

# Modernism and Norwegian Musical Style: The Politics of Identity in Grieg's *Norwegian Peasant Dances*, Op. 72 \*

Daniel Grimley

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Edvard Grieg's perceived status as the founding father of Norwegian music has defined and limited his reception both at home and abroad. Popularly understood as a musician of 'local' significance working on the edge of the mainstream Austro-German tradition, the historical importance of his work has remained under-appreciated.<sup>1</sup> His work lies tantalisingly outside the sweep of the 'grand narratives', such as 'the emancipation of the dissonance' or 'the birth of modernism', that have conventionally shaped our view of late-nineteenth-century musical history.<sup>2</sup> Though Grieg's treatment of folk material is acknowledged as innovative, his arrangements of Hardanger Fiddle music, the *Slåtter* Op. 72, have been consistently overshadowed by the work of later composers such as Bartók.<sup>3</sup> In the context of the dialectical views of musical progress advanced by critics such as Adorno, Grieg's pursuit of an apparently miniaturist idiom seems cosy or anachronistic. Grieg's perceived inability to produce anything significant in the way of large-scale symphonic works, the success of the Piano Concerto notwithstanding, has inevitably been read as a sign of aesthetic failure.<sup>4</sup>

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\* This paper is drawn from a proposed longer study of Grieg's treatment of Norwegian folk music in the context of musical modernism. I am grateful to Dr W. Dean Sutcliffe for his comments on this work.

<sup>1</sup> Documentary evidence suggests that Grieg was already aware of this trend towards the end of his life. In a letter to the German musicologist Walther Niemann, following the publication of Niemann's important survey of Nordic music, *Die Musik Skandinaviens* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1906), he wrote: 'How many times have I had to suffer the cheap banality "Norwegian, er norwegert" and so on, directed as a complaint against my work. No one would permit himself to use the expression "Deutschtum, Deutscherei," as a term of abuse towards any German composer. And yet it is a fact that German music critics have remained distrustful and unsympathetic, not only towards Norwegian, but also towards *all* national movements in the art of music outside Germany.' (Edvard Grieg, letter to Walther Niemann, 6 August 1906; quoted in David Monrad-Johansen, *Edvard Grieg*, trans. M. Robertson (New York: Tudor Press, 1945) 376.

<sup>2</sup> The brief discussion of Grieg's music in Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 302–11, is a good example of this pattern of reception.

<sup>3</sup> Bartók probably became familiar with the *Slåtter* during his stay in Paris, 1910. For a discussion of the relationship between Op. 72 and Bartók's work, see Dag Schelderup-Ebbe, 'Béla Bartók's forhold til Edvard Grieg og Norge,' *Norsk musiktidskrift* 1 (1993): 4–9.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Kathleen Dale's apologia in *Grieg: a Symposium*, ed. Gerald Abraham (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1948) 45, which seeks to draw a direct link between the composer's physiognomy and his creative compositional work: 'That Grieg wrote so few long works and so many short works is due to the fact that he was essentially a lyricist. Never robust in health, he lacked the necessary staying power to

In spite of the decentralising rhetoric of much recent musicology, Grieg has remained on the edge of mainstream academic musical debate. His work is neither 'exotic' enough to attract radical interdisciplinary scholarship, nor a sufficiently central part of the Western canon to demand rescue from structuralist analysis or historical positivism. Grieg's fate as one of Western music's 'minor masters' seems to have been assured.<sup>5</sup> Though Grieg's peripheralised critical position within our received model of musical history is well established, the precise nature of his music's 'Norwegianness' is less clearly understood. As Carl Dahlhaus has argued, for example,

[I]t is no easy matter to see a definite distinction between the combination of double bourdon, Lydian fourth, and chromatic colouration in the Jumping Dance of Grieg's purportedly *Scandinavian Nordic Dances and Folk Tunes* Op. 17 (1870), and the similar stereotype combination used as an orientalism in the dance 'L'Almée from Bizet's *Djamileh*. In neither case can the local colour be localised in purely musical terms without a scenic or linguistic tag.<sup>6</sup>

The evocation of folk music as a trace of national identity in Western Art music, Dahlhaus suggests, constitutes a form of exoticism in which the sense of distance or alienation is more important than the shade of local colour itself. Nationalism in late-nineteenth-century music, he concludes, is both assimilative and exclusive. Within common late-nineteenth-century musical practice, nationalism is more concerned with the expression of difference than of specific cultural or regional identity.

The notion that the regional identity of Grieg's dance is defined primarily by its title, as opposed to its musical material, is difficult to challenge. The melodies in Grieg's Op. 17 set are taken from Ludvig Matthias Lindemann's pioneering collection of folk tunes, *Ældre og nyere Norske Fjeldmelodier* (1858–63). In the first printed edition of Op. 17, dedicated to the internationally renowned Bergen fiddler Ole Bull, the opening dance is identified as a *Springlåt* from the village of Gol in Hallingdal. That does not, however, entirely support Dahlhaus's orientalist reading. Bizet's dance forms part of a large-scale work, so that its 'ethnicism' is framed within the theatrical space of an opéra-comique. Grieg's dance, by contrast, opens a set of pieces that consists entirely of such 'ethnic' material. Furthermore, the dance sequence in *Djamileh* is scored for chorus, soloists and symphony orchestra with a range of 'exotic' percussion, the semiotics of which are well established in nineteenth-century musical practice. The semiotics of the solo piano in Grieg's Op. 17 seem less securely defined, even if the domestic salon, the natural performing space for Grieg's work, is a no less colonised environment than the bourgeois milieu of the Parisian opera house.

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wrestle with the larger problems of form and balance.' This was, to some extent, a peripheralist discourse in which Grieg himself took an active part. In a letter dated 13 August 1877 to Gottfred Matthison-Hansen, he wrote: 'Nothing I do pleases me, and even if I seem to have ideas there is neither fluency nor form when I proceed to the working out of anything on a large-scale ... it is due to the lack of practice, and also to lack of technique, because I never managed to get beyond composing by fits and starts. But there must be an end of that now. I want to battle through the larger forms, cost what it will.' Quoted in John Horton, *Edvard Grieg* (London: Dent, 1974) 55.

<sup>5</sup> Sutcliffe makes precisely this observation at the opening of his penetrative analysis of *Klokkeklang*, Op. 54/6: 'as a carrier of the strain of nationalism it may be that [Grieg] has been marginalized so that such a piece [as Op. 54/6] is more easily regarded as interesting rather than significant. As a *petit maître* his work is unlikely to be privileged enough to demand weighty readings.' W. Dean Sutcliffe, 'Grieg's Fifth: the Linguistic battleground of *Klokkeklang*,' *Musical Quarterly* 80 (1996): 162.

<sup>6</sup> Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* 306.

More importantly, the design of Op. 17/1 points to a systematisation that is radically different from Bizet's work: the metrical conflict in the second strophe, for example, intensifies the linear part movement that generates the diatonic circle-of-fifths pattern in bars 21–24 (see Ex. 1). Likewise, the fourth strophe synthesises the different registral and rhythmic parameters of the dance so that the whole piece can be understood as an end-oriented structure premised as much in physical as thematic or harmonic terms. Dahlhaus's claim that the local origins of either dance are of little aesthetic or historical relevance is justifiable. The evidence of structuralist thought that Op. 17/1 presents, however, is arguably what constitutes the abstract Scandinavian musical identity that Dahlhaus seeks to deconstruct. The 'authentic' musical identity of Op. 17/1 has less to do with pictorialism than with a mode of discourse or compositional frame of mind.

**Example 1.** Grieg, 'Springdans,' 25 Norwegian Folk-Songs and Dances, Op. 17/1, bb. 21–24.

The aesthetic status of the *Slåtter*, Op. 72 is more immediately problematic. The melodies in Grieg's collection were originally transcribed by the composer Johan Halvorsen from the playing of Knut Dahle, a fiddler from Telemark in southern Norway.<sup>7</sup> The most important difference between the Hardanger fiddle and the ordinary violin, namely the set of sympathetic strings strung through the bridge and underneath the fingerboard, cannot be recreated on the modern piano. Furthermore, many of the *Slåtter* were associated with particular localities, players, or historical events. Grieg's correspondence shows that he was keen to record such details, but to a twenty-first century ethnomusicologist the level of documentation provided in the final published collection is unacceptably thin. Similarly, the fixed notation eclipses the improvisatory nature of the fiddle repertoire. Many of the *Slåtter* consist of complex chains of melodic ideas that were transmitted aurally and used in a particular performative context.<sup>8</sup> Grieg's avoidance of strict repetition in favour of a continual redecoration of tiny melodic figures evokes such patterns of invention but does not constitute 'improvisation' in the sense understood by the fiddlers themselves, for whom the notion of a closed musical work belongs in the concert hall.

Though Grieg was sensitive to the constructed nature of his musical syntax in the *Slåtter*, he wrote that his intention was to get away from 'oysters and caviar' and get out the 'rye-

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller account of the initially troubled compositional history of the *Slåtter*, see Finn Benestad and Dag Schelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: the Man and the Artist*, trans. William Halvorsen and Leland B. Sateren (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1988) 363–70, as well as their commentary in the Critical Edition. Some of Knut Dahle's *slåtter* were recorded on wax cylinders in 1910–12, and the surviving fragments have been reissued on CD (Oslo: Musikk-Husets Forlag, MH 2642-CD, 1993). The recordings are one of the most important source documents pertaining to Op. 72.

<sup>8</sup> See the useful discussion in Pandora Hopkins, *Aural Thinking in Norway: Performance and Communication with the Hardingfele* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986).

bread and butter'.<sup>9</sup> Arguably, the *Slåtter's* authenticity is as much discursive as ethnic.<sup>10</sup> Treating the *Slåtter* as a 'pure' internally-organised work, however, raises a further set of interpretative issues. It is unclear which audience Grieg's 'rye-bread and butter' was intended for precisely. The most striking aspect of the *Slåtter* is their uncompromising physicality. The second *slåt*, 'Jon Vestafæs Springdans' ('Jon Vestafæ's Leaping Dance'), for example, could be read as a physical narrative, winding itself up in cumulative repetitions towards the leaping chords at the close. The practical difficulties of Op. 72 are not so much matters of velocity, tone or voicing, as of strength and rhythmic precision. A more problematic characteristic of the *Slåtter* is their extreme diatonicism. In a letter to Halvorsen dated 3 February 1900, Grieg wrote, 'my thoughts are only about Norway and Norwegians, about all our youthful pugnacity up there. Yes, it is like the music of strong triads compared to all the sugary seventh chords down here.'<sup>11</sup> The *Slåtter* are so saturated in 'strong triads', however, that if they performed as a complete set the effect can be over-bright.

The *Slåtter* are equally unsuited to the small-scale domestic use for which the *Lyric Pieces* were intended. The type of material presented in Op. 72 is of a more brutal kind than that in Op. 17 so, as Kleiberg concludes, it is hard to see how the *Slåtter* can ever have been intended as a 'popular' work.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the *Slåtter* challenge our conventional image of Grieg as a safe, easily compartmentalised figure. In this sense, they constitute not so much a starting-point, an anticipation of the work of more assimilable twentieth-century figures such as Bartók or Debussy, as the conclusion of a process that Grieg himself had begun in his earlier folk-song arrangements. Herein lies their centrality. The *Slåtter* require us to read against the grain of received models of musical development, since they pursue a structuralist discourse that is more avant-garde modernist than localised or conservative. The fact that their musical language seems ill-attuned to the rhetoric of some, though not all, Grieg scholarship, only accounts for their continued critical neglect.

The eleventh *slåt*, 'Knut Luråsens halling II,' is typical of the kind of specialised compositional procedures Grieg developed in Op. 72 (see Ex. 2). Op. 72/11 articulates two large-scale formal shapes. The first is the dynamic, metrical and registral arch that reaches its point of maximum tension in the centre of the dance, bars 49–53. The second is the strophic structure, articulated by theme and tempo, that divides the piece at bars 24 and 54 respectively. This formal dualism is echoed by a metrical conflict that constitutes the work's fundamental structural paradigm.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Edvard Grieg, letter to Gerhard Schelderup, 24 November 1905. Quoted in Benestad and Schelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg* 172.

<sup>10</sup> This is the conclusion of Kleiberg, who argues at the end of an important article, that '[Grieg] does not, then, use the surface details of folk music as a kind of exotic spice to an otherwise conventional German/Romantic musical idiom. On the contrary, it is the basic structures of the original material which form the starting-point for his piano versions.' Ståle Kleiberg, 'Grieg's *Slåtter*, Op. 72: Change of Musical Style or New Concept of National Identity?' *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 121 (1996): 57.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Benestad and Schelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg* 331.

<sup>12</sup> 'The folk music is, now, to a far greater extent, treated on its own terms. Should this result in music which is rich in dissonance and less accessible, so be it. It is perhaps more important to create an authentic art than an art which may function as a national symbol.' Kleiberg, 'Grieg's *Slåtter*' 57.

<sup>13</sup> Percy Grainger's two-piano arrangement of Op. 72/11 (ms MG 4/13 in the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne, dated 21 October 1921) is a fascinating case study in the reception of Grieg's work. Grainger characteristically thickens the texture by doubling individual lines, adding inner parts (in bar 32, for instance), and emphasising changes of articulation such as the sudden shift to staccato at bar 18. One of the most striking effects of his arrangement is to strengthen the metrical conflict that runs throughout the dance, though it is unlikely that Grainger understood the dance from the same structuralist perspective as my analysis. I am grateful to the curators of the Museum for their assistance during my visit to Melbourne.

**Example 2.** Grieg, 'Knut Luråsens halling II,' *Slåtter*, Op. 72/11. Reproduced by kind permission of Peters Edition Limited, London.

Knut Luråsens Halling II  
1st Strophe

Allegretto tranquillo ♩ = 78

*p* RH: 3/4  
LH: 6/8 (bass)

5 *f* *p*

9 *p*

13 *fz* *3p*

acceleration

17 *cresc.* *f scherzando* *fp*

21 *f* *dim.* *p dolce*

24 **2nd Strophe** *tranquillo*

26 *cresc. molto* *ff* *fp*

29 *p* *molto* *ff* *fp* *pp* RH: 3/4 LH: 2/4

33 *cresc.* *cresc. sempre*

37 *ben ten.*  $\frac{3}{4}$  *f* *ff*

41 'tranquil window'  $\frac{3}{4}$  *p tranquillo* *senza Ped.* + 8

45  $\frac{3}{4}$  *f animato* *più f* LH:  $\frac{2}{4}$  *Ped.*

49 *ff feroce* *Ped.*

|| 3rd Strophe

53 *a tempo tranquillo* *dim. e rit.* *p dolce* 3 5 4 2 353 2 1 2 1 1 2 1 3 8

Detailed description: This page of a musical score for piano contains five systems of music. The first system (measures 37-40) features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It includes markings for 'ben ten.' (ritardando), dynamics of *f* and *ff*, and a 3/4 time signature. The second system (measures 41-44) is marked 'p tranquillo' and 'senza Ped.', with a 3/4 time signature and a +8 measure rest. The third system (measures 45-48) is marked 'f animato' and 'più f', with a 3/4 time signature and a left-hand part in 2/4 time marked 'LH: 2/4 Ped.'. The fourth system (measures 49-52) is marked 'ff feroce' and includes a 'Ped.' marking. The fifth system (measures 53-56) is marked 'a tempo tranquillo', 'dim. e rit.', and 'p dolce', with a 3/4 time signature and various fingering numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) and a 'Ped.' marking. The page number 127 is in the top right corner.

57

58

59

60

61

*mf*

*p*

3 4

2 1 2 1 1

Detailed description: This system contains measures 57 through 61. The music is in 6/8 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The right hand features a complex melodic line with many slurs and accents. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment with some triplet markings. Dynamic markings include *mf* and *p*.

62

63

64

65

*mf*

*p dolce*

*rit.*

*ch!*

(6 8)

3 4

3 1

Detailed description: This system contains measures 62 through 65. Measure 62 starts with *mf*. Measure 63 has a *ch!* marking above the staff. Measure 64 begins with *p dolce*. Measure 65 ends with a *rit.* marking. There are several triplet markings in both hands.

66

67

68

69

*più p*

4 2 4 2 1 1

4 2 4 2 3 3

4 2 4 2 3 3

Detailed description: This system contains measures 66 through 69. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. Dynamic marking is *più p*.

70

71

72

73

*sempre più p*

4 2 4 2 3 3

4 2 4 2 3 3

4 2 4 2 3 3

Detailed description: This system contains measures 70 through 73. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. Dynamic marking is *sempre più p*.

74

75

76

77

*rit.*

*pp*

*fz*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 74 through 77. Measure 75 has a *rit.* marking. Measure 76 has a *pp* marking. Measure 77 has a *fz* marking. The music concludes with a final chord in the right hand.



The most important characteristic of the opening is its metrical shape. The melody articulates a bar of  $3/4$  against the duple beat of the accompaniment, followed by a bar of  $6/8$  where the hands move more smoothly together. The first break in this pattern of metrical alternation takes place at bar 18. The raised dynamic level and the expression marking *scherzando* engender the first change in articulation. The music marks a definitive  $3/4$ , as though seeking to regularise the instability of the opening bars. The resolutive effect of bar 18 is compromised, however, first by syncopation, and then dramatically by the  $3/8$  bar in bar 20. This is the first real interruption in the series of stable two-bar units that had been established at the outset. It is also the most severe metrical 'jolt' to have shaken the dance thus far. The placing of the *fortepiano* accent on the final beat of bar 19 in effect creates a  $4/8$  bar, despite the placing of the bar line. Consequently, the three-bar unit (bars 18–20) is a telescoped  $3/4 - 5/8 - 4/8$  structure that accelerates towards the end of the first strophe and functions as a local clausal device.

The second strophe begins with a texturally filled-out version of the opening. This is both a point of relative relaxation and an intensification. Following the convention of the first strophe, bar 26 should have been a straightforward variation of bars 24–25. Instead it becomes the beginning of a new two-and-a-half-bar block reminiscent of the metrical jolt at bars 18–20. Accordingly, the sudden drop to *pianissimo* in bar 32 is the most drastic dynamic change so far in the dance. The compass of the upper melodic voice has been reduced from over an octave to barely a fourth, but bar 32 also brings a number of new factors into play, notably the strengthening of the  $3/4 + 6/8$  feel in the right hand, and, crucially, the  $2/4$  octave leaps in the accompaniment.

These dynamic, rhythmic and textural processes are brought dramatically together by the central climax, marked *feroce*, in bars 45–53. The left hand articulates a martial syncopated  $2/4$  that had been planted in bar 32. The inner parts in the right hand perpetuate the pattern established in the previous four bars, and articulate  $3/4 + 6/8$ . The placing of the accents in the inverted pedal, however, suggests the minim tread of  $3/2$ , so that each bar in the top of the right hand coincides with every two bars in the lower parts. Consequently, there are at least four different metrical streams running concurrently in bars 45–53. In some senses, the central climax is the most obviously 'inauthentic' passage in whole dance, since it makes registral and rhythmic demands that are obviously beyond the capability of a violin. At the same time, bars 45–53 are also the most 'authentic', since they contain the most dissonant, physical and metrically complex music in the work, precisely those characteristics Grieg identified as the defining features of the Hardanger repertoire. From Grieg's perspective, bars 45–53 present folk music in its rawest state.

Since the central climax marks the outer limits of the work's structure, it also signals a point of no return. Though the music subsequently maintains residues of earlier disruptive gestures, the retrospective feel of the third strophe is intensified by the pungent  $C\sharp$ s from bar 63 onwards. The modal variance of the fourth scale degree is obligatory throughout Op. 72, but a modally-altered seventh degree is exceptional. One speculative possibility is that Grieg had simply misread Halvorsen's transcription of the dance. Halvorsen notates the music with a *scordatura* with the G-string tuned up to A, so that the notes played on the bottom string sound a tone higher. In this case, the notated  $c\sharp^1$  would sound  $d^1$ , a reading which Johannes Dahle's recorded version of the *slåt* appears to confirm. It could also be argued that Grieg's

C♯s represent a response to the variable tuning characteristic of the Hardanger repertoire, in which notes at the lower end of the violin's range tend to be played flatter than those higher up the instrument. On balance, however, it is easier to hear this sudden flat-side inflection, in the hyper-sharp harmonic domain of Op. 72, as a remnant of diatonic tonal procedure. Not least since the figuration (from bar 68 onwards) resembles distant horn calls, one of the most poignant syntactical devices, associated with closure, in diatonic music. Grieg appears to be working diatonically in spite of himself: such a flatside step sounds involuntary after the excessive sharpness of the preceding music. But the tension between diatonic and modal-intervallic procedures also functions as an expansion of the metrical conflict that underpins the *slåt*. Ultimately, it constitutes a higher level dissonance that the structuralist dialogue of Grieg's work seeks to resolve.

In an interview in the Leipzig magazine *Signale für die musikalische Welt*, Grieg acknowledged a tension between musical cultures, the mainstream Austro-German tradition of which he was essentially a product, and the Norwegian folk tradition to which he felt he more properly 'belonged'.<sup>14</sup> The real creative tension in Grieg's music is not an inability to meet the demands of large-scale symphonic form, but a linguistic conflict, between the deliberately primitivist treatment of musical raw material, and an increasingly abstract sense of syntax and structure. The *Slåtter*'s most controversial legacy, however, is the way they challenge our conventional view of music history. Far from reinforcing our centrist model of musical development, Grieg suggests that it is remoteness from mainstream practice that is responsible for the radical aspects of his musical style. 'When Vøring Falls are nearby', he once wrote, 'one feels *more* daring than down in the valley.'<sup>15</sup> As the *Slåtter* startlingly reveal, Grieg's provincialism became cutting-edge.

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<sup>14</sup> The interview is dated 4 April 1907, the final year of Grieg's life. It is partially reprinted in Benestad and Schelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg* 334.

<sup>15</sup> Letter dated 22 August 1896, quoted in Schelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg* 335.