

AGATHE BACKER GRØNDAHL (1847-1907)

Cecilie Dahm *

In a letter of 1866, the composer Halfdan Kjerulf wrote to his young, most talented pupil, Agathe Backer, who, following his advice, was studying composition and piano in Berlin:

And become an artist as much as you want, but believe those as well who advise you to learn all you can as long as you can, and do not set as an inescapable goal that you have to become a concert pianist. No—to be able, but not to need it, is the best. Follow the common road of women, if that is what God grants you to do: take your art with you as a delectable ornament by which you can light up your surroundings, but do not leave the common way in order to become a concert pianist.

Halfdan Kjerulf was a child of his time in holding such opinions. Women's musical talents were best confined to the private sphere. To break out of this constraint and become a professional was a destiny he did not wish for her. He knew from his own experience that the life of an artist was full of difficulties.

But the eighteen-year old Agathe Backer, full of her studies, had another opinion. In a long reply to her most beloved teacher, she wrote *inter alia*:

I do not understand how both you and my parents could object to the fact that I want to become what one calls a female artist [...] It seems to me that a beautiful, independent future for a woman can be found in the simple act of striving, if possible, to be able to present an enjoyable experience to people, especially if that future included a way to travel and to see a little of the world! But time will decide. I simply feel that there is something in me that will never give me peace, and which constantly drives me onward [...] for I love art so much that the desire to master it is indescribable.

In these lines we meet a woman and an artist who was to achieve a strong position in the musical life of nineteenth-century Norway. As a composer she was in the first rank, on a par with Edvard Grieg and Halfdan Kjerulf. As a pianist of international renown she became a cornerstone in the building of a professional musical life in Norway. And in respect of the choice of the way of the “ordinary woman” or the artist, she achieved both: she married and had three sons.

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Growing Up

Agathe Backer was born on 1 December 1847 in Holmestrand, a little town south of Oslo, where she grew up in comfort in an art-loving family. Nils Backer, a successful businessman, and his wife Sophie had four daughters, all of whom were gifted in drawing and music. Agathe's sister Harriet Backer, who was three years her senior, became a famous artist: but it was Agathe, with her special musical gifts, around whom everything revolved. At three years old she was already composing small melodies at her grandmother's piano. "It was certain from the first moment that Agathe was a *Wunderkind*", wrote Harriet in her memoirs.²

When Agathe was ten years old the family moved to Christiania,³ where she was educated by the composer and pianist Halfdan Kjerulf. He realised very quickly that her domestic *milieu* was too narrow for a special talent such as Agathe's. But her parents did not want their daughter to have a public career, which would have been against all convention. In addition, they thought a domestic life would better suit her shy and romantic spirit. However, it was not unusual for parents to send their daughters out into the world to develop their talents, and on Kjerulf's advice they agreed to send her to the music academy in Berlin to study piano and composition with the famous professor Theodor Kullak. She was then seventeen years old.

During her years of study in Berlin, Agathe focussed on her studies with great intensity. At a public "pupils' evening" she impressed with her piano playing. She composed several songs, and two works for orchestra.

On the Road to Fame

In 1868 Agathe made her first public appearance in Christiania. The conductor of the orchestra was the still unknown Edvard Grieg, who had chosen the twenty-year old Agathe Backer to be the soloist in Beethoven's fifth piano concerto. This was a breakthrough: "An extraordinary musical talent, for one can count on one's fingers the number of women in whom such inspiration flows", wrote the most fearsome critic, who described her as a strong and self-possessed artistic personality. After her studies in Berlin she gave several concerts of her own in Christiania, both as pianist and composer. The public and the press showed an overwhelming interest in her. The maturity and self-possession of her playing also earned her acceptance as a composer. She was the first woman in Norway to produce an orchestral work, a *Scherzo* for woodwinds, two horns and orchestra, a student work from Berlin. This was very well received by the press, having been eagerly anticipated. But it was her songs that impressed most. These songs received the best possible first performances by the singer Nina Grieg, wife of Edvard Grieg.

In Christiania, Agathe was a sought-after pianist. In 1870 she participated in one of the concerts of the legendary violinist Ole Bull, and in the same year she began a study tour of

² From Gunnar Graarud, *Holmestrandiana (Holmestrand, 1929)*

³ Between 1624 and 1925 the Norwegian capital Oslo was known as Christiania [Kristiania].

Italy and Germany with a strong recommendation from Ole Bull. Her sister Harriet accompanied her, as she did on several of Agathe's journeys. Harriet had studied at art school in Christiania. She had the opportunity to study world art, combining this with the job of being Agathe's travelling companion, for, as she wrote in her memoirs, "All these journeys were not really for my sake; it was always to follow my sister Agathe; —but they nonetheless made a great impact on me..."⁴

In Leipzig Agathe played Beethoven's fifth piano concerto with the Gewandhausorchester, and in Florence she took lessons with Hans von Bülow. But the highlight was her stay at the Altenburg castle in Weimar, where Franz Liszt gave his piano masterclasses. Here she got the opportunity to perform her own compositions, which were "very well received" by the aging master. In the 1870s she built up an outstanding career with a series of concerts all over Scandinavia. Everywhere she made an impact with her clear, poetic playing and her strong artistic personality: "She has the instrument completely in her power"; "...the wonderful combination of a woman's grace and a man's energy", according to some reviews. In 1875 she was elected a member of the Svenska musikaliska akademien [Swedish Musical Academy]. She had become a famous name all over the north. A Danish newspaper prophesied a great future, adding, "...if the circumstances are propitious for her development".

Marriage and Career

How propitious *were* the circumstances for this artistic development? In 1875 Agathe married the singer, teacher and conductor Olaus Andreas Grøndahl, who was a central figure in Norway's choral movement. The same year she received an offer of a leading teaching post at the well-known Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore in the United States. She politely refused. Her strong feelings of loyalty to her family may have been one reason for this refusal. Olaus Grøndahl was also offered a post at the Peabody: but he had established himself as a choir leader and singer in Christiania, with many interesting opportunities ahead, so the young couple remained in the Norwegian capital.

They were at the centre of a strongly developing musical life that offered many challenges. But it was a musical life without official support. The public was still unfamiliar with much classical music, and had to be conquered again and again. This required strong motivation and idealism. To help on the economic side they took pupils, as did all their musical colleagues. For Agathe Backer this meant from now on the need to divide her time and energies between domestic duties, concerts, teaching and—in her spare time—composition. Later came children—a daughter who died after two months, and three sons. In Agathe, Olaus Grøndahl had a solid support. She became a regular accompanist for his male choir, and together they gave concerts. A tour to Sweden had to be cancelled because of overwork and illness.

From childhood Agathe had suffered from poor health, including an illness of the ear, already present in her thirties, which had made her almost deaf in one ear. But in spite of

⁴ *From an unpublished manuscript (3856:26) of autobiographical notes in the Manuscript Department at the National Library of Norway.*

this she continued her concert activities, with breaks for childbirth, frequent tours in Norway and the other Scandinavian countries. By reading the critics we can see that her performances were brilliant, stamped with poetry, authority and strength. She presented the best of the European piano repertory to the Norwegian public, especially in the field of chamber music. Closest to her own musical tastes were Beethoven and Schumann. Often her own compositions were in her programmes. People loved to hear her playing. In 1885 she was honoured with the order *Pro literis et artibus*.

How did she feel about giving concerts? By nature she was reserved, and seldom talked about her successes. She was a perfectionist, and in addition suffered severely from stage fright. Her son, the pianist Fridtjof Backer-Grøndahl, described his mother as follows: "To play in concerts was a great suffering, almost a trial. When she sat in the artists' room, nobody was allowed to speak to her. She sat quite quietly, profoundly serious, concentrating only on her music, to reach the perfection that was her goal throughout her life".

In Paris and London: a Meeting with George Bernard Shaw

In 1889 and 1890 Agathe was enthusiastically received in London and Birmingham, where she performed an extensive programme that included Beethoven's fifth piano concerto and, at Grieg's own wish, Grieg's piano concerto in A minor. Among those on whom she made a great impression was George Bernard Shaw, England's sharpest music critic at that time. He exclaimed that she was one of Europe's greatest pianists. In London he visited her for a newspaper interview, published under his signature "Corno di Bassetto". Here she tells, "in an excellent English", about her studies and her family duties; about giving concerts; and about when she finds time to compose.

She composes, she says, in the quiet of the evening, when the day's work is done: chiefly, indeed, in the evenings of December, when the year's work is done. "What work?" I ask, astounded. "Oh, all the things one has to do" she replies "the housekeeping, the children, the playing, the three lessons I give every day to pupils". I rise up in wrath to protest against this house, these children, these pupils swallowing up the ministrations that were meant for mankind; but she adds, with a certain diffidence as to her power of expressing so delicate a point in English, that it is as wife and mother that she gets the experience that makes her an artist. I collapse. Bassetto is silenced. He can only bow to the eternal truth, and think how different his column would be if all artists were like this one. Here, then, is the reason why she never came to England before. She was too busy in her own house!⁵

Shaw also praised her compositions, and summarised his impressions as follows: "...she leaves England—surely only until next season—with a London reputation as a great

⁵ Originally published in *The Star*, 13 July 1889. Reprinted in Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Shaw's Music: the Complete Musical Criticism in Three Volumes, vol. 1* (London: The Bodley Head, 1981), 699-703. The passage quoted is from p. 701-2.

Beethoven player, a great Schumann player, a great Chopin player, and, consequently, a great pianoforte player".⁶

In 1889 Agathe played Grieg's piano concerto at the Paris Exposition universelle: "a queen of her instrument", wrote a critic. In Agathe, Grieg had one of the most splendid interpreters of his concerto.

The Last Concerts

From the beginning of the 1890s Agathe's health began to deteriorate, and she had to save her strength. A large operation resulted in serious nerve problems, and she regarded herself as finished as a pianist. Rescue came via her close friend and adviser Edvard Grieg, who insisted that she play his concerto at the music festival in Bergen in Summer 1898. She roused herself, and fulfilled the engagement. It was to be an artistic victory, and in the following years she gave concerts in Norway, Sweden and Finland. She then retired to compose and to teach, in spite of the fact that she was nearly deaf, and suffering from tinnitus, "...a buzzing in the head day and night, completely beyond my ability to control the whole apparatus", as she wrote in a letter to her son Nils. Her last efforts were dedicated to her youngest son, Fridtjof Backer-Grøndahl: he was to become one of Norway's most important pianists.

Compositions

From childhood until her final year, Agathe composed. To compose was to become her dearest activity, a counterweight to the stresses and nerves of concert life. "There is no greater happiness than to compose, to create something really beautiful, to draw something from one's own soul and send it into another's" (letter to her son Fridtjof). Composing came easily to her. She elaborated themes very quickly, wrote them down at once, and seldom or never revised them. One of those who really appreciated her compositions was Grieg, who encouraged and supported her. In Grieg Agathe found a confidant. The letters between them, especially from their last year, are a gripping testimony to an intimate friendship between the souls of two artistic soul-mates.⁷ It was the lesser forms—songs and piano pieces—that were Agathe's natural forms of expression. She produced many—250 songs, and 150 piano pieces, amounting to seventy opus numbers in all. Among these are around seventy arrangements of Norwegian folk songs and dances. From the first it was the songs, with their combining of text and music, that were closest to her. The earliest songs date from the 1860s and are in the European romantic *Lied* tradition, with Mendelssohn and Schumann as models. They show a deep understanding of their texts, a strong sense of form, and an ability to construct a melody. Among them is the beautiful and very romantic

⁶ Originally published in an article entitled "Exploiting Children and Critics", *The Star*, 19 July 1889. Reprinted in Laurence, ed., *Shaw's Music*, vol. 1, p. 707-11. The passage quoted appears on p. 709.

⁷ *Edvard Grieg: Brev i utvalg 1862-1907*, ed. Finn Benestad (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1998), vol. 1.

“Til min hjertes dronning” [To the Queen of my Heart], to a text by Shelley. It was published as her first opus, and was to become one of the Norwegian romances most frequently included in concert programmes, even long after her death. Later on she elaborated this in a more daring style, and a freer form. In her twenty large-scale, frequently virtuosic concert studies she places herself in the Chopin/Liszt tradition. As a pianist she explored all the instrument’s possibilities, often with a masculine power and intensity. The later songs are coloured by late romanticism, melody and accompaniment peppered with chromaticism and refined chord combinations. This is especially the case with the songs to texts concerning the ocean—this was one of her favourite themes—where the piano part is often clearly used for tone-painting.

As a composer she stood alone among men. We think that she did not herself see this as unnatural. The question of her place as a *creator* of music was never put. Her compositions, included in her concert programmes from early on, were very popular with a wide public, and were acknowledged with admiration and on their own terms. For Agathe herself it was probably never a matter of a fight to establish herself as a composer. But on the other hand she did not cross the line set down for women composers. By confining herself to songs and piano pieces she placed herself in a particular tradition, and in this respect she confirmed the opinion that women and the lesser forms go together.

Agathe Backer Grøndahl had a background in bourgeois surroundings that laid down clear borders for women’s development, and she remained loyal to this custom. Her answer to Shaw—“it is as a wife and mother that you gain experience as an artist”—expresses this clearly. On the other hand, she had in her old age a feeling of bitterness that she was meant to be someone greater. More than once she expresses this, among other places in a letter to her son Nils: “...when I reflect on what I could have achieved if I had not lived in this narrow, underdeveloped condition, I am filled with sadness. As it now is, it is small things all together”. We know that she wished to write in the large-scale forms: her two orchestral works from her student days show assuredness and skill in her writing in these larger forms. But this required quiet and concentration. When would Agathe have found this? Her sister, the artist Harriet Backer, who never married, saw the impossibility of combining a woman’s life with an artistic career: “...this [art] cannot be maintained as an additional job, because it requires all thoughts and abilities” (letter to her mother). Harriet also accepted the consequences of this theory when, contrary to her sister, she chose to give herself fully to her painting.

Agathe Backer Grøndahl’s external life was not marked by great things. But she wrote her own world into her compositions. In over 400 songs and piano pieces she embraced a very broad register of feelings and moods. On the one hand were miniatures, pointed, often with humour, many of them for children. On the other hand came broad, elaborate piano pieces and songs about depression, sorrow and passion. Today she is mainly remembered for her beautiful, lyrically poetic compositions, her *Serenade* for piano or for the most profound of all her songs, “Mot kveld” [Eventide]. These are compositions that, supreme in form and melody, have become jewels in Norway’s romantic musical treasury, and are still heard. Nevertheless, they show only a small part of her rich artistic mind.