

## *Of Trolls, Frogs, and Mr. McGregor's Garden*

by  
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A friend of mine, an author, posts entries about various historical topics on his blog site. Currently, he is writing a series of articles on the lives of the Great Composers. A few months back, he posted an article on Edvard Grieg, Norway's greatest composer.

As my friend noted in his blog entry – which focused on the composer's musical styles and what critics have thought of his compositions – Grieg was particularly famous for searching the valleys and villages of his beloved mountainous homeland for folk music, and then adapting the melodic strains to the Romantic style of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century orchestral scores.

Reflecting on the half-day visit that my wife Suzanne and I made to Grieg's home near Bergen, Norway, in August 2013, I thought I would offer some of my own brief observations about the composer's bittersweet personal life.

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While most Americans (including myself until this past year) may not be familiar with the name "Grieg," I believe that most of us would recognize the melodic themes in his wonderful scores. Grieg was trained in the best European music schools of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, and he was also a famous piano virtuoso, performing in venues throughout the world, including the United States.

During our brief visit to Norway in the summer of 2013, Suzanne and I gained a greater appreciation for why the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg is such a beloved figure in his homeland.

The year 2013 happened to mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of Expressionist artist Edvard Munch (pronounced "Monk" as we learned); and therefore, tributes to the painter of "The Scream" perhaps overshadowed Grieg's musical accomplishments while we were traveling across Norway. Apparently, both giants of the arts had huge personal challenges to overcome – Munch with depression, and Grieg with the loss of a child and chronic ill health. However, both men ultimately transcended these handicaps and were able to re-invent themselves, producing new masterpieces in new styles as they matured in life.

Edvard Grieg has been perhaps a more unifying figure in Norway than Munch, mainly because of the uplifting nature of his music. While he was only tangentially involved in politics, Grieg's notoriety and folk-based music provided an emotional inspiration to the efforts of Norwegian patriots, who finally won independence for their country from Sweden in 1905, two years before he died. Statues of Grieg are ubiquitous in his beloved city of Bergen, and his works remain as staples of symphonic orchestral groups throughout Norway.

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While Edvard and his wife Nina were performing artists who toured venues throughout the world (oftentimes separately, which didn't do much for their marriage), the couple was finally persuaded by friend Frants Beyer to start putting down roots in Grieg's home town in 1885, on property near the coastline, about 10 miles south of Bergen.

Grieg's reluctance to settle down – particularly in Bergen – was probably due to the loss of their only child, a one-year-old daughter named Alexandra, while on a visit from Christiania (now Oslo) in 1869. Grieg always remained sentimental and perhaps emotionally attached to young children as a result; and despite his and Nina's loss, he apparently embraced throughout his life a child-like optimism toward things that kids loved (such as folktales, nature, and toys).

For instance, upon learning that the children in his neighborhood referred to a nearby depression leading down to the water as "Troll Valley," Grieg decided to name his new villa "Troll Hill," or *Troldhaugen*. As visitors began dropping in from time to time, the distraction-sensitive Grieg had a small but cozy hut built down by the water, where he could practice and compose in isolation.

Suzanne and I made a memorable visit to Troldhaugen during one typically rain-drenched day in Bergen. (The locals have a saying: "There's never bad *outdoor weather* in Bergen – just bad *outer-wear*.") Unfortunately, the lighting was so poor that only a couple of my photos from that day are worth sharing. However, we did enjoy the privilege of listening to a piano concert in the theater, *Trolldsalen* (Troll Hall), built discretely into the hill between the villa and the hut years later, after Troldhaugen had become a national historic site. During our visit, we learned a couple of other interesting stories about Grieg's personal life.

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During one visit to Troldhaugen after Nina and Edvard had settled in to their new villa, a little girl asked Grieg if he had any toys. He replied "yes." Indeed, he had two little dolls sitting on his nightstand by his bed: a troll and a pig. According to his wife Nina, Edvard always patted the dolls and told them "Good Night" before he went to sleep.

Well, the little girl offered Grieg her "pet" frog, a little green cloth doll; and Grieg graciously accepted it. He would treasure this gift for the rest of his life, and it became his mascot whenever he went on tour.

Grieg could be seen wearing the little frog in the pocket of his concert jacket, its head cheerfully popping out. He would lovingly pat his diminutive friend and softly whisper to it "good luck," each time he took the stage.

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Before our visit to Norway, I hadn't realized the extent of relations between Scotland and Norway throughout the history of both nations. I knew that early Medieval Norwegians

had settled the north of England after Roman legionaries left, and these Scandinavians formed the demi-kingdom of Bernicia in Northumbria; also that Norwegian and Danish Vikings had conquered the Faeroes and Shetland Islands; and that Vikings had established earldoms in the Orkneys and Ireland. As a result, many Brits and Irish living today possess Scandinavian DNA.

While Norwegians often raided and conquered parts of Scotland, I did not realize, however, until our visit, that Scots also routinely traded with and at times re-settled on the western shores of Norway. For instance, it was Scottish stone masons who built the first churches and stone buildings used by German merchants who established Bergen as a major trading center of the Hanseatic League in the years following the Black Plague.

Centuries later, one such Scot with the Christian name of "Alexander," after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, wandered around the world for a period, then settled in Bergen. His surname when he arrived was "Greig," which the docent at the Troldhaugen villa insisted was a version of "Greg" and a shortened form of "*McGregor*." Alexander then changed the spelling from Greig to "Grieg" to make his surname sound even more Norwegian (pronounced "*Greeg*").

Alexander's great-grandson – a descendant of the Scottish McGregor clan – thus became Norway's greatest composer.

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As Beatrix Potter had only introduced the character of Mr. McGregor and his tempting vegetable garden to children's literature during the waning years of the composer's life, Grieg probably never had the opportunity to read the famous English author's stories.

Having learned about Grieg's life, I believe that – had he made the connection with these fables – with his love of children's objects and tales, the famed musician would have enjoyed reading about Peter Rabbit and all his adventures. Despite the tragic loss of his only child many years before and his own ill health, Grieg would have known that his personal and professional life had always been blessed with many child-like wonders, and with a sense of inspiration and renewal – the sort of objects that Ms. Potter left the world.

I can't help thinking that the Norwegian composer – with his beloved troll, pig, and frog among his fondest possessions – would have first chuckled and then agreed with the notion that his life had indeed been a "Mr. McGregor's Garden."

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- Bruce (February 2014)