

**Chandos**

**CHAN 8524**

# GRIEG

**ULSTER ORCHESTRA**  
Leader, Richard Howarth  
conducted by  
**VERNON HANDLEY**

## **PEER GYNT, Suite No.1, Op.46 (14:28)**

- 1. Morning (4:09)
- 2. Death of Åse (4:05)
- 3. Anitra's Dance (3:43)
- 4. In the Hall of the Mountain King (2:17)

## **2 ELEGIAC MELODIES Op.34 (7:19)**

- 1. The Wounded Heart (2:55)
- 2. The Last Spring (4:20)

## **SIGURD JORSALFAR, Suite Op.56 (16:41)**

- 1. Prelude: In the King's Hall (3:37)
- 2. Intermezzo: Borghild's Dream (3:50)
- 3. Homage March (9:07)

## **4 SYMPHONIC DANCES, Op.64 (30:57)**

- 1. Allegro moderato e marcato (7:24)
- 2. Allegretto grazioso (6:09)
- 3. Allegro giocoso (5:45)
- 4. Andante (11:29)

DDD

TT = 69:41

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**Chandos**  
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# GRIEG

Peer Gynt, Suite No.1  
Sigurd Jorsalfar  
Symphonic Dances  
Two Elegiac Melodies

**ULSTER ORCHESTRA**  
conducted by  
**VERNON HANDLEY**



## Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Edvard Hagerup Grieg is at once one of the most popular composers in terms of audience affection and one of the most misunderstood in terms of his musical personality. Only in his native Norway is his large output properly and regularly heard; elsewhere the Piano Concerto, some of the music for *Peer Gynt* and a handful of other pieces are turned out with such persistence that familiarity has bred routine acceptance from music lovers. His Symphony in C minor, which Grieg himself withdrew from public performance during his lifetime, has now found a place in concert programmes, and his only other large-scale formal works are the three Violin Sonatas and the Cello Sonata. Yet his music for the theatre and his works inspired by Norwegian folk music are filled with powerful nationalism by a composer who was in the forefront of his country's patriots.

During Grieg's lifetime Norwegian literature was flowering and Norway's two greatest dramatists, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910) were contemporaries with whom Grieg collaborated. The young, enthusiastic Grieg and Bjørnson's cousin, Rikard Nordraak, became deeply nationalistic, and Grieg was devastated when Nordraak died of consumption in 1866 at the age of twenty-three in Berlin. This left him with the feeling of having to do the national work of two men. Fortunately for Grieg he was already deeply in love with his cousin, Nina Hagerup, whom he married in 1867, and her voice, which some compared with that of the 'Swedish Nightingale', Jenny Lind, together with her character, were to sustain and inspire him for a lifetime.

## PEER GYNT Suite No.1 Op.46

In 1874 an enlightened Norwegian Government gave the 31-year-old Grieg an annuity of 1,600 kroner per annum, which gave him the freedom to devote himself solely to composition. This very practical honour came at just the right time, because in January of that year Grieg had received a letter from Henrik Ibsen, informing the composer that *Peer Gynt*, which was already in its third

edition as a literary work, was being recast by its author for the stage, and asking Grieg to provide the incidental music. The co-operation produced a theatrical masterpiece with some of the most inspired music ever composed. It was first produced on 24 February 1876, six months before the first Wagner Festival at Bayreuth.

Ibsen wrote his ideas for the stage project to Grieg: 'The first act is to be kept in its present form, except for a few cuts in the dialogue. I want *Peer Gynt*'s monologue (Act 1, scene 2, opening) treated either 'as melodrama or in part as recitative. The wedding scene is to be made more effective in the text, with the help of ballet. A dance-tune should be composed for this, and should continue in a subdued manner until the end of the act.' Ibsen proceeded to outline his requirements for the other four acts, the last of which he said 'counts in performance as the fourth or as an epilogue'. Grieg, who described *Peer Gynt* as a great literary work but 'the most unmusical of all subjects', thought that all Ibsen wanted from him was 'a few fragments'. While pleased to be asked, he had trouble summoning up real enthusiasm.

He spent the second half of 1874 and much of 1875 on the music, writing to Frants Beyer in August 1874: '*Peer Gynt* progresses very slowly, and there is no chance of it being finished by the autumn. It is a very unmanageable subject, except in a few places, as when Solveig sings; I have actually finished that already. I have also done work on the Hall of the Old Man of the Dovre, and I truly cannot bear to listen to it, it is so full of cow-turds, Norse-Norsehood, and Be-to-thyself-enoughness! But I am being careful to allow the irony to come through, especially where *Peer Gynt* is finally forced to say, against his will, "May the cat scratch me, if both dancing and playing were not very nice indeed".'

Neither author nor composer were present in the Christiania theatre when the play was premiered, Ibsen being away from Norway and Grieg at home in Bergen. Nevertheless, the production was a great success and had thirty-seven performances before a fire destroyed both scenery and costumes. In 1885 it was revived in Copenhagen and again in 1892 and 1902 in Christiania, on the first performance of which the title role was taken by Bjørn Bjørnson, who was then

Ibsen's son-in-law. For each of these revivals Grieg was asked to add to the incidental music, which was finally published by Peters in 1908 with twenty-three items. When Ibsen eventually saw his play on the stage, in 1892, he stated that Grieg's music was a major factor in its success.

After the Copenhagen revival Grieg assembled four of the more extended numbers as the *Peer Gynt Suite No.1*, putting together a Second Suite in 1891. This Suite was soon taking his name around the world, bringing Grieg both fame and financial advantages. It also brought unexpected praise from the great Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick, the friend and champion of Brahms, whose attacks on Wagner caused that composer to ridicule him as the stick-in-the-mud Beckmesser in *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*.

By this time Grieg was more assured as his revised score for the 1885 Copenhagen revival showed. This production was worthy of Hanslick's attention, although the Suite was what the critic praised so highly. Grieg wrote to Max Abraham in February 1886: '*Peer Gynt* is not a drama but a dramatic poem similar to Goethe's *Faust*. In the production here more than a third has been cut and a great deal of the ballet substituted, so that Ibsen's noble conception has become a kind of fairy-tale 'Round the World in Eighty Days', or something of the kind. But the public fills the theatre, and is pleased with a work which it does not in the least understand.'

Hanslick went even better in 1891, writing that 'perhaps in a few years Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* will live only through Grieg's music, which to my taste has more poetry and artistic intelligence than the whole five-act monstrosity of Ibsen.' His summing up of the four movements of the Suite is worth quoting: '1. The Prelude to the fourth act. Morning-mood: a pleasing idyll with dancing lights of flute-trills on the gentle uniform wave-movement. 2. The dainty dance of the slender Bedouin's daughter, Anitra; charming in invention, and orchestrated with magic art. 3. A sorrowful quiet adagio in A minor, on the death of Ase, Peer Gynt's mother; the simple, song-like melody made more impressive by some felicitous harmonies. Finally, 4. The immensely characteristic, clumsily baroque dance of the dwarfs in the hall of the Troll Princess.'

## TWO ELEGIAC MELODIES Op.34

These are arrangements made by Grieg in 1881 of two of his settings of poems by Åsmund Vinje, being the third and second of the first set in his Opus 33, which consisted of twelve songs in Book 1 and six songs in Book 2, published that year. Both songs had been composed in 1880.

Vinje came from a peasant background, but had struggled to make something of himself as both poet and journalist, although he died in distressing circumstances in 1870. His finest poems were published in his journal *Dølen*, meaning *The Dalesman*, and were written in what Vinje called 'the old tongue', which had been studied and set down in 1848 by Ivar Åsen as *landsmål*, being a rural language. Norwegian intellectuals, including Ibsen, disliked this language and it is even ridiculed in *Peer Gynt*, but Grieg was now nationalistically inspired to study folk music, and these poems brought immediate response from him with their rugged individualistic humanity.

That Grieg immediately realised the string potential for these two melodies underlines their importance to him, and they were to play an important role in taking his music outside Scandinavia. Grieg personally conducted them at important concerts in England and Germany.

## SIGURD JORSALFAR, Suite Op.56

While Grieg's relationship with Ibsen was essentially professional, his appreciation of Norway's other great dramatist, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, was enhanced by a deep friendship. This was to suffer a fifteen year rift because the temperamental Bjørnson took umbrage when Grieg started work on *Peer Gynt*, refusing to believe that the project was not an operatic one. Bjørnson and Grieg had already begun collaborating on an operatic subject, *Olav Trygvason*, three scenes of which had been set before *Peer Gynt* was taken up. Now Bjørnson refused to provide Grieg with any more of the text, and Grieg never composed his opera. The two eventually came together again when Grieg set the temple scenes as a choral cantata in 1889.



It was an earlier collaboration which had given Bjørnson the idea that he could provide Grieg with a libretto, although Grieg's settings of his poems are supreme examples of his genius as a writer of songs, causing Bjørnson to describe the composer as 'the great tone poet'.

On a larger scale, Bjørnson wrote a number of historical dramas, often based on passages from the Norse saga *Heimskringla*. One of these was *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, meaning *Sigurd the Crusader*, which was performed in Christiania on 17 May 1872, Norway's Constitution Day. For this production Grieg provided two songs for male singer and chorus and three orchestral interludes, which he revised and reorchestrated twenty years later, in 1892, when it was published as Opus 56.

The original scoring for the first movement of the Suite was based on a piece for violin and piano, a Gavotte with another piece which became the Minuet in Grieg's First Violin Sonata. In the *Sigurd Jorsalfar* incidental music Grieg turned the gavotte into a march, which accompanied the first scene of the Second Act, where the merits of two rival kings are treated to the old Viking custom of being ceremoniously enumerated and compared, as a Matching Game.

The Intermezzo comes from Act 1, being the prelude to the scene where the heroine, Borghild, one of the main causes of rivalry between the two kings, wakes from a troubled dream.

Finally, the great Homage March from Act 3, was greatly extended and enhanced by Grieg for the concert hall. It opens with an unusual cello quartet, melodically close to the slow movement of Grieg's Cello Sonata, composed in 1882-3. The March is further dignified by the inclusion of a fine trio section, providing an expressive central part in a stirring March in the grand manner.

## **SYMPHONIC DANCES Op.64**

These dances exist as both an orchestral set and a set for piano duet; both date from 1898 and are equally effective and well composed. They may have been written for the Bergen Festival, the first of which was held that year. Grieg was one of the originators of this event, which remains a major European Festival today.

They are among the finest examples of Grieg's use of folk idioms in a highly individual way. When played as a set they become a four-movement work, rhapsodic in character, full of charm and originality.

Many different folk idioms are used, including the *halling* and *springdans*, which is especially evident in the opening of the third dance. Grieg obviously relished the chance to work with a large orchestra, which included a harp, trombones and tuba. His delight in changing harmonies shows a strong feeling for colour and a mastery of orchestral scoring.

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**Vernon Handley** is widely respected as one of Britain's leading conductors. Born in London, he studied English at Balliol College, Oxford, before going on to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

His flair and energy in both the concert hall and recording studio have highlighted his contribution to music in Britain, and the enormous success of his recordings with the London Philharmonic prompted the orchestra to create an appointment especially for him, that of Associate Conductor. At the beginning of the 1985/86 season he took up the position of Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Ulster Orchestra and also of the Malmö Symphony Orchestra. He has worked with many foreign orchestras including the Stockholm Philharmonic, the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Amsterdam Philharmonic.

Vernon Handley has gained particular esteem for his championship of British music, and in 1974 the Composers' Guild of Great Britain named him Conductor of the Year. His recordings for Chandos include music by Bax, Bliss, Bridge, Delius, Dvořák and Vaughan Williams.

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GRIEG: SYMPHONIC DANCES — Ulster Orch / Handley

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