

The Music of Grieg

was the subject of last Monday's "Musical Portrait"—a series on the lives and works of the famous composers, which is broadcast weekly from 2YA. In the following, Mrs. Daisy Basham—"Aunt Daisy," of 2YA—tells readers something of the life of Edward Grieg, in whose music breathes the spirit of Norway, the land that gave him birth.

NORWAY, with its sombre fjords, deep forests and smiling meadows as a rich source of inspiration, has always been a land of song. Its very folk-lore, half-Christian, half-pagan, translates itself naturally into tones, and the humblest peasants enjoy and appreciate the excellent music that enters so much into Norwegian life and custom.

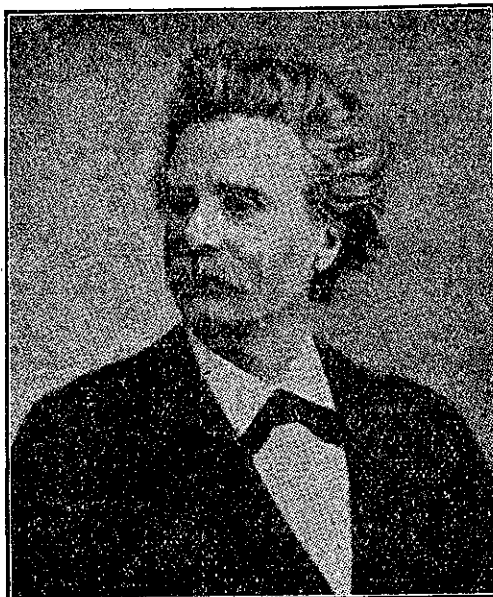
Even in the traditional period, when Odin and the old Norse gods were worshipped, high honours were paid to the bard, who sang the epic legends. During the Christian period the people developed their own music, expressing themselves in the bold and vigorous fashion that blends so well with the melancholy sweetness usually in evidence in their music. There is no doubt that the weird and sad element predominates, and small wonder that it should, for the winter is a long and fearsome night when God knows what is abroad, and the peasants, huddling together about their fires, drink, fiddle and sing in an effort to forget the evil things that scream in the wind.

The summer, a short sun-lit day, has scarcely smiled before it has gone and, because of its fleeting beauty, it leaves sadness in the hearts of those who know too well the darkness, the cold and the solitude of the long nights. These things are told in the music of Edward Grieg.

Grieg came of Scottish ancestry. His great-grandfather, a native of Aberdeen, left the land of his birth in the troublous period of the wars of Charles Edward Stuart, the Pretender, and settled permanently in Bergen, Norway. His son, John Grieg, became British Consul, and that office was passed down to Alexander, the father of the composer. The mother of Edward Grieg, a woman of much culture and considerable knowledge of things musical, carefully nurtured the exceptional talent for music which her son Edward revealed while but a small child. The story of his first attempt to play the piano is significant as being typical of his artistic originality and the modern quality of his ear.

"WHAT shall prevent me," says Grieg himself in a delightful reminiscence of his youthful days, "from calling back that wonderful and mysterious content at discovering when I set my arms up to the piano—not a melody, that was far off—no, but a harmony. First two notes, then a chord of three notes, then a full chord of four; ending at last with both hands—oh, joy! a combination of five, the chord of the ninth." It should be explained that this chord is one of the most important characteristics of modern music and a valuable asset of composers of to-day. "When I found that," said Grieg, "my happiness knew no bounds. At the time I was about five years old." These juvenile attempts at harmony are of special interest, for, next to his gift of melodic invention, are the romantic harmonies with which Grieg clothes and delicately colours his musical thoughts.

It was soon time for him to go to school—a prospect of which he deeply disapproved, for he preferred to lie upon his back and



Edward Grieg, 1843-1907

dream as he watched the summer clouds float lazily in the sky. His protests, however, were over-ruled. One day he brought to school, instead of an essay, his first attempt at musical composition, in the form of variations on a familiar melody. A buzz went through the class-room, and the teacher made inquiries. "Grieg has a composition." The professor went to the door and called a colleague. "Come here; here is something to look at. This little chap is a composer." But the happiness of the child was short-lived, for when the second professor had departed, the first changed his tactics and "took me," said Grieg, "by the hair until everything was black before my eyes, saying harshly, 'another time bring your German dictionary with you as you ought to do, and leave this foolish stuff at home'."

Grieg found solace in the person of a young lieutenant who lived opposite the school and who was devoted to music. For him Grieg had to copy out all his compositions. "Fortunately," he remarked, "I afterward succeeded in getting back all I had given him, and throwing them in the wastepaper basket,

where they most certainly belonged. I have often thought with gratitude of my friend the lieutenant, who has since become a general, and of the compliment he paid to my first attempt at art."

THE day came when Ole Bull, the celebrated Norwegian violinist, rode clattering into the yard and, hearing Grieg's music through the open window, insisted that he become a musician and that his parents send him at once to Leipzig to study. At Leipzig, however, Grieg was mortally homesick, and it was many months before his new environment and his music lessons at the Conservatory could reconcile him to the loss of Norway.

It is in his many songs that Grieg's great melodic gift finds its best expression. Often they are tinged with melancholy—perhaps too much so—but they are never lacking in beauty.

In his innocence Grieg had expected that, by some miracle, he could, in a short time, become "a wizard master" of music, but surprise and disappointment were in store for him. It gradually dawned on him that progress meant long and patient drudgery. This would have been endurable if he had had more sympathetic and intelligent teachers, but German provincialism ruled so strongly at the Leipzig Conservatory that it was impossible for Grieg's masters to realise what he was trying to do, or give him anything but the most academic counsel. When he tried to write the original harmonies that filled his ears he was reproved. His teachers did not realise Grieg must discover new laws of composition before he could put himself into his music. He worked hard, scarcely leaving time to eat or sleep.

The result was, that in two years, he suffered a collapse, and severe lung trouble, which left him with one lung for the rest of his life. With the loss of physical strength, however, there seemed to come an increase of nervous energy, and he recovered sufficiently to resume his labours and graduate with honours from the Conservatory in 1862. After a happy summer in his Norwegian (Concluded on page 2.)