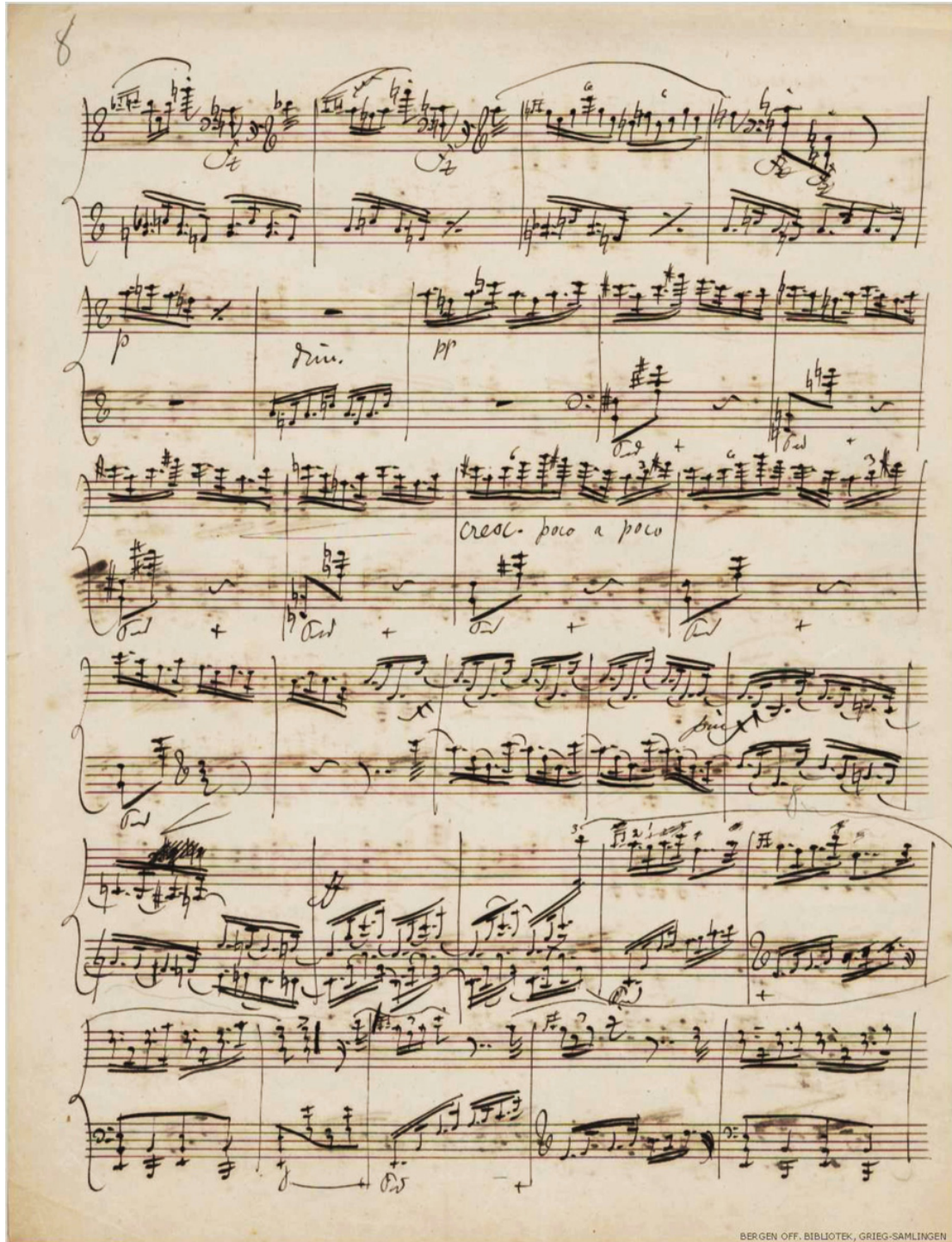


Illustration 2: Grieg's autograph of 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' (page 1 and 2). Grieg archive, Bergen Public Library

III. Grieg and Romantic performance style: the tempo question

In the following section, some of the core features of the so-called Romantic performance style concerned with the most crucial issue, tempo, are presented in terms of their relevance for Grieg's individual performance style. When speaking of musical performance practice, tempo, along with its multifarious manners of modification, is the most significant feature. As we know, Grieg was very critical of contemporary virtuosos, who he supposed to be

insensitive regarding the right tempo and character of his music. Among several of the typical sarcastic comments made by Grieg about performers who were not able to find the tempo and character matching the composer's intentions, you can find the following:

The devil take these virtuosos and their 'I know better.' In the first half of the concerto, she played all too slow in the passages, so that the flight totally flopped. And in the Finale, she took the second theme suddenly extremely slow. This should she be punished for. She even was proud of herself afterwards. But then I told her my opinion and said: 'Yet, Chopin is dead, so he could not hear it!' When Weingartner speaks about 'tempo-rubato-conductors', this applies to performers as well. They all suffer from the virtuoso-and-obnoxiousness disease.¹⁰

The issue that is raised here is how one could justify Grieg's use of apparently shockingly fast tempi in his recorded performances, far beyond what a modern performer might accept as faithful to the score. Important here is to recall that the only indication given in Grieg's published score is the generic Italian tempo expression 'alla marcia'.

Until we were given the evidence of Grieg's recording, it was usual to interpret this instruction in terms of a march-like character, with a quite slow pace, suggesting the ceremonial marching of the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' indicated in the title and the notated rhythm and meter. The performance of Eva Knardahl, a prominent Norwegian post-war piano soloist, might serve as an illustration of the modern 'werktreue' performance.¹¹

Compared to Knardahl, and many others, Grieg's choice of tempo sounds ridiculously fast. Accordingly, Grieg's choice of tempo has provoked some performers, and also scholars such as Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, to assume that there was something wrong with Grieg's metronome, and he therefore chose faster tempi than it was reasonable to expect:

How did his contemporaries judge him as a performer? ... He was well known for his vivid manner of playing, and there were rumours spread about the rhythmic edge he added to the music. If one might assess according to the metronome markings he put to his works, he probably had a tendency towards very fast tempi. One might even wonder if the pace of his metronome was way too slow.¹²

Another explanation might be that the recorded piece has been distorted during the transmission process, or that Grieg had to rush because of the limitations of the recording time on the disc. However, one could plausibly argue that Grieg in general preferred quite fast tempi, as indicated by many of the metronome markings he applied in his scores. Moreover, there is no indication that the SIMAX production made a modification of tempo, considering the fact that the frequency would be distorted significantly when increasing the velocity of the disc.

Quite interesting in the case of the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' is the matter that we have some further written sources which might suggest that Grieg's fast tempo in the recording has an 'authentic' justification. For example, the National library in Oslo keeps

10. 'Men Fanden stå i disse Virtuoser med deres Bessermachen. I 1ste Del af Koncerten fandt hun på at spille langsommere i Passagerne, så Flugten gik i Vadsken, og i Finalen fandt hun pludselig på at tage 2det Thema meget langsommere. Der burde være Straf for Sligt. Og så braskede hun sig deraf, det var det Værste. Men da sagde jeg hende min Mening og føjede til: «Nun, Chopin ist ja tot, er hört es nicht!» Når Weingartner taler om Tempo-rubato-Dirigenter, så gjælder dette i samme Mål de udførende Kunstnere. De lider alle af Virtuoso- eller Vigtighedssygen. ...: The performance of Chopin's concerto derided by Grieg in this letter was given by the famous piano virtuoso Teresa Carreno, see letter from Grieg to August Winding, 13 December 1895 (Benestad 1998, 278).

11. Released by BIS in 1978.

12. 'Hvordan bedømte samtiden han som utøver? ... Han var kjent for sin friske spillemåte, og det gikk frasagn om den rytmiske snert han tilførte musikken. Skal man dømme etter de metronomtall han satte på sine verker, må han ha hat ten tendens til å spille svært hurtig, ja man spør seg i dag uktelig om ikke hans metronome må ha gått aldeles for langsomt!' (Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe 1990, 304).

the posthumously edited autograph manuscript of the Peer Gynt version performed in 1886 in Copenhagen. This also includes the ‘Norwegian Bridal Procession’ in an orchestrated version, arranged by Johan Halvorsen.

Norwegischer Brautzug im Vorüberziehen.
Vor der „Hochzeit auf Hågestad“ zu spielen.

Brudefolget drager forbi.
Foran „Brylluppet på Hågestad.“

Alla marcia. M.M. ♩. 76

Flauto I.
Flauto II e Flauto piccolo.
2 Oboi.
2 Clarinetti in A.
2 Fagotti.
4 Corni in E.
2 Trombe in E.
Tromboni.
Piatto e Triangolo.
Timpani in E. II.
Violini.
Viola.
Violoncello.
Basso.

*Die Orchesterübertragung dieses bekannten Griegschen Klavierstückes (Op. 19 Nr. 2) wurde vom Komponisten an dieser Stelle in die Peer Gynt Musik eingeleitet.
Die Orchestrierung ist von Johan Halvorsen.

Probe für Norwegisch
Zweite Probe für Norwegisch

Edvard Grieg
Eilif Peten

Uebers. von Eilif Peten

Illustration 3: Mus.ms. 6900 Edvard Grieg: “Peer Gynt”, op. 23. [Akt 1]. National Library of Norway

What is interesting here is the metronome marking for the orchestral version: MM 76 bpm.

In Grieg’s gramophone recording, the metronome fluctuates far beyond this tempo within the small range of 85 and 95 bpm. The tempo on the piano roll is even more rushed than this. In contrast, Eva Knardahl consistently follows the general tempo suggested in the score of the orchestrated Peer Gynt version of the piece performed in 1886 in Copenhagen, arranged by Johan Halvorsen: 76–78 bpm.

A separate edition, allegedly ‘revised by the author’ was published in 1885 and shows an even slower metronomic tempo indication.

Norwegian Bridal Procession. 3

NORWEGISCHER BRAUTZUG IM VORÜBERZIEHEN.

Op. 19. No. 2. Edvard Grieg.

New Edition revised by the Author.

Alla marcia. ♩ - 69.

Copyright - Kunkel Bros. 1885.

Illustration 4: ‘Norwegian Bridal Procession’, Kunkel Bros., St. Louis, 1885. New ed. revised by the author. Archive.org

On the other hand, there exists another sketch-like note, an undated autograph of the beginning, which seems to add a more precise idea on Grieg’s preferred tempo and character for the piece. Quite surprisingly (or maybe not), the tempo here is annotated as ‘*alla marcia un poco vivace*’.



Illustration 5: Mus.ms. 1346 Edvard Grieg: [Brudefølget drar forbi, op. 19, nr. 2]. National Library of Norway

Given the general tempo as a referential framework, the rubato is, often in combination with dynamics, the major means to mark structural events, such as the introduction of a new formal section, the recurrence of thematic material, or the appearance of a new harmonic region. Grieg's well-known dislike of exaggerated use of rubato, for which he coined the word 'virtuoso disease', allows us to expect an economic use of this specific performative means. So, what happens in his recordings? When listening to Op. 19 No. 2, it becomes apparent that Grieg almost totally refrains from employing the conventional rubato, besides a slight ritardando at the ending of the piece. What we can hear instead are sudden shifts of tempo, and 'short expressive effects', for example the marking of the entrance of the new, pianissimo episode at bar 43, described by Benedict Taylor as an expressive moment of 'involuntary memory', underpinned by an harmonic non sequitur, a tritonus progression (2017, 133f). Compared to the recording of Landon Ronald from 1900, another example of the contemporary piano style, the difference of their 'rubato style' becomes quite obvious. As a rule, Landon makes much more extensive use of *accelerandi* and *ritardandi*, and exploits a much bigger range of tempo variation, such as when he slows down the pace dramatically preparing the pianissimo episode from bar 40 on, and at bars 44 and 45, by melodic dislocation intensifying the effect even more (Da Costa 2012, 25).¹³

In general, when consulting the written score, one can observe that the annotation of tempo fluctuation and rubato is totally absent. There is not one tempo mark notated throughout the whole piece, besides the general instruction at the beginning. Ironically, in terms of this particular feature, Grieg's performance deviates much less from the notated text than most of the performances of other performers, including the modern ones. At the same time, it is even more fascinating how Grieg, within this steady, almost rubato-free pulse, creates the theatrical image of the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession', indicated only by

13. Da Costa coined the concept of 'metrical rubato' for the wide-spread practice of 'rhythmic alteration of melody notes while essentially preserving the metrical regularity of the accompaniment' (2012, 189).

the dynamic and articulation markings (crescendo from *leggiero ppp* to *ff e marcato*), and described by Daniel Grimley as ‘beginning with hushed accompanimental figuration, and gradually building up to a point of dynamic and registral saturation at its centre, before winding down to a *pianissimo* conclusion’ (2006, 68).

Accordingly, the most fascinating feature of Grieg’s recorded performance is how he created the ‘theatrical’ imagery of the ‘Norwegian Bridal Procession’ almost solely by employing a delicate feeling of melodic swing. He did this by means of micro-fluctuations in melodic articulation, emphasised by dislocated accentuation on weak beats, prolongations of certain tones, and delayed punctuations of the dotted rhythms. The pianist Sigurd Slåttestrekk considered this characteristic ‘structural swing’ the hallmark of Grieg’s performance style in his historical performance project named after another recorded piece by Grieg, the ‘Butterfly’.¹⁴ Clive Brown, in his examinations of the performance practice of Grieg’s model from the Leipzig period, Carl Reinecke, describes rhythmic inequality as one of the main features of Romantic performance practice.¹⁵ So, it might not be surprising that Grieg took over rhythmic irregularity from Reinecke and other teachers and colleagues. At the same time, he seems to have discarded other common features of the ‘Romantic style’, such as melodic dislocation, the arpeggiation of chords, and, as mentioned, the ‘large scale’ *rubato*.¹⁶

IV. Romantic or sentimental? Historical performance and history of mentality

In the following section, the analysis of Grieg’s recorded renditions in technical analytical terms will be elaborated a little further, taking the peculiar notions of rhythmic inequality in Grieg’s performance as paths to a new understanding of the *musical poetry* expressed in Grieg’s ‘Norwegian Bridal Procession’ in particular, and in terms of its relation to the broader cultural-intellectual context for Grieg’s poetic-aesthetic conception. The term ‘poetic music’ has, according to Carl Dahlhaus, been a ‘centerpiece’ of the 19th century’s piano music aesthetics, yet ‘it is one of those categories which historical substance crumbles the moment we try to capture it in a definition’ (1989, 142). In the context of the early 19th century’s aesthetical debates, instrumental music was supposed to emancipate itself from poetry and renounce the ‘doctrine of imitation’ of external nature, such as in musical ‘*Tonmalerei*’. At the same time, the concept evokes its own contradictions in the context of the aesthetics of ‘programme music’, paradigmatically exemplified by Liszt.¹⁷ Accordingly, the concept of the ‘poetic idea’ in music conveys not so much the oppositional position to non-referential ‘absolute music’, but rather the acknowledgement of a musical poetics that ‘draws on pictorial or literary subjects’. According to Dahlhaus, in the case of Liszt, ‘it is not “literarization” per se, which is poetic, but rather the substance that attaches to a work of music when the composer succeeds, as it were, in picking up the thread of a major work of literature’ (Dahlhaus 1989, 150). A more extensive discussion of this historical-aesthetic framework of piano music in the 19th century would exceed the limits of this article. In this case,

14. See the website presenting the outcomes of Slåttestrekk’s research project: http://www.chasingthebutterfly.no/?page_id=842 [accessed 8 June 2020].

15. Reinecke’s historical recordings are discussed in Brown (2016, 8ff).

16. Da Costa observes in his analysis of Grieg’s 1903 recordings of ‘Remembrance’ Op. 71 No. 7, and the Finale of Sonata Op. 7, that Grieg ‘made dislocations much less frequently than many of his contemporaries’ (Da Costa 2012, 92f.).

17. See also the chapter on ‘Aporien der Programmusik’ in Dahlhaus (1988, 365–413).

the aim is simply to point out how this aesthetics of 'poetic' piano music supports the possibility of musical 'literarisation' or 'theatricalisation' as it is realised in the composer's recorded performances.

In 1974, the critic Gerald Abraham characterised Grieg's recorded performance of 'An den Frühling' [To Spring, Op. 43.6] as 'playing like a sentimental schoolgirl' (1974, 3).¹⁸ With a modern listening culture estranged from 19th century culture and mentality, notions of the 'sentimental' or 'eccentric' appear time and again, when 20th century performers and critics addressed Grieg's (or other 19th century virtuosos') style of performance (Philip, 2004; Day, 2002). In the case of Grieg, these notions were also associated with Norwegian folklorism, evoking the nostalgic cliché of Norwegian peasants living a simple, happy life in idyllic sceneries or struggling with trolls and other mythical ('underjordiske') creatures.

However, the notion of 'sentimentality' should not be dismissed entirely, since it might be useful as a category of interpretation of Grieg's Romantic, musical poetry. Sentimentality might be 'prompted by feelings of sadness, tenderness, or nostalgia', to quote the Oxford dictionary. Why this modern-day anxiousness about being sentimental, then? Does Grieg's performance of the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' convey the kind of self-indulgence and artificially exaggerated expression of feelings that would justify Abraham's judgement? How can we judge and dismiss an expression made more than a century ago as irrelevant, when it is now situated in a totally different culture? An open-minded re-listening of Grieg's recordings might have the opposite effect: his recordings enrich the expressive scope of his compositions, far beyond what his written scores could tell us. Grieg's recordings give us modern listeners an impression of a concept of music, which we do not know so much of any more. In Grieg's playing, the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' turns into a poetic fantasy, a retrospective evocation of a major event in the life narrative of the so-called 'ordinary people'. As Grieg emphasised on several occasions, such as in this letter to his friend Frants Beyer, his music is most of all an expression of 'ordinary' life as it is experienced by the individual:

Indeed, I could wish I lived for another 1000 years to study history, and by this turn the gaze towards myself. I do not mean the history of kings, powerful men, or heroes of war we learned about at school, but the history of the little, unnoticed people, and their history and development through history.¹⁹

Even an apparently national romantic virtuoso piece such as the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' should therefore never be trivialised and reduced to the superficial folkloristic cliché. That would be self-indulgent and sentimental, indeed.

18. See also Day 2002, 155.

19. 'Ja, jeg skulde ønske at kunne leve i 1000 år forat studere Historie og derigjennem få Blikket på mig selv. Jeg mener ikke Kongernes og Magtavernes og Hærførernes Historie, som vi er proppet med i Skolerne, men de små ubemærkede Menneskers Historie og Udvikling gjennom Tiderne': Letter from Grieg to Frants Beyer, 25 July 1883 (Beyer 1923, 19).



Illustration 6: Adolph Tidemand: *Brudetoget gjennom skoven* (1873). KODE Bergen Art museums and Composer homes

A traditional, Norwegian wedding was at Grieg's time one of the major experiences not just in a person's life, but also in a family's and a community's life: everybody in the village was included and invited to participate. It is at the same time one of the most cheerful and holy moments in the individual life and memory of the loving pair being married. A wedding is a celebration of life, love, and of social bonds between generations and families, where emotions and moral reason come together in an array of sentiments conveying very much the opposite of sentimentality. One should recall that Grieg, most probably, was inspired by his experience of the carnival during his stay in Italy 1869/70. The carnival, as abundant celebration of life, reverberates, too, in the conception of the *Pictures from Folk Life*, as Grieg himself evokes the poetic imagery of Mediterranean and Norwegian folk life in his programmatic introductory note to the first edition: 'In the carnival, behind the colourful swarm of people, a Norwegian bridal procession emerges in the background' (I karnevalet skimter man nemlig blant den brokede vrimmel i det fjerne et norsk brudedefølge ...).²⁰

As pointed out by Harald Herresthal, the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' in *Pictures from Folk Life* refers to the close relationship of literature, arts, sculpture, architecture, and music in the national romantic era, and Grieg's close relationship to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, whose peasant tale 'Brudeslätten' was published the same year as Grieg's Op. 19 (Bjørnson, 1911; see also Herresthal 1993, 79). In the period from 1856 to 1872, Bjørnson shifted between writing peasant tales and dramatising ancient Nordic sagas. His depiction of folk life was both literary, ethnographic, and comprised sociological investigations into the full range of societal relationships, that is, the mentality of a community, not mere idyllic, pastoral tab-

20. The first edition with the composer's introduction was published by Horneman & Erslev in 1872 (see footnote 10).

leaux. His tales explored the full range of human nature, and the process of civilisation, from savagery to a responsible society (Beyer 1963, 274ff). His 'Brudeslåtten' marks the end of the period of writing tales and sagas. It was conceived as a series of texts to Tidemand's painted images of peasant life, inspired by a piece of music: a *slått* (peasant dance on the fiddle), played for him by Anders Reitan (Beyer 1963, 279). When Grieg started his close music-dramatic relationship with Bjørnson around 1870, he wanted his music to reverberate with the shared ideals: '[t]o depict Norwegian nature, Norwegian folk life, Norwegian history, and Norwegian folk poetry by means of tones appears to me as a goal I could be able to achieve...'²¹

We do not know whether Einar Steen Nøkleberg had Grieg's historical words in mind when publishing his own comments to the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession' in 1992, the same year the SIMAX recordings were released (Steen Nøkleberg 1993, 93). Nevertheless, his interpretive instructions seem to correspond to a remarkable extent with what might be called the poetic idea of this piece, supporting the possibility of a specific, Norwegian allegory of folk life, reverberating in Grieg's recorded performance. According to Steen Nøkleberg, the meaning of the rhythm in this piece is not to evoke the image of well-trained soldiers marching in regular rows. Accordingly, the performer should not follow the notated rhythm literally and strictly during the whole piece. A Norwegian 'alla marcia' must have some 'slingringsmonn', according to Steen Nøkleberg, some 'leeway'. To the author, this specific use of rhythmic irregularities might possibly refer to the poetic idea of the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession', captured as a musical analogy to a defining moment of Norwegian folk life, the wedding, and the motion of the people falling behind during the procession, trying to recover lost time, or rushing too much, slowing down and trying to fall into the regular march rhythm again.

A conclusion of this preliminary inquiry into Grieg's peculiar interpretation of one of his favourite pieces, the 'Norwegian Bridal Procession', might be that Grieg's recordings have a still unexplored potential to shed new light on the history of mentality in the Norway of the national romantic period. Moreover, by listening to Grieg's recordings, one achieves a more immediate access to the musico-poetic images Grieg brought to life for his audiences numerous times during his long career as performer, a practice he revisited himself, when recording selected works from his oeuvre in Paris in 1903 and ultimately in Leipzig in 1906, only one year before he passed away. Maybe he was in a nostalgic mood then, yet certainly not sentimental, at least in the present-day understanding of the term.

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21. 'At male norsk Natur, norsk Folkeliv, norsk Historie og norsk Folkepoesie i Toner, står for mig som det, hvori jeg tror ad kunne udrette Noget...'. Letter from Grieg to Bjørnson, 21 February 1875 (Benestad 1998, 58). Translation by the author.

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