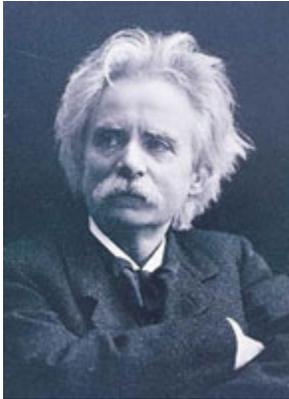


Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

String Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 27 (1877-1878)



Edvard Grieg produced only one complete mature string quartet, the String Quartet in g minor, Op. 27 dating from 1878 when he was 35. The historical record indicates that it was a challenge for Grieg, a composer who was perhaps more accustomed to writing in smaller forms such as his celebrated art songs and Romantic piano miniatures. Yet his remains one of the most original and influential string quartets of the late 19th century, approximately contemporaneous with the first important quartets from Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Borodin and Dvořák. It was written in the same year as César Franck's piano quartet with which it shares some prominent elements of innovative cyclic design. Grieg's quartet even managed to impress the aloof Debussy who, fifteen years later wrote his only quartet in the same key, with more than a few striking similarities.

Like many composers (notably Schubert, Mendelsohn and Shostakovich), Grieg borrows from his own music for the main theme of the quartet: a portion of his somber song *Spillamæd* (Minstrels). The icy theme is announced in unison by the quartet right at the beginning, the emphatic slow introductory *andante* before the bristling *allegro*. Almost all of the musical material in the first movement is derived from it including several creative variations of the full theme itself in a wide range of expression and affect. There are at least eight clear permutations for the listener's delightful discovery. But like the cyclic designs of Franck and, later, Debussy, the theme extends beyond the bounds of the first movement to obliquely influence the second, reappear in the third and frame the fourth including a nearly literal restatement of the quartet's beginning just before the final conclusion. Though the complete work comprises a four-movement design with a great variety of music, it is fused together with a rare artistic unity.

One of the most striking aspects of Grieg's quartet is the distinctive way he writes for the string ensemble, an inseparable combination of texture and color resulting in a consistently unique quartet sound. On one hand, Grieg scores thick sections of unison sounds encroaching on the orchestral with double, triple and even quadruple stops simultaneously in all parts. Were this the only texture Grieg used, one might be tempted to agree with those who find the quartet rather un-quartet-like. But Grieg employs a diversity of other textures including skillful

counterpoint, a fluid exchange of voice-leading across all four instruments and a variety of novel sounds that he may well have borrowed from Norwegian folk music for fiddle. If the stormy first movement emphasizes the vast orchestral unity of the strings, the middle movements highlight the delicate spaciousness of individual instruments in diverse combinations. The nimble finale and numerous sections throughout the quartet have an etched clarity of remarkable lightness and effervescence. It is precisely the juxtaposition of all these textures within one work that makes Grieg's music a revelation of new possibilities. Like Debussy, Grieg seemed to wholly re-imagine how to use a quartet. Grieg was the first to do so.

Fresh in the way it sounds, Grieg's quartet is equally striking in the way it moves. The music is energized with astonishing rhythmic vitality and the constant impulse to dance. The second movement Romanze begins with a gently swaying waltz that accelerates into an intoxicating whirl around the dance floor with the intensity of a manic dervish. This is but a tentative warm-up for the intricate motions of the third movement Intermezzo, a scherzo with the rustic spice of a festival dance under the midnight sun. The finale sustains and ultimately surpasses this energetic frolic with its saltarello, a leaping dance of Italian origin dating back to the Middle Ages. Grieg's absorption of Nordic folk dances such as the springdans and haller is evident here along with heavy syncopations and cross-rhythms in an unbridled, lyrical frenzy framed by the sober soundposts of the motto theme on either side.

Grieg's musical language was progressive for its time particularly within the generally conservative genre of the string quartet. Highly chromatic with rich harmonies and bold modulations, the music explores modal and pentatonic scales with an exotic folk flavor leading the vanguard of new music invading the traditions of Western Europe. Though Grieg studied in Leipzig using Mendelssohn and Schumann as his first models, he ultimately developed his own unique musical voice perhaps best illustrated by this inspired and passionate string quartet, a harbinger of musical developments towards the end of the century. Grieg would try his hand with the string quartet once more some ten years later, but his efforts produced only two movements and rough sketches for the rest of a quartet in F major. Though incomplete, these continue to demonstrate Grieg's innovative approach with many of the same characteristics. Though leaving us wanting, it is enough for us to marvel. No great cycle of quartets here, just a

single finished work of great originality, historical significance and ravishing musical delight.

© Kai Christiansen Used by permission. All rights reserved.