

Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 16 • Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

SCORED FOR: TWO FLUTES, TWO OBOES, TWO CLARINETS, TWO BASSOONS, FOUR HORNS, TWO TRUMPETS, THREE TROMBONES, TIMPANI, AND STRINGS.

Edvard Grieg came of age as a composer during the great age of musical nationalism, a time when composers were valued not only for how well they wrote, but for how well they represented their home countries to the world of music. Nationalist composers purposefully allowed their inspiration to be drawn from the folksongs and dances of their homeland and as such they became icons of identity for an entire nation. Edvard Grieg embodied and embraced this role as musical ambassador; his works are firmly rooted in and filled with the Norwegian musical traditions that he knew and loved. Describing his approach to composition, Grieg writes: "Composers with the stature of a Bach or Beethoven have erected grand churches and temples. I have always wished to build villages, places where people can feel happy and comfortable. The music of my own country has been my model."

Grieg's *Piano Concerto in A Minor* was written during the summer of 1868, when the composer and his family were on holiday in Sölleröd, near Copenhagen. The concerto is dedicated to the pianist Edmund Neupert, who premiered the work in Copenhagen in 1869. The work was composed when Grieg was only 25 years old and it immediately caught the attention of some of the most notable musical minds of the time. Perhaps none was as important or influential as the preeminent piano virtuoso of the 19th century, Franz Liszt. The young Grieg had received an invitation from Liszt to visit him in Rome in 1869, and he brought with him a copy of his newly completed piano concerto. Liszt played through the work, and according to Grieg's own description, the great pianist became so agitated while he played that he leapt from the bench during the finale and danced around the room singing its main theme-- completely caught up in the work's sheer excitement. "Then he went back to the piano," the exhilarated Grieg reports, "repeated the whole passage, and finished it off. At the end he said to me, 'Carry on, my friend, you have the real stuff in you. And don't ever let them [presumably the critics of the day] frighten you!'"

Equally complimentary of this masterpiece are the words of the Russian master Tchaikovsky: "In Grieg's Concerto there prevails a fascinating melancholy that seems to reflect all the beauty of the Norwegian scenery--now grandiose and sublime in its vast expanse, now gray and dull, but always full of charm. . . . What warmth and passion in Grieg's melodic phrases, what teeming vitality in his harmony, what originality and beauty in the turn of his piquant and ingenious modulations and rhythms, and in all the rest, what interest, novelty, and independence!"

The Piano Concerto in A Minor has been a regular part of the romantic concerto repertoire since the late 19th century. It is set in three movements, following the strictest German models in matters of form, but Grieg's Norwegian heritage shows through in every passage, in his

regular phrasing and in his lyrical melodies. The first movement begins with one of the most famous and oft quoted musical motives in the repertoire: a brilliant crashing of chords and parallel octaves plunging from the highest range of the piano to its depth and then cascading upwards in overlapping waves of arpeggios. Strangely enough, this most memorable of music is hardly used at all in the remainder of the movement that it has just christened. A march-like tune immediately follows (the true first theme of the work) followed shortly by a tender, lyric and somewhat slower theme first presented by the cello section. The themes are developed and recapitulated in the traditional manner and the movement is capped off with an exciting cadenza for the piano alone. The second movement provides a much needed respite from the aggressive nature of the first. The stark contrast begins straight away with the delicate sounds of muted strings opening the movement. The hushed sounds give way to the piano sounding a new theme and a delicate dialog between orchestra and piano ensues. The work climaxes with the piano playing the opening theme in canon with the cellos. Ending nearly as quietly as it began, the music continues without pause into the concluding movement.

The finale is a rollicking rondo-like movement that demonstrates Grieg at his nationalistic best. There are no fewer than five themes presented in this movement, each having a distinct folksong character. Two of these themes have direct links to traditional Norwegian dances. At times the music recalls the traditional Hardanger fiddle - an instrument with both played strings and a set of sympathetic strings to resonate and drone beneath the melody. The movement begins in duple meter and features a playful banter between the piano and the orchestra ultimately climaxing in a brief cadenza for the soloist. After a moment of silence the music begins again, now rhythmically transformed into scherzo waltz-like feel. The tension builds once again until the full orchestra and the piano together make the final fortissimo statement of the work.