



Exactly why Close Encounters with Music has subtitled its June 8 evening at Tanglewood “Grieg Revival” remains, in the words of the King of Siam, a puzzlement. Certainly Grieg’s tuneful Peer Gynt Suite, Piano Concerto, three violin sonatas and the most popular of his many songs are so frequently performed that no revival is necessary. But in the case of the main title for the evening, Nordic Lights, the reason is clear. The seeds for the evening, which includes some of Grieg’s most glorious smaller-scaled music as well as spoken excerpts from Henrik Ibsen’s Peer Gynt and Hans Christian Andersen’s works, both read by Broadway and Western Massachusetts Shakespearian sensation Tina Packer, lie in cellist Yehuda Hanani’s frequent trips to Scandinavia for summer festivals.

“On one of these occasions,” he reports, “I was taken to the Finnish woods at midnight, when the sun still shone, to pick wild berries. The colleague who accompanied me said that the reason the berries were so sweet and succulent was because of their endless exposure to sunlight.” With his taste buds tingling at the thought, Hanani began to ponder the ramifications of life in a region where the sun shines all night in the summer and goes into apparent hibernation in the winter.

“I had never made this connection between the tastiness of the berries and the several months they’re exposed to the midnight sun,” he says. “Those long summers, where everyone seems intoxicated and dizzy, offset the darkness of the winters, with their long brooding nights where everyone goes inward, and many become depressed and suicidal. I wonder if this very strong polarization of the seasons reflects in the dramatic nature of Ibsen’s plays and Bergman’s movies, with the contrast between darkness and the summertime of Wild Strawberries.”

It is the intoxication of Nordic summers that Hanani and his fellow artists hope to share in Tanglewood’s Ozawa Hall. Their main focus is Grieg because his music so clearly evokes place and culture. “His music invokes the place and the culture; you can smell the pine forest and see the fjords,” claims Hanani. “It is tremendously physical and immediate, and it is so attractive. You even get a sense of a beautiful tradition of embroidery, native dress, music redolent of nature, and humble homes. As Grieg himself said, his aim was to build dwellings for men [and women] in which they might feel at home and happy.”

Inside and Out

One of the binding forces between Grieg and Ibsen, who were good friends, was their love of Peer Gynt. Packer, who is very much drawn to Ibsen’s feminist consciousness, notes that he “translated the ancient ferocity of his country’s history and landscape into domestic dramas that shook the foundations of European thought: the sense of climbing to the top of mountains and plunging into the depths, the unconscious mind held in the symbolism of the fjords, a combination of great space and small interior rooms from which there may be no escape.”

“Ibsen maps the mind in a way no other playwright does,” she says. It will be very interesting to experience how her readings further illumine the brilliant music that surrounds them.

When I learned that some of Grieg’s most popular songs would be sung by baritone Mischa Bouvier, the familiarity of his name drove me to his website. There I found a glowing quote from *San Francisco Classical Voice*, a publication I review for. Searching further, I discovered the author of the quote—“immensely sympathetic, soulful voice. . . It’s easy to see why this presumably young artist won awards in four competitions in 2009–2010; his rare vocal and interpretive gifts all but ensure many major solo turns in the years ahead”—was none other than Jason Victor Serinus. Is it a sign of impending old age when you can no longer retain the names of the young artists you love? In any case, consider this an endorsement.

After a performance of Grieg’s virtuosic Violin Sonata No. 3 by Ara Gregorian and pianist Adam Neiman, Hanani joins them to perform Brahms’ gorgeous Trio No. 1, Op. 8. Why Brahms? Not only did Brahms and Grieg know each other, not only were they friendly, but the oft “autumnal” nature of the brooding composer also reminds us of the darkness that follows the Nordic summer’s light. “I’m fond of this first trio for an interesting reason,” says Hanani. “It’s the only piece of chamber music by Brahms for which we have two versions. He wrote it as a young man, and then, much later in life, revised it. It’s fascinating to see how his final version combines the passion of youth with the experience and wisdom that come with maturity.” Is Hanani being a bit selfish by providing this rationale for sticking Brahms in the middle of a Nordic program? Let’s put it this way: I’ve been carrying CDs of the Brahms trios to audio shows for years. Every time I play the opening phrase of the Trio No. 1, Op. 8, I sense hearts opening all around me. Isn’t that reason enough, not only for Brahms’s presence, but also for your own at Close Encounters with Music’s annual Gala Concert? CEWM’s Gala Concert and Reception, Nordic Lights, begins in Tanglewood’s Ozawa Hall on June 8 at 6 pm.

—Jason Victor Serinus, Preview Massachusetts |