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Springvand

The Fountain · Springbrunnen

But inside the palm grove it is so cool and quiet
Two small trickling fountains play, lonely in the sunshine.

*Men inde i Palmelunden er der saa svalt og stille
To smaa rislende Springvand ensomt i Solskinnet spille.*
(Vilhelm Krag)

Doch im Inneren des Palmenhains ist es so kühl und still
Zwei kleine Springbrunnen plätschern einsam im Sonnenschein.

Agathe Backer Grøndahl
Op. 39, No. 6

Allegretto leggiero ♩ = 144

6. *staccatiss. pp*

Ped.

cantando

Ped.

11 *Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.*

16 *Ped. Ped.* *8va*

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 Similarly, the opera composer Gerhard Schjelderup described her as a personality marked by 'a withdrawn shyness, an intimacy, which we also find in her numerous works.'²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?

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. Simultaneously, Agathe devoted much of her time to her family and teaching, rather than cultivating her own career. This is clearly evident in an 1889 article written by the British author and music critic George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950):

She composes, she says, in the quiet of the evening, when the day's work is done: chiefly, indeed, in the evenings of December, when the year's work is done. 'What work?' I ask, astounded. 'Oh, all the things one has to do' she replies 'the housekeeping, the children, the playing, the three lessons I give every day to pupils.' (...) she adds, with a diffidence as to her power of expressing so delicate a point in English, that it is as a wife and mother that she gets the experience that makes her an artist.⁵

Shaw refers to Backer Grøndahl as one of the foremost pianists in Europe. She did indeed have a very active and successful career as a concert pianist, performing to great acclaim in Paris and London, as well as in the Nordic countries. During the 1890s, however, she was forced to significantly reduce her concert activities due to health problems. This led, in turn, to more time for composing, and it was during this period that she created many of her most important compositions, including the *Fantasy Pieces* and the suite *I Blaafjellet*. She did not stop giving concerts either and her performance at the great Musikkfesten festival in Bergen in 1898 was a milestone during this period.

Agathe Backer Grøndahl died in 1907. She was then hailed as one of the great names of Norway's musical landscape. She left behind 70 opus works, including 250 songs and around 150 pieces for piano.

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

⁵ quoted from *Shaw's Music. The Complete Musical Criticism of Bernard Shaw*, ed. by Dan H. Laurence, 1981, vol. 1, p. 709 f.