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“Olav Trygvason” by Edvard Grieg and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson: Viking Identity in Norway’s Romantic Nationalist Movement

ABSTRACT: This article explores how the composer Edvard Grieg and the author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson approached contemporary nationalist sentiment and historical ownership over the Norse sagas in their works. Focusing on textual and musical components in these artistic collaborations, the author argues that Grieg and Bjørnson sought to transform traditional historical characters from the Norse sagas into modern re-conceptions that reflected the values of the nationalist discourse of a new Norway.

KEYWORDS: European history; Norway; Vikings; Olav Trygvason; Norse sagas; Edvard Grieg; Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson; opera; Romanticism; nationalism

Introduction

Outside of Norway, the composer Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) is chiefly remembered for his incidental music to Henrik Ibsen’s 1867 drama, *Peer Gynt*,¹ but – well before Ibsen – Grieg was collaborating with another poet, namely, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), for whom he wrote music to accompany *Sigurd Jorsalfar* and *Bergliot*, and with whom he planned at least two opera projects, one of which was *Olav Trygvason*.² Both opera projects were left unfinished, but what is left of *Olav Trygvason* demonstrates Grieg and Bjørnson’s continued relationship in the face of a changing landscape of national sentiment in their home country of Norway.

Just as in the case of the Italian *Risorgimento*, which intended to promote national unity and statehood in Italy,³ the relationship between Romantic era nationalism in Norway and the explicit intent of the Norwegian artists in their art is often complicated.⁴ While there are undoubtedly some bald, surface-level

¹ Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian playwright whose dramas had strong modernist and surrealist influences, and he is often seen as one of the founding fathers of modernism in drama. *Peer Gynt* (1867) is Ibsen’s best known dramatic work, chronicling the travels of the titular character around the world from the mountains of Norway to the deserts of North Africa. It is loosely based on a Norwegian fairy tale.

² Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist*, trans. William H. Halvorson and Leland B. Sateren (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988; first published 1980 in Norwegian). Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe’s work is the most authoritative biography of the composer to date, as both authors were involved in the categorization of all the Griegiana bequeathed to the Bergen Public Library (Norway) by the composer in his will. For a period biography compiled during Grieg’s life, see Gerhard Schjelderup, *Edvard Grieg: Biographie und Würdigung seiner Werke* (Leipzig: Peters, 1908).

³ The Italian *Risorgimento* (“rising again”) movement strove for Italian unification and culminated in 1861 with the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy. Giuseppe Verdi’s melody for “Va, pensiero” (“Fly, thought”), a chorus from his 1842 opera *Nabucco*, came to express many Italians’ national longing or desire for a unified state. While many of Verdi’s operas have come to be viewed as explicitly nationalist in retrospect, this connection is not always evident.

⁴ See Daniel M. Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2006), for the interaction between a composer’s intent, nationalism, and national identity.

attempts at invoking nationalist sentiments in art (Verdi's 1871 opera *Aida* is a prime example), the influence of nationalism is often indirect, operating at the level of the artist rather than the art itself. Understanding the Norse and Romantic nationalist influences on the art of Bjørnson and Grieg can illuminate the culture, society, and politics of nationalism in nineteenth-century Norway.

In their respective art forms, Grieg and Bjørnson refashioned the heroes of old into modern incarnations where these historical characters reflect the values of a new Norway, a practical necessity for the contemporary national discourse. In the process, they also re-asserted ownership over the Norse sagas from which the stories derive. To understand this reclamation, however, several topics need to be addressed. First, defining the problem of the relationship between nationalist movements and the art they produce can situate Bjørnson, Grieg, and others in the moment in which they produced their work. Next, we can look to the sagas and histories to reveal the suitability of Bjørnson's cast of characters for a modern drama, and why he chose the Norwegian kings Olav Tryggvason and Sigurd I "Jorsalfar" Magnusson as the historical embodiment of the new movement. Finally, we can look at the works themselves to see how these modern conceptions of Norwegian identity are expressed in the performance and production of *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, *Olav Trygvason*, and the constellation of works that surround them.

I. The Grieg-Bjørnson Collaboration

Bjørnson's and Grieg's collaboration focused on historical characters found in the Norse sagas. Olav Tryggvason, Sigurd Jorsalfar, and Sigurd Slembe were Bjørnson's main historical inspirations.⁵ Taken together, these characters encompass a period of nearly two hundred years from the tenth to the twelfth century. The specter of the Norse sagas inevitably hovers over any artistic movement associated with Nordic identity, and the works which the Norwegian nationalist movement produced during the last half of the nineteenth century – by Ibsen, Bjørnson, Grieg, Ole Bull (the musician), and Johan Halvorsen (the composer) – are no exception. These works, produced for an inward-looking Norwegian community, are rich in historical context, but often languish out of view of the collective historical memory. Outside of Norway, for instance, Grieg's contemporaries like Rikard Nordraak (the composer of the Norwegian national anthem) or Halvorsen are all but unknown, and Bjørnson suffers a similar fate. Grieg's nationalist output, however, is much better known by comparison.

Beginning in 1850, Ole Bull, famed violinist and paternal figure to the entire Norwegian arts community, began promoting a new movement in Norwegian art

⁵ Olav Tryggvason (ca. 968-1000) was King of Norway 995-1000. Sigurd I "Jorsalfar(e)" ("Jerusalem-Farer") Magnusson (1089-1130) was King of Norway 1103-1130 and a son of Magnus III Berrføtt ("Barefoot") Olafsson (ca. 1073-1103; King of Norway 1093-1103). Sigurd Slembe (ca. 1100-1139) claimed to be Magnus III's son as well and was a pretender to the throne. A note on spelling: the historical Olav's cognomen is spelled here as "Tryggvason," while his name in Grieg's opera fragment is spelled *Trygvason*.

based on a burgeoning interest in Norwegian folk tales, as well as new translations of the sagas and a renewed interest in the components of a Norwegian – as distinct from Danish – identity. In the context of the latter half of the nineteenth century, this movement would inevitably include the folk stories and songs of the rural *bonde* or freeholder, the return of a "folk spirit" in music, and ownership over the rich source of historical drama found in the sagas.

Before his death in 1907, Grieg willed his collected manuscripts to the Bergen Public Library, close to his home, where they have since been cataloged several times. Finn Benestad, together with Dan Fog and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, started an initiative to create a complete thematic catalog in the early 1960s, an effort which took until 1995 to produce a complete set.⁶ The library also maintains a large collection of Grieg's letters and public writings, which Benestad and his English translator William H. Halverson have collected into two volumes, and is generally the source for modern English scholarship on Grieg's personal life. The historical Norse characters from which Bjørnson drew his libretti are all contained in Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century *Heimskringla* ("Earth's Circle"), which experienced a revival in the mid-nineteenth century. The more detailed view of Olav Tryggvason, found in the twelfth-century *Saga of Olav Tryggvason*, compliments the resources which appear in an abbreviated form in the *Heimskringla* and also provides the necessary additional context for the life of this Viking hero.⁷

Fortunately for Grieg research, many of the same scholars responsible for the categorization of Grieg's complete works and personal items are also behind much of the original scholarship on the salient topics of the composer's life. Beryl Foster, who has focused primarily on Grieg's choral and dramatic works, proves instrumental to any discussion about the analysis of the operatic fragments or the incidental music *in situ* during their premieres and subsequent productions, albeit from the perspective of vocal performance and choral pedagogy.⁸ When the focus turns to nationalism and the collective creation of national identity, especially in the context of music, Eric Hobsbawm's anthology on tradition, as well as Benedict Taylor's monograph on nationalist trends, make note of the problem in defining nationalism.⁹ To situate Grieg and the Norwegian art culture inside that

⁶ For C. F. Peter's complete editions, see *Edvard Grieg: Samlede Verker*, vols. 16 and 19, ed. Finn Benestad (Frankfurt and Leipzig: C. F. Peters, 1986-1988). Of particular interest are *Foran Sydens kloster* Op. 20, *Sigurd Jorsalfar: Scenemusikk til Bjørnstjerne Bjørnsons skuespill* Op. 22, *Landkjenning* Op. 31, and *Olav Trygvason: Operafragment* Op. 50. All of these have lyrics or libretti by Bjørnson.

⁷ Snorre Sturluson, *Heimskringla, or the Lives of the Norse Kings*, ed. Erling Monsen, trans. Albert H. Smith (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1932), contains passages on Saint Olaf, Olav Tryggvason, and Sigurd Jorsalfar. For Olav Tryggvason, see Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olav Tryggvason*, ed. and trans. Theodore M. Andersson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁸ Beryl Foster, *Edvard Grieg: The Choral Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); and Beryl Foster, *The Songs of Edvard Grieg* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1990; new edition Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007).

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (1983; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Benedict Taylor, *The Melody of Time: Music and Temporality*

production of national identity, Daniel Grimley has examined Grieg's *Haugtussa* ("Mountain Maid" Op. 67) and *Slåtter* ("Peasant Dances" Op. 72), in the frame of musical techniques, an exploration that is very relevant to his dramatic works.¹⁰

II. Forming the New Norway

Several trends in the history of Norway after 1814 increased the potency and urgency of the nationalist movement there, which was fully underway by the 1860s when Bjørnson and Grieg began their collaboration. The Treaty of Kiel, which ended King Frederick VI of Denmark's rule over Norway in 1814 and nominally handed control of the country to the king of Sweden, was fiercely opposed by the Norwegian *bonde*, and Prince Christian Frederick led Norway in an insurrection against Sweden's rule.¹¹ It was the belief of many Norwegians that "no king had the right to dispose of a sovereign kingdom without the consent of his subjects and that they were neither legally nor morally bound to observe the terms of the treaty."¹² The rebellion, despite the enthusiasm of the "Eidsvoll Men,"¹³ did not result in lasting independence for Norway, and the parliament of Norway (the *Storting*) was forced to accept a personal union between the Kingdom of Norway and the Kingdom of Sweden under the auspices of Charles XIII of Sweden (d. 1818)—although the French marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte in reality became the leader of the union as Charles XIV John (1818-1844).¹⁴ Charles XIV John's concessions to the parliament, however, endowed the Norwegian *Storting* with more power than almost any other comparable assembly in Europe, with the King only able to temporarily veto a parliamentary action until such time as three consecutive *Storting* sessions had passed it.¹⁵

The Kingdom of Norway lasted independently for only a few brief months, but the ideals behind it, which had made their way into the constitution of the *Storting*, lived on. Even though the "Eidsvoll Men" acquiesced first to Charles XIII and later to Charles XIV John in their union with Sweden, there was some sense that the majority of Norwegians "looked back to the brief months of complete independence as a national dream which had been needlessly shattered."¹⁶ More to the point, however, the national dream persisted. If the founding principles of the *Storting* were self-determination and democratic rule, it was essential to find

in the Romantic Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁰ Grimley, *Grieg*.

¹¹ Thomas Kingston Derry, *A History of Scandinavia: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 212.

¹² Harold Larson, *Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson: A Study in Norwegian Nationalism* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1944), 3.

¹³ Derry, *History of Scandinavia*, 213.

¹⁴ Karen Larsen, *A History of Norway* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 572.

¹⁵ Derry, *History of Scandinavia*, 218.

¹⁶ Derry, *History of Scandinavia*, 217.

out the true character and heritage of actual Norwegians, selectively reinforcing a national past that conformed with the ideas of the new post-1814 Norway. The collection of folklore and the traditions of the *bonde*, which for centuries had been considered as the periphery or "cultural backwaters," could instead be turned into the ethnographic portion of an argument that supported Norway's fundamental, innate ability to self-govern.¹⁷

To Norwegian artists, there was one principal roadblock to artistic sovereignty, namely, the influence of the Danish capital of Copenhagen. They believed that they were being stifled by Danish talent, that the metropolitan elite of Oslo would forever speak Danish instead of Norwegian, and that Norway would be relegated to a subservient place in relation to Denmark and Sweden. Harold Larson lays out these problems succinctly in his study of Bjørnson, where these concerns about the influence of Denmark and Sweden over Norwegian culture are enumerated: "the bureaucrat generally had his cultural roots in Denmark, read Danish books, enjoyed Danish plays, and used a language which was closer to the Danish than to the Norwegian dialects."¹⁸

It was in this dialogue that the distinctly Norwegian sensibility emerged. Almost as repartee to the prevailing sentiment of Danish hegemony, Bjørnson's letters and articles reveal a mantra that Ole Bull had shared with him regarding the Norwegian theater which Bull had started in 1850: "Norwegian characters, not French ones; Norwegian music, not the music of Leipzig; and a Norwegian ballet" ("norske Karakterer, ikke franske, norsk Musik, ikke Leipziger Musik, – og norsk Dans").¹⁹ Bjørnson took this maxim to be his guiding star when he became the artistic director of Bull's theater in 1857 and encouraged his actors to depart from the Danish style of acting which was "conventional, superior in a technical way," but without the individuality and freedom that Bjørnson wanted.²⁰

To truly express that unique Norwegian sense of individual freedom, however, one needed a consensus on what it meant to *be* Norwegian, or even what Norway was. While an earlier generation of folklorists had provided the raw matter for artistic endeavor, it was largely up to the community of Norwegian Romantic nationalist artists to offer answers to the question of Norwegian identity. The raw matter of the past had to be shaped by Bull, Bjørnson, and Grieg's cousin Rikard Nordraak, who was the first to set Bjørnson's dramas to music. Their fascination with their Norse history, which was already burgeoning by the early nineteenth century, was invigorated by the translations of the *Heimskringla* and other Norse sagas by Peter A. Munch, as well as by the folk story collections compiled by

¹⁷ Grimley, *Grieg*, 18.

¹⁸ Larson, *Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson*, 8.

¹⁹ Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, *Artikler og taler, udgivet af Chr. Collin og H. Eitrem*, ed. C. Collin and H. Eitrem (Kristiania: Gyldendal, 1912), 153.

²⁰ Larson, *Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson*, 25.

Jorgen Moe and Peter Christian Asbjørnsen.²¹ Publications like Munch's edition of the *Historia Norwegiae* ("History of Norway") and his translation of the *Heimskringla* were part of a broader revived interest in Norway's Viking heritage, and all of the major Romantic nationalist artists in Norway looked to them for inspiration: Bull, though known better as a performer, composed such works as his *Halling Springdans* ("Halling Leaping Dance") based on folk wedding dances; Nordraak set Bjørnson's *Ja, vi elsker dette landet* ("Yes, We Love This Land") to music, which became Norway's national anthem; and Grieg's collaborations with Bjørnson all required the sagas to be brought into contemporary discourse.²²

Establishing which publications of the sagas and *Eddas* (i.e., collections of Norse mythology) Bjørnson and Grieg would have had access to can solidify the context in which they would have received them—especially once those sagas were claimed as distinctly Norwegian. It is likely that the version of the sagas published by Munch, since they were the most recent and by far the most popular, would have been the source material for Bjørnson's artistic endeavors. Munch did much of the legwork in translating the sagas into contemporary Norwegian—even though *which* "Norwegian" would qualify to be called that language was still being debated at the time—and claiming them for the nationalist discourse. The Norwegian Historical School of which Munch was a member took a public stance that "most of the supposedly 'Scandinavian' literary antiquities, such as the sagas and *Eddas*, were definitely Norwegian and Icelandic, rather than a common possession of the Scandinavian peoples. Thus, the Danes, together with the Swedes, were excluded from this heritage."²³

The constructed nature of national identity is what makes it hard to define.²⁴ For our discussion here, the very discourse of national identity itself is revealed to have two interesting features. These features do not just apply to the case of Norway but to most cases of nationalist re-definitions of history. First, nationalism generally attempts to assimilate *extra-territorial* materials into the discourse of nationhood.²⁵ Territory can mean literal, actual land, which usually brings with it a certain bellicosity to integrate such land into the "motherland" or "fatherland"

²¹ Larson, *Björnstjerne Bjørnson*, 10. The 1859 Norwegian translation of the *Heimskringla* by Peter A. Munch was (and this is just speculation) likely the version used by Bjørnson and others for their dramatizations. In 1850, Munch had edited the sole extant manuscript of the *Historia Norwegiae* (ca. 1500) as *Symbolae ad Historiam Antiquiorem Rerum Norwegicarum*.

²² See [Ole Bull, *Halling Springdans*, holograph manuscript, 1848, Bergen Public Library](#), accessed May 19, 2020; and Rikard Nordraak, *Ja, vi elsker dette landet* (Kristiania: Norsk Musikforlag, 1864).

²³ Larson, *Björnstjerne Bjørnson*, 10.

²⁴ See Celia Applegate, "How German Is It? Nationalism and the Idea of Serious Music in the Early Nineteenth Century," *19th-Century Music* 21, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 274-296; Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977).

²⁵ Grimley, *Grieg*, 23.

to which it supposedly belongs, or it can mean some cultural heritage with influences that are more difficult to sort out. Secondly, nationalism has an innate tendency to *exclude* by defining what the borders of nationality are and what lies outside of that definition. National ideologies can be described as having "finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations," which is nebulous enough as a definition, but in practice it can lead to systematic privileging or exclusion of anything believed to be "beyond."²⁶ The nationalist discourse has a problem with its historical place in addition to its issues with physical boundaries. While the nation-state can be seen as a purely political entity, created out of a collective identity with ethnic or cultural boundaries, it also requires a historical imperative, a *raison d'être*, to justify it.²⁷ In a sense, the nation must *always* have existed, something which Benedict Anderson has described as follows: "If nation-states are widely conceded to be [both] 'new' and 'historical', the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future."²⁸

In Norway's case, that would mean a dominion over the sagas and *Eddas* which – especially since Iceland, Greenland and the Faroes were still a part of the Kingdom of Denmark at the time – could be seen as Pan-Scandinavian instead. By claiming the entire Viking past for Norway, however, the Norwegian nationalist discourse could appropriate vast swathes of history to provide justification for the ideals of the new Norway.

III. The Cast and Crew

Knowing why Bjørnson was attracted so strongly to figures like Olav Tryggvason and Sigurd Jorsalfar is a good entryway into the ideals he desired – not only for the protagonist-heroes in his dramas, but also into the ideals he wanted to see embodied in the new Norway. Concerning *Olav Trygvason*, Bjørnson's fascination is easy to comprehend. As one of the first Christian kings of Norway, and by all accounts a man of heroic proportions, Olav seemed the perfect fit for the kind of self-reliance and vitality that Bjørnson envisioned for Norway. Erling Monsen, in the introduction to the 1932 English translation of the *Heimskringla*, described Olav Tryggvason as a "sea-king [...] the embodiment of sportsmanship, bravery and strength combined at times with recklessness."²⁹

Olav Tryggvason's peculiar place in medieval Norwegian history as a "violent importer of Christianity,"³⁰ as someone who acted like a true Viking – but in the name of the Christian faith, put him into an ideal position to bridge the gap between heathendom and Christianity which separated the Vikings from

²⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

²⁷ Grimley, *Grieg*, 12.

²⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11.

²⁹ Erling Monsen, in Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, xvii.

³⁰ Letter (Edvard Grieg to Frederick Delius), December 9, 1888, in Foster, *Edvard Grieg*, 109.

Bjørnson's contemporary audience. Casting Olav as a prominent Christian was not, however, unique to the nineteenth century. The passage of the *Heimskringla* where Olav adopts Christianity betrays an attempt at amelioration by the writer, Snorri Sturluson:

The hermit said that the God of Christian men let him know all he wished, and then he told Olav of many great works of God and after all these words Olav agreed to be baptized, and so it came about that Olav and all his following were baptized. He stayed there very long and learned the right faith and took with him from there priests and other learned men.³¹

Olav's duality as Viking and Christian is not reconciled in the same way as it is in accounts of later Christian kings, for example the early twelfth-century Norwegian co-rulers Sigurd Jorsalfar and Eystein I Magnusson. Instead, Olav Tryggvason has more in common with Olav Haraldsson (ca. 995-1030, King of Norway 1015-1028), canonized as Saint Olav, and both are recognized as instrumental in bringing Christianity to Norway, to the point of neglecting their respective violent tendencies.³² Grieg and Bjørnson were not unaware of Olav Tryggvason's violence and, in the course of planning the opera *Olav Trygvason*, portrayed the title character as "the evil Olav" coming to rout the pagan temple near Trondheim where the first three scenes of the opera are set.³³

Sigurd Jorsalfar and his brother Eystein represented a very different dramatic potential, which Bjørnson chose to address at a turning point in his career. The melodrama *Sigurd Jorsalfar* was completed in 1872, when Bjørnson was well on his way beyond his former constraints as a poet and patriot. His subsequent works (apart from the failed libretto for *Olav Trygvason*) were all contemporary social dramas. Grieg immediately wrote the incidental music to *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, and it was performed on May 17, 1872 (Constitution Day in Norway), to a packed auditorium, with Grieg and Bjørnson both in attendance.³⁴ Most of the drama of *Sigurd Jorsalfar* is found in the love triangle between the two brother-kings and Borghild, the maiden who is the focus of the two brothers' romantic overtures. For Bjørnson, the quarrel between the brothers signals a change in dramatic purpose. Instead of the thematic unity of retaking Norway for Christianity that is present in *Foran Sydens kloster* ("Before a Southern Convent"), Grieg's Op. 20, the focus in *Sigurd Jorsalfar* is on the modern dichotomy that the two brothers represent: Eystein, the state-builder, is reasonable and cautious, but Sigurd displays the classic Viking desire for exploration and great accomplishments. By this time an elder "statesman," Bjørnson in *Sigurd Jorsalfar* stresses a need for balance, tempering the desire to enter world affairs with a recognition of the duty to develop the domestic institutions at home.³⁵

³¹ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, 137.

³² Larsen, *History of Norway*, 95.

³³ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 168.

³⁴ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 154.

³⁵ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 153.

Borghild's and Sigurd's relationship is portrayed as a contentious issue between the brothers, even though it only occupies a few lines in the *Heimskringla*. In the latter, after consecutive visits by first Sigurd and then his brother Eystein to Borg, which is ruled by Borghild's father Olav of Dale, Borghild learns that she has been accused of improper conduct and undergoes a ritual to prove herself innocent on the matter:

Borghild, Olav's daughter, heard the rumor that folk were speaking ill of her and King Eystein about their talks and friendship. She then went to Borg and fasted and underwent the ordeal of hot irons for this matter and was well cleared. And when King Sigurd heard this, he rode two long days' journeys in one day and came forth into Dale to Olav. He was there during the night. He then had Borghild as his concubine and took her away with him. Their son was Magnus.³⁶

In the melodrama, however, Bjørnson transforms this quarrel into an essential conflict. Sigurd and Eystein grow to be at odds with each other, but ultimately make peace in Act III. Since Sigurd's Christian morals *and* Viking credentials were without reproach, both the cautionary duality of Sigurd and Eystein, as well as their deep and introspective disagreement, could be explored without any other underpinnings.³⁷

IV. Grieg and the Opera

Grieg's unique musical vocabulary across his dramatic works (including *Peer Gynt*) was highly suitable for expressing his Norwegian heritage. The clash of heathen and Christian tropes that permeate his *Landkjenning* ("Land-Sighting" Op. 31), the use of the Freudian "Uncanny" in "Borghild's Dream" from *Sigurd Jorsalfar* (Op. 22), and the symbol of heathendom found in the augmented-fourth intervals during the recitative portion of Scene I of *Olav Trygvason* (Op. 50), are all illustrative of a Norwegian artistic culture that enthusiastically refashioned their Norse heritage for the present day.

Although the eponymous character never appears in Grieg's *Olav Trygvason* opera fragment, there is a great deal about him in the hymn-cantata *Landkjenning* from which the opera is supposed to have proceeded.³⁸ In the cantata, Olav is transformed into a Christian conqueror seizing a land unknown. Although his family hails from Viken, and he has a legitimate claim to the throne through Harald Fairhair, Olav is spirited away from home as a young child, with his father's killer, Harald Greycloak, hot in pursuit. From there, he is sold into slavery

³⁶ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, 624.

³⁷ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, 608.

³⁸ Colin Timms, Nigel Fortune, Malcolm Boyd, Friedhelm Krummacher, David Tunley, James R. Goodall, and Juan José Carreras, *Grove Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), s.v. "cantata," subscription database online, accessed May 19, 2020. The word "cantata," because of its ubiquity in history, ends up being relatively ill-defined, but here it can be read as meaning "a work for one or several voices, with instrumental accompaniment," which generally has a religious or secular patriotic undertone.

and rescued by a relative, and after he has regained his freedom, he gradually rises in station at the court of King Valdemar of Garderik, until he consorts with the queen and is expelled.³⁹

Olav's return to Norway comes as a stranger, as a conqueror of foreign lands. In Bjørnson's text setting for *Landkjenning*, the revelatory moment where Olav experiences nature's might and symbolically takes Norway for Christianity happens when he and his men finally set foot on shore. Olav immediately swears an oath, declaring he will build a church at Nidaros (Trondheim).⁴⁰ The moment is recorded in the *Heimskringla* briefly: "Thereafter Olaf went out to sea to the eastward, and made the land at Morster Island, where he first touched the ground of Norway. He had High Mass sung in a tent, and afterwards on the spot a church was built."⁴¹ By this time, Olav had become a man converted to Christianity by proof, which is to say by the words of a soothsayer from the Scilly Isles. Bjørnson uses the "Land-Sighting" moment to claim all of Norway for Christianity – via a man who, to all outward appearances, is a thoroughbred Viking. The arrival as envisioned by Bjørnson

Sounds as though church bells chiming,
and then spake the King, spake as tho' dreaming:
Here is the spot to found our kingdom!
Hell, these temple walls defy thee!
Hearts are swelling, souls are yearning
God to Thee alone be glory!⁴²

Grieg's treatment of that musical moment, in the approach to a preparatory cadence in measures 80-82, is reminiscent of a hymn or sacred work, employing turns of phrase more likely to be found in sacred music by Handel than in a national anthem. By means of contrast, the beginning of the piece is very much like a national anthem (though in the case of Norway, the actual national anthem was set to music by Grieg's cousin, Rikard Nordraak).⁴³ Grieg and Nordraak both composed a variety of music intended to be performed at *Sangerfests* ("Singers' Festivals") where male choruses sometimes competed and where the majority of the Norwegian nationalist musical repertoire was born. The change from rousing anthem to solemn cantata only comes at the first mention of their Christian faith, right before Olav is getting ready to speak. For that revelation, the orchestration is

³⁹ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, 115-131, here 129 (Olav's expulsion from Valdemar's lands).

⁴⁰ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 155.

⁴¹ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, 153.

⁴² Grieg, *Landkjenning* Op. 31, in *Edvard Grieg: Samlede Verker*, vol. 16, ed. Benestad, mm. 77-98. The abbreviation "mm." denotes measures or bars in musical notation.

⁴³ The moment in question is a decorated, drawn-out cadence in the key of B major, where the first and third voices in the male choir have passing neighbor-notes around their ultimate destination of D# and F# respectively. The cadence which comes afterwards is resolved authentically, although the passage which follows—the solo recitative—is in the key of E. For a fine example of a Protestant "hymn," see Martin Luther's *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (ca. 1529).

reduced to four cellos, which marks the quiet moment of Olav speaking "Be my faith as yonder mountains / root as deeply, shine as purely / and as these my faith strive upward / on to Him the All-Creator!"⁴⁴ In a sense, the separate styles and aesthetics of religious hymn and national anthem are used as devices that solidify the symbolic conversion that Bjørnson affected in his poem.

By way of contrast, Grieg's incidental music to *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, composed before *Landkjenning*, focuses more heavily on the Romantic tropes regarding magic and mysticism, as well as the feminine. The second movement, "Borghild's Dream," takes place at the moment described earlier where, after being accused of improper conduct, Borghild submits to a trial by hot irons. The dream occurs during the night before the trial and acts as a portent of the future – Bjørnson's stage directions are thus:

Borghild lies partially clothed upon the coverlet. Her hair is disheveled, her sleep restless ... Soft music begins before the curtain goes up, and as it rises it reveals her restless sleep little by little until it comes together in a great terror; she screams, awakens, and sits up. The music reflects the awakening, confused thoughts that swarm to the fore; it stops and she whispers: 'Still burns my anger like glowing iron!' The music follows her as she slowly comes forward, stops, and leans against the back of a chair.⁴⁵

Grieg's treatment of that description involves a very soft melody, rising and falling like the tormented Borghild, with the strings muted and a low roll on the timpani. Harmonically speaking, the passage is dominated by diminished chords and lines which descend chromatically.⁴⁶ While the passage is, in the words of Finn Benestad, "the absolutely weakest part of the entire piece [...] Musically it is thin and cliché-ridden compared to the rest," it does make ample use of the musical tropes that suggest themselves to dreams, mystery and the occult.⁴⁷ In particular, passages which make use of the diminished sonority – two interlocking tritones, or a collection of four minor-thirds – defy the bounds of tonality, existing in a state of ambiguity.⁴⁸ Harmony that is symmetrical and cyclical, like the diminished chord, also suggests an unendingness that is associated with nature and the feminine, both of which have ties to the theme of magic.

⁴⁴ Grieg, *Landkjenning* Op. 31, in *Edvard Grieg: Samlede Verker*, vol. 16, ed. Benestad, mm. 99-106.

⁴⁵ Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson in Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, n. 154.

⁴⁶ "Borghild's Dream," in Edvard Grieg, *Sigurd Jorsalfar: Scenemusikk til Bjørnstjerne Bjørnsons skuespill* Op. 22, in *Edvard Grieg: Samlede Verker*, vol. 19, part 1, ed. Benestad, mm. 1-11.

⁴⁷ Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 154.

⁴⁸ There are several reasons for this ambiguity. Primarily, it is due to the nature of the diminished chord in relation to common-practice tonality. The diminished harmony is constructed entirely symmetrically, and each note can be construed to resolve in several different ways. Because of that, it is often used to take the music to more remote keys. By the time of Grieg, however, the semantic association between diminished chords and themes like uncertainty was more important than the actual harmonic implications. For Romantic approaches to tonality, see *The Second Practice of Nineteenth-Century Tonality*, ed. William Kinderman and Harald Krebs (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

Richard Cohn has discussed the link between the Freudian "Uncanny" and the Romantic musical gestures which hint at the phenomenon. *Sigurd Jorsalfar* is rife with signs of the Uncanny: first between the mystical and cyclical aspects as discussed; second from the blurring of boundaries of the real and the imagined with techniques such as modal inflection, which obscures the feeling of cadences; and last, between the oscillation of parallel major and minor keys in "Borghild's Dream."⁴⁹ These marks of the Uncanny were a major tool in Grieg's reconciliation of "that which was heathen and foreign" with "that which belonged to our people's history," or as a tool to remedy those heathens.⁵⁰

The three extant scenes of *Olav Trygvason* deal almost entirely with the heathen priest and seeress at Trondheim who beseech the gods for victory against Olav – similar to the priests of Baal in Felix Mendelssohn's 1846 oratorio *Elijah*.⁵¹ The prophetess's invocation and the high priest's ritual are rife with musical symbolism, the most prominent of which is the *diabolus in musica* ("the devil in music"), the augmented fourth (or tritone) interval that was considered a sure mark of heathendom in classical European musical repertoire.⁵² Grieg enhances this with other modal inflections and altered scales, set in stark contrast against the triumphant horn-call passages which were surely intended to herald Olav's arrival later in the opera, and the chorus movements which were, in my opinion, planned to be transformed thematically at the end of the opera – sung first in the context of pagan praise, but later sung by all the heathens wishing to be baptized.⁵³

The trajectory of the opera, as Bjørnson imagined it, would have seen Olav triumphant over the burnt remains of the pagan temple:

Olav before the burned-out temple. With the bishop and people standing further down the steps singing God's praise; and from above, from the surrounding forest, the throng of white-robed people desiring to be baptized [...] white-robed men and women who come singing from every direction, white music, white sun shining on the land and in their faces.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Although the "Picardy third" to alter the final cadence of a piece in a minor key to its parallel major (for example, a piece in B minor ending in B major) had been in use for hundreds of years by the time of the Romantic period, it had grown to encompass a number of techniques which are broadly called "mode mixture." I distinguish between tonic chords in parallel keys and the rest of the modal techniques here because of the unique ambiguity that it introduces into a piece.

⁵⁰ See Richard Cohn, "Uncanny Resemblances: Tonal Signification in the Freudian Age," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 2 (August 2004): 285-324, here 286. For Grieg, see Wojciech Stepień, "Musical Categories of the Uncanny in Edvard Grieg's 'Troll Music'," in *Memory of Prof. Finn Benestad (1929-2012)*, *Studia Musicologica Norvegica* 38, no. 1 (2012): 46-64.

⁵¹ Foster, *Edvard Grieg*, 109.

⁵² Grieg, *Olav Trygvason: Operafragment* Op. 50, in *Edvard Grieg: Samlede Verker*, vol. 19, part 2, ed. Benestad.

⁵³ For passages involving recitative with augmented fourths (tritone), see Grieg, *Olav Trygvason*, mm. 21-24. The triadic "horn-call" appears at mm. 77-84, which is followed in mm. 86-123 by the choral passage that was most likely intended to be transformed at the end of the opera.

⁵⁴ Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson in Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 162.

While it may have been difficult to realize Bjørnson's vision of the opera, which was "totally out of step with the aesthetic standards of the 1870s," according to Benestad, it may well have been within Grieg's power to "blow life into this torso of rough-hewn granite."⁵⁵ The opera as it was envisioned would have showcased both the Christian redemption arc of *Landkjenning* (which also featured Olav Tryggvason) and the mystical and magical heathen associations of "Borghild's Dream" from *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, and in keeping with that, Grieg's music in *Olav Trygvason* shows signs of tropes from both of these categories.

Conclusion

If it had ever been fully realized, *Olav Trygvason* would have demonstrated Edvard Grieg's latent talent for drama on a scale which the composer had not yet expressed in his career up. He never wrote a proper opera, since *Peer Gynt* was a melodrama like *Sigurd*. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, for his part, even though he moved on to more Realist artistic endeavors, was crucial in shaping Grieg as an artist and providing him with verse that was suitable to the composer's immense talents. Together, they shaped the artistic conversation in Norway for almost an entire generation.

Bjørnson's historical dramas have been neglected for any sort of textual analysis in modern scholarship, and very few have accessible English translations. Likewise, very little English language scholarship has been done on Grieg relative to his output and historical significance. Both artists would benefit from closer scholarly examination, which would enhance our understanding of nationalist movements on the European "periphery" in the nineteenth century.

Grieg and Bjørnson displayed complex relationships with their nation's history and the Romantic nationalist discourse in which they participated. Tracing the path of historical figures through the sagas into the consciousness of nineteenth-century Norway, and from there into works like *Olav Trygvason*, reveals the part that historical ownership had to play in defining national identity in Norway. Folklore, folk melodies, and historical sagas were crucial to providing the framework for nationalist discourse, and in *Olav Trygvason*, *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, and *Landkjenning* we can see how these materials were applied to great effect.

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⁵⁵ Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson in Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 162, 167-168.