

Contents · Inhalt

Preface	V
Biographical sketch	VI
Vorwort	IX
Biographische Skizze	X

I Blaafjellet · In the Blue Mountain · Im Blauberg

1. Nat (<i>Night / Nacht</i>)	2
2. I Trollhallen (<i>In the Troll Hall / In den Trollhallen</i>).....	4
3. Stortrollet (<i>The Great Troll / Der große Troll</i>)	12
4. Huldrelok (<i>Hulder-Call / Ruf der Huldre</i>)	14
5. Den Bjergtagnes Kvad (<i>The Mountain Captive's Song / Das Lied des Berggefangenen</i>)	17
6. Trolldans (<i>Dance of the Trolls / Tanz der Trolle</i>)	20
Critical Commentary	24

Biographical sketch

One of the best-known descriptions of Agathe Backer Grøndahl's music comes from the short diary entry written by Edvard Grieg (1843–1907) on receiving news of her death on 4 June 1907: 'If a mimosa flower could sing, it would sound like Agathe Backer Grøndahl's most beautiful, intimate notes.'¹ Grieg here refers to the plant *mimosa pudica*, also known as the sensitive or touch-me-not plant, based on its shy nature and leaves that recoil to the touch. He had also previously referred to Backer Grøndahl's 'mimosa-like aloofness'. Similarly, the opera composer Gerhard Schjelderup described her as a personality marked by 'a withdrawn shyness, an intimacy, which we also find in her numerous works.'²

It is noteworthy that those who knew Agathe Backer Grøndahl drew many of the same parallels between her personality and the music she created. A listener and performer, however, will also notice other equally prominent qualities of her music. Yes, it is intimate and enchanting, but it is also virtuosic, brilliant and vigorous. She composed for the home, but also for the concert hall. So how can we truly understand and interpret her music? Who was Agathe Backer Grøndahl?



Agathe Backer Grøndahl

Photo by Frederik Johannes Gottfried Klem, National Library of Norway
Foto von Frederik Johannes Gottfried Klem, Norwegische Nationalbibliothek

Early years

Agathe Backer was born in Holmestrand on 1 December 1847, the third of four sisters. They were all artistically inclined and were tutored in music and drawing. Her older sister Harriet was to become one of Norway's foremost painters, but it was clear early on that Agathe was the most musically gifted of the sisters. Harriet recounts:

There was never any doubt about my sister Agathe's talent. At the age of three, she had already begun to tinker on the old piano that stood in our nursery, any melody that was played or sung (...) There is no question that Agathe was a child prodigy from the very beginning.³

She also paints a vivid picture of the strong feelings the music evoked in her sister:

Agathe once came to me in tears and said: 'I have made a beautiful song. It came to me in such a way that I could not resist.'⁴

In 1857, the family moved to Kristiania. Agathe was then able to study under the most renowned teachers, and Halfdan Kjerulf (1815–1868) in particular became an important mentor for her. Kjerulf was a big name in the Norwegian musical landscape of the era, and one of the country's most important composers. His art songs and use of Norwegian folk music made him a pioneer in art music in Norway. At Kjerulf's suggestion, Agathe travelled to Berlin, where she studied under Theodor Kullak (1818–1882). She would also go on to study under great names like Franz Liszt (1811–1886) and Hans von Bülow (1830–1894).

Adulthood and later years

Her first compositions were songs. Opus 1, *Tre sanger* (1872), was dedicated to Nina Grieg (1845–1935), who also premiered them. Backer Grøndahl developed a close friendship with both Edvard and Nina Grieg. In 1889, Edvard Grieg invited her to play his Concerto in A minor, Op. 16, conducted by him, in cities including London and Paris. Grieg dedicated his *Vinje* songs, Op. 33, to her, and Backer Grøndahl in turn dedicated *Sange ved havet*, Op. 17, to him.

Agathe Backer Grøndahl's life was not marked by major or dramatic events. In 1875, she married choir conductor Olaus Andreas Grøndahl (1847–1923). They had three sons, the youngest of whom, Fridtjof Backer-Grøndahl (1885–1959), became one of the foremost Norwegian pianists of his generation. The Backer Grøndahls played a key role in the establishment of a viable music scene in Norway.

¹ Edvard Grieg, *Dagbøker*, Bergen 1993, p. 205.

² Gerhard Schjelderup, Ole Mørk Sandvik (ed.), *Norges musikhistorie* vol. II, Kristiania (Oslo) 1921, p. 143.

³ Cecilie Dahm, *Agathe Backer Grøndahl. Komponisten og Pianisten*, Oslo 1998, p. 23.

⁴ Ole Mørk Sandvik, *Agathe og O. A. Grøndahl 1847–1947. Et Minneskrift*, Oslo: Grøndahl & Søn's Boktrykkeri, 1948, p. 108.

Huldrelok

Hulder-Call · Ruf der Huldra

Andante ♩ = 60

4. *pp* *dolciss.*

Ped. una corda sempre

5

10

p *p*

poco più mosso ♩ = 120

8va

15

sost. *pp*