



National treasure

Norwegian pianist **Pål Eide** introduces his new solo album recorded on Grieg's 1892 Steinway in Trolldhaugen

In 2017, my album *Grey Clouds* caught international attention and I was invited to give a recital on Grieg's piano at his home in my birth town of Bergen. A winter storm was raging outside and the temperature was 12 degrees below zero. Grieg's old house was creaking. I waited downstairs with blankets to keep warm. Outside the audience was freezing, impatiently waiting to come inside. It was my first time playing the great Norwegian composer's instrument. Since childhood, Grieg's music has been particularly dear to me: no other music can touch me so quickly.

In Grieg's living room the audience sits very close to the piano – there is not much space. I play the first five tones from 'To Spring' extremely softly. The optimistic sound of singing birds is followed by a beautiful melody. Grieg has a unique ability to evoke particular moods and memories. He speaks directly to our hearts. Suddenly it no longer feels cold. The music fills our minds with pictures of springtime. At this moment I feel closer to Grieg than ever before.

This experience made me dream of recording my next album, *Pictures*, on Grieg's 1892 Steinway. Trolldhaugen has always been one of my favourite places – the atmosphere is unique. Grieg built the house in 1885 on a wooden hill by a lake and called it Trolldhaugen or, 'Hill of the Trolls'. He lived there with his Danish-Norwegian wife Nina for the last 22 summers of their life. The house is Norwegian with elements of Swiss style and has a certain eccentricity to it, with ornaments and a tower. He built it thinking more about acoustics than keeping warm.

Grieg's furniture is kept in his living room, full of personal items and pictures and drawings, many of them gifts. Into the hill a bigger concert hall, Trolldsalen, was built in the 1980s. From the audience you can see

the lake, and in the foreground, a little red composer's cottage where Grieg could work undisturbed. He was easily distracted; a boat sailing on the lake could break his concentration. Outside the concert hall is a life-sized statue of him. The ashes of Edvard and Nina are kept in a little mountain crypt down by the lake. They were among the first people in Norway to be cremated.

Grieg's Steinway was purchased in Hamburg in 1892 and given to him by friends. They managed to get it into his house without his knowledge, which must not have been an easy task! It is kept in superb condition and has a unique and beautiful sound which is more mellow and less metallic than modern instruments. You can hear it is old, but in a positive way: the upper register has a bell-like sound with a nostalgic quality.

Grieg himself played and practised on these keys. Every musician has a strong connection to their instrument as it is our door into the world of music. Grieg was a great pianist who often toured Europe, which left him longing for his home in Norway. He called Trolldhaugen 'my best opus so far'.

From the very first note I played on Grieg's piano, I was caught by its beautiful sound. I feel a deep connection to the music through this instrument and immerse myself in it, sometimes losing touch with the outside world. During recording, however, every sound becomes a disturbance: a chair, a shoe, the floor, humming, ventilators, lighting, birdsong, dogs barking, people passing by outside – sounds are everywhere. Sometimes you start to notice noise that normally would not be a problem. If you listen carefully to the album, you might notice one small beep from a car reversing, but it is hard to hear, as it is in the right key.

The first day, there was quite a loud knocking sound from the pedal. Luckily, we had the piano technician

Richard Brekne to help us. He is responsible for maintaining the instrument and tuned it twice a day. He lay on his back to fix the pedal, and after a while the knocking sound virtually disappeared. Richard says the instrument's sound changes with the weather – and because tourists visit the house every day of the year. With this in mind, the instrument is in a fantastic condition.

Strong wind whistling through the house is likely to be picked up by a sensitive microphone. But it might also give the recording an extra dimension. After all, I am in Grieg's house playing his piano like he did himself in many cold and windy evenings. If you turn the volume up, you may be able to hear the sound of the wind.

My programme for *Pictures* explores Grieg's impact on modern music. He was far ahead of his time – a side of him not always recognised. Grieg used harmonies as colours, not always in theoretical relation to one other. His harmonic style was a direct inspiration for the impressionists, Debussy and Ravel, and may have influenced jazz music.

The powerful direct expression of Grieg's music is what makes it so popular. He was closely connected to the nature of Norway, loved walking in the mountains and could express pictures in music like few other composers. When he wandered around the countryside, he listened to the melodies, harmonies and rhythms of folk music and integrated them into his works. He wanted to demonstrate the universal meaning of folk music.

I understand Grieg's close relationship to nature: I enjoy walking in the mountains and woods of Norway. I grew up listening to folk music. My father's family were farmers from a small village in western Norway and have played folk music for several generations.

My selection of musical pictures for the album includes Nordic works by Grieg, Sæverud and Johansen, plus Jesper Koch's *The Mirror of the Mind*, written specially for me. I have combined them with one of the most important works of piano literature, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, written by Musorgsky shortly after Grieg's *Pictures from Folk Life*.

I like to find musical and historical connections between pieces, and look for harmonic, melodic or rhythmic similarities. Even when there is a change from one composer to the next, I look for a natural 'flow' as well as seeking contrasts. In concerts, I sometimes ask the audience not to applaud between pieces. In this way you don't break the music's flow. By putting composers together in a non-traditional way, I hope that listeners can hear the music afresh. I want to give listeners a sense of how composers influence each other, and innovate by developing their own personal style.

I don't know whether Grieg and Musorgsky listened to one another's music, but artists from Nordic countries and Russia definitely share influences. They were both masters in describing moods and pictures in music; they both tried to integrate national music and develop their own style; and they both influenced modern composers.

Pictures from Folk Life Op 19 (1871) is among Grieg's

best piano works. It is written in a clear folk-music style. 'Mountain Dance' features typical folkdance rhythms. The changes in character give it a powerful expression. 'Bridal Procession' depicts a wedding procession in a Norwegian village, and 'From the Carnival' is a romantic picture describing a carnival in Rome – a city often visited by Grieg.

The 10 volumes of *Lyric Pieces* provide a wide perspective on Grieg's lifework and gave him his main income. 'Butterfly' and 'To Spring' from Op 43 (1886) and 'March of the Trolls' from Op 54 (1891) are among his most popular pieces. 'Bell Ringing' (Op 54) includes elements that point into the future. It employs parallel fifths, resulting in a tonality that moves away from functional harmony and gives the impression of a bell tolling.

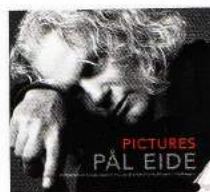
Harald Sæverud (1897-1992) was one of Norway's most original composers who created his own style that makes use of folk music elements. This can be heard in the fifths of the beginning of his most famous piece 'Kjempeviseslätten' (The Ballad of Revolt, 1943) from *Tunes and Dances from Siljustøl* Op 22, dedicated to the resistance movement and composed in response to the German occupation of Norway. Every Norwegian knows it, but when I perform it abroad, the audience is struck by its emotional power.

David Monrad Johansen (1888-1974) was educated in Norway, Germany and France. His *Pictures from the North* Op 5 is clearly inspired by Norwegian folk music, but also by French impressionism. 'Profile of a Woman' describes the temperament of a woman he met, and in 'The Little Stone God' we are attending a prayer meeting in the far rural north of Norway. Seeing a reindeer herd running inspired him to compose 'Reindeer', while 'Towards the Mountains of my Forefathers' describes the feeling of looking down at a farm from a high mountaintop.

Danish composer Jesper Koch (b 1967) has written numerous works for Danish symphony orchestras. *The Mirror of the Mind* was written for me in 2007 and drew inspiration from *The Snow Queen* fairytale by Danish writer H C Andersen.

Musorgsky's genius shines through every note of *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874). Some of the pictures require a short description, such as 'Tuilleries', which depicts children playing at a park in Paris. 'The Hut on Fowl's Legs' is a picture of a hut belonging to the fabled Russian witch Baba-Yaga.

The wind is still raging as the last note of Grieg's 'Leik' (Cattle Call, 1869) is fading. Grieg heard a young woman sing this song during one of his hikes and could never forget it. For me, it reminds me of my childhood, and I find it a calming encore – a perfect example of Grieg's genius on a small scale. **IP**



*Pål Eide's Pictures is now available from Danacord (DACOCD 847).
koncertpianist.dk*