

SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

April 25, 26, and 27, 2008

KELLOGG

Fiery Furnace

INTERMISSION

GRIEG

Peer Gynt, Opus 23

Prelude

Prelude to Act II

In the Hall of the Mountain King

Dance of the Mountain King's Daughter

Aase's Death

Prelude to Act IV: Morning Mood

Arabian Dance

Anitra's Dance

Solveig's Song

Prelude to Act V: Peer Gynt's Homecoming

Song of the Church-Goers

Solveig's Lullaby

Peer Gynt, Opus 23

EDVARD GRIEG

Born June 15, 1843, Bergen

Died September 4, 1907, Bergen

In January 1874 Edvard Grieg received a letter from the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, proposing a collaboration. The two had met in 1866, but in January 1874 neither had reached the full measure of his fame. Grieg, then only 30, was known as the composer of a popular piano concerto. Ibsen, then 45, was living in self-imposed exile, and the plays that would define him as one of the great dramatists—*The Doll's House*, *The Wild Duck*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Master Builder*—were still in the future. Now Ibsen was adapting his mock-heroic poem *Peer Gynt*, first published in 1867, for a stage production in Oslo, and he asked Grieg to compose incidental music for that production. By all accounts, Ibsen was not particularly sensitive to music, but he wrote Grieg an extraordinarily detailed proposal for the kind of music he envisioned, ranging from the places he wanted music to the specific character of each piece.

Grieg was attracted to the idea of working with Ibsen, but he had doubts about *Peer Gynt*. He had for years dreamed of composing a heroic opera on a Norse subject, and the character of Peer Gynt is hardly heroic. In fact, he's an embarrassment: Peer is a lazy, lying, philandering lout who travels throughout the world making money in amoral ways. He learns absolutely nothing from his many adventures, and at the end of the poem he is forced to confront his own emptiness. Peer is redeemed only through the faithful love of Solveig, who has waited a lifetime for his return.

Grieg began to compose the music during the second half of 1874, working in an ivy-covered garden house in Sandviken, outside Bergen, that a friend had lent him. He promptly ran into trouble. He did not like the main character, and he complained that Ibsen's play forced him to compose music for "the most unmusical of subjects." He wrote to a friend in August: "The work on *Peer Gynt* is proceeding very slowly . . . It is a terribly difficult play for which to write music, with the exception of a few places—as, for example, the scene where Solveig sings; that part I have finished. I have also written something for the scene in the hall of the Mountain King—something that I literally can't stand to listen to because it absolutely reeks of cow pies, exaggerated Norwegian nationalism, and trollish self-sufficiency!" He continued work in Fredenburg in Denmark, and by the following January he began to feel more sympathetic to the message of Ibsen's play: "the performance of *Peer Gynt* just now can do some good in Oslo,

where materialism is trying to rise up and choke everything that we regard as high and holy. There is a need for one more mirror, I think, in which all the egotism can be seen, and such a mirror is *Peer Gynt* . . .” Grieg completed the 23 movements of the incidental music that fall, and the play went into rehearsal. The premiere—on February 24, 1876, in Oslo—was a notable success. When combined with Grieg’s music, Ibsen’s stage adaptation lasted five hours, and this massive undertaking ran for 36 performances. Grieg, who was busy with other things (including going to Bayreuth to see the first performance of Wagner’s Ring), did not see the production until that November, and then disaster struck: a fire in January 1877 destroyed the costumes and scenery. The production was abandoned, and Ibsen himself would not see *Peer Gynt* until 1892. Meanwhile, the two concert suites that Grieg had drawn from the larger score had made the composer’s reputation, becoming so famous that Grieg was obliged to conduct them on virtually every concert he led. In 1885 he returned to the score and reorchestrated the music for a larger orchestra than had been available in the small pit in the Christiania Theater in Oslo; he also composed four new pieces for *Peer Gynt*.

At the present performances, the San Diego Symphony offers a generous selection of Grieg’s music to *Peer Gynt*, a version that includes about 2/3 of Grieg’s complete score. Performed in correct chronological order, these excerpts offer all the music from the famous suites, several less-familiar orchestral movements, and a selection of the vocal music.

The music begins with the vigorous *Prelude* to Act I, and like any good overture this offers a foretaste of some of the music to come. Next come three excerpts from Act II, and two of these will all be familiar to those who know the suites. The *Prelude* to Act II opens with the somber *Ingrid’s Lament*, sung after she is abandoned by Peer, and this is followed by *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, where Peer finds himself surrounded by trolls who shriek out their demands that he be killed. Excerpts from Act II conclude with *Dance of the Mountain King’s Daughter*, which she performs to seduce Peer. She is most unattractive, as Grieg’s bucolic music makes clear.

The only music Grieg wrote for Act III is the famous *Aase’s Death*, which depicts the lonely death of Peer’s mother. Some of Grieg’s best music is in Act IV, and ironically Ibsen had planned to drop that act from the stage presentation. In its place, Ibsen suggested that Grieg should compose a “large-scale tone picture suggesting Peer Gynt’s wandering throughout the world; American, English, and French melodies might be interwoven, growing and fading one by

one.” In the event, Act IV—which takes place in Africa—was included, and for it Grieg wrote some of his most evocative music. The excerpts include *Morning Mood* (a depiction of a sunrise in Morocco), *Arabian Dance*, *Anitra’s Dance* (she dances to this seductive music as Peer watches while sipping coffee in her father’s tent). The concluding excerpt is the haunting *Solveig’s Song*, sung as she waits patiently for Peer to return.

Act V depicts Peer’s return home after years of wandering, his recognition of the emptiness of his life, and his redemption through Solveig’s devotion. The excerpts begin with the dramatic *Peer Gynt’s Homecoming*, include the chorus *Oh, Blessed Morning*, and conclude with *Solveig’s Lullaby*.