



TOCCATA  
CLASSICS

# Sparre OLSEN

COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC

Øyvind Aase

FIRST COMPLETE RECORDING

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## SPARRE OLSEN Complete Piano Music

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|----|--|-------|
| 1  | <b>Vesle fivrel</b> ('Little Butterfly'; 1953)   | 0:46  |
| 2  | <b>Frå Telemark. Suite over norske folkevisur No. 1, Op. 31, No. 1</b><br>(‘From Telemark. Suite on Norwegian Folksongs’; 1940–41) | 7:41  |
| 3  | <b>Air</b> (1981)  | 1:42  |
| 4  | <b>Frå Telemark. Suite over norske folkevisur No. 2, Op. 31, No. 2</b> (1940–41)   | 9:53  |
|    | <b>Tre små klaverstykker</b> ('Three Small Piano Pieces'; 1936)  | 4:59  |
| 5  | No. 1 Menuett  | 1:14  |
| 6  | No. 2 Aftensang ('Evening Song')   | 2:12  |
| 7  | No. 3 Gavotte  | 1:33  |
|    | <b>Leitom Suite, Op. 33</b> (1950–51)*   | 18:20 |
| 8  | No. 1 Ved Gamle-kyrkja ('By the Old Church')   | 2:34  |
| 9  | No. 2 Når jola kjem ('When Christmas comes')   | 1:59  |
| 10 | No. 3 Reinblom ('Glacier Crowfoot')  | 2:16  |
| 11 | No. 4 Sorpero-leiken ('The Sorpero Dance')   | 3:37  |
| 12 | No. 5 Snøkledd skog ('Snow-clad Forest')   | 4:09  |
| 13 | No. 6 'Leitom'n' ( <i>halling</i> ) ('The Leitom')   | 3:45  |
| 14 | <b>Seks gamle bygdevisur frå Lom, Op. 2</b> ('Six Old Village Songs from Lom'; 1927–28)  | 3:12  |
| 15 | <b>Andante funebre</b> (1937, arr. 1949)   | 4:31  |
|    | <b>Norske folkevisur fra Gudbrandsdalen</b> (1938)   | 8:58  |
| 16 | No. 1 Langen Lasse ('Big Baby Larry')  | 0:25  |
| 17 | No. 2 Låvgrisen ('The Prize Pig')  | 0:23  |
| 18 | No. 3 Kari med huva ('Kari's Ugly Cap')  | 0:31  |
| 19 | No. 4 Pisi og fugeln ('Pussy and the Tom-tit')   | 0:36  |
| 20 | No. 5 Det va' tvæe syst ('The Two Sisters')  | 0:25  |
| 21 | No. 6 Huldra ('The Fairy and the Mother')  | 0:50  |

22	No. 7	Slik var vennen min ('My Sweetheart was that kind')	0:50
23	No. 8	Katta og eg ('Pussy and I')	0:12
24	No. 9	Å eg ha lov' ('O, it's alright')	0:29
25	No. 10	Mari Støvelrompe ('Mary Lazy-Bones')	0:24
26	No. 11	Han Liten bli stor ('When Baby Grows up')	0:23
27	No. 12	Sporven sit i lyudør ('Sparrow to its Wee One')	0:32
28	No. 13	Uppi bakkom ('Up the Slope')	0:40
29	No. 14	Går du nord ell' går du sør ('Going north or going south')	0:27
30	No. 15	Mari, Kari, statt upp no ('Polly, Molly, get up now')	0:14
31	No. 16	Millom omnen og bordet ('Between the Oven and the Table')	0:30
32	No. 17	Vesle gjenta låg og venta ('Pretty Polly, Sweet and Jolly')	0:29
33	No. 18	Vet-Ola Finndale ('Young Ola Finndale')	0:19
34	No. 19	Dansen kring smiustabba ('The Dance around the Anvil')	0:19
35	<b>Variasjonar over ein norsk folketone, Op. 5</b> ('Variations on a Norwegian Folktune'; 1930–31)		<b>7:46</b>
36	<b>Salme: Ære det evige Forår</b> ('Hymn: Honour Eternal Spring'; c. 1916)		<b>1:04</b>

Øyvind Aase, piano

TT 68:57

ALL EXCEPT \* FIRST RECORDINGS

## SPARRE OLSEN AND THE ART OF SAYING A LOT WITH A LITTLE

by Øyvind Aase

The Norwegian composer and violinist Carl Gustav Sparre Olsen was born in Stavanger on 25 April 1903. His parents were Gustav Olsen and Amalie Caspersen, who married Gustav after he had become a widower. The family moved to Copenhagen when Carl Gustav was about one year old. He was already linked to Denmark through family connections: he was descended from the Norwegian Sparre family, one of his female ancestors being Else Jørgine Sparre, who in turn was descended from a Danish noble family by the name of Sparre. In the Danish capital he went to kindergarten, where he enjoyed singing Danish children's songs, among them Carl Nielsen's well-known 'Jens Vejmand'. He was, however, as much influenced by the Norwegian musical heritage in his early years: his mother would sing at home, and his older stepbrother<sup>1</sup> accompanied folk-tunes and songs by Edvard Grieg and Rikard Nordraak on the piano.

In 1909 the family settled in Kristiania (as Oslo was then known), where Carl Gustav lived during his youth and early adult life. In his younger years he displayed his musical talent in various ways: he began playing the piano at the age of seven, at fourteen he composed his first melodies, and later received violin lessons from the Dutch violinist Herman van der Vegt. Among his composition teachers were the Norwegian composers Bjarne Brustad and Fartein Valen. During his lessons with Valen (1926–30) he became familiar with the works of Palestrina, Bach and Reger – all masters of polyphony.

<sup>1</sup> Carl Gustav's stepbrother Alfred was Gustav's son from his marriage to Magnhild Dulin, a pioneer officer in the Salvation Army. In his younger years Alfred Olsen-Dulin (also known as Dulin Olsen) composed the melody to the internationally known hymn 'He the Pearly Gates Will Open'.

Olsen's deep respect for Valen showed itself some years later. Olsen had applied for an annual composer's salary from the Norwegian Parliament. Learning that Valen was among the applicants, he withdrew his application. He didn't want, as he put it, 'to get in the way of his good friend and colleague.'<sup>2</sup> A grateful Valen was assigned the support, and two years later – in 1936 – his former student was also granted an annual income by the state.

After his studies with Valen, Olsen went to Berlin for lessons from the composer Max Butting and musicologist Georg Schünemann at the Staatliche Akademische Hochschule für Musik (1930–31). He also attended guest lectures given there by Arnold Schoenberg and Paul Hindemith. Olsen was especially excited by Hindemith, of whom he gave the following description in a radio interview in 1973: 'Not only was he a nice man, but what an amount of knowledge he possessed, what technical skills as a composer he had and what an extraordinary ability he had to explain to the listener what he had on his mind in a vivid manner!'<sup>3</sup>

By this point Olsen had become acquainted with the Australian-born pianist and composer Percy Grainger. Between 1929 and 1959 the two musicians corresponded extensively, and over the years their warm friendship included walking trips together in the Norwegian mountains. It was in Oslo in 1932 that they met for the first time. In the same year Sparre Olsen married the pianist Edith Davidsen, whom he had got to know in Berlin, and in the summer of 1936 the couple were invited to stay with Grainger and his wife Ella at their summer house in Pevensey Bay, near Eastbourne, on the English south coast. Grainger made an indelible impression on Olsen, who in 1963, two years after Grainger's death, wrote a book about his mentor, describing his friendship with and his experience of Grainger the musician as 'a revelation that lives in my mind forever.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Øistein Gaukstad, Sverre M. Halbo and Rolf Bækkelund (eds.), *Metamorfose: Festskrift til C. G. Sparre Olsens 80. år*sdag 25. april 1983, Norsk Musikforlag, Oslo, 1983, p. 27. Where no attribution of or reference to a translation is otherwise made, all translations from Norwegian into English are made by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Kristian Lange, 'Carl Gustav Sparre Olsen', in Kjell Bækkelund (ed.), *Norske komponister*, Tiden Norsk Forlag, Oslo, 1977, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> Sparre Olsen, *Percy Grainger*, Det Norske Samlaget, Oslo, 1963, p. 57.

Like Grainger, who admired Duke Ellington, Olsen was inspired by a variety of musical styles. During his early years in Oslo he played the violin in Willy Johansen's popular orchestra, among the best restaurant bands in Norway. At the Grand Café, which had been Henrik Ibsen's favourite café a couple of decades earlier, the orchestra performed dance tunes and the popular hits of the day. Looking back on his earlier career as a fiddler playing popular music, which also included engagements at the Theatercaféen in Oslo, Olsen later commented that 'I became a usable second violinist in the orchestra and a mediocre banjo and guitar player in the dance orchestra. I enjoyed playing jazz, I learned a lot from that – also as a composer'.<sup>5</sup> According to the pianist Robert Levin, who played with Olsen at Theatercaféen in 1932, his colleague sometimes even played the trombone if necessary.<sup>6</sup>

In 1932 the newly-weds settled for the rest of the decade in Edith's home-town of Bergen, where Olsen embarked on a wide range of activities. He gave lectures at The Bergen Music Conservatoire (now The Grieg Academy); he conducted a choir; he was a music critic for the local paper, *Bergens Tidende*; for some time he even made use of his violin-playing in the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra (BFO); and on top of that he managed to compose some of his best early works in Bergen. His much-acclaimed oratorio *Draumkvedet*, Op. 22, based on folk-melodies from the old Norwegian visionary poem of that name, won him a prize in a BFO competition, and the work was given its first performance by the BFO in 1937.

After the German occupation of Norway in April 1940, the couple moved to the small town of Olden in the district of Nordfjord, north of Bergen. But although both Sparre and Edith loved living in the midst of nature, Edith's poor health and worsening asthma forced them to seek out a new place to live, with a more suitable climate. In 1947 the couple accordingly made Gausdal, in Gudbrandsdalen in eastern Norway, their new base. In Gausdal they built their own house, buying a site on the mountainside high above the house of the writer Inge Krokann. It was Krokann who later coined the name of Olsen's home, 'Leitom', with reference to its high-lying location: 'I leitom' means

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Gaukstad, Halbo and Bækkelund, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Levin, *Med livet i hendene* ('With my Life in my Hands'), as told to Mona Levin, J. W. Cappelens Forlag, Oslo, 1992, p. 96.

something like ‘on the horizon,’ and ‘leite’ means ‘field of view,’ a viewpoint where one can look to both sides. An old Norwegian folk-poem opens thus:

Har du sett no'  
te kjerringa mi?  
Langt nord i leitom!  
Går og gjeter geitom!

*Have you seen anything  
of my wife?  
Far north in the distant horizon!  
Goes herding the goats!*

Like Edvard Grieg in his home, Troldhaugen, outside Bergen, Olsen regarded Leitom as a place where he could compose in concordance with nature. His love of animals made Leitom a little paradise far away from the noise of the city.

In 1966, however, Edith's health had deteriorated to such a degree that it became impossible for her to go on living somewhere as remote as Leitom. After her death in 1969, Olsen made Lillehammer his permanent home – the final station of a nomadic life. It was in Lillehammer that he died, on 8 November 1984.

### **Musical and Cultural Orientation**

The musicologist Nils Grinde put his finger on a paradox in Norwegian musical life: ‘The Grieg tradition has unquestionably been a burden for many Norwegian composers. Sparre Olsen is virtually the only one who has managed to carry it further in a positive way.’<sup>7</sup> To be able to understand this statement fully, one must take into consideration the strong influence that nationalism had on Norwegian music after Grieg, significantly so in the decade before the Second World War.

As the Grieg biographer John Horton has pointed out, ‘As far as music was concerned, Norway never experienced the headlong flight from national romanticism that was to occur in Denmark and Sweden.’<sup>8</sup> In his biography of Olsen's colleague, the Norwegian composer Ludvig Irgens-Jensen, Arvid Vollsnes comments on Grieg's huge influence on later generations:

<sup>7</sup> Nils Grinde, *Contemporary Norwegian Music 1920–1980*, transl. Sandra Hamilton, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1981, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> John Horton, *Scandinavian Music: A Short History*, Faber & Faber, London, 1963, p. 136.

Romanticism was still very firmly rooted in Norwegian music around the time [of] the First World War, perhaps because, unlike most other European countries, Norway's National Romantic movement was extended in time through the dominating influence of Grieg.<sup>9</sup>

Such was the cultural climate around 1930 when Sparre Olsen began his career as a serious composer. Grinde does indeed have a point when he suggests that Olsen's experience of the national movement in music and literature during those years 'not only affected his entire artistic attitude, but surely touched a responsive chord in the depths of his personality'.<sup>10</sup>

In his childhood Olsen often spent the summer holidays in the Norwegian mountains, listening to folk-music, later recalling that 'Already as a young boy I took an interest in the folk tunes I heard in Østerdalen and Gudbrandsdalen'.<sup>11</sup> In many of his mature compositions Olsen's affinity for the simplicity of folk-melody is apparent. His melodies are diatonic and frequently built on modal scales, a characteristic of the old Norwegian ballads.

Language is another aspect of Sparre Olsen's affiliation with the Norwegian tradition. In his childhood the other children made fun of him because he could not speak 'proper' Norwegian. His Danish-Norwegian was very different from the way small boys spoke in Kristiania. This distinction made the young Carl Gustav particularly conscious about mastering the Norwegian language correctly, and his interest in literature developed accordingly.

He became friends, and collaborated, with outstanding Norwegian poets like Olav Aukrust, Tor Jonsson, Inge Krokann, Tore Ørjasæter and Aslaug Vaa. Writing in *nyorsk* (literally, 'new Norwegian'), a fusion of different rural dialects and today one of Norway's two official languages, what these writers had in common was a vocabulary with its origins in the nineteenth century as part of Norway's national awakening and

<sup>9</sup> Arvid Vollsnes, *Ludvig Irgens-Jensen: The Life and Music of a Norwegian Composer*, transl. Beryl Foster, Toccata Press, London, 2014, p. 107 (original edition *Komponisten Ludvig Irgens-Jensen: Europeer og nordmann*, H. Aschehoug, Oslo, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Gaukstad, Halbo and Bækkelund, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

liberation from the Danish language and culture that had exerted its influence on the country for centuries.<sup>12</sup> For Olsen, Norwegian nature and *nyorsk* seem to have formed a kind of unity.

In an article about Olav Aukrust, he recalled his reaction when he heard Aukrust's poem *Fjell-Noreg* ('Mountain Norway') for the first time. He was on a walking trip with Aukrust in the mountains when the two of them halted by a small lake to try some angling:

Aukrust read his *Fjell-Noreg* to me. It was the first time I heard the poem. I was so moved that I began singing it to myself while I walked on in the mountain wilds. I was so taken with the spirit of the powerful poem. While I was walking with fishing rod in hand the tune came to me. I had not brought any music paper with me so instead I used some sandwich paper to scribble down the melody.<sup>13</sup>

*Fjell-Noreg*, for mixed choir, soon became a classic in the Norwegian choral repertoire. And vocal music makes up the biggest part of Olsen's extensive *œuvre*. His compositions are mostly in small format, and his 'gift for lyricism and fine poetic feeling', as Nils Grinde points out, 'were well suited to vocal music'.<sup>14</sup> *Two Songs from the Edda* for song and orchestra, Op. 8 (based on poems from Norse mythology), *Draumkvedet* for soprano or tenor solo, mixed choir, recitation and orchestra, Op. 22, and *Ver sanctum*, Op. 30, for mixed choir and orchestra, based on a text by Olav Aukust, are among his best-known works for voice(s) and orchestra.

The prominence of his vocal music has rather obscured his purely instrumental music. His first orchestral work – *Kleine Overture für kleines Orchester*, Op. 7 – was written during his years of study in Berlin, and accepted for performance by the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra at a music festival in Bad Pyrmont, in Lower Saxony. The more important of his later orchestral works are a *Symphonic Fantasy*, Op. 27 (1938–39), *Nidarosdomen* (a fugue and chorale), Op. 29, *Music for Orchestra*, Op. 38 (both from 1947), and *Symphonic Fantasy* No. 2, Op. 47 (1960). Some of his orchestral works –

<sup>12</sup> In practice Norway was under Danish rule from 1537 until 1814. Denmark-Norway was an absolute monarchy from 1660.

<sup>13</sup> Gaukstad, Halbo and Bækkelund, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

Op. 7 and Op. 38, for instance – show very little influence from folk-music. But on the whole Olsen's compositions are to a significant degree in debt to the Norwegian folk-music tradition.

### The Piano Works

Sparre Olsen's piano pieces are for the most part of an uncomplicated nature and are often rather brief. His own words explain why: 'The more simply and concisely I manage to express an idea, the more happy I become. I try not to muddy it with padding. If I am able to express what I have on my mind with two voices instead of six, I do so'.<sup>15</sup>

Because of its generally unpretentious character, Olsen's piano music has also attracted the attention of amateur pianists. For Olsen it was crucial to write *good* music for the young, and he emphasised that to be able to do so, 'you must compose with a clear awareness of whom you are addressing [...]. Each voice must take part in the musical development in such a way that it becomes fun to play'.<sup>16</sup>

Professional pianists, by contrast, may find it challenging to cope with Sparre Olsen's piano music exactly because of its seemingly effortless character. The lack of what normally counts as virtuosity forces the player to focus solely on the musical content of the works.

The Hymn 'Honour Eternal Spring' – a little gem [36] – is not really a piano piece as such, but a song to the Norwegian writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's poem of the same title. It is printed as No. 146 in *150 Sparre-tonar* ('150 Sparre Tunes') published as a homage to Olsen on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 1973. The song was composed when Sparre Olsen was still in his early teens, and is included here – in Olsen's own harmonisation - as an example of the young composer's early talent for shaping his own distinctive melodies. In an interview he gave in connection with his 80th birthday in 1983, Olsen elaborated on his early dealings with melody:

As a schoolboy I resented the melodies we had to learn from the songbook. When there was a text I liked but the melody was bad, I tried to create another melody. I had to walk

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Gaukstad, Halbo and Bækkelund, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

for ten minutes between the school and my home. I walked to the rhythm of the text, and more often than not the melody was ready when I arrived at home. This happened, *inter al.*, with Bjørnson's 'Honour Eternal Spring'.<sup>17</sup>

According to Fartein Valen, Olsen had an exceptional talent for the sonorous and linear aspects of composing. These qualities are apparent even in a miniature like *Little Butterfly* [1], composed on 22 September 1953 at Leitom, and an example of what Olsen was able to do 'with two voices instead of six'. This little piece is furthermore a characteristic example of Olsen's ambiguous use of tonality. The first eight bars seem to indicate C major as the main key, but then in bars 8 and 9 the composer elegantly leads the two voices, soprano and bass, stepwise down to the adjacent notes. The voice-leading seems to establish the relative key of A minor. But then in the last two bars, while the soprano note is gradually fading out, a three-note melody in the bass is introduced, and the tonality seems to float in the air like a butterfly.

In Olsen's *Air* (1981) [3] – something of a song without words – the use of the Lydian mode reflects his predilection for the old church modes so often present in Norwegian folk-music. The tune itself was composed in the mid-1930s to a poem called 'Vågåvatne' ('Lake Vågå') by the Norwegian poet Tore Ørjasæter. The beauty of the melody inspired the composer to arrange it for piano solo, string quartet and oboe, and string orchestra.

Olsen wrote incidental music for four plays. The music for two of them was composed during Olsen's years in Bergen. *Den gode stjerne* ('The Good Star'), a Christmas and fairy-tale comedy for children by Annik (Anna Constance) Saxegaard, was premiered on 20 December 1936 at Den Nationale Scene in Bergen. Olsen wrote eleven numbers for the play, selecting Nos. 4, 'Menuet' [5], 5, 'The Princesses' Evening Song' [6], and 6, 'Ballet Music for the Dance of the Children of the Star' (Gavotte) [7], for his *Three Small Piano Pieces*. In Nos. 4 and 6 Olsen reveals his talent for recreating the style of the old Baroque masters. When composing No. 5, he no doubt profited from his experience in playing popular music. After the premiere of the play, *Bergens Tidende* wrote that 'Sparre Olsen's music raised [the songs] up to a higher level'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> 21 December 1936.

Although the stage music for *The Good Star* may be described as light music of a kind, Sparre Olsen's next assignment for the stage demanded music of a much darker timbre. His score for the play *Nederlaget* ('Defeat') by the Norwegian playwright Nordahl Grieg is dated 4 March 1937; the play was premiered three weeks later, on 26 March, at the Nationaltheatret in Oslo. Grieg's drama is about the Paris Commune, the revolutionary government that ruled Paris in the spring of 1871 in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 until, after a few months, it was suppressed. The controversial message of the play, written during the Spanish Civil War and at a time when the Second World War was only a few years ahead, is summarised by the revolutionary Louis Charles Delescluze:<sup>19</sup> 'Goodness can win only by the use of violence.' Sparre Olsen's prelude, *Andante funebre* [15], sets the gloomy mood of the play from the very beginning. In 1949 the piece was also published for piano solo.

Olsen began composing his *Leitom Suite* in 1950; it was completed in 1951. Besides being a reference to the place itself and written for Edith, 'Leitom' as applied to Sparre Olsen's Op. 33 may also be perceived as a kaleidoscopic view on themes and experiences related to the composer's life and orientation. No. 1, 'Ved Gamle-kyrkja' ('By the Old Church') [8], may refer to a touching story in one of Inge Krokann's novels about two young men who are suddenly aware of a peculiar song coming from inside an old church; 'a silent, strange tune that glides into everyone, and releases a still timbre in all.'<sup>20</sup>

No. 2, 'Når jola kjem' ('When Christmas comes') [9], was directly inspired by one of Krokann's books. A man is bedridden in the mountains and will not be able to reach home for Christmas. On Christmas Eve he is visited by his little daughter. She falls asleep but after a while awakens and wants to sing. The song is called 'The Solstice Song', and is described as a kind of music nobody has ever heard before. Each stanza is rounded off with the words 'Når jola kjem'. Percy Grainger, who arranged the piece beautifully for three saxophones, was of the opinion that 'Even without Inge Krokann's profound

<sup>19</sup> Delescluze (1809–71) was a genuine historical figure, a radical from an early age. He spent much of his life in exile or in prison; when in France he was deeply involved in revolutionary republicanism, as an activist and journalist. He was killed on 25 May 1871, during the week of battle which saw the suppression of the Commune.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Gaukstad, Halbo and Bækkelund, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

and captivating poem, “Når jola kjem” would be among the most wonderful treasures of three-part music.<sup>21</sup>

No. 3, ‘Reinblom’ (‘Glacier Crowfoot’) [10], an Arctic plant, suggests music barely audible outside the mountain world. Favouring altitudes above 2,300 metres and growing only in a cold climate on acid soils, the Glacier Crowfoot leads the mind to both Sparre Olsen himself, who preferred to work in remote areas, and Leitom, the distant and steep place where he felt at home.

The word ‘Sorpero’ in No. 4, ‘Sorpero-leiken’ (‘The Sorpero Dance’) [11], refers to another distant place, Sorperoa, situated in Fron, north of Gausdal. ‘Leik’ has various meanings in Norwegian; it stands for both ‘play’ and ‘dance’.<sup>22</sup> It may also allude to a piece of folk-music, the *slått*, originally played on the *hardingfele* (Hardanger fiddle), the national instrument of Norway, characterised, among other things, by its understrings, resonating under the influence of the four or five standard strings. Grieg brought the *slått* into the world of classical music with his seventeen *Slåtter*, Op. 72 (1902–3). Olsen followed up Grieg’s practice in ‘Sorpero-leiken’, but his inspiration in this case is a *flatfele*, an ordinary violin or ‘flat fiddle’. The motif of the *slått* is from Gudbrandsdalen – Olsen heard the tune from a fiddler named Øivind Marstein from Lom – and the Hardanger fiddle was never adopted in this part of Norway. This dance with three beats in the bar is called a *springar* (or *springleik*).

Snow has inspired Impressionist painters and composers alike, and in No. 5, ‘Snøkledd skog’ (‘Snow-clad Forest’) [12], Olsen joins this tradition. His musical vision of the silent, static landscape of snow recalls Debussy’s ‘Des pas sur la neige’ (‘Footsteps in the Snow’), the sixth in his first book of *Préludes* (1909–10), and yet, in spite of the obvious connection this piece has to that Impressionist soundscape, it hints at the same time to the wintry climate at Leitom, where the snow often hangs around until late spring.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> The word moved into English in the 1860s to describe the display gatherings of blackcock, capercaillie and other members of the grouse family.

Kristian Lange, for many years head of the music department of the Norwegian Broadcasting Company, recalled the happy spirit that prevailed at Leitom during his visits there, and No. 6, 'Leitom'n' ('The Leitom') [13], does indeed communicate a joyful mood, with its vivid rhythms, abrupt accents and contrasting dynamics. According to Lange, the piece is a musical self-portrait of Sparre Olsen.<sup>23</sup> That may be accurate to some degree, since the composer explained in an interview that it was the custom among the villagers to name people after their address, and 'Leitom'n' can thus be understood to reveal something of the composer's personality. He was obviously a man with a well-developed sense of humour. The time-signature is two beats in a bar, typical of the Norwegian folk-dance called *halling*. The three *halling* motives here were found in Ole Mørk Sandvik's collection *Folke-musik i Gudbrandsdalen*.<sup>24</sup>

In a tribute to Sparre Olsen on his 50th birthday in 1953, Grainger compared the use of folk material in the music of Grieg and Olsen:

Two unforgettable human experiences have pleased me in the field of Norwegian music: to be well acquainted on a personal level with Edvard Grieg in his two last years of life [...] and my friendship with Sparre Olsen after having heard [...] his 'Six old village songs from Lom' [...]. To me – as a foreigner – these two great masters of the musical world offer an exceedingly intimate Norwegianness, but a different Norwegianness and particularly different in their relation to Norwegian folk music. It seems to me that the charm of Grieg's harmonizations of folk songs [...] lies in his distance from the folk material (the contrast between him and the folk art), while the charm of Sparre Olsen's harmonizations of folk songs [...] lies in his closeness to the folk material (the fusion between him and the folk art).<sup>25</sup>

Unlike Grieg, Olsen had been in close contact with folk-music since his childhood, and later developed an individual technique of fusing folk-elements with his own melodies and harmonies. 'Since I was a little boy', he told an interviewer in 1941, 'Norwegian

<sup>23</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> Swanström, Kristiania, 1919.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Gaukstad, Halbo and Bækkelund, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

folk-music made me listen. And I never gave up before I knew its heartbeat. And I still feel it as if it carries within itself a rhythm of eternity. A rhythm that belongs only to the Norwegian people.<sup>26</sup> Commenting on the originality of Olsen's melodies, the Norwegian composer and musicologist Trygve Fischer drew attention to his 'unmistakable melodic sensibility and ability to combine his own innovative qualities with those of the folk music.'<sup>27</sup>

These qualities can already be noticed in *Seks gamle bygdevisur frå Lom* ('Six Old Village Songs from Lom'), Op. 2 [14], Olsen's first work for solo piano. The six tunes were written down in Lom in 1927, after Olav Aukrust had sung them to him, and were published in 1928. The collection contains different types of folk-tunes. No. 2 is a *bånsull* (lullaby), and No. 3 is a shepherd's song. The texts circle around nature and daily life in the valley, exemplified by opening lines like 'Høyre du gauken du gamle mainn' ('Do you hear the cuckoo, old man') in No. 2 and 'Trøste og bere oss fatige bønder kå ska' det bli oss til føe i år' ('Whatever food will we poor peasants be having this year') in No. 6.

Olsen frequently uses parallel fourths and fifths, traditionally forbidden to students of harmony, with the technique introduced in the bass from the very first bar of his first work for piano. Singing in parallel fifths has been common in Icelandic folksong for centuries, and it is probable that he was inspired by this tradition.

Op. 2 was given its first performance in the 'Aula' (large assembly hall) in Oslo University on 2 October 1929 by the pianist Mary Barratt Due. Jens Arbo's ambivalent review in *Morgenbladet* on 4 October was typical of the critical reception: 'With regard to the humble origin of the melodies, the often harsh arrangement is hardly respectful towards the tunes and their textual basis, but it is of interest as experiment and often sounded powerful and amusing.'

Grainger, by contrast, was excited by the work. In his book on Grainger, Olsen outlined the Australian's first attempt to contact him after he had heard the collection.

<sup>26</sup> *Norsk musikkliv*, No. 2, 1941, quoted in Arne Ingar Petersen, *Sparre Olsens folkemusikkbearbeidelser for klaver*, Hovedoppgave til historisk-filosofisk embetseksamen, Universitetet i Oslo, 1970, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Trygve Fischer, 'Olsen, Carl Gustav Sparre', in Kari Michelsen, Hampus Huldt-Nyström, Robert Levin *et al.* (eds.), *Cappelens musikkleksikon*, Vol. 5, J. W. Cappelens Forlag, Oslo, 1980, p. 223.

In the spring of 1929 Ella and Percy were on a short visit to Oslo on their way back home from Sweden to England. Grainger had bought some copies of the newly published Op. 2, and had grown enthusiastic about the pieces after Mary Barratt Due had played them to him.<sup>28</sup> When Olsen arrived at the Grand Hotel one evening to play in the salon orchestra, he was told that Grainger had asked for him, but unfortunately they did not meet on that occasion.

Grainger's praise may have inspired Olsen to continue his work with folk material. During the 1930s he spent the summers in Lom and Skjåk collecting folksongs. The nineteen pieces in *Norwegian Folksongs* No. 1, *From Gudbrandsdalen*<sup>29</sup> were arranged for piano in 1938. The collection consists for the most part of *bygdeviser* ('village songs') and *skjemteviser* ('comic songs'). No. 5, 'Det va' tvæ syst' ('The Two Sisters') [20], is a *kjempeviser* ('heroic ballad') widespread in Gudbrandsdalen, Valdres and Telemark. No. 1, 'Langen Lasse' ('Big Baby Larry') [16], and No. 12, 'Sporven sit i lyudør' ('Sparrow sit to its Wee One') [27], are both lullabies, while No. 14, 'Går du nord ell' går du sø' ('Going north or going south') [29], is a children's song.

Olsen collected the melodies from various sources. One in particular has a special position in Norwegian musical history. Gjendine Slaalien (1871–1972), a peasant woman from Lom, was Edvard Grieg's muse when he wrote 'Gjendine's Lullaby' and other tunes in his *19 Norwegian Folk Tunes*, Op. 66. Like Grieg, Olsen met Gjendine several times during his visits to Jotunheimen, where he had been a frequent visitor since the age of seventeen, and where he would go walking with friends like Grainger and Aukrust. Olsen understood soon, as he put it,

that Gjendine was in possession of many precious folk tunes [...]. I wrote down a good deal of the ones she sang for me and in 'Norwegian Folksongs from Gudbrandsdalen', which I collected and harmonized, Gjendine sang to me both 'Vetlgutein dansa i Klukkargarde' ['Kari med huva' ('Kari's Ugly Cap') [18]], 'Ja, pigerne de ere få' ['Slik var vennen min' ('My

<sup>28</sup> Olsen, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–38.

<sup>29</sup> The collection was not allocated an opus number, but in Øystein Gaukstad's bibliography of Sparre Olsen's works under 'Folk-tune arrangements' it is numbered as No. 251 (*cf.* Gaukstad, Halbo and Bækkelund, *op. cit.*, p. 40).

Sweetheart was that kind') [22] and 'Vesle gjenta låg og venta' ['Pretty Polly, Sweet and Jolly' [32]].<sup>30</sup>

The dominance of linearity over functional harmony in Olsen's music is apparent in many of these miniatures. An apt example is the use of parallel fourths in No. 5 [20], where the descending bass line is determined more by linear progression than by harmony.

The collection was ready in 1938 but was not published until 1946 because of the war. It received enthusiastic reviews, with Dag Winding Sørensen later describing these miniatures 'as the richest and most artistical modern harmonies in Norwegian music'.<sup>31</sup> Grainger had played through the work in 1939, and fell for it at once. He performed the pieces in public in England and translated the original texts accompanying the folk tunes into English. He also prepared the following preface in English for the published edition (dated 4 July 1939):

In the royal line of Norwegian musical genius Sparre Olsen [...] is the direct successor of Grieg; not that Sparre Olsen is in any way an echo of Grieg, but in that, like him, he has the rare gift of concentrated miniature musical utterance and the ability and willingness to voice deep human feelings and highly original musical thoughts in an idiom that is pianistically within the scope of any musical child or amateur, though it equally can delight the advanced musician and virtuoso pianist. In the present collection the folk tunes (collected by Sparre Olsen himself from hillpeasants in Jotunheim – the Norwegian Alps) are winsome and racy, the folkpoems whimsical and touching, the harmonies daring and soulrevealing in their utter simplicity yet rich selfhood. In this inspired music all is reduced to essentials. Is there any more golden musical gift than this: to express much in little?

While living in Olden and waiting for his folk-tunes from Gudbrandsdalen to be published, Olsen was also drawn to the folk-music of Telemark, a county in the southern part of eastern Norway. His two collections *From Telemark. Suite on Norwegian Folksongs*,

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Arvid Møller, *Gjendine*, J. W. Cappelens Forlag, Oslo, 1976, p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Aftenposten*, 24 April 1963.

Op. 31, Nos. 1 and 2, were composed at the beginning of the war, and published in 1941 and 1942 respectively. Sparre and Edith lodged in Dalheim, the house of the American painter William Henry Singer, Jr.,<sup>32</sup> and his wife Anna, during the war, and Suite No. 1 was composed there. After the war *Bergens Tidende*, in a review of Norwegian music composed during the five years of occupation, also mentioned Sparre Olsen's two Telemark suites. The reviewer, Oscar Hansen, was of the opinion that the opus 'belongs to Sparre Olsen's most outstanding achievements and is among the most charming stuff in recent Norwegian piano literature whatsoever' (17 July 1947).

The expression of national spirit in these suites made them instantly popular during the occupation. The pianist Kjell Bækkelund recalled the eager reception the music received among pianists when the first suite was published in 1941: 'At the time I was by chance visiting Musikk-Huset<sup>33</sup> when the first edition was laid on the counter. It was like a "hit tune" being launched [...]. The first copies were torn away! People – old and young – were playing Sparre Olsen's Telemark suite almost everywhere!'<sup>34</sup>

The folk-tunes in Op. 31 are selected from Magnus Brostrup Landstad's *Norwegian Ballads*, in which Ludvig Mathias Lindeman had added to Landstad's folk-texts corresponding folk-melodies that he had collected.<sup>35</sup> Both suites present their constituent tunes in a continuous flow of music. Six of the seven folksongs in Suite No. 1 [2] are heroic ballads; the exception is 'Liti Kjersti', which is of a later date than the other songs and is specified as a romance in Landstad's collection. The titles in succession are: 'Kvikisprakk Hermodson' (A young man who rides to Jutland to win the princess) 'Roland og Magnus kongin' ('The Kings Roland and Magnus') 'Frånar-ormen' (A glistening snake)

<sup>32</sup> Singer, born in Pittsburgh in 1868 to a family in the steel business, studied first with the Norwegian artist Martin Borgord in Pittsburgh, with whom he and his wife then travelled to Europe. Borgord suggested that the Singers move to Norway; overwhelmed by the majesty of the landscape, they settled in Olden, a fishing village at the bottom of the Innvikfjord, between Åndalsnes and Bergen. The large fortune that Singer inherited did much to improve community life in Olden, and the grateful inhabitants duly did what they could to shield the Singers from the worst effects of the Occupation. He was placed under house arrest by the Nazis, which weakened his constitution and led to a fatal heart in 1943.

<sup>33</sup> The Norwegian music-publisher Musikk-Huset had its own music-shop in Oslo.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Gaukstad, Halbo and Bækkelund, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> *Norske Folkeviser*, Chr. Tønsbergs Forlag, Christiania, 1853.

‘Knut liten og Sylvelin’ (‘Little Knut and Sylvelin’)  
‘Store bror og lille bror’ (‘Big brother and little brother’)  
‘Liti Kjersti’ (‘Little Kjersti’)  
‘Råmund den unge’ (‘Råmund the young one’).

The second suite of Op. 31 [4] is dedicated to the Norwegian sculptor Dyre Vaa from Telemark, who shared Olsen’s interest in Norwegian folklore. It seems that the ubiquitous Grainger was partly involved in arousing Olsen’s interest in Landstad’s collection of folksongs. Olsen’s book on Grainger relates how, during the Graingers’ visit to Norway in spring 1939, he introduced them to his friends Dyre and Thora Vaa, in Rauland in Telemark. During this visit Grainger, who evidently had already studied Landstad’s edition of *Norwegian Ballads*, was shown Landstad’s home in Seljord. Landstad regarded upper Telemark among the districts in Norway where ‘the language and custom of antiquity [had] been maintained for the longest time’. He feared, however, that the old culture was about to disappear for good, and in the preface to his collection he therefore characterised his project as ‘an attempt to rescue an old family gem out of a burning house.’<sup>36</sup>

Olsen’s Op. 31 may be regarded as a further contribution to Landstad’s salvage operation, and his arrangements of selected ballads has proved a valuable addition to the Norwegian piano repertoire. Olsen’s inclination to add chords of fourths and fifths to the melodic line is efficiently carried out in the opening bars of the First Suite. The melody, based on the interval of fourths, is supported harmonically by fifths and fourths in the upper and lower voices. The appearance of the tritone (diminished fifth/augmented fourth) in bars 3 and 4 emphasises the expressive accent on the second beat of the fourth bar.

The eight folksongs in Op. 31, No. 2, are of a later date than the seven songs in No. 1 and represent various types of ballad.

The pieces in succession are:  
‘Haugebonden’ (a kind of fairy<sup>37</sup>)

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. ii–iv.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Haugebonden’ (also called ‘haugfolk’) live in *hauger* (mounds) and are mostly on friendly terms with the people around them.

‘På Grønaldid-heidi’ (‘On the Heaths of Grønaldid’)

‘Margit Hjukse’ (a woman’s name)

‘Den fyrste gongi’ (‘The First Time’)

‘Å guten’ (‘The Lad’)

‘Herr Nikelus’ (‘Mister Nikelus’)

‘Rikeball og stolt Gudbjørg’ (‘Rikeball and the proud Gudbjørg’)

‘Mitt bån sit på tuve’ (‘My child sits on a tussock’)

‘Rikeball og stolt Gudbjørg’ and ‘Haugebonden’ are classified in Landstad as *Ridderviser*<sup>38</sup> og *Romancer*. It is uncertain whether ‘På Grønaldid-heidi’ is a *gammelstev*<sup>39</sup> or a *gâtevise* (‘riddle song’). ‘Margit Hjukse’ and ‘Herr Nikelus’ are romances, whereas ‘Den fyrsti gongi’ is a *nystev* (‘new stev’). ‘Mitt bån sit på tuve’ and ‘Å guten’ are *bånsuller* (lullabies).

The *Variations on a Norwegian Folk tune*, Op. 5 [35], Olsen’s only set of variations for piano, is dedicated to his friends Anna and William H. Singer, Jr. Most of the work was written by 1930, and was completed in Berlin in the spring of 1931 as *Thema con variazone* and published the year after with the new title *Variasjonar over ein norsk folketone*. Edith Davidsen gave Op. 5 its first performance, from manuscript, on 26 April 1931 in Bergens Kringkaster (Bergen Broadcasting). Two years later, on 21 March 1933, Mary Barratt Due gave the variations their first live performance in the Aula of Oslo University. Jens Arbo’s review in *Morgenbladet* on 23 March spoke highly of the

fresh, energetic harmonies and genuine Norwegian colour and rhythm. The composition is among Sparre Olsen’s most beautiful ones [...]. The sensitive harmonies combined with the thematic and rhythmic energy founded on Norwegian character had an extraordinary appealing effect.

<sup>38</sup> Ballads about conflicts among people of the upper classes, often about love, with a courtly ideal.

<sup>39</sup> *Stev* are separate stanzas of four lines, sung to special ‘stev melodies’. The oldest type of *stev* is called ‘gamlestev’ (literally, ‘old stev’), while the newer ones are called ‘nystev’ (‘new stev’). The difference between the two kinds of *stev* depends on the text, or the text and melody as a whole.

The variations are indeed rooted in Norwegian soil. The theme of Op. 5 is the folktune ‘Bokkjen gjekk ette gjeitom sine’ (‘The tramp went after his kids’), which Olsen had received from Olav Aukrust. According to Arne Ingar Petersen, Sparre Olsen told him in interview that the theme was jotted down in 1926 during a fishing trip with Aukrust to the mountain village of Skjåk in Gudbrandsdalen.<sup>40</sup> In an article in 1916 Ole Mørk Sandvik suggested that ‘Bokkjen gjekk’ is more closely related to playing than are conventional lullabies and children’s songs – he recommends that it be sung with the child sitting on the lap while imitating the trotting of the horse:<sup>41</sup>

Bokkjen gjekk ette geitom sine,  
so kom’n upp aa haugen,  
so fekk’n sjaa alle smaageit’nn sine,  
so hoppa’n so dansa’n,  
so traava’n so sprang’n som ein hest,  
som ein hest, som ein hest.

*The tramp went after his kids,  
then he came up on a hill,  
then he could see all his young billy goats,  
then he leapt about and danced,  
then he trotted and ran like a horse,  
like a horse, like a horse.*

Olsen probably used the old folk-poem as both basis and inspiration when developing the theme into a set of variations. The work consists of nine variations altogether, and in the last the vigour of a running horse does indeed come to mind, although as the piece comes to its end, calm is restored, and the last eleven bars are a distant echo of the opening theme.

During the nine variations the nature of the theme gradually alters through Olsen’s use of chromaticism (which is not common in folk-melodies) and unusual harmonies, and it may be that, as the work was being composed in the early 1930s, Olsen was under the influence of his teachers Schoenberg, Hindemith and Butting in Berlin. The critic of the *Stavanger Aftenblad* (who signed himself ‘G. E.’) on 23 December 1932 – having had a glance at the music – may therefore have put his finger on one of the characteristics of the work when he wrote that ‘the composer sometime soon will write atonal music à la Fartein Valen’. In the event, Olsen never followed in Valen’s footsteps, although, having

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> Ole Mørk Sandvik, ‘Baansuller og andre barnesange fra Gudbrandsdalen’ (‘Lullabies and other children’s songs from Gudbrandsdalen’), *Maal og minne*, Bymaals-lagets forlag, Kristiania, 1916, p. 186.

spent the most receptive years of his childhood abroad, he was always all ears to new tendencies in music. He may in this respect be regarded as much as a cosmopolitan as a purely Norwegian voice. For Percy Grainger, Olsen's art was as timeless as it was without boundaries. In a letter dated 10 March 1935, written three years after the publication of the Variations, Grainger points out that 'it is the technical perfection [...] in [Olsen's] art that moves me most (as a composer). The way his polyphonic voices move freely as well as meaningfully through the harmonic web is something that always arouses my boundless admiration.'

The Norwegian pianist Øyvind Aase made a highly acclaimed debut as a concert pianist in Oslo at the age of twenty, after studying with Jan Henrik Kayser and Eline Nygaard. In London he continued his studies with Edith Vogel at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, where he was awarded the Concert Recital Diploma (*Premier Prix*) in 1983. He also received lessons from the pianists Albert Ferber, Charles Rosen and Jenny Solheid.

He has made radio recordings in Norway, Sweden and Finland, also recording major piano sonatas by Haydn, Schumann and Stravinsky on record albums. His recording of Poulenc's *The Story of Babar* in 1999 with the Norwegian actress Sidsel Ryen, a work they both performed at the International Chamber Music Festival in Stavanger the same year, was the first release of the work with Norwegian text.

His work with twentieth-century repertoire also involves performances devoted to 'entartete' composers banned by the Nazis. In a concert series he initiated in Bergen in 2011–15 he played works by Hindemith (*Suite* 1922), Korngold (the Piano Quintet), Bloch (Piano Quintet No. 1) and Hans Gál (Sonata for violin and piano, Op. 17). His album *In Evening Air: Piano Moods 1900–2000* (thema), consisting of 34 piano miniatures by 33 composers, was ranked among the ten best classical CDs in 2006 by *Bergens Tidende*, one of Norway's leading newspapers.



Photograph: Marit Hommedal

As of the early 1990s he has devoted himself largely to Nordic repertoire. On a tour of India in 1992 he performed selections of Grieg's piano music, in 1993 he gave a solo recital of six Norwegian piano sonatas in Oslo, in 2012 he played Ludvig Irgens-Jensen's seldom-performed Piano Quintet with the Frosch Quartet in Sofia, and he presented selections of Alf Hurum's piano music at a solo recital in Berlin in 2014. He often appears at Edvard Grieg's home Trolldhaugen, where he has been the 'Pianist of the Week' on several occasions.

He has given the first performances of many Norwegian piano works and made the first recordings of works by such Nordic composers as Bjørn Gjerstrøm, Gunnar Gjerstrøm, Edvard Hagerup Bull, J. P. E. Hartmann, C. F. E. Horneman, Alf Hurum, Johan Kvandal, Leifur Thórarinnsson and Adolf Wiklund. Among his recordings of this repertoire are *Nordic Piano Music for Children* (thema, 1995) and *The Hurum Collection* (thema, 1999–2003), constituting the first thorough presentation on four albums of the piano works and chamber music with piano by Alf Hurum, Norway's first Impressionist composer.

Øyvind Aase is also a writer, and has published two collections of essays on music (1999 and 2019) and a book on philosophy (2017). He contributed to the international Grieg anthology *Music and Identity in Norway and Beyond* (Fagbokforlaget, Bergen, 2011); 2013 saw the publication of his history of the musical life of his home-town of Bergen, *På mange strenger. Musikk og undervisning i Bergen* (Bergens Musikklærerforening, Bergen); and *Grieg's Best Opus*, a book on Grieg's home Trolldhaugen, the first full history of the museum, is due to appear in 2022. [www.oyvindaase.no](http://www.oyvindaase.no)



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