The String Quartet in G minor by Edvard Grieg is quite unlike other string quartets. Indeed, its originality is so marked that it is easy to imagine it has no predecessor in the string quartet repertoire. However, since no quartet is written in isolation from what has gone before, it must be assumed that some work, or works, in the string quartet tradition served as a model for Grieg. It is strange that no effort has been made by musicologists or others to enquire into this. Until now, that is. By placing side by side two works that at first sight seem fairly different, this recording aims to bring into the open, for the first time, the fascinating details that link them.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
1 - 4  String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, D. 810

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)
5 - 8  String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 27

Oslo String Quartet
The Schubert Connection

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

String Quartet No. 14 in D minor D. 810

Death and the Maiden

1. Allegro 10:58
2. Andante con moto 12:53
4. Presto 9:05

Edvard Grieg (1843–1907)

String Quartet in G Minor Op. 27

5. Un poco Andante – Allegro molto ed agitato 11:45
7. Intermezzo. Allegro molto marcato – Più vivo e scherzando 6:06
8. Finale. Lento – Presto al Saltarello 8:56

Oslo String Quartet

Geir Inge Lotsberg and Liv Hilde Klokk (violins)
Are Sandbakken (viola) and Øystein Sonstad (cello)

The connection between Edvard Grieg’s String Quartet in G minor and Claude Debussy’s String Quartet in the same key is very well documented. On the surface, this connection might seem a little unlikely since Debussy once – a little cruelly perhaps – dismissed Grieg’s music as having the strange and delightful taste of pink candy filled with snow. But a closer look at Debussy’s own music reveals that he in fact owed more to his older colleague than he cared to admit. Both their G minor quartets not only share the same tonic key, but also the general outline of the main themes, which are thematically prominent throughout the two quartets. Thus both works are in effect cyclical, a device not so common in chamber music before Grieg’s time. There are also, of course, many differences between these two works, but it remains fascinating to note the similarities between them.

However, comparatively little (or rather, to the best of my knowledge, nothing at all) has been written on the subject of the models Grieg himself might have had for his string quartet, in terms of style, instrumentation and musical idiom. As is well known, Grieg did not consider himself a master of the big forms, and, despite such an incredibly successful work as the early Piano Concerto in A minor, history on the whole has proved him right. He even went so far as to suppress his only symphony, literally forbidding posterity to perform or hear the work. However, he never actually destroyed the manuscript and this indicates, perhaps, that he still harbored ambitions to be a symphonist.

At all events, it seems reasonable to see the G minor String Quartet as an attempt by Grieg to “redeem” himself as a composer of music on a larger scale. He said that he wanted this new work to sound as big as possible for the four string instruments, and the frequent use of double stops, loud dynamics and heavy accents certainly lends to it an orchestral air. In fact more than one string orchestra has tackled the work, only adding a double bass part to the already full-bodied texture.

During composition of this quartet, Grieg repeatedly met stumbling blocks in terms of difficulty of form and lack of inspiration. Much can be attributed to the fact that he was going through a particularly difficult phase in his personal life at the time, as well as suffering from one of his recurring losses of confidence. This certainly makes an imprint on the music: its sombre and troubled atmosphere makes it a somewhat problematic, even recalcitrant piece, in spite of its many passages of repose and light.
The main theme is derived from a song that Grieg composed in 1876 called “Spillemænd” (Fiddlers), based on a poem by Henrik Ibsen. In the song the protagonist comes to the conclusion that he is a failure both as a lover and as a human being. There can be little doubt that Grieg himself identified to a certain degree with this figure.

The opening theme is very much an example of the typical Grieg leitmotif (already heard extensively in the Piano Concerto): a falling minor second and major third. This leitmotif permeates the whole quartet on a scale that was quite unprecedented at the time, especially in the chamber music repertoire. Even the delicate second subject (which usually plays the role of a complete contrast to the main theme) is here practically a note-by-note reproduction of it, although transformed into the major and in another key and a different mood.

The lyrical and song-like melody that opens the second movement is soon interrupted by a dramatic and dark middle section, again based on the leitmotif. The music frequently reaches climaxes of such intensity that the sonorous capabilities of the four string instruments are stretched to their limits.

The third movement, an angular Scherzo in disguise, with heavy syncopations and hemiolas that threaten to mask the notated rhythm completely, is once again based on the opening motif. However, the contrasting trio is in an unabashedly rustic folk idiom – Norwegian folk music is of course a major influence on Grieg’s music as a whole.

After a brooding introduction the last movement flings itself into a fast and furious dance in 6/8 time, resembling a tarantella. Stubbornly repeated and syncopated double-stops are prominent features, and there is an abundance of fast scales in unison, and other kinds of virtuosic string writing, all making the lives of the performers less comfortable.

The quartet ends in some sort of triumph, albeit a hollow one: just after the leitmotif makes its final appearance in glorious major, we are briefly, but powerfully, reminded of the dark minor that opened the piece.

Descriptions like this may go some way to explaining the individuality of this string quartet, but only by listening to it can one fully realize how unique it really is. This brings us back to the question of whether Grieg looked to any earlier music as a model. As members of Oslo String Quartet we have had ample opportunity to compare the G minor Quartet with a lot of other great works, but after many years giving concerts at home and abroad we have never met anything quite resembling it – apart from the Debussy quartet, of course. But that was its sibling, so to speak.

So, where to look for its ancestors? It was when we started tackling another centerpiece of the string quartet repertoire, Franz Schubert’s Quartet in D minor (“Death And The Maiden”), that it dawned on us that here was a possible answer, for we were struck by the number of traits in this work with close parallels in the Grieg quartet.

Like the G minor Quartet, the “Death and the Maiden” Quartet stands out as a very singular work, even in Schubert’s own oeuvre, with its sombre mood and uncompromising directness of expression. It was written at a time when Schubert was suffering from great despair, borne of his terminal illness and of a sense of failing as a human being. In a letter to a friend he wrote: “Think of a man whose health can never be restored, and who from sheer despair makes matters worse instead of better. Think, I say, of a man whose brightest hopes have come to nothing, to whom love and friendship are but torture, and whose enthusiasm for the beautiful is fast vanishing; and ask yourself if such a man is not truly unhappy.” Schubert had never before reflected his personal misery as directly as he did in this quartet, and, perhaps not surprisingly, it was considered difficult and relatively inaccessible by his friends and by early performers of the work. The music was not performed in public until several years after his death.

The quartet derives its name from the song “Der Tod und das Mädchen” (Death and the Maiden) that Schubert had composed in 1817, based on a poem by Matthias Claudius. It depicts a young woman who is dying and who asks Death to pass her by and not touch her, but she is ultimately seduced by his sweet and comforting words, as he invites her to sleep in his arms. This was a common art theme from the Renaissance, later being picked up by Romanticism, and resurfacing again as late as in Edvard Munch’s “Det syke barn” (The Sick Child).

The dark piano chords that open the song provide the main theme on which the second movement of the quartet and its variations are based. Developing from a funeral march-like opening, the music of this movement subsequently reaches a violent climax that threatens to overreach the sonorous capacity of the four string instruments.
Indeed, the subject of death permeates the entire work, starting at the very outset with the fearsome destiny-packed opening chords of the first movement, and culminating in the fast and furious finale in 6/8 time, resembling a tarantella, a dance often associated with death. The ominous triplet rhythm that runs through the whole opening movement, almost like a leitmotif, briefly reappears in the finale as a triumphal march, but it celebrates a hollow victory, and the movement ends in despair.

The third movement is an angular scherzo with an abundance of syncopations and heavy double-stops. However, the contrasting trio is in a folk idiom in the form of a gentle ländler, a favorite device of Schubert.

Stubbornly repeated and syncopated double-stops are a prominent feature of the finale, and the fast scales and virtuosic string writing make the lives of the performers very difficult at times.

The similarities between the two works should be quite obvious by now, and the list could go on. But this is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the possible connections between these two quartets of Schubert and Grieg. Rather, it can be seen as a starting point for further exploration. According to scholars, there is no record of Edvard Grieg ever hearing or reading the score of “Death and the Maiden”. If he did, it might well have been while he was studying in Leipzig. In fact, this is highly probable, since the music of Schubert had by then gradually regained popularity and was again being regularly performed after some years of “hibernation”.

Did Grieg model his string quartet on Schubert’s masterpiece? We do not know, but playing or listening to the two quartets together certainly raises the question, and the possibility is a fascinating one. At all events, we are confident that the last word on this has not been said. Stay tuned on www.stringquartet.com

Øystein Sonstad
Oslo String Quartet

Oslo String Quartet is widely recognized as one of the most versatile string quartets of our day. Since it was founded in 1991 it has established a reputation as an ensemble that unites high artistic standards with a degree of playfulness and an absolute integrity. The quartet’s concerts and recordings have consistently received acclaim, both by the public and by critics. A strong attachment to the music of Beethoven has resulted in several performances of his complete string quartets, for example in the quartet’s festival ”The Beethoven Code” in 2006. Their programs range from the classic string quartet repertoire to the works of contemporary composers, but also include music in other genres, and their unique versions of, for example, Peer Gynt and Tosca break with what is normally expected of a string quartet.

The quartet has played regularly in many important halls and festivals, such as the Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall, the Dortmund Internationales Streich Quartett Festival, the Risør Chamber Music Festival, the Oslo Quartet Series, the Orlando Festival and the Canary Islands Music Festival. Outside Norway, it is in Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Spain and Denmark that the quartet has given most concerts. The quartet is never happier than when playing in small rooms – rooms of the size for which chamber music was originally written – and such “house concerts” are the Oslo String Quartet’s most important arena when sharing challenging programmes with its public.

The Oslo String Quartet plays on instruments loaned by Dextra Musica and the ensemble is supported by Arts Council Norway. The current members of the quartet are Geir Inge Lotsberg and Liv Hilde Klokk (violins), Are Sandbakken (viola) and Øystein Sonstad (cello).
Mye er blitt sagt og skrevet om den nære forbindelsen mellom Edvard Griegs strykekvartett i g-moll og Claude Debussys kvartett i samme toneart, og tallrike sammenstillinger av de to verkene på CD finnes på markedet. At Debussy ved flere anledninger nærmest latterliggjorde Grieg og betegnet hans musikk som rosa sukkerspin, rokker ikke ved den allment aksepterte oppfatning av at han må ha vært mye mer påvirket av sin eldre kollega enn han ville innrømme. Og det finnes da også helt åpenbare paralleller mellom strykekvartettene. Foruten felles toneart, er begge verkenes sykliske, forstått på den måte at et hovedmotiv eller ledemotiv gjennomsyrer hele forløpet fra start til stopp, noe som slett ikke var vanlig i kammermusikk på den tiden. Selv om kvartettene selvfølgelig også er ulike på mange punkter, er det likevel, eller kanskje nettopp derfor, fascinerende å legge merke til likhetene mellom dem.

Derimot er det skrevet lite eller ingenting om hvilke modeller Grieg selv kan ha hatt når han satte seg fore å skrive en kvartett. Grieg regnet seg slett ikke som en storformens mester, og med unntak av a-mollkonserten, som av mange anses for å være et mester-verk, har ettertiden i det store og det hele gitt ham rett. «Maa aldrig opføres» skrev han i manuskriptet til sin nyskrevne symfoni i c-moll etter at han hørte Johan Svendsens første symfoni for første gang. Men han gikk likevel aldri til det drastiske skritt å ødelegge manuskriptet, noe som kan gi oss en mistanke om at han ikke helt hadde gitt opp håpet om å framstå som symfoniker. Han ville så gjerne mestre de store formene.

Kanskje kan g-mollkvartetten ses på som et slags forsøk på å "rehabilitere" seg i så henseende? Grieg ville at det nye verket skulle strebe «mot bredde, flukt, og fremfor alt mot klang for de instrumenter for hvilke den er skrevet.» Til det formålet anvendte han flittig dobbeltgrep, sterke dynamikker og tunge aksenter, og musikken kan synes nesten å sprenge grensene for hva fire stakkars strykeinstrumenter kan formå av klang og fylde. Det er ikke uten grunn at flere kammerorkestre har gitt seg i kast med dette verket uten større endring i partituret enn å legge til en basstemme.


Den solfylte lyrikken som åpner annen sats blir hurtig avbrutt av en stormfull mellomdel, igjen basert på ledemotivet. Musikken når tidvis temmelig voldsomme klimaks som krever all den klanglige kapasitet de fire instrumentene kan monstre, og litt til.

Tredje sats er en kantet, nesten massiv Scherzo med tunge synkoper og hemioler, hvor ledemotivet også her står modell. Den kontrasterte trioen står til avveksling fullstendig i folkemusikkens tegn, et virkemiddel som alltid ligger nært for hånden hos Grieg, også i hans mest kunstferdige verker.

Etter en temmelig dyster og illevarslende innledning kaster siste sats seg ut i en vill dans i 6/8-takt, noe som gir associasjoner til en tarantella. Stadig gjentatte og synkoperte dobbeltgrep preger forløpet, og en mengde hurtige skalar opp og ned i unison og andre virtuose teknikker gjør livet vanskelig for utøverne.

Verket ender tilsynelatende i triumf, men spørsmålet er om ikke denne seieren føltes noe påtatt når det kommer til stykket. Når ledemotivet gjør sin siste entré i strålende dur, blir vi flyktig, men kraftfullt minnet om den dystre stemningen som åpnet verket og som har fulgt tilhøreren helt fram til det aller siste.

Griegs g-mollkvartett er et svennestykke for enhver ung, norsk strykekvartett, og for Oslo Strykekvartett har den vært fast på repertoaret fra starten. Men selv etter mange års turnering med verket i bagasjen, og med en følelse av å ha kommet godt under huden på det, hadde vi stadig til gode å finne andre kvartetter som overhodet minnet om det. Et unntak er Debussyss kvartett, men den er jo en etterkommer, så å si. Spørsmålet var: hvor kom egentlig g-mollkvartetten fra?

Da det mange år senere var vår tur til å geve løs på en annen pilar i kammermusikk-repertoaret, nemlig Franz Schubert's d-mollkvartett med tilnavnet ”Døden og piken”, falt med et mange brikker på plass. Det var nesten overveldende å oppdage hvor mange små og store detaljer ved dette stykket som vi faktisk kunne spore i Griegs kvartett.
Schuberts ubestridte mesterverk er i likhet med g-mollkvartetten av Grieg et ganske unikt verk, selv i Schuberts egen produksjon. Det ble til i en av komponistens mestulykkelige perioder, i en tid da vissheten om at han snart skulle dø på grunn av uhelbredelig sykdom gjorde hans følelse av å ikke strekke til som menneske desto mer bitter.

«Forestill deg en mann hvis helbred aldri blir god igjen og som av ren desperasjon gjør situasjonen verre for seg selv i stedet for bedre. Tenk deg en mann hvis største forventninger har ført til ingenting, for hvem kjærlighet og vennskap kun er en tortur, og hvis entusiasme for det vakre er i ferd med å forsvinne. Spør deg så selv: Er ikke en slik mann i sannhet uulykkelig?» (brev til en venn, 1824). Schubert hadde aldri før utlevert seg selv og sin misere på samme måte som i denne kvartetten, og hans venner og musikerkolleger stilte seg ikke overraskende temmelig uforstående til den.

Kvartetten har fått sitt tilnavn fra en sang som Schubert skrev i 1817 over et dikt av Matthias Claudius, "Der Tod und das Mädchen". Sangen beskriver en ung kvinne som av frykt for døden ikke vil slipp på livet i dødens stund. Døden, i mannskikkelse, trøster eller kanskje snarere forfører henne, og til slutt gir hun seg hen i Dødens armer. Dette var et vanlig tema for renessansens malere som senere ble tatt opp i romantikken, og det dukker opp igjen så sent som hos Edvard Munch i hans "Det syke barn" (eller "Syk pike"), som maleriet ofte kalles.

De dystre klaverakkordene som innleder sangen er basis for temaet og de etterfølgende variasjoner som utgjør annen sats av kvartetten. Musikken utvikler seg fra noe som ligner en sorgemarsj til et veldig klimaks som krever all den klanglige kapasitet som de fire instrumentenes kan formå.

Sangens dødstema gjennomsyrer faktisk hele verket, helt fra de første skrekkinngytende åpningsakkordene, til finalens ville tarantella i 6/8-takt, dansen som ofte assosieres med døden. De skjebnetunge triolene som gjennomsyrer hele åpningssatsen nesten som et ledemotiv, gjenopptør i finalen i et parti som kan minne om en triumfmarsj. Men i tilbakeblikk synes seieren heller overfladisk, siden satsen ender i desperasjon.

Tredje sats er full av tunge synkoperinger og aksettuerde dobbeltgrep, mens den kontrastrende trioen er i stil av en landler, en form for folkemusikk Schubert var meget opptatt av. Kvartetten setter skyhøye krav til utøverne. Finalens svinlende tempo, samt en mengde unisone løp og lignende virtuose virkemidler gjør livet vanskelig for utøverne. Stadig gjenrattet og synkoperte akkorder preger forløpet.

Likhetene mellom de to verken burde nå være åpenbare, og listen kunne ha blitt mye lengre. Men dette er ikke ment å være en uttømmende analyse over de mulige forbindelser mellom Schuberts og Griegs kvartetter, heller en appetittvekker for videre studier. Iøgle musikkhistorikere finnes det ingen indikasjoner på at Grieg noensinne hørte eller leste partituret på "Døden og Piken", men sannsynligheten for at han kan ha gjort det under sine studier i Leipzig er stor. Schuberts musikk hadde på det tidspunkt kommet ut av sin mangeårige tonerorsesøvn siden hans død og var stadig oftere framført.

Sto "Døden og piken" modell for Grieg da han komponerte G-mollkvartetten? Det kan ikke bevises, men man kan ha sine teorier. Vi er uansett sikre på at det siste ord ikke er sagt om denne saken. Følg med videre på: www.stringquartet.com
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