

Benedikte Damgaard  
VIOLIN

Emil Gryesten  
PIANO



THE VIOLIN SONATAS

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## Edvard Grieg: The Violin Sonatas

Benedikte Damgaard, violin  
Emil Gryesten, piano

Violin Sonata no. 1 in F major, op. 8 *23:16*

- [ 1 ] Allegro con brio *9:11*
- [ 2 ] Allegretto quasi andantino *5:01*
- [ 3 ] Allegro molto vivace *9:04*

Violin Sonata no. 2 in G major, op. 13 *20:19*

- [ 4 ] Lento doloroso - Allegro vivace *8:59*
- [ 5 ] Allegretto tranquillo *5:55*
- [ 6 ] Allegro animato *5:25*

Violin Sonata no. 3 in C minor, op. 45 *22:45*

- [ 7 ] Allegro molto ed appassionato *8:49*
- [ 8 ] Allegretto espressivo alla Romanza *6:15*
- [ 9 ] Allegro animato *7:41*

Total playing time: *66:25*

Recorded at Hjørring Gymnasium, January 7-8, 14-15, 2023.

Tonmeister and producer: Federico Mattioli.

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## **Romanticism, Folklorism, Virtuosity - the violin sonatas by Grieg**

*By Emil Gryesten*

Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) is famous for compositional masterpieces in a variety of different genres, such as piano concerto, orchestral suites, short piano pieces, and songs. Yet Grieg wrote curiously little instrumental chamber music. In fact, only six compositions for chamber music constellations exist, counting also the incomplete string quartet in F major. The violin sonatas thus make up half of his chamber music output, and all three sonatas are important contributions to the repertoire for violin and piano duo. No. 3, the C minor sonata, is widely considered one of Grieg's greatest works, and its tremendous popularity has indeed tended to overshadow the recognition of his two earlier works throughout the reception history of Grieg's oeuvre.

Grieg himself was fond of all three of his violin sonatas, describing them thus in 1900: "They represent periods in my development – the first naïve, rich in ideas; the second national; and the third with a wider horizon." Although such classifications almost always result in oversimplification, it seems true that the cycle of the three violin sonatas tell a story of an artistic journey - from a young creative soul's coming to terms with the heritage of great classicist composers in the generations before him; experimenting with a national romantic musical language in the second sonata; and finally arriving at the supreme artistic achievement, which both summarises the past influences and looks ahead into the music of the future.

### **Sonata no. 1 in F major, op. 8**

The first violin sonata reflects the 22-year-old composer's training at the Leipzig Conservatory and strong musical roots in the heritage of German romantic masters like Mendelssohn and Schumann; however, the evolving personal style of the young composer is evident in many of his creative choices throughout the work.

The sonata is an underrated work, in the opinion of this writer. Often programmed alongside the other two violin sonatas, Sonata no.1 is seldom performed on its own, which is a pity. It is a seductively charming work.

The composer spent the summer of 1865 in Rungsted - some 25 kilometres outside Copenhagen - where he stayed with his friend the Danish writer Benjamin Feddersen. During the summer months, Grieg completed his Opus 8, the first violin sonata, shortly after finishing the composition of his Piano Sonata in E minor op. 7.

In November of that year, the F major violin sonata was given its first performance in Leipzig, with Grieg at the keyboard, and was published by the Leipzig-based publisher Edition Peters. In fact, Peters did such a good job of distributing the music across Europe that Grieg's first sonata caught the attention of famous pianist and composer Franz Liszt, a supremely influential personality in the music world at the time. Liszt penned a letter to Grieg in 1868, expressing sincere acknowledgement for the qualities he found in the violin sonata: "It bears witness to a talent for composition—vigorous, reflective, inventive, and of excellent material—which has only to follow its own way to rise to the heights." Liszt invited the young Norwegian to come visit him in Rome. Upon receiving a travel grant for inspirational travels in 1870, Grieg went to see the legendary maestro, who among other things offered Grieg advice on the orchestration of his Piano Concerto in A minor.

Certainly, the F major violin sonata is rich in captivating musical ideas, as both Liszt and Grieg have pointed out. However, Grieg's description of its naivety is perhaps not entirely justified. Instead, there is tension between the classical simplicity of the musical organisation and the many instances of dark, chaotic elements that have a strong presence throughout the work. Thus the governing formal logic rests on an undercurrent of romantic anarchism. Perhaps one might say that, already at the age of 22, Grieg was remarkably successful in finding a personal way of balancing conservatism and progressivism, order and chaos.

The first movement begins with two mysterious chords played by the piano, suggesting the key of E minor. It sets the stage for a melancholic or sombre character - something like the beginning of Schumann's cello concerto, which opens in a similar way. But the listener's expectations quickly turn out to have been led astray, as the music launches into the *Allegro con brio* proper, in F major, opening with an energetic tune in a lilting 6/8 metre.

In the exposition section, Grieg utilises a three-part structure often featured in Beethoven's sonata forms: after the main theme, a contrasting theme in a minor key follows, leading eventually through a transition to the expected secondary theme in the dominant key. In this case, we are presented with a dark, romantic theme - a striking moment in this opening movement - which opens the gates to wilder, stormier kinds of romanticism than the charming, merry music of the main theme material. We do, however, continue to a secondary theme in the expected dominant key of C major, which opens somewhat hesitantly in the piano, but brings the exposition to a festive conclusion.

Following the repetition of the exposition, the beginning of the development section brings the tempo down to andante, the mood dark and brooding, setting the stage for a large development section where the tempestuous tendencies present in the minor-mode material presented earlier in the movements reach their culmination, after which we return to a standard recapitulation. At the end of the movement, the tempo returns to andante, and a few measures of darker, more elegiac music close out the movement. It is quite striking how dark romanticism creeps in at important formal hinges throughout the piece: at the opening, at the link between the exposition and development, and in the coda.

The second movement, marked *Allegretto quasi andantino*, is in the style of a minuet, an archaic dance form evoking feelings of nostalgia for a noble but mysterious distant past, specifically for the music of 18th century masters like Händel and Domenico Scarlatti. Curiously, there are some rather striking similarities to Brahms' 1st cello sonata, which also has a minuet in A minor as its second movement; but the sonata

by Brahms was published later in 1865, around the same time as Grieg's, so it seems the two composers both independently got the idea to write a similar kind of minuet for their sonatas for violin and cello, respectively, around the same time. The middle part, trio section, is in the style of a Norwegian folk dance, more specifically a leaping dance called "springar;" the violin part employs playing techniques derived from the playing style of the Norwegian folk music instrument Hardanger fiddle.

The brilliant and virtuosic third movement, marked *Allegro vivace*, is reminiscent of certain pieces by Robert Schumann: energetic and often frenetic opening characters, and sudden changes of mood. Like the first, Grieg's third movement is in sonata form of the three-partite type, featuring a festive opening theme, a mysterious, brooding transitional theme in the mediant key of A minor containing a characteristic syncopated motif, and a sweet, nostalgic second theme in the expected dominant key. The stormy development section opens with a *fugato* on the minor-mode transition theme.

### **Sonata no. 2 in G major, op. 13**

Norwegian violin virtuoso Ole Bull (1810-1880), one of the important instrumentalists of the 19th century, who was sometimes called "the Paganini of the North," had a significant influence on Grieg's creative development and career trajectory. It was Bull who already in 1858, when Grieg was 15 years old, advised the aspiring composer to travel to Germany to study at the famous conservatory in Leipzig, which was founded by Mendelssohn in 1843. Ole Bull was a pioneer in integrating Nordic folk music into his classical concerts. He championed the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle and developed ways of converting playing techniques specific to this instrument (which with its flat stringing was more suited for polyphonic playing) to the classical violin. According to Grieg, it was the older violinist who "opened my senses towards the beauty and originality of Norwegian music. From him, I learned many forgotten folk tunes and, above all, my own nature".

In the Second Violin Sonata, composed two years after the first, around the time of Grieg's honeymoon following his marriage in 1867 with the Norwegian soprano Nina Hagerup (Grieg's cousin), Grieg has arrived at the national romantic style for which he became famous. He wrote the sonata while also working on the sketches for his Piano Concerto. All three movements contain folkloristic elements, and fiddle techniques inspired by Bull are an important part of the violin texture.

Grieg's Norwegian tone worried Danish composer Niels W. Gade, who, according to legend - after the first performance of the work in Copenhagen - commented, "Dear Grieg, the next sonata you must really make less Norwegian," to which Grieg replied, "on the contrary, Professor, the next one will be even worse!"

Like the first sonata, the opening movement begins not in the main key, but instead in an elegiac G minor key, marked *lento doloroso*. The powerful, cadenza-like passages in the violin and the overall gravitas of the slow introduction leads the listener to expect a work of much grander scope than the first sonata. After steering the music towards the major-mode form of the dominant ninth chord, we arrive at the main sonata allegro (*allegro vivace*). The exposition's main theme is in the style of a vigorous "springar" dance, followed by a melancholic second theme in a lilting 3/4 metre. The modal harmonic shadings of the minor key give the second theme a folk-tune-like flavour. Though the first movement is in a fairly traditional sonata form, the impression is rather like a fantasia, alternating between exuberant virtuoso passages and calm, lyrical moments.

The second movement is in E minor and marked *Allegretto tranquillo*; most performances render it more tranquillo than allegretto. It's in ternary ("ABA") form, and the outer "A" sections feature a hauntingly beautiful folk-song-like melody. This melody is first introduced by the piano, and then further elaborated by the violin, with a few interruptions by more dance-like passages. The overall pensive or melancholic character sometimes erupts in passionate, more powerful outbursts. The "B" section brings out a more calm and content spirit, and is a beautiful oasis right at the centre of the entire sonata.

The brilliant third movement finale, *Allegro animato*, is, like the second movement, in ternary form. The opening section is like a fast, energetic waltz, intermixed with virtuoso triplet passages for both piano and violin. The middle part is a calm, dreamy waltz, which after some moments turns surprisingly dark, threatening to fall into real tragedy, though the music is soon steered back into peaceful territory. After a reprise of the opening allegro, the sonata closes with an exalted coda bringing back the theme of the middle section, now in a jubilant fortissimo.

### **Sonata no. 3 in C minor, op. 45**

Twenty years were to pass before Grieg would write another sonata for violin and piano (completed 1887), during which time Grieg composed several of his most celebrated works, including the Peer Gynt suite, the From Holberg's Time suite, and several opuses of lyrical pieces for piano. The third sonata was not more Norwegian than the second - as Grieg had joked to Gade about twenty years earlier - but was truly of a "wider horizon." Undoubtedly written in a personal and very Norwegian style, Grieg had transcended the overt folklorism of his earlier works. One also senses an influence of later romantic composers, especially Wagner and Brahms, and all these elements merge into a uniquely personal compositional style. The third sonata is Grieg's supreme chamber musical achievement, and one of the highlights in the entire repertoire for violin and piano. It stands alongside some of the finest examples of the romantic sonata for violin and piano, such as the 3rd violin sonata by Brahms and Cesar Franck's violin sonata. All three works mentioned were composed around the same time, during the years 1886 and 1887.

The two outer movements have some strong resemblance to musical textures in Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman*. It is as if Grieg is now more oriented towards the innovative styles of progressivist composers like Liszt, Wagner, and Dvorak, rather than anchored to the heritage of his earlier more classicist models, Mendelssohn and Schumann, or the folklorism of his early mature style. Perhaps this is what Grieg himself meant by describing his third sonata as having "a wider horizon."

The first movement opens *in medias res*, in a turbulent 6/8 metre. After a short statement of the frenetic opening theme in forte dynamics in the violin surrounded by violent chords in dotted rhythms in the piano, the dynamics drop and the violin sings a more extended arioso-like melody accompanied by nervous tremolos in the piano. We might here hear echoes of Senta's ballad, and Grieg's music also seems to tell tales of dangerous sea voyages and burning passion. At the moment the second theme enters, the music calms somewhat down, though the persistently syncopated rhythms create a feeling of uneasy forward propulsion.

The C minor sonata would be the last time Grieg used the traditional sonata form, but even in this opening movement, the sonata framework almost completely dissolves into a fantasia-like flow of musical ideas. What remains of the sonata form is more of a principle of thematic rotation - twice cycling through various thematic sections, and culminating in an exciting, fast-paced coda. Despite the opening theme occurring in various disguises and transformations throughout the movement, this recurrent thematic material adds a strong sense of cohesion and logic to the musical flow.

The second movement bears the description *alla Romanza*, referring to a narrative style of poetry and song (of Spanish origin), music that dreams of a glorious past and lost beauty. The piano opens with an unusually long solo passage, presenting a cantabile melody with a wonderfully rich harmonisation. Grieg instructs the pianist to use long sustained pedals, which creates an aquarelle-esque blending of chords. Younger composers such as Puccini and Debussy must have appreciated passages such as this.

After the violin's statement of the cantabile melody of the romanza, we enter the middle section, a dancing *moresca*, a type of renaissance pantomime dance, remaining within the second movement's overall character of nostalgia for the past.

The finale, *allegro animato*, is something like a Norwegian-inspired *dance macabre*, and requires tremendous virtuosity of both players. The swirling winds of rapid oscillations in open fifths return and we once again seem to be out on the stormy

ocean. The movement is in a somewhat free sonata form, where the development section has been replaced with a contrasting calm and expressive middle section, seeming to recall the romanza style of the second movement. Towards the end of the movement, this contrasting theme reappears, accompanied by exuberant arpeggios in the piano, and the energy increases into the hectic coda which brings the sonata to a close.

## **Duo Damgaard-Gryesten**

Benedikte Damgaard and Emil Gryesten met as schoolmates at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and began their musical collaboration 10 years ago.

They share a profound passion for chamber music and have performed together extensively throughout Denmark, in the Faroe Islands and in Vietnam, in concert series at venues such as Nordens Hus Torshavn, Grand Concert Hall Hanoi, Hue Concert Hall, Copenhagen Summer Festival, Radiohuset Kbh, Glyptotekets Sommerkoncerter, Vendsyssel Festival, and in most of the Danish music societies.

The duo has recently completed a concert series featuring all of the Beethoven violin sonatas.

Both members of the duo have been selected for the Danish Arts Foundation's "Young Elite" program, a special career development program that supports the artistic and international career development of the most talented young Danish musicians. Individually and together they have released 9 CDs of solo and chamber music, and among their many awards, they have won the Jacob Gade Violin Competition, Nordic Piano Competition, Royal Danish Academy of Music Chamber Music Competition, and Val Tidone International Chamber Music Competition.

Currently, Benedikte is a member of the Royal Danish Orchestra, and Emil is assistant professor of piano and chamber music at the Royal Danish Academy of Music.

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