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Notes on the Program

March 7, 2017

Christian Sinding

Kongsberg, January 11, 1856—Oslo, December 3, 1941

Suite im alten Stil, Op. 10

Noted for being Edvard Grieg's Norwegian Romantic successor, Christian Sinding began his career as a violinist. He took lessons with Gudbrand Bøhn and studied music theory with Norwegian composer and organist L.M. Lindeman (1812–87). By 1874 Sinding was enrolled at the Leipzig Conservatory—founded by Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47) in 1843—where he studied violin with American violinist, conductor and composer Henry Schradieck (1846–1918) and theory and composition with German composer, theorist, and conductor Salomon Jadassohn (1831–1902). Because of Sinding's keen compositional abilities, he eventually turned to composing as his principal focus and abandoned violin performance during his studies at Leipzig. His output was especially prolific in the genre of song; Sinding composed over 250 songs. During his life he spent over forty years in Germany, resulting in a close affiliation with German Romanticism. Sinding's musical language echoes that of late Romanticists Richard Wagner (1813–83), Franz Liszt (1811–86), and Richard Strauss (1864–1949).

The *Suite im alten Stil* (1889) starts with a relentless and breathless pace that continues until the last four bars of the movement, at which point the rhythm slows to close the movement. A clear contrast emerges in the second movement with the introduction of a lyrical and tuneful melody. The piano repeats the mournful character of the melody after the violin introduces it. One wonders what is old in this “suite in the old style.” Incidentally, several late 19th- and 20th-century composers, including Max Reger (1873–1916) and Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), wrote works with the same title. In each case, the modern composers used neoclassical references as inspiration for their works. Neoclassicism in the twentieth century featured a return to the clarity, balance, and order of older forms and genres—particularly those of the Baroque period—while simultaneously using the “new” language of the twentieth century, such as the latest dance styles, jazz music, and machine art.

In Sinding's *Suite im alten Stil*, the older elements that he incorporates are a traditional setup of three movements; the use not only of closely related harmonies to organize each movement but also indeed the same key—A minor—for each movement, with the exception of a Picardy

third at the close of the finale. The Picardy third was a stereotypical musical device that grew in popularity in the Baroque period. In incorporating this idiom the composer changes the tonality of the piece from a minor key to a major key. The inclusion of a cadenza in the finale is also a trademark of the Baroque solo concerto genre. Newer elements include the piano part that often engages as an equal partner with the violin, along with the frequent pedal markings in the score. The addition of pedals to the piano in the nineteenth century was a physical change to the piano itself that broadened the instrument's range of expression, and composers used this expressive marking with increasing frequency in the nineteenth century. Although the tonalities are the same for each movement, suggesting a traditional design in that there are few distant chromatic wanderings, it is somewhat unconventional for a composer to choose such a harmonic setup. Add to that the stops and starts in the textures at the close of the first and last movements, and there is an overarching continuity between all of the movements, possibly suggesting that the work could be interpreted as one long movement. These are just a few of the stylistic updates and new elements that Sinding incorporates into the work.

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

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

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. 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.”

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.

— Notes by Kathryn White

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