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Notes on the Program

March 6, 2017

Johan Halvorsen

Drammen, March 15, 1864—Oslo, December 4, 1935

Concert Caprice on Norwegian Melodies

Halvorsen began his musical studies on the violin. When he was fifteen, he traveled to Christiania (now Oslo) to play with the orchestra for local theater and operetta ensembles. Although he took violin lessons only for short periods of time, he became one of Norway's premiere violin virtuosi. His teachers included Jakob Lindberg [n.d.] in Stockholm and Adolph Brodsky (1851–1929) in Leipzig. In 1889 Halvorsen moved to Helsinki to begin work as a violin professor and chamber musician at the Helsinki Music Institute. Just four years later, he received offers to conduct both a theater and a semi-professional orchestra in Bergen. His success continued with an appointment as the conductor at the new national theater in Christiania in 1899, a post he held for thirty years. During his career, he also directed twenty-five operas. As Halvorsen scholar Øyvind Dybsand writes, “as a composer Halvorsen was mainly self-taught, apart from some lessons in counterpoint from Albert Brecker in Berlin (1893). His compositions develop the national Romantic tradition of his friends Grieg and Svendsen, but his was a distinctive style marked by brilliant orchestration inspired by the French Romantic composers.”

The *Concert Caprice* for two violins is a rustic, folk-inspired work, evoking cheery pastoral settings. The piece opens with one of the violins delightfully imitating a bird's song, and from there the violins engage in a musical dance around one another inspired by the folk dances of Norway. Although no written evidence exists, some scholars believe this piece was inspired by the Hardanger fiddle (*hardingfele* in Norwegian), a folk-violin that some call the national instrument of Norway. The Hardanger has four normal strings as well as four or five understrings, run along the bottom of the fingerboard. The instrument was created for accompanying dance, and so would be quite apropos to the subject matter of the *Caprice*. The numerous double-stops and other playful bits throughout this short work do seem reminiscent of the

hardingfele and we know that Halvorsen both played the instrument and composed for it, notably transcribing seventeen tunes from fiddler Knut Dahle at the request of Edvard Grieg in the early 1900's, which Grieg then turned into his *Slåtter (Peasant Dances)*, Op.72.

Whether or not the *Caprice* was inspired by the Hardanger fiddle, it is an immensely enjoyable and virtuosic duet that audiences deserve to hear more often on concert hall stages.

Edvard Grieg

Bergen, June 15, 1843–Bergen, September 4, 1907

Andante con moto in C minor for Piano Trio

Violin Sonata in C minor, Op. 45

Composer, pianist, and conductor Edvard Grieg had an affinity for lyrical pieces, including songs and piano miniatures. He became close with one of the most famous violinists of the nineteenth century, fellow Norwegian Ole Bull (1810–80). Bull first heard Grieg play piano at Grieg's childhood home in 1858, and he persuaded Grieg's parents to send him to the Leipzig Conservatory. Grieg's studies outside of the school in Leipzig were perhaps more instructional than the school itself. After expressing frustration with some of his early instructors, including Louis Plaidy (1810–74), Grieg began studies with E.F. Wenzel [n.d.], who was a close friend of Robert Schumann (1810–56). As his compositional style developed, Grieg wrote that “the spirit of my native land, which has long found a voice in the traditional songs of its people, is a living presence in all I give forth.” One of Grieg's most celebrated compositional traits was his ability to blend folk songs with the musical language of late Romanticism.

An intensely brooding atmosphere emerges in Grieg's *Andante con moto* (1878). He went through much turmoil in the years preceding the trio's composition; his daughter passed away in 1869 and his parents died within the next few years. According to Grieg, he nearly gave up composing due to his grief. What helped Grieg compose during this mournful time was his homestead—a cottage at Lofthus in Hardanger—where he felt the return of his creative energy. The music of Franz Liszt was also an important influence in reinvigorating and re-inspiring Grieg's compositional focus, and Grieg met Liszt in the 1870s in Rome.

Grieg's Violin Sonata in C minor, Op. 45 is a hallmark of late nineteenth-century harmonic language. As one example, it often centers upon a tonality without stating it directly. This is very similar to harmonic procedures found in musical works by Liszt, Strauss, and

Wagner. In the Violin Sonata, Grieg has a tendency to use relative major and minor key relationships, along with the use of keys that are a third apart. In addition, Grieg creates a sense of longing in the opening of the slow movement by continually using the leading tone—the tone that one would expect to resolve up by a half step—in the melody more frequently than the actual note that would sound as the resolution. The slow movement also features a turbulent contrasting middle section before returning to the lyricism of the opening theme. Other traits throughout the work include the recollection of themes taken from preceding movements, creating a cycle, and the use of “drone” transitions, or the static holding of the same notes of a chord accompanied by an extreme slowing-down of the tempo before contrasting material begins. An ethereal effect emerges at the end of the slow movement in the final presentation of its initial thematic material, two octaves higher than stated at the opening of the movement. The lively third movement recalls the static sections of the slow movement in its open chords at the beginning. An open chord omits the third and uses the first and fifth tones, enhancing Grieg’s ability to move between keys that are a third apart and to regularize modal ambiguities.

Johan Halvorsen

Passacaglia for Violin and Cello (after Handel)

Arranged for violin and cello by the Norwegian violinist, conductor and composer Johan Halvorsen, George Frideric Handel’s Passacaglia is from the Harpsichord Suite No. 7 in G Minor, HWV 432. At the premiere of Halvorsen’s arrangement of the Passacaglia (originally for viola and cello), Halvorsen played the viola. A passacaglia is a dance-inspired piece with a fixed melody and variations on the bass line and was especially popular in the Baroque period. In this case Handel (1685–1759) begins with a four-measure phrase and modifies it in fifteen subsequent variations. In Halvorsen’s arrangement, he rearranges twelve variations of Handel’s original fifteen. Halvorsen uses several colorful timbral effects, such as plucked (*pizzicato*) strumming in the ninth variation to imitate the sound of a guitar, or the *sul ponticello* (on the bridge) indication in the eleventh variation that creates a scratchy sound achieved by the elimination of notes in the overtone series. In the twelfth variation, the bouncing ricochet of the bow enhances the lighthearted and dynamic interaction of the players.

Edvard Grieg

Cello Sonata in A minor, Op.36

Grieg wrote this Cello Sonata in 1882–83, just following the period during which he conducted the Bergen Harmonic Society (1880–82). The work was part of a contract with Peters Publishing in Leipzig. Grieg dedicated the sonata to his brother John, who was a cellist. Grieg himself played piano during one of his last appearances as a performer in 1906 with the renowned cellist Pablo Casals (1876–1973). Like the Violin Sonata on tonight’s program, the Cello Sonata also features a cadenza, this time in the first and the third movement. After a somber and contemplative opening, the first movement blossoms into a lyrical theme characteristic of Grieg’s writing. In the middle movement, Grieg uses one of his own works as source material. The motive derives from a march he originally composed for four cellos in the 1870s that turned into incidental music to accompany a play about King Sigurd Jorsalfar of Norway. Grieg juxtaposes this motive with contrasting material in the middle of the movement before returning to the march at the close. The finale features a brief cadenza and opens into a folk dance, and as historian Michael Parloff notes, “although the sonata has no extra-musical program, it creates a strongly narrative impression and represents Grieg at his most intense and passionate,” creating a fitting close for the impassioned Norwegian narratives on tonight’s program.

— Halvorsen *Caprice* Note by Rachel Ciprotti
— All Other Notes by Kathryn White

Biographical information provided for each composer comes from
The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

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