



Composer Edvard Grieg based his music on the sounds of his nature country, Norway. His Trolldhaugen House, now a living museum, in Bergen, Norway. (Evikka/Shutterstock)

#### PERFORMING ARTS

# No Place Like Home: Edvard Grieg and Musical Nationalism

BY MICHAEL KUREK | May 10, 2021 Updated: May 10, 2021

**A** **A** Print

There are certain classical composers so closely identified with their country that it feels impossible not to talk about the two in the same breath. It might not matter so much with other composers. Frédéric Chopin was born and raised in Poland but worked as a composer in France. Handel was German but wrote some of his masterworks in England. However, Aaron Copland is strongly associated with the United States, especially in works like “Appalachian Spring” and “Rodeo.” His “American sound” became definitive for composers like Leonard Bernstein and film composers like John Williams (for example, in his score for “Saving Private Ryan”).

Composer Edvard Grieg (1843–1907) was distinctly Norwegian and even helped define and promote a Norwegian identity, both for Norwegians and in the eyes of the rest of the world. In orchestral works like his “Four Norwegian Dances” and “Peer Gynt,” he used actual Norwegian folksong melodies and also original melodies written in Norwegian folk style, baptizing them with classical music status worldwide. This made him a kind of favorite son and a point of great pride for that nation, with a population about the same as Colorado’s and a geographic size about that of New Mexico. You might say that, at least musically, Grieg helped put Norway on the map, and his countrymen honor him for it to this day.

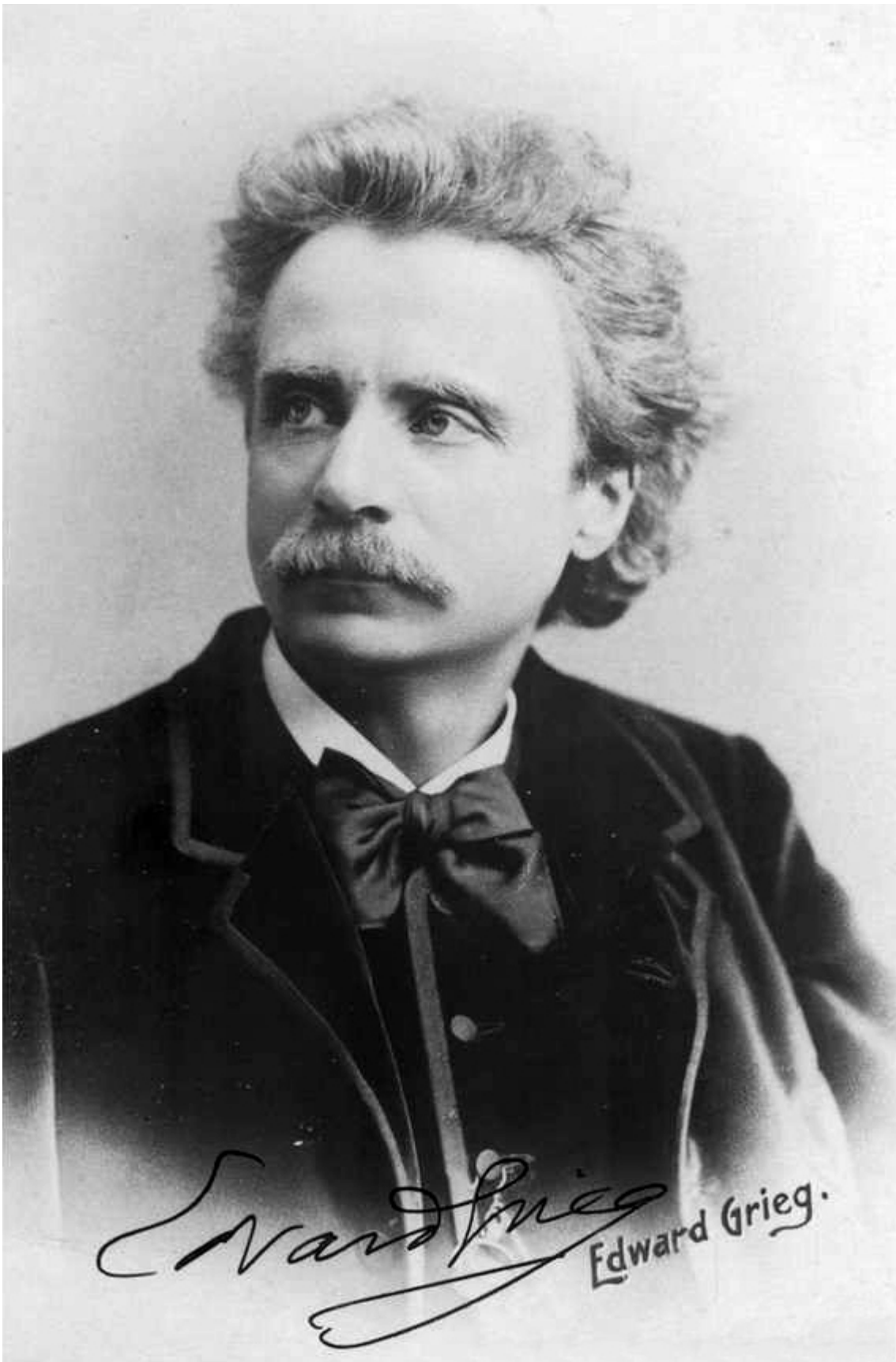


Photo portrait of Edvard Grieg, 1888. Elliott and Fry. (Public Domain)

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This all seemed natural and a matter of course when I was a music major in college. I was happy for them! Every country deserves heroes they can take pride in, after all. But nowadays, so-called musical nationalism is taught in a very different way in university music departments, with a definite negative connotation. Cancel culture has not come after Grieg personally, to my knowledge. He neither owned slaves nor oppressed any ethnic group. Or did he?

## Healthy Pride

Was bringing the folk music of the common people to the concert halls of high art a kind of cultural appropriation or exploitation of one class by another? The Norwegians certainly did not feel that way at the time, in part because

people simply did not think of folk and classical music styles in such an adversarial way then. And in Europe generally, classical music belongs to all people in a way that it does not seem to in the United States.

Grieg was their homegrown boy made good, from the village of Bergen. He did them proud, just as Abraham Lincoln with his log-cabin roots made the people of the Midwest frontiers proud. Grieg made his whole nation proud.



The 1970 film “Song of Norway” was based on composer Edvard Grieg’s life and filmed in Norway, where he lived. The soundtrack is Grieg’s music with added lyrics. (Cinerama Releasing Corporation)

But that again is a problem, nowadays. With every field of academe preaching the gospels of globalism and decolonization, musicology has been no exception. Such scholarship seems utterly unable to make a commonsense distinction between healthy pride and wicked pridefulness, between satisfaction in one’s identity and cynical accusations of xenophobia, chauvinism, bigotry, or racism. If I wear the colors of my school and root for my school’s football team, does that mean I think the students in my school are a master race, compared to students in other schools, or that I wish to terminate the existence of other schools? Of course not.

## Coming Home

However, asserting that a wrong idea is wrong, as I have just done, does not make a complete argument. Why is it *right* to have national pride or school



pride, or for Norwegians to feel pride in the music of Grieg? The “theology of place” or of home provides an answer to that question. According to Leonard Hjalmarson’s theology of place, this is because spiritually we do feel that we have an ultimate home—heaven—and deep inside we long to get there. It is like the magnetic north that our interior compass needle points us to.

We can observe our own feelings of not feeling that we belong anywhere in particular at certain seasons of our life, when we either have been alienated from our home or have been transient as young adults and have not yet, for whatever reason, been able to “put down roots.”

Modern man is particularly susceptible to this sense of rootlessness and can feel mentally disoriented without a physical sense of security. I feel a bit adrift every time I take the highway across several states, and every exit has the same fast food chains, restaurant chains, and gasoline brands, and the landscape looks as if it could be anywhere.

Global communications can also tend to erase distinct cultural differences, distinctive spoken dialects, and a sense of belonging to a home base.

To take satisfaction in our hometown, our national music, our regional cuisine, or our home sports team is a healthy and positive way of symbolizing that we do have a heavenly home, and we are on a journey to arrive there. In no way does our need for such symbols imply that we do not want others to have their own such symbols, or a desire to deny them entry into heaven, or a desire for any harm whatsoever to befall them.



The irony of Grieg's specific musical identity is that it is this very identity that imparts to his work a kind of coherence of language that is unique but at the same time universally appealing, like various ethnic cuisines. We do not need to erase our own identities or put a sushi roll on a slice of pizza to prove that we are people of goodwill. We can (and we used to take it for granted that we could) rejoice in and celebrate everyone's symbols of heaven. Long live Norway!

*American composer Michael Kurek is the composer of the Billboard No. 1 classical album "[The Sea Knows](#)." The winner of numerous composition awards, including the prestigious Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he has served on the Nominations Committee of the Recording Academy for the classical Grammy Awards. He is a professor emeritus of composition at Vanderbilt University. For more information and music, visit [MichaelKurek.com](http://MichaelKurek.com)*