

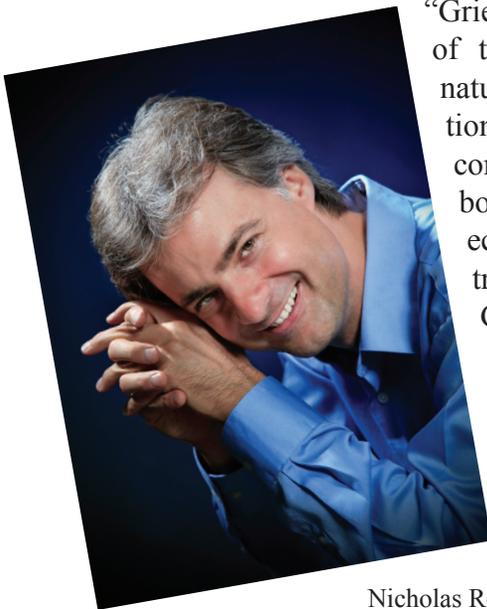
# Edvard Grieg's *Lyric Pieces*

By Kara Cahill, Ph.D.

Music is a realm of consciousness in which a listener connects with a composer through a beam of sound. An altered consciousness and a transcendence through time are the rewards of hearing Grieg's bountiful *Lyric Pieces* for piano. Edvard Grieg (1843 - 1907) balances abundant lyricism with technical virtuosity in the *Lyric Pieces*, a 66-part collection of short vignettes of Norwegian life, a work that spans his career. Nationalism is evident in each of the selections, which are evocative of Norwegian culture and landscape; the *leitmotifs* incorporate folk song melodies to emphasize the uniqueness of Norway.

In a recent interview with gifted pianist and Drake University faculty member Nicholas Roth, DMA, whose recording of the *Complete Lyric Pieces* is reviewed (see column to the right), I had the opportunity to inquire about Grieg's position in the Western musical canon. Roth indicates Grieg is noted for his "brilliant lyricism" as well as being a "nationalist composer."

These small lyric pieces are "ideally suited to the piano" but Grieg, as a composer, had been neglected until Rachmaninov and Rubinstein played the cycle in the early twentieth-century, thereby lending credibility to the pieces and cementing its addition to the repertoire of serious piano students, alongside Czerny's études.



Nicholas Roth

"Grieg's understanding of the piano is most natural;" his "figuration" is "beautifully complicated. There is both simplicity and economy, which is a tremendous gift," to Grieg's writing.

Roth, who has toured the world performing a wide range of solos, now turns to the Bösendorfer



on his left to play a *scherzo*, the notes fill the room as Roth duplicates one of Grieg's signature melodic aspects, the sigh motif, a Norwegian fingerprint which recurs often, particularly in the nocturne parts. He continues with the opening bars of Grieg's 1868 *Piano Concerto in A Minor*, op. 16, the fanfare; then he segues into the closing segment, emphasizing the flattened seventh, (as opposed to the expected sharp) which clearly illustrates Grieg's unique timbre. For Grieg, his core mission was to represent his country, as a musical ambassador. Tapping the rich folklore of Norway, the *Lyric Pieces* are both exotic and mystical.

Taking a closer look at Grieg's op. 54 *Nocturno*, the middle segment consists of a nightingale's call and imitation, with harmonization provided by a half-diminished seventh chord. This chord is first heard as a dominant in the previous section which ended with a G major triad. Thus, the half-diminished seventh chord will be heard as sub-dominant, right from its inception. This style of suggestive harmony recurs often in Grieg's work.

A primary influence on Grieg's early musical development as a child was his mother, Gesine Grieg, who had studied with pedagogue Albert Methfessel in Hamburg. Later, Ferdinand Schediwy, a Czech musician who had arrived in Bergen in 1825, was Grieg's music instructor at the Tanks School, which he attended before leaving for Leipzig in 1858. Schedi-

wy's roles included Cantor and organist at Bergen Cathedral, as well as a composer and choral conductor. The concert life in Bergen was considerable, as evidenced from past issues of the *Bergens Adressecontours Efterretninger* and *Musicalsk Løversdags-Magazin*, two periodicals which appeared bi-weekly and included small pieces for piano or voice; through these two magazines Norwegians were introduced to new German piano music. The composers that were to have such a formative influence on Grieg in Leipzig were undoubtedly known to him before he left Norway.

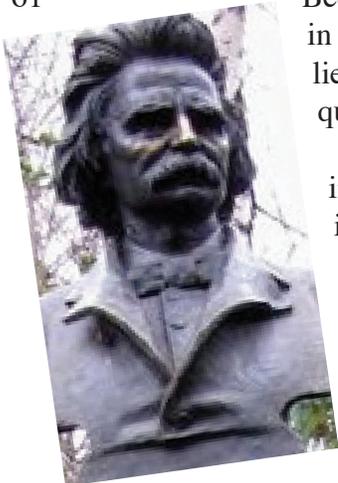
Grieg scholar, Peer Findeisen, suggests, "Grieg as well as Bartok had to endure the conflict between their German education as composers and their native folklore with its own laws, the latter serving them as basis for the acquisition of their musical native tongue," which functions as "the expression of a strife towards cultural independence, which since the time of national romanticism, runs parallel to political movements of independence in Hungary and Norway." Grieg's interpretations of politics and history are a juxtaposition of complexity and sonic spontaneity.

To explore more of Grieg's works, Roth recommends Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite* and chamber works, including the three sonatas for violin and the cello sonata, as opening entrées to the *oeuvre*. They are "always fresh" and in many ways, these works mirror the development process as a composer for Grieg, similar to that of

Beethoven, which can be heard in the changes among the earlier and later sonatas and string quartets.

On the agenda for Roth in the upcoming months is an imminent release of Robert Schumann's *Novelletten* and an early Fall trip to Serbia for the World Piano Conference.

Above: Grieg at the piano  
Left: Grieg statue

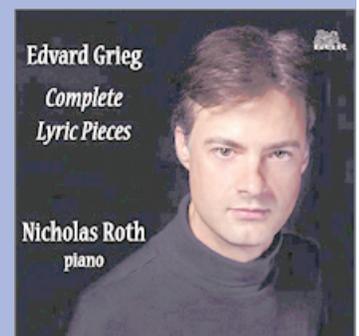


## Review

GRIEG *Lyric Pieces* (complete) • Nicholas Roth (pn) • BLUE GRIFFIN 145 (3 CDs: 174 min.) (1120 Keystone Ave, Lansing MI 48911; 517-646-9117; <www.bluegriffin.com>)

Grieg's cycle of short *Lyric Pieces*, at the hands of über-talented Nicholas Roth, represents a landmark recording. Roth's strength lies in his astute interpretation, combining uncompromising technique with a subtle brand of pianism, offering listeners a gateway to Norway's past, a musical recapture of *temps perdu*. Without flash and sizzle, Roth's sumptuous sonic soundscape is shaped by chronological order, but in today's *mélange* of iPod™-able tracks, having the full selection of 66 pieces at one's fingertips is a playlist-creator's dream. With this mid-priced 3 CD set, listeners will enjoy the full spectrum of Grieg's dances, nocturnes, marches, melodies, impromptus, and songs without having to search for a haunting tune missed by shorter compilations.

Comparatively speaking, Naxos' Steen-Nøkelberg and RCA's Oppitz recordings cover the same ground, and although the Naxos wins on the cost factor, there is an intimacy between pianist and listener on the Roth recording that is not duplicated by either competing selection. Roth maintains a broad dynamic range, which may tax automotive speaker systems without Bose™ enhancements, but his keen articulation and precise ornamentation overcome any qualms about loading the disc into the rolling concert hall. Tonal clarity, particularly on the low notes, makes for a stand-out performance on op. 65 *Bryllupsdag på Trolldhaugen*. Without reservation, I highly recommend the Roth recording. Kara Cahill, Ph.D.



For more information, visit Roth's website at: <www.drake.edu/artsci/Music\_Dept/faculty/roth.html>