

CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

A look at Norway's greatest composer, Edvard Grieg, and how his music celebrated and inspired his homeland's burgeoning identity.

BY RACHEL GUYAH

# Ode To Norway

Let us start with a song, but not just any song—one that starts off slow, eerily slow, as a series of soft, short notes tiptoe around the scale. The suspense is immediate. A single melody repeats itself, relentlessly, as both volume and speed snowball toward the frenetic finish line.

If you don't know Grieg by name, surely you know some of his songs—particularly the one described above, “In the Hall of the Mountain King,” from Henrik Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt*. In its haunting refrain, you can practically feel young Peer’s panic as trolls hunt him down during his escape from the mountain king.

But there’s much more to Grieg than mountain kings and trolls. A brilliant pianist and composer, the Bergen-born man brought Norwegian culture to the masses through his musical marriage of folk and classical styles. His songs were both inspired by, and a reflection of, Norway’s people, land and legacy.



## MUSICAL BEGINNINGS

Born in the coastal town of Bergen on June 15, 1843, Grieg was fortunate enough to have his first music teacher close to home. In fact, she lived there too: Grieg's mother, Gesine Judithe, was a respected singer soloist and pianist herself, and an important figure in the Bergen music scene. She began giving him formal lessons at the age of six, though young Grieg preferred letting his fingers flit around the keys while his imagination wandered (as young minds often do).

But Gesine wasn't the only musical member of the family: Her sister, Grieg's aunt, was married to the brother of Norway's virtuoso violinist, Ole Bull. And when Bull visited the family home in 1858 and heard 15-year-old Grieg perform, he urged the boy's parents to enroll him in a premier music conservatory in Leipzig, Germany, to cultivate his talent.

## FINDING HIS WAY IN DENMARK

After graduation from Leipzig, Grieg moved to Copenhagen, a city renowned for its rich cultural scene. It was here where Grieg discovered his two greatest loves: his wife, Nina Hagerup (a talented pianist/singer herself), and Norwegian music. The latter was a result of meeting Rikard Nordraak, a young Norwegian composer with a fiery passion for his homeland. (Norway's national anthem was composed by Nordraak.)

Grieg credits Nordraak for guiding his musical compass back to Norway and finding creative ways to weave Nordic elements into classical music—a genre dominated by German masters at the time. In fact, Grieg once said, "I believe the journey to myself went through Nordraak."

## PIANO CONCERTO IN A MINOR

Grieg composed only one piano concerto in his lifetime, but perhaps that's all the world needed: One brilliant, beautiful concerto to inspire pianists, both budding and seasoned, as well as music aficionados all across the world.

He composed Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16, in the summer of 1868. He was only 25 years old. Newly married and perhaps invigorated by the spring birth of his daughter, Alexandra, Grieg and his young family fled to Denmark for the summer. Energized by love, youth and happiness, Grieg composed the three-movement masterpiece while abroad.

In many ways, the concerto is the quintessential love song—a touching tribute to his beloved wife and daughter, yes, but also a charming nod to Norway, with folk elements subtly sprinkled throughout its (roughly) 30 minutes, such as:

- In the song's dramatic opening cadenza, a falling minor second is followed by a falling major third—a musical motif commonly heard in Nordic folk tunes, which would later become known as the "Grieg motif."



(Pictured top): View of Bergen Harbour, by Johan Christian Dahl, 1834.

(Pictured middle): Edvard and Nina Grieg at the piano.

(Pictured below): An autographed musical quotation from the Ballade for Piano, Op. 24, signed and inscribed by Edvard Grieg.



(Pictured below): Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson & Edvard Grieg.

(Pictured bottom): Work entitled "Poster For Peer Gynt" by Edvard Munch (1863-1944). This work was produced in 1896.



- After a slow, melancholic second movement, the final section opens with a lively march-like tempo, infused with rhythmic vigor reminiscent of the traditional Norwegian "halling" dance. Keen ears may even be able to hear imitations of the Hardanger fiddle in this section.

## POETS + PEER GYNT

Through his extraordinary command of melody, harmony, dynamics and rhythm, Grieg was a masterful storyteller. Perhaps this is why he was drawn to Norway's literary greats—kindred spirits in story and song.

For years, he collaborated with Nobel laureate Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Norway's beloved poet and playwright. He composed music to several of Bjørnson's poems, as well as stage music for his play Sigurd Jorsalfar, based on the 12th century King of Norway. The dynamic duo's collaboration helped spur nationalist pride and identity in the decades leading up to Norwegian independence.

However, it was his partnership with another poet-playwright, Henrik Ibsen, that would cement his

international legacy.

Grieg and Bjørnson had been working on a national opera when Ibsen approached Grieg about an ambitious project: composing incidental music for Peer Gynt—a sprawling, satirical, genre-bending play based on Ibsen's dramatic poem. Grieg accepted the challenge, though the work proved to be tedious and taxing. Nevertheless, he toiled on, and in February 1875 the play premiered in Christiania (Oslo) with great success.

Years later, Grieg decided to extract several movements from the score to create two orchestral suites (Peer Gynt Suite No. 1, Op. 46, Peer Gynt Suite No. 2, Op. 55)—a decision

## Listen & Watch

### Piano Concerto in A minor

A breathtaking performance led by acclaimed virtuoso Arthur Rubinstein.  
[youtu.be/11Yoyz6\\_Los](https://youtu.be/11Yoyz6_Los)

### In the Hall of the Mountain King

A stunning rendition by the esteemed Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, dripping with vitality and virtuoso.  
[rebrand.ly/mountain-king-berlin](https://rebrand.ly/mountain-king-berlin)

### March of the Trolls

A remarkable performance of this beloved Lyric Piece by an 11-year-old Alfredo Van de Munt.  
[youtu.be/PSwuWObf3jU](https://youtu.be/PSwuWObf3jU)

### Grieg: Lyric Pieces

Norwegian Leif Ove Andsnes recorded 24 of Grieg's Lyric Pieces on the composer's own 1892 Steinway piano. Available for purchase on Amazon (Prime members can stream free).

### "Classics For Kids: In the Hall of the Mountain King"

- Fun activity sheet for kids with a short bio of Edvard Grieg  
[rebrand.ly/classicsforkids](https://rebrand.ly/classicsforkids)

### "Hey Kids, Meet Edvard Grieg"

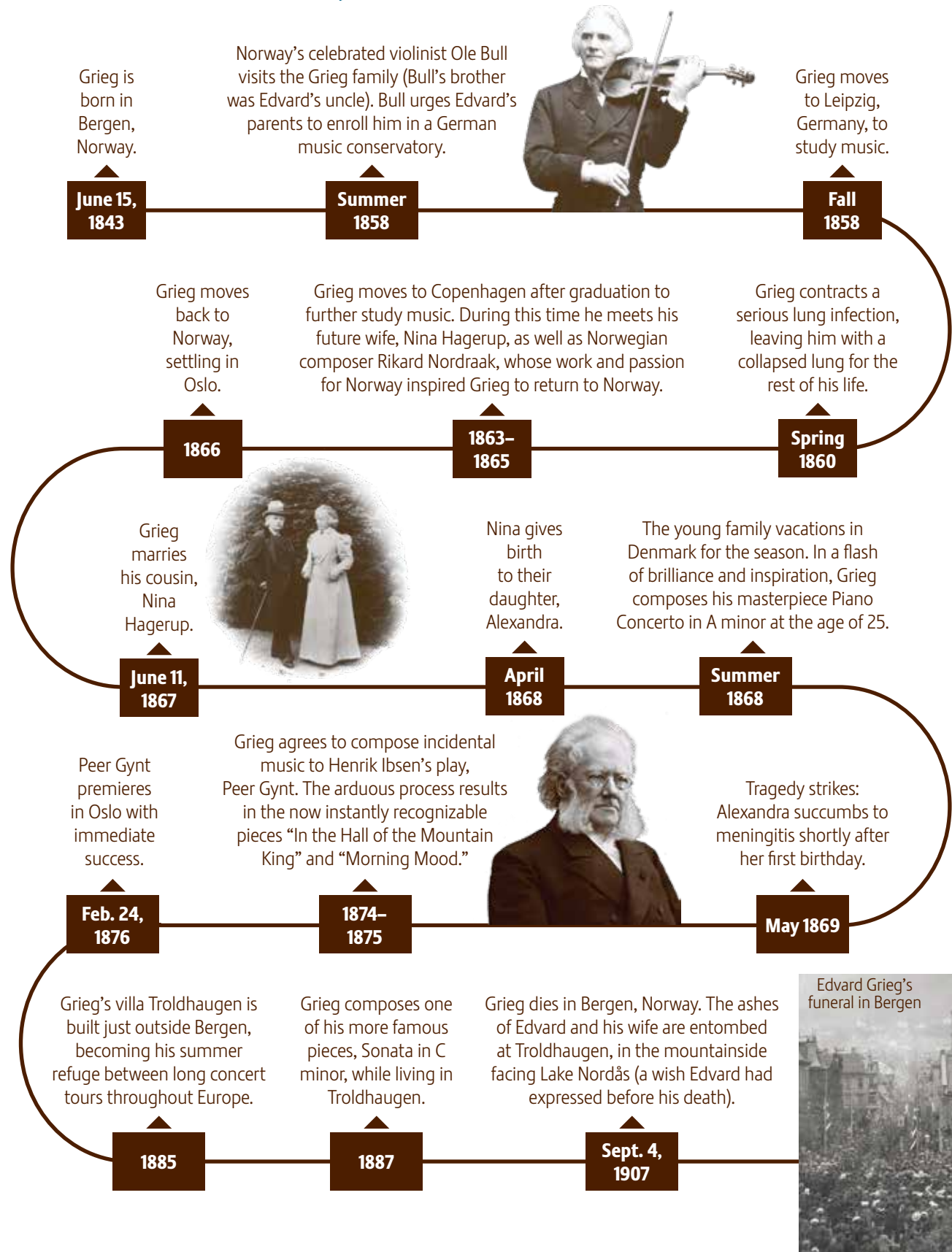
- Easy sheet music for piano, flute, trumpet and other instruments
- Free online piano lesson
- Grieg-themed word search, mad libs and more  
[rebrand.ly/makingmusicfun](https://rebrand.ly/makingmusicfun)

### Little Einsteins

- This beloved animated series introduces young children to famous art and music. Edvard Grieg is featured in Episodes 3 and 12 in Season 1.
- Available on Disney+ and Amazon Prime



# The Life of Edvard Grieg



WARREN'S PORTRAITS / BERGEN PUBLIC LIBRARY NORWAY; JACOBSEN / BERGEN PUBLIC LIBRARY NORWAY; GUSTAV BORGES / NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY; WS COLLECTION / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT) BY ANNA ANICHKOVA, HARMIS, INGVLID FJESTERVOLL MELEN

that would lead to his music being instantly recognizable and routinely referenced in pop culture across the world today.

Upon listening to "Morning Mood," one can immediately feel a sense of calm, hope and peace, as if waking upon a mountainside at sunrise. Compare that to "In the Hall of the Mountain King," whose deliciously menacing melody can invoke fear and doom.

## BRINGING NORWAY TO THE WORLD

Grieg was a master of the short form, which is beautifully represented in his collection, Lyric Pieces. He published 10 booklets of lyric pieces throughout his lifetime—each one containing short, highly engaging solo piano songs. Their brevity combined with their broad range in complexity and tone have made them popular worldwide. Over the generations, many a pianist—novice and professional alike—has enjoyed

playing these delightful, bite-sized compositions.

Grieg injected flavors of Nordic folk life into many of these pieces, and as a result, the collection became something of a cultural vehicle—an introduction of his homeland's growing identity into the homes and concert halls of Europe and America.

A favorite among pianists is the deliciously dynamic "March of the Trolls"—a piece that begins and ends with a maniacal, march-like tempo, separated by a slow, dreamy middle section. Perhaps it was inspired by one of Grieg's trips to Jotunheimen, Eastern Norway's mountainous region, which according to Norse mythology was once populated by trolls.

## GRIEG'S LOVE FOR NORWAY

Grieg led a nomadic life, often traveling for extended periods on long concert tours as both pianist and conductor. But whenever he had the chance, he'd escape to nature. For it was the mountains and

the fjords that fed his creative spirit. Indeed, Norway's stunning landscape was both medicine and muse for the composer. Despite having just one healthy lung due to a lung condition called pleurisy, Grieg loved heading out to Hardanger in Western Norway or hiking in Jotunheimen with friends—which he called his "only medicine" when the pain and exhaustion of his condition set in.

So strong was Grieg's love for Norway's beauty that in 1885 he and his wife oversaw the construction of Trolldhaugen, their idyllic villa, just outside Bergen. The residence included a tiny composer's hut along the shores of the Hardanger fjord. Inside these walls, he would escape to craft his next compositions.

As Grieg got older, his health continued to deteriorate. Yet he continued to compose and go on tour right up until his death on Sept. 4, 1907—leaving behind a legacy of music for generations to enjoy. ♡

## Bergen: A Perfect Grieg Getaway

If you're a fan of Grieg and his music, a trip to Bergen is a must. Here's where to go.



### Trolldhaugen

Trolldhaugen ("troll hill") was Grieg's personal villa for the last 22 years of his life. The residence is now a living museum open to visitors, offering concerts and piano competitions during the summer. Grieg's very own Steinway piano from 1892 is also housed here and is sometimes used for performances and recordings. [griegmuseum.no](http://griegmuseum.no)



### Bergen Public Library

Just 10 months before his death, Grieg and his wife bequeathed his handwritten notes, articles and letters to the Bergen Public Library. The extensive collection includes nearly 900 letters written by Grieg, as well as autographed scores, photographs and even live recordings of Grieg playing the piano in the years preceding his death. [bergenbibliotek.no](http://bergenbibliotek.no)



### Opus XVI

Opened in April 2018 by the great-great-grandson of Grieg's brother, the Edvard Grieg Heritage Hotel is located in a historic building in the heart of Bergen. It's named after Grieg's masterpiece, Piano Concerto in A minor (Op. 16). Elegance and comfort abound! There's an exhibit about Grieg on the lower level, too. [opusxvi.no](http://opusxvi.no)