

Edvard Grieg, *Lyric Pieces*

selections from *Lyriske stykker* opp. 12, 38, 43, 47, 54, 57, 62, 65, 68, and 71

Stephen Hough *pf*

Hyperion 68070, 2015 (1 CD: 73 minutes), \$20

Stephen Hough's CD makes a notable contribution to a long tradition of recording Grieg's *Lyric Pieces* that stretches all the way back to the early twentieth century and Grieg's own acoustic recordings produced by the Gramophone & Typewriter Company in Paris in 1903.¹ The *Lyric Pieces* have enjoyed immense popularity during the twentieth century through the recordings of eminent pianistic personalities, far more than Grieg's other small-scale, but lesser known, compositions, such as his folk-song piano arrangements (opp. 17 and 66) or the *Slåtter* dances (op. 72). Consequently, the *Lyric Pieces* remain closely bound with such legendary names as Walter Gieseking and Emil Gilels, whose recordings helped establish this repertoire within serious pianism.² It was not long before recordings of the complete *Lyric Pieces*, this time by Norwegian pianists, made a debut, including Liv Glaser's RCA recordings in the 1960s and Eva Knardahl's recordings on the BIS label in the late 1970s. Since a resurgence of interest in Grieg's piano music with the 1993 Simax Classics reissue of historical interpretations of his piano works, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth, recordings of the *Lyric Pieces* have continued to appear steadily either alongside other large-scale compositions, mainly Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor op. 16 and Ballade in G minor op. 24, or simply as stand-alone repertoire. Other recent recording projects, motivated by the existence of the composer's own recordings, have taken a historically informed approach to interpreting Grieg's piano music.³

Against this wellspring of recordings of Grieg's *Lyric Pieces*, a truly refreshing interpretation undoubtedly calls for the whole range of a pianist's technical and artistic resources, and an assured grasp of Grieg's 'ideology and culture of sound' which, at times, stretches the miniature, lyric genre to its impressionistic

¹ Five of the nine acoustic recordings are of *Lyric Pieces*: 'Butterfly' (op. 43, no. 1), 'To the Spring' (op. 43, no. 6), 'Gangar' (op. 54, no. 2), 'Wedding Day at Troldhaugen' (op. 65, no. 6) and 'Remembrances' (op. 71, no. 7). Grieg's historical recordings were reissued commercially for the first time in 1993 in the three-CD collection *Edvard Grieg: The Piano Music in Historic Interpretations* (Simax PSC 1809).

² Walter Gieseking recorded a number of the *Lyric Pieces* in 1931, 1939 and 1948. See 'Artists' Index' in the booklet accompanying *Edvard Grieg: The Piano Music in Historic Interpretations* (Simax PSC 1809): 12. His more extensive recording project of 32 *Lyric Pieces* was completed in 1956, although this was released posthumously. See Alfred Kaine, 'Grieg: *Lyric Pieces* by Walter Gieseking', *American Record Guide* 24/3 (November 1957): 107. Emil Gilels's 1974 Deutsche Grammophon recording marks another significant historic landmark. See Richard Freed, 'Recording of Special Merit – Grieg: *Lyric Pieces* by Emil Gilels', *Stereo Review* 35/6 (December 1975): 126.

³ For such an ambitious undertaking, see the 2010 recording Sigurd Slåttembrekk and Tony Harrison, *Edvard Grieg: Chasing the Butterfly – Recreating Grieg's 1903 Recordings and Beyond* (Simax PSC 1299).

extremes.⁴ Hough's approach unfailingly delights and captivates from start to finish with a rich palette of pianistic colours, sensitively nuanced dynamics and pedalling, and supple contrasts in tempo that reanimate these picturesque moods like unfolding vistas of a landscape. His personal selection comprises 27 items drawn from all ten books of the *Lyric Pieces*, nearly spanning Grieg's entire creative life.

The recording begins with the placid 'Arietta' (op. 12, no. 1) and finishes in a cyclic manner with 'Remembrances' (op. 71, no. 7), which nostalgically glances back to the opening 'Arietta' by recalling its tonic, E flat major. The intervening stylistically sensitive performances feature some of Grieg's most popular *Lyric Pieces*, including 'Butterfly', 'Little Bird', 'To the Spring', 'March of the Trolls', 'Notturmo', 'Bell Ringing' and 'Wedding Day at Troldhaugen'. Hough's assured technique, perceptive nuance, balance of texture and evocative tone convey these deceptively simple piano pieces with warmth and immediacy, but, at times, also a reticent manner of expression that befits Grieg's Nordic spirit – the economy of sentiment and directness of address which Grieg captures so well in the *Lyric Pieces*.⁵ Hough's interpretations poeticize the bare eloquence and simplicity of Grieg's music with erudite musicianship and a clear piano sound, always focusing the listener's attention on salient melodic, harmonic and rhythmic features but never overburdening the ear. The fluttering semiquaver runs of 'Butterfly' (op. 43, no. 1) unfold effortlessly yet with rhythmic vigour, the chordal crotchet accompaniment in 'To the Spring' (op. 43, no. 6) is endowed with a crystalline texture as the top notes are voiced delicately in counterpoint with the *cantabile* melody underneath, the falling semitones of the poignant theme in 'Elegy' (op. 47, no. 7) are made more resonant with subtle *tenuto* accents, and the impressionistic *Klangfläche* of open fifths in 'Bell Ringing' (op. 54, no. 6) evanesce lightly from the *pianissimo* tone of the lower register.

On the whole, Hough's chosen tempi are a little slower than the indicated pace, and closer, in this regard, to other contemporary interpretations of the *Lyric Pieces*. A broader tempo tends to emphasize the brooding melancholy that permeates many of these moods, and Hough's approach seemingly adheres to the introspective lyricism of the genre. The performance architecture, however, is not devoid of internal tempo variability and contrast. Hough's phrasing invariably exhibits a purposeful, forward-moving intent and any rubato is judiciously integrated at phrase boundaries bringing out the strophic form of the *Lyric Pieces*. In the longer pieces, the ternary design is, again, enhanced with suitable contrasts in tempo that evoke changes in mood, as heard especially

⁴ Concerning how many of Grieg's miniatures tend to encapsulate abstract sound moods rather than pictorial imagery, see W. Dean Sutcliffe, 'Grieg's Fifth: The Linguistic Battleground of "Klokkeklang"', *The Musical Quarterly* 80/1 (1996): 161–81, and Daniel Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006).

⁵ As Grieg himself had acknowledged, 'We are of north-Teutonic stock, and ... have ... the propensity toward melancholy and brooding ... [But] we have always loved brevity and succinctness, the clear and concise mode of expression ... These qualities are also what we aim for in our artistic endeavours'. See Finn Benestad and William H. Halverson, eds, *Edvard Grieg: Diaries, Articles, Speeches* (Columbus: Peer Gynt Press, 2001): 352.

across the more impressionistic numbers of op. 54. In 'March of the Trolls' (op. 54, no. 3) the middle *cantabile* section in D major is taken at a slower pace and imbued with a dreamy ambience, offering an appeasing respite from the incessant, uncanny motoric drive of the trolls' trudge, portrayed in the outer sections. In the tranquil 'Notturmo' (op. 54, no. 4) the cycle of fifths in the *più mosso* episode is shaped with an impending sense of urgency as the piano sound swells to a *fortissimo* climax before dying down again to an idyllic nocturnal quiescence.

Another notable feature in this recording is that the melody is given a prominent voice throughout, in keeping not only with the nineteenth-century piano genre of *Lieder ohne Worte* but also with the Norwegian folk-song origins of many of Grieg's *Lyric Pieces*. In 'Solitary Traveller' (op. 43, no. 2), 'In My Native Country' (op. 43, no. 3), 'Melody' (op. 47, no. 3), and 'At the Cradle' (op. 68, no. 5), Hough truly sings the melody at the piano, interpreting these pieces more like plaintive folk songs. Throughout the recording, Hough maintains a well-articulated piano tone coupled with frequent pedal changes producing a distinctly clean, contemporary sound. Recorded in St George's in Bristol, the instrument's transparent acoustic is particularly effective for rhythmically fast passagework and iridescent textures in the treble register, encountered for example in the chirping rhythmic motif of 'Little Bird' (op. 43, no. 4), or the pearlescent *glissandi* in 'Sylph' (op. 62, no. 1), 'Summer's Eve' (op. 71, no. 2) and the middle section of 'Homesickness' (op. 57, no. 6). Elsewhere Hough blends the sound more for dramatic effect, as for example in the *bravura* passage which builds up momentum before the *marcato* return of the registrally expanded theme in 'Wedding Day at Troldhaugen' (op. 65, no. 6).

Hough's dynamic range, rhythmic vitality and malleable piano sound effectively communicate a kaleidoscope of emotions: from the sincere intimacy of 'At Your Feet' (op. 68, no. 3) to the sombre retrospection of 'From Early Years' (op. 65, no. 1), the lilting exuberance of salon dances like the 'Valse-Impromptu' (op. 47, no. 1), the playfulness of 'Little Bird' (op. 43, no. 4) and 'Sylph' (op. 62, no. 1), and the powerful surges of spirited energy in 'March of the Trolls' (op. 54, no. 3), 'Wedding Day at Troldhaugen' (op. 65, no. 6) and 'Puck' (op. 71, no. 3).

The liner notes, written by Jeremy Nicholas, give a succinct, yet informative and accurate, account of the *Lyric Pieces* in the broader context of Grieg's nationalistic oeuvre. The cover illustration, *The Mill Stream* by the Norwegian landscape painter Fritz Thaulow, offers an attractive visual complement to the pastoral, idyllic associations emanating from Grieg's music. Hough's other Grieg entries in the Hyperion catalogue include the Piano Concerto in A minor op. 16 and the Cello Sonata in A minor op. 36, evincing his musical artistry for both Grieg's larger forms and his more intimate piano creations.

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