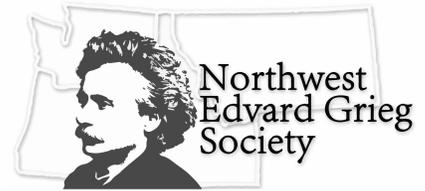


From Grieg to Gershwin
Part I: Songs of Solitude and Isolation

Friday, September 18, 2020



Program

Den særde, Op. 33, No. 3	Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)
Sildig, Op. 17, No. 1	Agathe Backer Grøndahl (1847-1907)
Miniature, Op. 5, No. 2	Alf Hurum (1882-1972)
Der skreg en fugl, Op. 60, No. 4	Grieg
En svane, Op. 25, No. 2	
Ritornell	Ole Olsen (1850-1927)
Nocturne	Steven Luksan (b. 1988)
Aa liva, Op. 42, No. 3	Eyvind Alnæs (1872-1932)
Trudom, Op. 33, No. 11	Grieg

Program Notes

Program Notes and Texts and Translations by Laura Loge

Edvard Grieg often felt the pull of isolation, both the desire to find solitude as well as loneliness that comes with longing to be elsewhere and with loved ones. He found inspiration in that solitude, primarily in his composer's hut, a very small cabin near his home at Trolldhaugen in Bergen, where he was able to focus his thoughts, influenced by nature around him and free from human distraction. But he also experienced the ache associated with being far from home, or at home and far from adventures with friends who brought a whole other kind of inspiration, that of performance and shared artistic experience. His life-long illness kept him from traveling to the United States, despite having been invited on numerous occasions and his desire to travel there, and also kept him from remaining at Trolldhaugen year round, instead seeking warmer climates to soothe his chronic lung condition. His personal experience with illness and loss, especially of his very young daughter, gave him intimate understanding of the struggles of being a mortal man.

This year has given us all an unplanned, and, for many, unwelcomed dive into solitude and isolation, and the very human feelings that accompany it. Like Grieg, we explore and express many of those emotions through music. This program offers us, as performers and audiences, a chance to feel, through songs and piano works by Grieg and his colleagues and those who came after him, that we are not actually alone in our solitude. That although we are separated, we are in this together -- first in the poetry written by a fellow human being and then in the music by a composer who chose that text to set to music, adding another layer of humanity, and finally through the performers, bringing it to you with as many layers of human experience as we can provide.

The songs in *Part I: Songs of Solitude and Isolation* were specifically chosen to delve into the myriad of experiences of solitude, from the longing to be with a loved one, to the isolation of a bird on the water, to taking the time for retrospection on the meaning of life and what is truly important to us in the end. We open and close the program with songs from Grieg's Opus 33 with texts by A. O. Vinje, one of the most poignant poets of his era in Norway. His poems, written in *nyorsk*, or New Norwegian, at a time when it was considered a literary faux pas, explored humanity in its raw, yet fully empathetic, form. "Den særde" (The Sore), in its strophic form, transforms through each verse from the pain we feel from tragedy, to the rebirth that comes from the beauty of the lessons learned in that moment, and the growth we experience as human beings. Agatha Backer-Grøndahl, a colleague and contemporary of Edvard Grieg as well as an accomplished pianist and composer herself, composed many charming and light songs with texts that draw from up-close views of nature. Her song "Sildig" (Late), however, gives us an up-close perspective on a woman's deep-felt desire to be beside the man she loves. Everyone has already gone to bed, yet she cannot sleep. She divulges her deepest thoughts to the sea with the hope that it will reach her lover, far away and possibly unaware of her longing.

Alf Hurum's life brought him from his native Norway to Germany and finally to Honolulu. Through all those travels, the feeling of longing for a far-away life and land in conflict with an ever-learning adventurer worked its way into his compositions. After a stay in Paris, where he encountered impressionism and contemporary French music for the first time and began to question his own musical style, he composed "Miniature," opening and closing with a simple, isolated melody supported only by sparse chords. In the middle, though, an apparition of a dance appears, haltingly, like a memory of another life from long ago.

Grieg's "Der skreg en fugl" (A Bird Shrieked) and "En svane" (A Swan) both present solitary birds in their element. In the former, a single seagull glides over the sea far from land, shrieking at the gray abyss, yet persisting on its path not knowing what lay ahead. Grieg filled this song with blatant impressionistic elements, decades before impressionism became mainstream, perhaps expressing his own persistence of following the bird into a musical unknown. "En Svane" by contrast, brings us far inland, to an isolated, dark lake with a solitary swan gently gliding in silence. Yet in the end, as the swan meets its mortality, it sings. Grieg's music opens and closes with the serenity of the setting and beauty of the bird, yet builds to an intense climax at the moment the bird sings. In that moment of anguish erupts the greatest beauty.

A composer of grand works, including several operas, Ole Olsen's music was influenced by both Richard Wagner and the traditional Sami *joik*, which he helped collect while in the Norwegian military. His "Ritornell," although not exactly composed in a true baroque ritornello style, is short and simple, hinting at an imaginary antiquated style that evokes a time of simplicity and beauty.

"Nocturne," by Steven Luksan, receives its world premiere in this concert. When the stay-at-home orders initially were given, he composed a beautiful cycle of songs for solo voice, knowing that collaboration between a singer and pianist would be extra challenging during this time. He composed "Nocturne" especially for this concert, offering the unaccompanied voice singing an introspective text by Sigbjørn Obstfelder, a Norwegian poet who immigrated to the United States, and often explored his spiritual world through his poetry. In this song, each element of being, from the moths and flowers to the priests and nuns, to the children and swans, find their solitary moment before sleep while the ever-protective mother, Maria, gently keeps watch. Luksan's setting serves as a lullaby into human sleep, all at once a solitary and mutual human experience.

The final two songs bring us back to the greater good of humanity. Eyvind Alnæs' "Aa liva" (To Live) straightforwardly explains the meaning of life: to do better for those around us and to create a heaven on earth. His musical style in this song reflects his abundant symphonic and larger works for organ and chorus, with broad leaping chords and full romantic harmonies supporting the melodic declamation, the importance of the text, and the weight of the message. Less optimistic, yet deeply reflective, Grieg's "Trudom" (Truth) also considers the meaning of life, but the extreme juxtaposition from the viewpoint of God looking at humanity, with His desires for us in contradiction with what we actually do in His name. Grieg opens and closes each verse of this song as a distinctly pious hymn, but the middle, where Vinje's texts delve into the pain and grief humanity inflicts upon itself, his piano accompaniment becomes chromatic, then minimalist, followed by a Bach-like voice leading over the crux of the texts. The message presented is to look deeper into ourselves, acknowledge what we have done, and do better, for ourselves and our fellow human beings.

We hope this concert brings a moment of beauty, introspection, and a small amount of healing, allowing us all to grieve what we have lost yet embrace what we have and will gain from an unprecedented time. Although we often feel alone in our isolation and solitude, as a human unit, we are all experiencing it together. We may have lost the intimate connection of live, in-person performance due to the pandemic, but we can be creative and make something beautiful come out of it, connecting us beyond the immediate physical space surrounding us.

Thank you for joining us on this journey and stay tuned for the next two installments of *From Grieg to Gershwin*.

Part II: Beyond Borders, The Folk Identity

Music for String Quartet by Grieg, Granger, Gershwin & Montgomery with the Seattle-Bergen String Quartet

Part III: Tradition and Contemporary Visions

Superstar Steinway Artist Charlie Abright joins the members of the SBSQ in works by Grieg and Gershwin with special improvisations along the way.

Artist Bios

Soprano **Laura Loge** has been hailed for her "luminous stage presence" and "characterful and versatile voice." Opera roles include Violetta, Musetta, Micaëla, Mother, Ännchen, Lisa, La Fée, Lucy, Rosalinda and others. She has been the soprano soloist in Mozart's *Requiem*, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and *Incidental Music to Egmont*, Fauré's *Requiem*, Grieg's *Songs for Soprano and Orchestra*, Nielsen's *Third Symphony*, Schumann's *Mass and Requiem*, Handel's *Messiah*, and Verdi's *Requiem*. Laura specializes in Nordic art song and chamber music which she performs frequently. She has two albums of Nordic song, including *Breaking the Language Barrier* and *Songs and Piano Music of Edvard Grieg, Op. 33 & 66*. Laura is the Artistic Director of the Mostly Nordic Chamber Music Series at the National Nordic Museum and Founder and President of the Northwest Edvard Grieg Society.

Composer and pianist **Steven Luksanis** is a music educator and collaborative pianist making music in Seattle, WA. He is an accompanist at Seattle Opera, the pianist for the French Choir at Alliance Française de Seattle, and is active with the Northwest Edvard Grieg Society. Steven is a piano instructor and the staff accompanist at Music Center of the Northwest. Steven's original compositions have been performed throughout the USA, as well as in Canada, Europe, and Asia. Steven received a Master's Degree in Music Composition from the University of British Columbia and degrees in Music and Norwegian Language from the University of Washington.

This program is made possible thanks to the following organizations and individuals:

- The Northwest Edvard Grieg Society
- The Seattle-Bergen Sister City Association
- The National Nordic Museum
- The Seattle Channel
- The Seattle Office of Arts and Culture smART ventures Grant
- The Norwegian American newspaper
- Steinway & Sons
- The Swedish Club
- Leiren Designs & Norse Mask
- Leif Eie
- Lori Ann ReinHall