

# Iowa Impromptu

## Norwegian Immigrant O. M. Oleson Seeks Music from Bjørnson and Grieg

by Camilla Haugen Cai

Norwegian-born Olaf Martin Oleson is a footnote in the music history of Norway. He is literally the person without a name in the authoritative biography of Norway's most famous composer, Edvard Grieg. However, Oleson is far more than a footnote in Iowa's musical past, in the cultural and business history of Fort Dodge, and in the 19th-century diaspora of Norwegians in America.

Who was this Olaf Martin Oleson? Someone worth knowing, it turns out. He was born in the Stod Parish near Steinkjer in the district of North Trøndelag, June 29, 1849. His father was the farmer-owner (also a teacher) of the family estate called Five or Fieve. Olaf was not the oldest son and therefore did not have inheritance rights (*odelsret*) to the farm, but his father helped direct the future for this bright young man and sent him to the city of Oslo to study gardening and landscaping. Olaf planned to go on to Leipzig, Germany, to the university, presumably to study botany, which was his strongest interest. But his older brother, Ingebrigt Oleson, then living in Fort Dodge, Webster County, Iowa, tempted Olaf with the dream of America. He convinced Olaf that the future lay in America, and in 1870, 21 years old, Olaf sailed for America. It is likely that his brother paid the passage.

America's appeal to Oleson also rang true to other 19th-century Norwegian children raised in large rural families. Many of the children survived to adulthood because there was improved health care and sufficient food, the result of vaccines and more efficient farming methods. Rural Norway, however, could not support the population increase. Whole farm families and extended families of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grand-

parents left for America when parents realized that their little patch of farmland would not support them or their children in the future. Young people faced grim futures if they stayed in Norway. Those who traveled only as far as Norwegian cities found little work. The cities were already overflowing with people who could do unskilled labor. Women might become primary teachers, house maids, or factory workers, but the salaries were tiny and the conditions rough. Marriage might secure their future, but many women could not afford to wait. Some were restless with ambitions of their own; others were desperate to escape the limitations of Norwegian social mores. For young men like Olaf, it was impossible to buy a farm. Usually the path to success lay in getting an education: Olaf had an advantage. His father had given the boy a basic education, and with the further schooling in Oslo, Olaf showed the skills and ability to pursue a university education in Leipzig. Even such an advanced degree, however, would only have prepared Olaf for a modest but comfortable life among Norwegian academics. To an energetic 19-year-old, that future seemed meager reward for study abroad, and he turned away from this comfortable life path, a path totally unavailable to most young Norwegians.

Adventure and opportunity appealed more to Olaf. Who knew to what heights he might rise? The lure of America was strong and its glories were exaggerated by shipping companies' advertising agents. Most persuasive were the letters home to Norway from newly American family members and friends. With such a relative in America to pave the way, it was almost a given that "America fever," as the Norwegians called it, would pull family and community members across the ocean.

Oleson, O. M.

### Norsk-Amerikansk 17de Maisang.

Johan Selnes.  
*Tempo di vivace.*

FOR MANDSKOR.

O. M. Oleson.

1. Nor - ges dag! Slik en fest og fol - ke - vrim - mell! Slik en  
 2. O - lafs land! Haa-kons, Ha - ralds Kon - ge - ri - ke, Bjørn-sons  
 3. Og - saa vi, som har bo - stavn her i vest - en, og - saa

lys - blaa Mai - him - mell! Slik en luft med smeld i smeld hvergang  
 Ver - ge - lands til - li - ke. Vik - ing - ret med aand og mot, daadskraft  
 vi er med i fest - en. Den er vor, som den er din, kjæ - re

Oleson, O. M.

### Come to Iowa.

Con Spirito.

For Mixed Voices.

1. Come to I - o - wa in the cen - tral West, Whe  
 2. Work in I - o - wa where the corn grows tall, Whe  
 3. Live in I - o - wa, in this fa - vored land, Whe

and the homes are the best. Here the  
 turn to gold in the Fall. Here the  
 es are ev - er at hand. Here the

realm on the hill, Faith - ful striv - ing the  
 green past - ures stray. From the dawn 'til the  
 whole - some - ly raised, And the glo - ry of

grand old State, in this good old State,

Published by O. M. Oleson, Fort D



Olaf M. Oleson of Fort Dodge played many roles in his lifetime: Norwegian immigrant, state senator, pharmacist, business owner, banker, town leader—and composer, choral director, and mover and shaker in the world of Norwegian-American men's choruses. In this last role, in 1896, Oleson boldly asked a favor of two international cultural celebrities. The results are revealed in an interesting tale involving witty verse, impromptu creations, and furious snowstorms.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Fort Dodge, Iowa, had about 3,000 residents when Olaf M. Oleson arrived in 1870, part of an influx of Norwegian-born immigrants to Webster County. By 1880, only Minnesota and Wisconsin had more Norwegian-born residents than Iowa.

Older brother Ingebrigt had already done the hardest part for the Oleson family. With the goal of finding inexpensive land to till, he had traveled as far west as the railway would take him, to a place on the frontier—Fort Dodge, Iowa—where he could get immediate farm work to keep him alive and where he had the prospect of buying inexpensive land. As luck would have it, Ingebrigt also found other Norwegians in Fort Dodge who counseled him wisely.

Norwegian immigration to America had begun

slowly in earlier decades, but by the 1860s thousands of Norwegian immigrants were coming to America every year. Iowa became a state in 1846, but only a few Norwegian immigrants had come here by then; the 1850 census lists only 330 people of Norwegian stock. A surge of immigrants came to northern and central Iowa in the 1850s and 1860s, many of whom had first settled in Wisconsin or Illinois and were experienced pioneers. By 1870 the census shows more than 25,000 Norwegians in Iowa, and in Webster County the handful of Norwe-



O. M. OLESON, PRESIDENT

T. S. LARSEN, SECY. AND TREAS.

# THE OLESON DRUG COMPANY

WHOLESALE AND RETAIL

DRUGGISTS

DRUGS, PAINTS, OILS, GLASS  
BOOKS, STATIONERY  
ETC, ETC.

FORT DODGE, IOWA,

DEC 6 1921

SHSI (DES MOINES)

Oleson quickly moved from immigrant farmhand to drugstore owner in Fort Dodge, but Norwegian choral music long nourished his ties to his homeland. The Oleson Building, built in 1894 to house his drugstore, also served as rehearsal space and meeting hall for the Fort Dodge Norwegian men's chorus until 1955.

gians had grown to 403 (307 born in Norway). Olaf Martin Oleson's arrival that year (1870) was one in a rising wave of emigrants from Norway. The number of Norwegian immigrants in the U.S. jumped from 44,000 in 1860, to 114,000 in 1870, to 182,000 in 1880. By that year, Norwegian-born immigrants were the fourth highest ethnic group in Iowa (after German, Irish, and English). Only Minnesota and Wisconsin had more of Norwegian birth.

Oleson revealed bits and pieces of his immigration experience in later life, experiences that were perhaps colored by the passage of time. By the time he got to Chicago, he related, he had only 50 cents left. (We must assume that he also still had his ticket for Fort Dodge.) In Chicago with this last 50 cents he bought a green tie in order to arrive properly attired at his brother's home in Fort Dodge. But Ingebrigt was shocked by the young man's gaudy tie and made him put it away for good: As the story goes, he was not even allowed to wear it among Irishmen in Fort Dodge, a reference to the Irish custom of "the wearing of the green."

The tie episode may be the most colorful story of Oleson's life. He was hard-working, apparently rather quiet, though with a sense of humor (something that would be much needed for his later encounter with two Norwegian cultural giants). He was intelligent and curious about the world, he had wide interests and an active mind, and he showed scientific and scholarly ability. Most of all he had imagination, discipline, and brilliant business instinct.

For two years at North Lizard Creek near Fort Dodge he worked as a farmhand driving a team of oxen. He used to say the oxen learned his Norwegian commands faster than he learned their English. Soon he went to work in a Fort Dodge retail drugstore, which led him to seek further education at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Graduating with highest honors in 1877, he returned to Fort Dodge, but not without some vital new knowledge beyond pharmacy. At the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876 he had seen his first electric light and telephone, and he understood their enormous potential for both him and his community.

He quickly moved up in the Fort Dodge drugstore business from clerk to partner and then to owner of his own Oleson Drug Company. But Oleson had wider interests; he was a man with vision, and he saw tremendous opportunity to shape the future of the growing city. His observations at the Philadelphia Centennial led him to establish the Fort Dodge Light & Power Company and the Fort Dodge Telephone Company. Putting his business skills to work, he also became president of

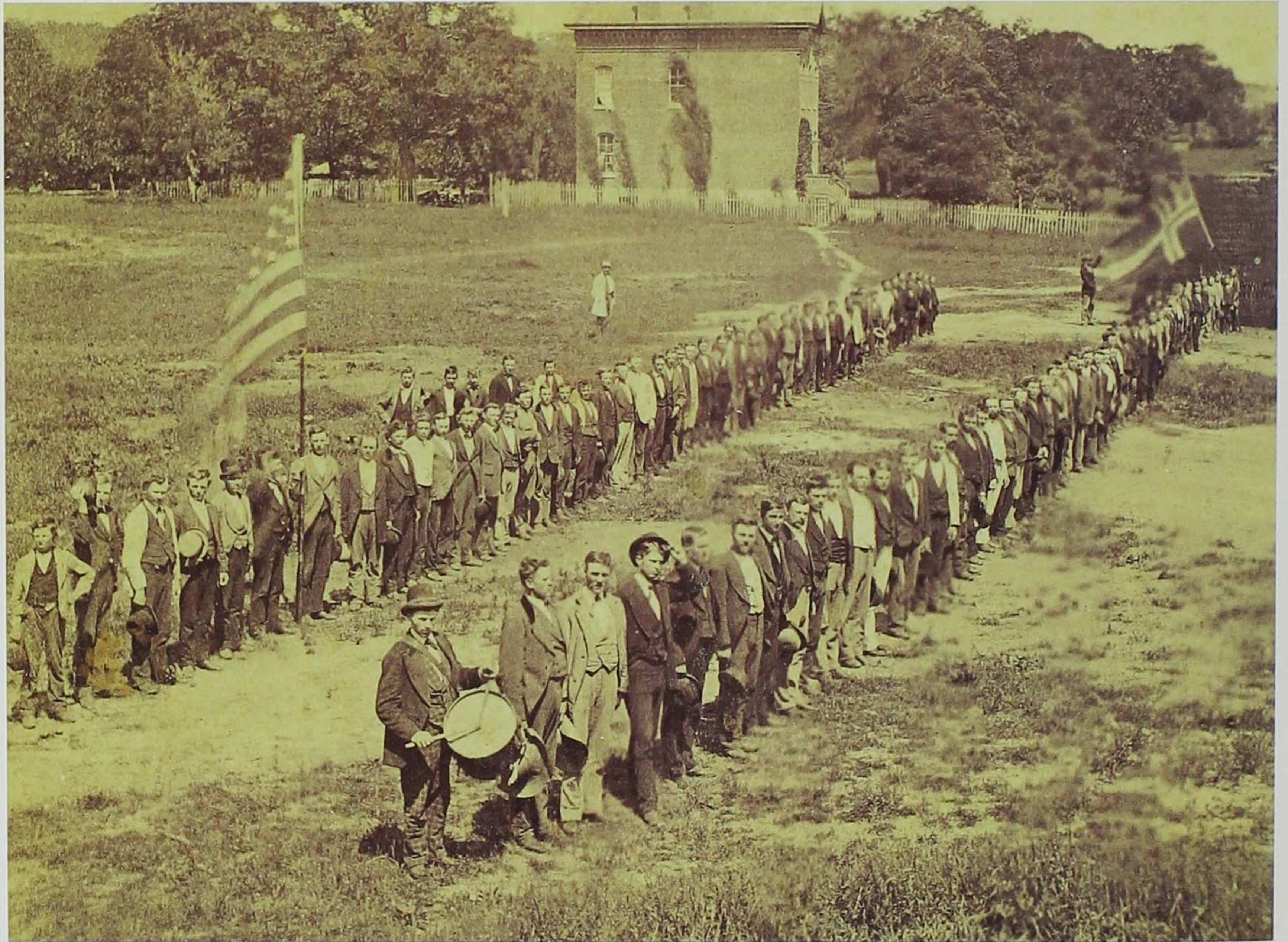
the Fort Dodge Hotel Company, which owned the centrally located Wahkonsa Hotel, and soon he held the position of vice president in the Fort Dodge State Bank. He even served briefly in public life, where he acquired the title "The Honorable" for his two years as Democratic state senator (1892-1894).

But there was another man inside this successful business leader. Oleson loved to sing in male quartets and choruses at just the time when such groups were being formed everywhere in America. Immigrants from Scandinavia, Germany, and other northern European areas brought this popular mid-century entertainment form with them. In Europe these urban groups were formed among men of similar class standing and profession. Laborers sang together, students and academics formed their own choruses, craftsmen were a separate group, and merchants formed other groups. The pleasure of joining together with like-minded people to sing, talk trade, gossip, and drink a bit afterwards was a treasured male privilege. Urban women could not take the same step because their primary workplace was in the home. For them to organize independently and to present themselves publicly would have been an embarrassment to society.

In Norway the first choruses formed along the lines of German groups in the 1840s and 1850s. The men in the singing groups usually shared a political stance. Some were involved in the budding labor movement, while others pushed forward the cause of nationalism. Nationalism was especially important to Norway and was in opposition to the more inclusive view called Pan-Scandinavianism—that is, presenting Scandinavian countries as a unit to the rest of the world. Pan-Scandinavianism was the majority viewpoint in Norway in the 1840s through the 1860s, but its citizens remained constantly dissatisfied with Swedish control of their nation. In the next years nationalism won out, through the oratory of writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and many others, and it led Norway to the brink of war with Sweden in 1905. Each wave of immigrants brought a new stage of this political struggle with them, and it affected especially the early stages of the singing societies in America.

The earliest Norwegian singing group in America was probably one founded in the late 1850s in Chicago. In the 1860s a group formed in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and a Decorah, Iowa, chorus named Luren followed soon thereafter. These were lively groups of young men in their twenties and thirties. More groups soon formed in other towns and cities with large Scandinavian popu-

SHSI (IOWA CITY). ORIGINAL COURTESY OF PAUL C. JUHL



Students in Decorah, Iowa, parade with both American and Norwegian flags in this stereograph from about 1876. With a large Norwegian population, Luther College, and a Norwegian-language newspaper, Decorah hosted two male choruses.

lations. Class and profession were much less important than they had been in European groups. These men knew of the large singing festivals in their homeland, but they also learned that other ethnic groups in America had the same tradition, the German *Sängerfesten* in particular, in which many choruses traveled to one place to sing together. In the 1880s a similar collective movement started in eastern cities with large Scandinavian populations—Boston, New York, and Philadelphia—and it spread to midwestern cities and towns—especially Chicago, Minneapolis, and Decorah.

Fort Dodge's Olaf Oleson became one of the important agitators in this large-scale movement. On January 23, 1886, Oleson wrote an article in the Minneapolis newspaper *Budstikken* encouraging midwestern Scandinavian singing groups to join together for larger festivities. "There are many good singers among the Scandinavians . . . but they have as yet had no chance to get

together, and their talents lie buried. Such a Festival will stimulate Scandinavian singing in this country, and that is most necessary, if it is not to die out altogether. This would be a great national loss, since surely no other nation can show such excellent music especially adapted for male chorus as the Scandinavian countries." Oleson indulges in a bit of Pan-Scandinavian pride here because he could count on an audience made up of immigrants who still supported the Norwegian-Swedish Union. They were not particularly interested in or current with Norway's radically changing politics of the 1880s.

Various smaller festivals (*sangerfest*) had been organized in the early 1880s, but Oleson's dream came true in New York City, May 16, 1886, when the United Scandinavian Singers of America was formed. In 1891, under the name Scandinavian Singers' Association, the choruses had a festival in Minneapolis, the furthest west for any such gathering at that time. It awakened strong

interest all over the Midwest, but tensions between Swedes and Norwegians soon split the organization. Personality conflicts among the leaders were the immediate causes, but political tensions in their homelands may have haunted their negotiations. Many Swedes left the organization. In the same year, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, other midwestern Scandinavians formed a new organization called The Northwestern Scandinavian Singers' Association (*Det Nordvestlige Skandinaviske Sangerforbund*).

Individual choruses invariably chose Norwegian names for their groups, and composer Edvard Grieg's name was a popular one: Grieg Mandskor (men's chorus) in Canton, South Dakota, in Dahlen, North Dakota, and in Fort Dodge, Iowa; Grieg Sangforening (singing society) in Madison and Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Decorah, Iowa, had two male choruses, Luren (named for the medieval musical instrument, the *lur*) and Grieg Mandskor. Edvard Grieg (1843–1907) was Norway's best-known composer with an international reputation. He was trained in Leipzig by German musicians; his style was therefore primarily European romanticism, and his music easily won the hearts of both Europeans and Americans.

Grieg's important place in history comes from his interest in Norwegian peasant music. His pieces that use the rhythms and melodies from this lively folk heritage take on a spirit different from his other pieces. Especially these pieces with their native colors helped to fuel Norway's turbulent events. For the political nationalists he and his music were confirmation that Norway had its own unique culture. That Grieg wrote incidental music for Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's heroic plays *Sigurd Josalfar* (Opus 22) and *Olav Trygvason* (Opus 50)—two heroes from Norway's Viking past when Norwegians were their own masters—suggests his close ties to both Bjørnson and his ideals. Best known, however, are Grieg's two *Peer Gynt Suites* for orchestra, especially the selections "Hall of the Mountain King," "Morning Mood," and "Solveig's Song." His Piano Concerto in A Minor is a favorite competition piece for young pianists. His many songs and character pieces for piano are popular with both amateur and professional musicians. "Land Sighting" (*Landkjenning*), "The Great White Flock" (*Den store hvite flokk*), and "Salute in Song" (*Sangerhilsen*) are still popular selections with Norwegian-American men's choruses today.

In Oleson's career-building years in Fort Dodge,



COURTESY OF VESTERHEIM NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN MUSEUM ARCHIVES (DECORAH, IOWA)

The Grieg Singing Society of Nordness (by Decorah) was one of many men's choruses in the heavily Norwegian Upper Midwest.

after his return from Philadelphia in 1877, he had no time for courting, marriage, or family (he did not marry until 1895). But he did entertain his male friends. In the 1880s his apartment became the gathering place for young Norwegian men who came together primarily to sing for their own amusement, but they also played card and board games and created skits together. In 1891 Oleson pulled these men together into a small singing group (about 16 members) that he named the Grieg Mandskor. Oleson never limited his membership to Norwegians, in spite of growing tensions in those last years before Norway gained independence from Sweden, and he even included members without Scandinavian heritage.

Oleson was 42 years old in 1891 when he founded the Grieg Mandskor, and he remained its director for many years thereafter. His chorus attended all the big festivals: Sioux Falls in 1892; Sioux City, 1894; Omaha, 1896; and Minneapolis, May 17, 1897, for the unveiling of the monument dedicated to the world-famous Norwegian violinist Ole Bull.

It was in 1896 that Olaf Oleson decided to write to Norway's great author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910). By this time Bjørnson, in his sixties, was one of the best-known citizens of Norway. He had built a career as a writer, director, and orator. (He would win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1903.) In the 1870s he became an agitator for politically liberal views, and with even more inflammatory views, an agitator against the beliefs and power of the Lutheran church. With his brilliant speeches he drove Norwegian politicians and the Norwegian people out of complacency. No longer could they be dutiful subjects of Sweden with unquestioning loyalty to the church and its hierarchy. The church survived Bjørnson's attacks, but not without change. Sweden's hold on Norway, however, would not. The Norwegian parliament pushed out the Swedish government in 1905, and in that moment Bjørnson saw his grand dreams for Norway come true.

What better way, Oleson reasoned, to stimulate Norwegian-American men's singing groups than with a song text specially written for them by Bjørnson and with music freshly composed by Norway's most famous composer, Grieg? A new piece could be a beacon, an anthem for the whole Norwegian men's choral movement in America. And, if successful, there could be further, active, cultural exchange with Norway.

On February 14, 1896, Oleson pulled out a piece of Oleson Drug Company letterhead—advertising its “Drugs, Paints, Oils, Glass, Wall Paper, Books, Statio-

nery, Lamps, Etc.” He wrote (in Norwegian) to Bjørnson requesting a poem and music for his chorus. The language of this letter reveals the great respect Oleson had for Bjørnson:

Mr. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson:

Thank you for your visit, Bjørnson, the unforgettable! Well, it is really a long time now since you were here and made such a powerful impression on us all!

We have a five-year-old men's singing society here that consists of about 16 members. Its name is the Grieg Men's Chorus. I have been and remain the group's leader, and we are making good progress so that, not only among our countrymen, but also several times among Americans, we have shown what excellent things Norway has both in the area of poetry as well as in the area of music. What we might wish for is just this: Would you have the kindness to write a verse for our society and send it to Edvard Grieg in order for him to set it to music? The reason I write to you is that I do not personally know Grieg although I am certainly “intimate” with his glorious music. I know that it is a great deal to ask you for all this; if it is not convenient for you, do not be afraid to say no—but if only you could see how a few lines from you in the form of a poem would inspire us all, then I could hardly imagine that you would say no to our request.

Hoping that you will find the time and the occasion to write us some lines, I remain with respect,  
O. M. Oleson

Then Oleson added:

Forgive this assumed privilege that I take in writing you, but it is truly a heartfelt need that drove me to it: because our singing society is so close to me, and it is trying to do everything it can in order to raise up our [American] nation to that which is noble and good.

You will certainly remember me—I was at the same apothecary then as now—was [the one who agitated] to get you to Fort Dodge—traveled to Albert Lea in Minnesota, as well as to Des Moines, Iowa, in order to hear you [speak]. I will never forget my memories of those experiences as long as I live; they are among the most pleasant that I can recall.

Yours obligingly, O. M. Oleson

Bjørnson took the challenge. On February 28 from Munich, Germany, he replied in a postcard to Oleson, “I will try.” (See opposite page.) On February 29 he dashed off a short letter



Fiery and opinionated Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (above) sent this note to Oleson in Fort Dodge, then sent a hastily written poem (next page) to his friend Edvard Grieg, to be set to music.

and a song text, and with Oleson's letter enclosed, sent these items to his friend, composer Edvard Grieg, then living in Leipzig. Bjørnson's letter was a humorous and deprecating little verse clearly meant for Grieg's eyes only, certainly not Oleson's. This first translation (by scholar William H. Halverson) of the letter captures Bjørnson's literary style and humor.

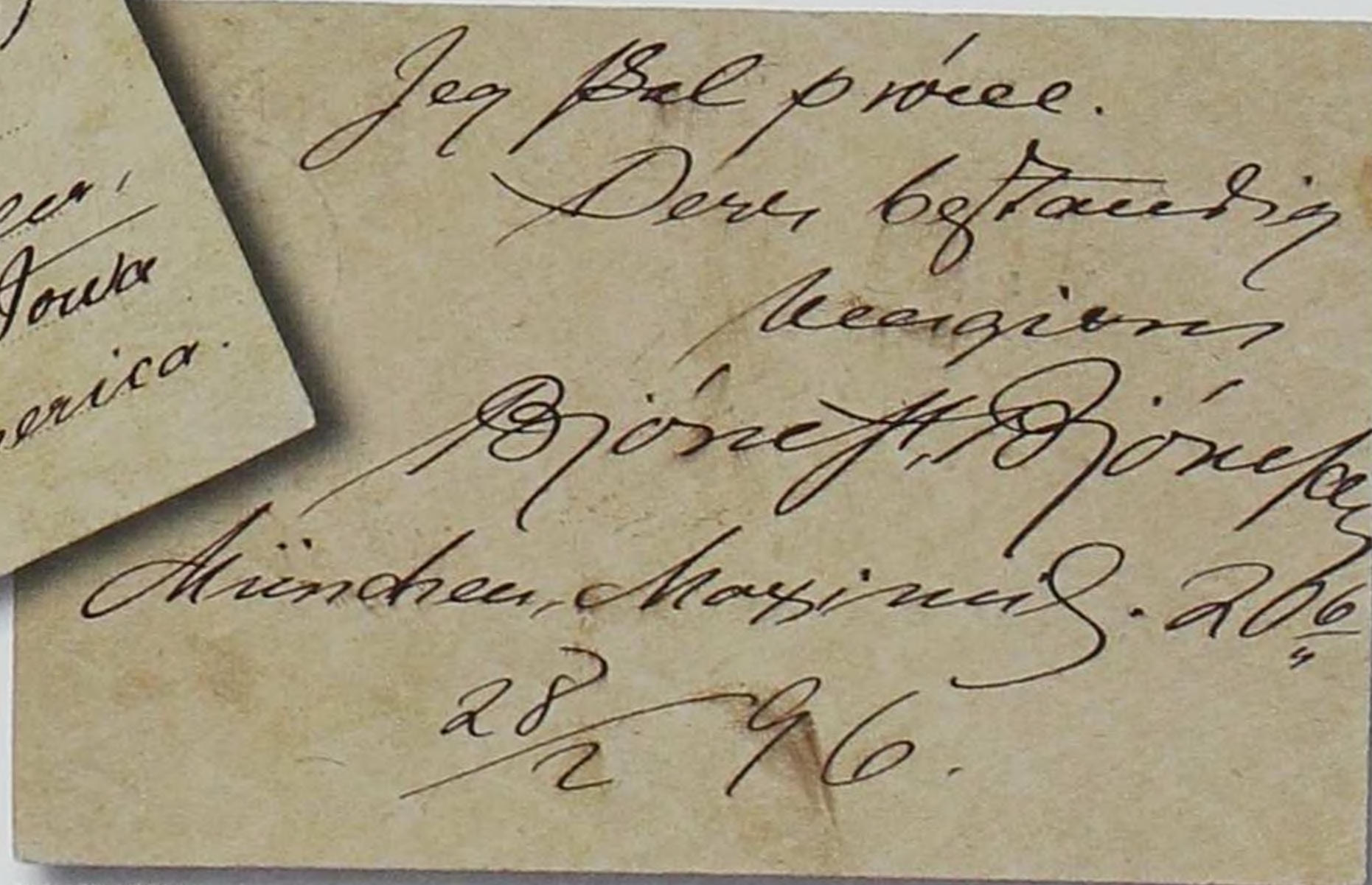
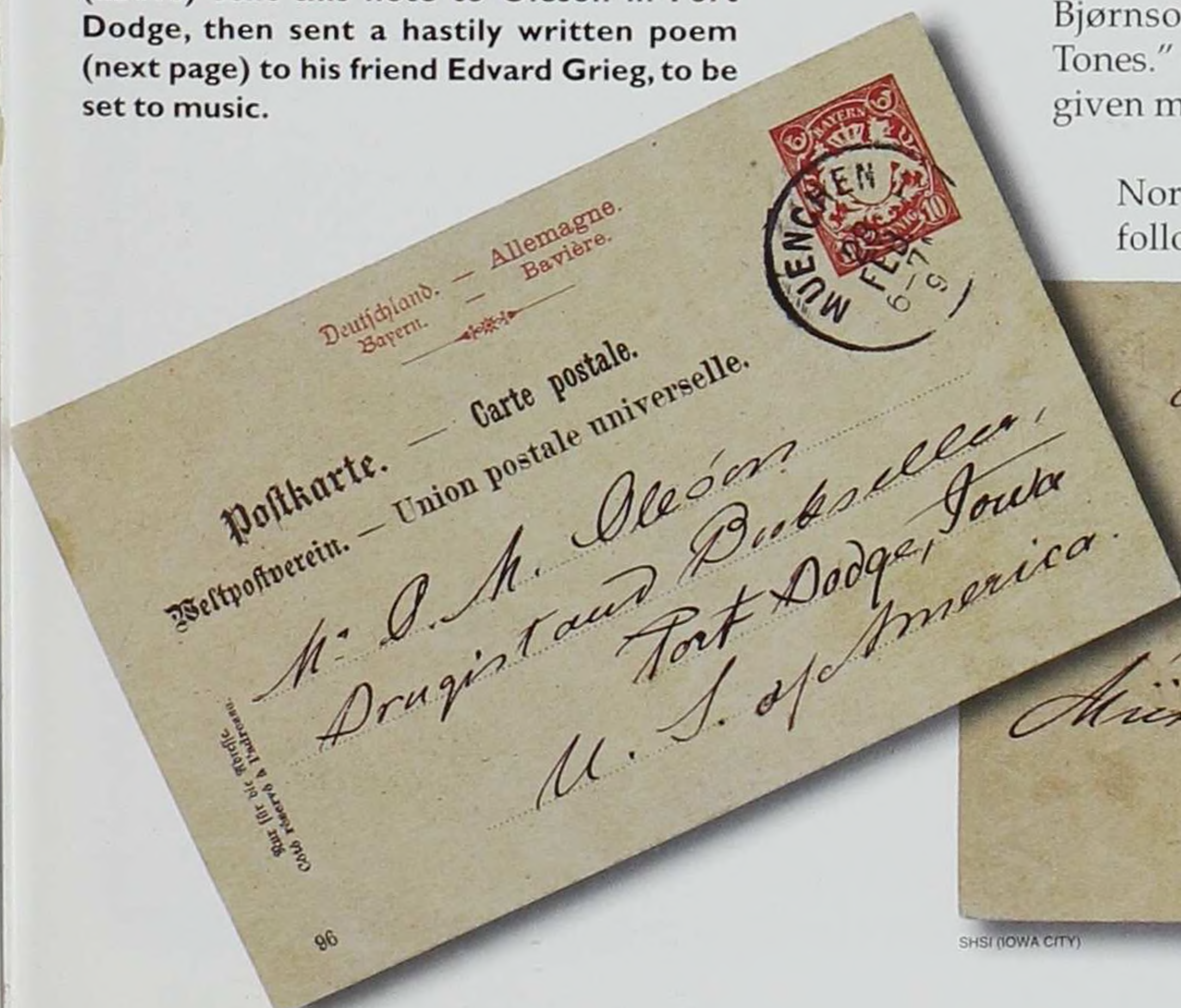
You [Grieg] to honor, you to cherish,  
I myself would gladly perish.  
Quick as lightning wrote this down,  
Which I send—and don't you frown—  
With this note. You'll get no rest  
Till you send to his address  
Music — and some verse as well,  
Hi to Nina [Grieg's wife], your sweet belle!

In my literal translation that follows, however, the words are harsher:

In order to honor you [Grieg]  
I have let myself be scalped alive,  
scribbled this down quick as lightning,  
which I send to you with his letter.  
You won't have any peace  
until you send music  
with the poem to his address.  
Greet your Nina, the goddess.

Tucked into the envelope along with this note in verse was the frivolous, even lightweight poem that Bjørnson had titled "Norwegian Tones, Norwegian Tones." (See next page.) There are three verses, here also given my literal translation:

Norwegian tones, Norwegian tones  
follow us, however far we travel,





3  
Impromptu  
til "Griegs Mandskor"  
Fort Dodge, Iowa, U. S. Amerika.

Norske toner, norske toner  
følger os hvor langt vi drage,  
fljætter os hvad stin tilbage,  
spejler minner, kugler vover.

Norske toner, norske toner, —  
som av hav den salte luft  
som av eng den friske duft  
samlet <sup>Sængens</sup> ~~rytmen~~ sig og steg  
op av folkets kamp og leg.

Fra den hele tone-skare  
sender hilsen hjertelig  
vi ved Björnson og ved Grieg.  
Giv den ringer, lad den fare!

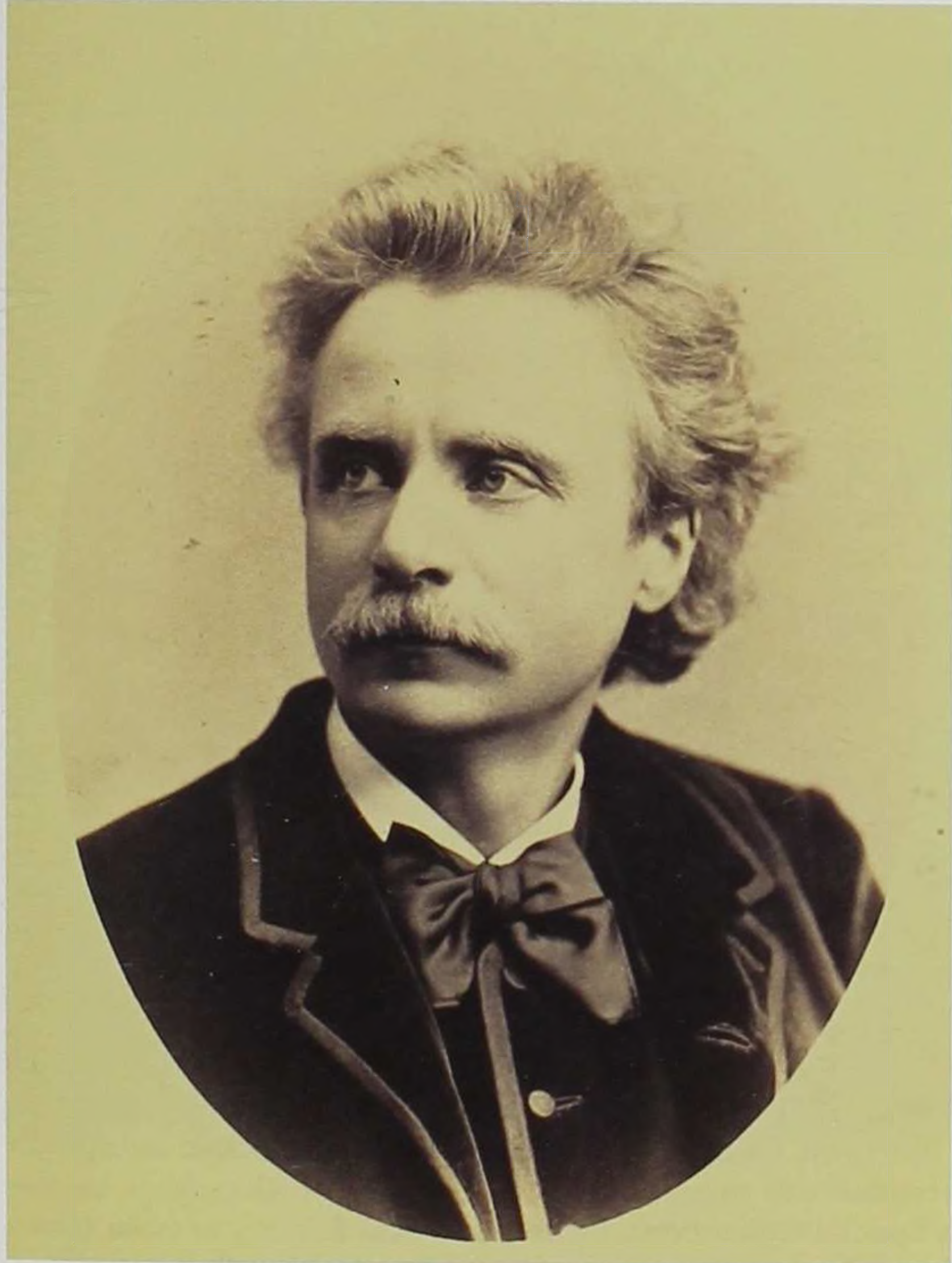
Norske toner, norske toner.  
Björnstjerne Björnson

Ja, hjertelig hilsen  
4

Björnstjerne Björnson

Minichm 29 96, Maxmids. 20<sup>6</sup>

veest!



Composer Edvard Grieg signed the back of Bjørnson's poem (below) and sent it with his music (next page) to Oleson in Fort Dodge. Then Grieg continued the jest that Bjørnson had begun, firing off a clever, though biting, reply to his friend.

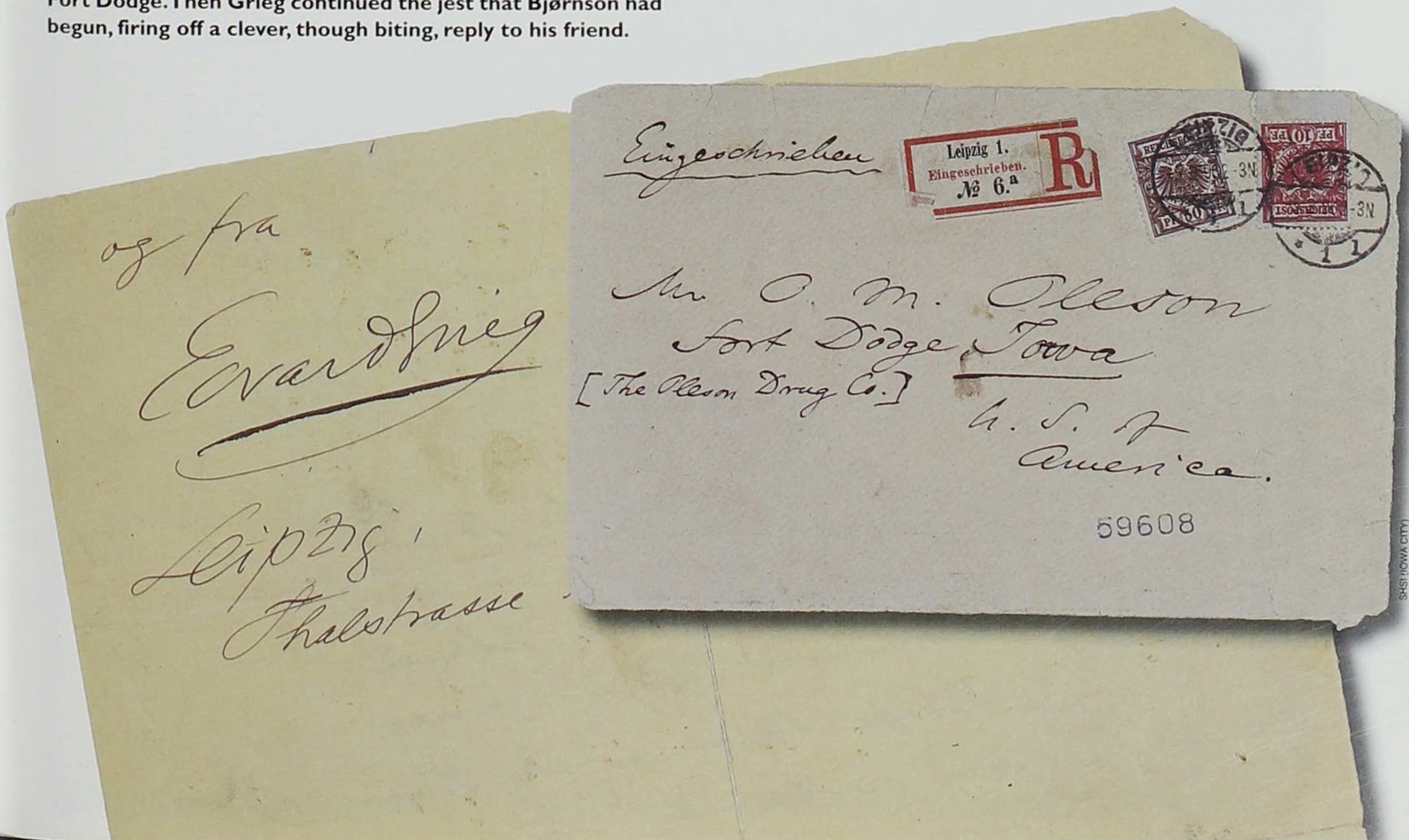
bring us back at every moment,  
reflect the memories, conjure hopes.

Norwegian tones, Norwegian tones,  
just as from the sea the salt air came,  
just as from the meadow, the fresh perfume,  
so the song gathered itself and rose up out of the  
people's struggle and play.

From the whole collection of tones,  
a hearty greeting is now sent  
by Bjørnson and by Grieg.  
Give it wings, let it travel!

Grieg in Leipzig did as he was commanded by Bjørnson. He wrote music for the poem, titled the little composition "Impromptu," and dated it March 5, 1896. His effort in music unfortunately matched the vacuousness of Bjørnson's text. While the piece is competently constructed, it remains among Grieg's weakest compositions. The music, like the poem, is almost silly, especially in setting the two names "Bjørnson" and "Grieg" to long, sustained tones.

Grieg kept one copy of the music for himself. On March 5, 1896, he sent Oleson the final copy of the music along with Bjørnson's poem manuscript. There was no letter included. Instead, on the back of the poem



*Impromptu*

Et "Frøys" manuskript  
i Fort Dodge, Iowa, U.S.A.

Ord af Bjørnstjerne  
Bjørnson  
Musik af Grieg.

*Allegro moderato*

Tenor  
Norske Toner, norske Toner, følger os, hvorlaugt vi drage,  
Dødt  
flytter os hvad Stund tilbage, spejter Min-ner, Løgløse To-ner.

*pp* *pp*  
Norske Toner, norske Toner, som et Hav den salte Luft,  
som et Eng den fri-ske Duft samlet Sangen sig og steg op af alle's Kamp og

Edvard Grieg's two-page "Impromptu" with text by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. This newly discovered and unpublished autograph manuscript is the public and official version of the piece. Grieg intended this manuscript, which he sent to Oleson, to be the version performed for American audiences. This manuscript is in Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City center). Several articulation and dynamic marks on it differ from those in the autograph manuscript that Grieg retained (now in the Grieg Collection, Bergen Public Library, Bergen, Norway).

*Allegro vivace.*

*Leg*  
fra den hele Toneskare, fra den hele Toneskare sendes tilbeholdnings,  
fra den hele Toneskare sendes tilbeholdnings nu ved Bjørnstjerne og ved Grieg. Giv den  
vinger, led den fa-re! Norske Toner! Norske Toner!

*pp* *pp*  
Norske To-ner!

Leipzig  
5/3/96.

manuscript, Grieg penned in Norwegian, "and from Edvard Grieg, Leipzig, Thalstrasse 10." Apparently he considered that sufficient communication with Oleson.

However, on the same day (March 5) Grieg not only returned Oleson's letter to Bjørnson, but he included his own quite lengthy verse-reply written in the style of Bjørnson's poetic request. Grieg's clever, deprecating verse announced to Bjørnson that he had dutifully accomplished his task. The first translation given here (Halverson's) captures the mood and style of Grieg's verse-reply.

You to honor, you to cherish,  
I myself would gladly perish.  
I'll respond to your gibberish  
with some verse that's—well, cleverish.  
I think you are plain tigerish  
to demand I deliverish  
an "impromptu" so feverish  
for Dodge City's Norwegerish.  
Clearly, now, my "I" I'll nourish  
with the peacock plumes that flourish  
'round you since you insisterish  
that I do this task nightmarish.  
You should know, my friend so bearish,  
[bjørn = bear]

your verse has this trait contrarish:  
It gives unconventionalish  
zeal that, wholly arbitrarish,  
makes me spurn tasks customarish.  
Your word, though't be antiquarish,  
makes all else quite ancillarish,  
sets me hopping coronarish,  
lest I fail my friend so rare-ish.  
Well, old bear (soon centenarish),  
let us not be adversarish;  
I will act disciplinarish  
(I'm not revolutionarish)  
and conclude this verse bugbearish:  
You to honor, you to cherish!  
[. . .]

My following, more literal translation, however, introduces the bitingly sharp quality of the actual words.

You say "to honor you, to honor you"  
I let myself be scalped alive.  
Yes, do whatever the hell you want.  
The smallest of those things—to make a fool  
of me who delivers an "Impromptu"  
where you force me to learn  
to compose my own name —

## On Translation

Translation from one language to another poses difficult problems. Pitted against each other are the needs, first, to convey the basic meaning of the original words, that is, a literal translation, and, second, to bring out the images, character, and subtleties of the original words. A direct word translation rarely covers the total meaning of the original. For example, the Norwegian word *gård* translates to "farm" in English. However, a Norwegian *gård* is usually a small scrap of land, on a steep hillside, with a growing season so short and wet that grain often rotted before harvest. A midwestern farm, in contrast, usually has many acres of land, rich soil, and long, sun-filled summers. Because these images are so different, the translator needs to use more and dif-

ferent words so that American readers can imagine the Norwegian *gård*.

In our Norwegian verse-letter Grieg conveys two attitudes: annoyance with the composing task and humor about the situation he is in. How to present both in readable English? My direct translation of the words conveys Grieg's annoyance. (Norwegian grammar is adjusted to make the translation readable.) In the Norwegian text, Grieg's words that express annoyance also express sarcasm. This comedy within words of annoyance is a literary device that Norwegians find thoroughly clever and devilishly funny. In English those same words of annoyance do not necessarily contain sarcasm. Thus translators expand and use different words to try to capture both concepts.

Grieg's verse-letter is additionally

made funny through the use of rhyming Norwegian words, the same rhyme that Bjørnson had used in his communication. These rhymes are a mix of literary words, half-invented words, and words with amusing distortions that force them to rhyme. In English the same words are not particularly literary or funny, nor do they rhyme. Therefore, translator William H. Halverson chose to distort other English words and to add the amusing "ish" ending-rhyme to suggest Bjørnson's cheerful, but devastating humor.

Combining these complicated details into one readable translation is the translator's perpetual, and almost impossible, challenge. Here, using two translations, we are able to savor to the fullest Grieg's annoyance, sarcasm, and exaggerated rhyming-humor.

—Camilla Haugen Cai

is just to let Iowa's Norwegian honor me.  
 Of course I will puff myself up  
 with your golden peacock feathers,  
 since you, dignified one, demand  
 that I shall assist you.  
 In addition you must know, dearest,  
 that your poetry has that special quality  
 to inspire me so fully,  
 and to forget myself so completely  
 that, caught in your high sphere,  
 I do not wish for anything more  
 than to renounce everything  
 just to create for "Bjørnson."  
 Yet, I don't want to risk  
 boring the old bear [you Bjørn],  
 yes, and especially not irritate him,  
 but rather shall cut to the end  
 and not identify any more clearly  
 what I dare to wave to pretend  
 that "I honor you, I honor you."

This was not the tone Grieg used with professional acquaintances. This kind of humor was revealed only to his most intimate friends. To Oleson in Fort Dodge, Grieg had signed only his name. Yet, how different were his earnest responses to requests from others in America—Henry Finck, who was writing a book about Grieg; Robert Johnson, who requested articles on Mozart and Schumann; and composer Edward MacDowell, who asked to dedicate two pieces to Grieg. To these he responded with dignity, respect, and friendliness, and he worked hard to help Finck and Johnson. Why so short, then, with a serious request from a Norwegian-American that came to him through Bjørnson? Why did he not call Bjørnson to task for the poor quality of the poem or write good music even though the poem was weak?

Oleson's name was certainly unfamiliar to Grieg, so there could not have been a personal grudge. Could there have been class issues at stake, with Grieg, from Bergen's bourgeoisie, guessing correctly that Oleson, a farmer's son from North Trøndelag, was of a lesser class? Would the response have been different if the request had come from, for example, the well-known Norwegian-American Carlo A. Sperati, trained in Leipzig as a choral director, professor of music at Luther College, and the son of well-known Norwegian conductor Paulo Sperati in Oslo? Could Grieg have been resentful of emigration and emigrants in general and therefore conveyed contempt with this work? Many who were left behind in Norway covered personal feelings of envy, bitterness, or sadness with public charges

that emigrants were too weak to endure Norway's hardships or were disloyal in leaving when Norway needed their talents and skills.

Grieg's speedy and halfhearted effort at composing the music was probably driven by none of these subtle or complicated reactions. It seems that Grieg was simply caught up in the jaunty mood of Bjørnson's versified request and mocking song text. Though he had Oleson's letter in hand, he did not reflect on the seriousness of his request or the humble wording of the letter. The musical result suggests that more of Grieg's immediate effort went into creating his long verse-reply to Bjørnson than into his musical composition. Rightly enough Grieg called the piece "Impromptu," an "in-the-moment" composition—though not a very good one at that.

The collaboration was, essentially, Bjørnson's caper and Bjørnson's revenge on America. He, unlike Grieg, had good reason to be angry with Norwegian-Americans. The circumstances under which Oleson and Bjørnson had met—"thank you for your visit," writes Oleson politely—came during Bjørnson's disastrous lecture tour of the Norwegian-American Midwest in the winter of 1880/81, when conservative Norwegian-American Lutheran pastors, most of them born in Norway, took aim at Bjørnson's increasingly liberal, heretical views.

Bjørnson's religious convictions had gradually changed from those of his father, who was a stern pastor with issues of sin, self-abnegation, grace, and salvation at the core of his religion. Instead, under the influence of Danish writer and titular bishop Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, young Bjørnson began to advocate a joyful Christianity with love for people, "happiness in life, and goodness toward others." While the church continued to interpret life as a "vale of tears" with unending suffering, Bjørnson now saw life as reflecting sincerity and humane love. In the 1870s Bjørnson was pulled even further from the official church into the ideals of Marcus Thrane, a Norwegian rationalist who hoped the individual "instead of his belief in the Bible and fairytales . . . will come to a faith in mankind and the progress of society."

Bjørnson's most radical next step was to question the idea of a personal God—a fundamental principle in Lutheranism—as he embraced concepts of rationalism and realism from the Danish philosopher Georg Brandes. In 1877 Bjørnson, so well-known for his inflammatory political writing and oratory, wrote that he rejected the concepts of heaven and hell. The immedi-



On his lecture tour in the Upper Midwest during the brutal winter of 1880/81, Bjørnson spoke in small Norwegian-American settlements and large cities about his radical opposition to the Lutheran church and Swedish control of Norway. Here, he is approached at his lecture in La Crosse.

ILLUSTRATION BY HERBJØRN GAUSTA, FROM JOHS. B. WIST, "DA BJØRNSON KOM TIL LA CROSSE," SYMRA (DECORAH, 1913), PP. 55-68.

ate reaction from the Norwegian clergy was outrage. From the pulpit they hurled their most damning epithets; he was an agnostic and an atheist, harsh words coming so directly from the powerful Norwegian church.

Bjørnson's other causes—for enlightened progress, for freedom and rights for all, and especially for independence from Sweden, were his other passions, and he wanted to visit America to study and learn how America handled progress and freedom. To support his journey he gave lectures (in Norwegian) for the Norwegian-American communities. If anything, the Lutheran pastors in America reacted even more aggressively than their religious counterparts in Norway. Bjørnson was a blasphemer, they said, as they warned their parishioners not to go to any of his lectures. The pastors were relentless and even cruel in their attacks. Bjørnson stubbornly played into their hands by refusing to modify his words. His Norwegian-American tour manager, friend, and supporter, Rasmus Bjørn Anderson of Madison, Wisconsin, pleaded with Bjørnson not to air his freethinking religious ideas and to give only his lecture on Norwegian politics and history. But Bjørnson could not resist temptation, and, when baited, he responded with brilliant, fiery rhetoric. This put him at the center of debate, and many people were excited to attend his lectures.

Nevertheless, the power of the pastors was great. In some places Bjørnson's lectures were poorly attended,

and he felt insulted. On March 19, 1881, from Fort Dodge, Bjørnson angrily wrote home to his wife, Karoline, about his experience two days earlier (March 17) in nearby Forest City: "I am working terribly hard to get through. One day [March 17] I spoke for 4—four—hours, two lectures (after having driven eighteen miles [by oxcart]). The minister had gone out to give a lecture against me at the same time, and then I got so angry that I said I would give them [the lecture on] the prophets free—and managed to borrow a church whose congregation does not believe in the Bible. Full house, close attention. This is a battle to the death."

Worse was the weather. That winter of 1880/81 was the harshest the midwestern immigrants had experienced, and blinding snowstorms stranded Bjørnson time and again in tiny communities, with no income and nothing to do. Bjørnson's letters reveal a very angry man. From Nora Springs, Iowa, he wrote to Anderson on February 4: "I am snowbound in Nora Junction between Albert Lea and Calmar, cannot get to my lecture today in Decorah."

He continued, "I have one book that I have read, but I am 'through'—and I'm bored to death in a house that is built for dogs and not for people, and where of course I will catch cold again."

Still in Nora Springs five days later, he wrote his wife: "This house is not a house, but a tent. The snow blows on my face while I sleep; I have to go to bed fully dressed and wearing a cap. The room we spend the day

in is crowded with all kinds of people. The stove stands in the middle of the floor, red hot; and the door has a crack an inch wide at the bottom, through which the snow blows far in on the floor. Your letters of course do not get here, and no papers either, not even a telegram; so I hope nothing wrong is happening anywhere in the world. You can't walk many feet here without running into a snowdrift; some days we can't see across the street."

From Decorah on March 15, he complained that "the snowstorms have again spoiled two stops for me and now almost the third. I am pursued by endless bad luck."

To his tour manager, Anderson, from Fort Dodge Bjørnson wrote on March 19, "Again a storm! On that account people didn't dare come in," and the same day to Karoline he showed his real despair: "The snowstorms have done me out of at least 2,000 dollars. It is the worst winter old people have seen, for it doesn't ever seem to end. I had to walk one half mile with my baggage to reach my destination. I was sweating as in a Russian bath."

He continued: "Well, I won't come home with much more than 4,000 dollars [about \$70,000 today]! I could weep over this result after such great efforts. Would you believe it, the snowstorms are still going on; either I can't make it or the farmers can't! Last year at this time they were sowing here. I am now speaking nearly every day to small audiences in order to make up a little. Ugh!"

After the mixed reception, poor receipts, angry attacks, miserable weather, and uncomfortable travels, revenge surely was not far from Bjørnson's thoughts at these "end-of-the-earth" midwestern towns. These miserable memories must have flooded his mind 15 years later when he read Oleson's letter, postmarked Fort Dodge, Iowa.

But Bjørnson had the wrong target. Oleson was very much in sympathy with Bjørnson's ideals. He had always been a strong Bjørnson supporter and had gone to hear several of his lectures in other towns. Oleson was also, as he says himself in his 1896 letter, the one who arranged Bjørnson's lectures in Fort Dodge.

Oleson was an astute and discerning man, and in retrospect he probably understood Bjørnson's scorn. Reactions from Fort Dodge to Grieg's composition have not been located; the piece apparently did not appear in the community's Grieg Mandskor repertoire, and it also did not appear in the repertoires of other Norwegian male choruses. Oleson, as a key member of the Northwest Scandinavian Singers' Association, was in a position to advocate performance of "Impromptu" to all the association choruses, but apparently he did not

do so. We can only surmise that Oleson decided his request had been a mistake, that the piece did not merit exposure and put it away. As the rational businessman he was, he must have written the whole episode off as a learning experience.

**G**rieg, on the other hand, had missed an opportunity to gain the support of an enterprising American who perhaps could have helped him get royalties from the sale of his music in the United States. Grieg, who feared traveling by sea and never visited America, discovered that, though his music sold well there, the U.S. did not honor the international copyright law developed at the Berne Convention of 1886. As a result, American publishers earned huge sums on his music and gave him no royalties. Grieg was so concerned about these violations that in 1900 he wrote to Lyman Gage, a prominent American banker and politician, to ask for help. Oleson, with his midwestern banking connections, might have been another expert ally for Grieg in forcing publishing companies to pay royalties. While the results of the Gage request are unknown, it is very likely Oleson would have been eager to take active measures on Grieg's behalf.

In addition, Oleson, as one of the founders of the Norwegian singing movement, had both the financial resources and personal connections to see to the publishing and disseminating of Grieg's music to a large population of eager choral singers. Although Grieg, of course, did well enough without such support, it remains his path not taken. Norwegian-American male choruses, who repeatedly performed Grieg's "Land Sighting" and "The Great White Flock," would have jumped at the chance to sing pieces composed specifically for them by Norway's most famous composer. Grieg missed this opportunity, and he also turned down the chance to conduct in Chicago at the World's Fair in 1893. Again, in 1903, he refused the offer to conduct in Philadelphia for the opening of the grand new department store Wanamakers. His fear of sailing, his crippling asthma, and even his casual treatment of Oleson all kept him from expanding his devoted American audience.

The irony of this tale is that Grieg and Oleson would have met in Chicago had Grieg chosen to accept the invitation to conduct at the 1893 World's Fair. The Northwest Scandinavian Singers' Association choruses sang at this event, and Oleson, who attended as treasurer of that group's steering committee, would most certainly have been among those to host the illustrious Grieg.

Perhaps, if they had met in 1893, Oleson would have written directly to Grieg in 1896, rather than to Bjørnson.

In 1905, Oleson and his Grieg Mandskor hosted *Amerikakoret*—the Norwegian Royal University Male Chorus of Oslo with 45 singers directed by Olaus Andreas Grøndahl—on its first visit to Fort Dodge. Oleson then accompanied the group to Washington, D.C., for their historic performance at the White House. On *Amerikakoret's* return to Norway on July 3, the Oslo newspaper *Morgenbladet* reported, "With Norwegian songs and Norwegian melodies they have sung the old country into the hearts of the Norwegian Americans—they have awakened their longing and beautified their memories. Out of these moods will grow a firm conviction to support Norway in council and action if necessary."

The tour had indeed been a carefully planned political strategy to increase support for Norway among the Norwegian-American diaspora at a critical moment. Although the Norwegians had their own constitution, drafted and accepted already in 1814, they had not been independent since 1397. Sweden, who annexed Norway in 1814, controlled the Norwegian government, monitored Norwegians, and withheld diplomatic power on the international stage. On June 7, 1905, while Oslo's chorus was in America, Norway proclaimed its independence from Swedish rule. Not only had war with Sweden been averted, but the Swedish government, through a series of crisis decisions, was in the process of granting Norway its independence. Bjørnson, of course, had been a leader in the drive for independence.

Oleson worked all his life to develop his musical skills. Though never formally trained, he had considerable musical talent. He remained an amateur choral director and a group singer, yet he tried his hand at composing a few works. "In Flanders Fields" for men's chorus (on an English World War I text by John McCrae of Scotland) was taken up by other groups around the country and became reasonably well known. Oleson's "Norwegian-American Seventeenth-of-May Song" (*Norsk-amerikansk 17de maisang*) for men's chorus celebrated the signing of the Norwegian constitution on May 17, 1814. Oleson's other songs were also patriotic; "We are from Iowa" is a unison song, and "My Country 'Tis of Thee" for men's chorus has a new tune by Oleson. He published these four songs in Fort Dodge. "Come to Iowa" for mixed choir was also published in Fort Dodge in 1922 and "O Sagaland" in 1923.

By 1910 the Northwest Singers' Association had 32 choirs, and the Fort Dodge Grieg Mandskor had never missed a *sangerfest*. Over the years, after the formal dinners at the big *sangerfests*, American social dancing became part of the evening's entertainment. Norwegian folk dancing, if it occurred at all, was performed exclusively by exhibition dancing groups. Rural folk dance had traveled to America with its Norwegian stigma attached, as dancing at unruly, drunken, lower-class events. The second and third generations in America wanted little to do with this part of the Norwegian heritage.

In the 1920s and '30s, the choruses enthusiastically adapted the new American custom of weekend picnics at parks and other natural settings—a result of the growing mobility that the automobile brought. Wives and families formed active support groups. There were games for the children, food for everyone, and a concert by the men—in all, a full day at the park with family friends.

To this day, the umbrella organization, now called the Norwegian Singers' Association of America, and its magazine, *Sanger-hilsen*, founded in 1910, still thrive. There are now fewer of these lively singing groups for men, and the members tend to be older, but because groups admit any man who wants to sing and will sound out Norwegian syllables for the old Norwegian songs, the movement is still going strong. To appeal to modern tastes the choruses also sing new American songs: Broadway tunes, popular songs, and American folk melodies, each arranged for men's voices, usually with piano accompaniment. Women and families still



Among Oleson's philanthropic gestures towards Fort Dodge was a large tract of park land. An avid botanist, he grew hundreds of kinds of iris and wrote *A Flora of Webster County, Iowa*.

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form active support groups, and choral concerts continue as family events.

Oleson served as treasurer for the Norwegian Singers' Association of America for 25 years, and in 1925 became lifetime honorary president. Only in 1924 did he actually miss an American *sangerfest*, when, at age 75, he was on his second visit to Norway. There, he was honored by King Håkon VII with the St. Olaf's Medal for helping found Norwegian singing societies in America. Oleson attended his last *sangerfest* in 1940. He was 90 years old. His Grieg Male Chorus had become one of the leading musical organizations in Fort Dodge, and it continued long after his death in 1944, just short of his 95th birthday.

Through hard work, intelligence, and honesty of reputation, Olaf M. Oleson had joined the new Norwegian-American upper class as an educated, respected, and well-established individual. His position was earned and not the result of family name or background, as it might have been in Norway. At Oleson's death in 1944, there were many kind words, including these in the local newspaper: "He will not be forgotten in the community where he was such a moving spirit for good. . . . not alone because of the generous gifts of money, distributed with such a lavish and liberal hand, but also for his kindly personality and simple acts of friendly consideration that have no material rating." Oleson's

generosity went beyond philanthropy and kindness. His cultural and musical gifts were the truest and the most unusual ones. He helped bring the Norwegian tradition of men singing together to the Midwest and specifically to Fort Dodge. Then he worked hard to make the custom grow and evolve in new Norwegian communities of America. But his imagination took him one step further. By appealing directly to two of Norway's greatest champions of their culture—Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Edvard Grieg—Olaf Oleson took a first step toward building an ongoing collaboration between Norwegian and Norwegian-American cultures. As the grand marshal of the Norwegian Singers' Association explained at the 50th celebration for Oleson's Grieg Male Chorus in 1941: "[The chorus] provides companionship, education, it is a practical lesson in democracy for no matter how prominent or how lowly the individual members they are all brothers in the chorus. . . . It teaches you harmony not alone in music but in your life outside."

If only Grieg and Bjørnson had understood. These singing groups in America embodied the new Norwegian ideals of enlightened progress and freedom with equal standing. Lost was an opportunity for cultural exchange that would have enriched them all. ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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During research for this article, five new documents have been found. The previously unknown autograph manuscript that was sent to Oleson of Grieg's "Impromptu" (CW152, now EG175) is the most important. The second is Bjørnson's autograph poem manuscript; and third, the envelope that held the poem sheet and music sheet. These documents are in the Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City), as is the fourth new source, the previously unpublished original postcard from Bjørnson to Oleson. I thank SHSI Special Collections for use of these sources. The fifth new source is Oleson's original letter to Bjørnson in the Bjørnson Papers, Manuscript Collection, National Library, Oslo, Norway; thanks to Sigbjørn Grindheim for supplying a copy.

Sources on Oleson and Fort Dodge include: William Sayles Doan, *A Book of Days*, 2d ed. (Fort Dodge: The Messenger and Ogden Newspapers, 1992); "An Iowa Philanthropist," *Des Moines Sunday Register* (June 25, 1939), pp. 1, 3; *Sangerfest* programs (Webster County Historical Society archives); and articles in the *Fort Dodge Messenger and Chronicle*. I thank Roger Natte for his generous help in locating and providing copies of these newspaper sources. Oleson's article in the *Minneapolis Budstikken* (Jan. 23, 1886) appears in the Gunnar J. Malmin Papers, Norwegian American Historical Association, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN. I thank the staff for their generous help.

Sources on Edvard Grieg include: Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: mennesket og kunstneren* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1980), 1st ed., p. 296; (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1990), 2nd ed., p. 352; Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist*, trans. William H. Halverson and Leland B. Sateren (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 347; Edvard Grieg, *Brev i utvalg 1862-1907*, ed. Finn Benestad, 2 vols. (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1998), I:73-74; footnote 101, 2:8-24. For William H. Halverson's translation of Bjørnson's letter to Grieg, and Grieg's reply, see *Edvard Grieg, Letters to*

*Colleagues and Friends*, ed. Finn Benestad, trans. William H. Halverson (Columbus, Ohio: Peer Gynt Press, 2000), pp. 130-131 and footnote 61. The original Norwegian for Bjørnson's poem "Norwegian Tones" is in Edvard Grieg, *Complete Works*, vol. 17, ed. Dan Fog (Frankfurt: C. F. Peters, 1985), my translation in this article. Grieg's autograph manuscript of "Impromptu" (CW152, now EG175) that he kept for himself is in the Grieg Collection, Bergen Public Library, Bergen, Norway. It was first published in *Grieg's Complete Works*, 17:84-85. Its editor, Dan Fog, is in error when he states (p. 163) that a facsimile of Grieg's music autograph appeared in the newspaper *Bergens tidende* (Nov. 24, 1959). Only an incomplete facsimile of Grieg's March 5, 1896, verse letter to Bjørnson was published there. Its transcription there is also incomplete.

For Norwegian immigration, see Odd S. Lovoll, *A Century of Urban Life: The Norwegians in Chicago before 1930* (Champaign, IL: Norwegian-American Historical Association with University of Illinois Press, 1988); and Carlton C. Qualey, *Norwegian Settlement in the United States* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1938).

For Bjørnson's tour of America, see Eva Lund Haugen and Einar Haugen, trans. and eds., *Land of the Free: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's America Letters, 1880-1881* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1978). Bjørnson was a household name for most Norwegian-Americans, either from their years in Norway or from hearing Norwegian-American pastors preach against him. There could have been no better advertising for Bjørnson's midwestern tour. The dollar figures, the disappointing \$2000 and the expected \$4000, would be about \$35,000 and \$70,000, respectively, for a winter midwestern lecture tour. (I thank Ginalie Swaim for this comparison.) The larger number resembles what a reasonably well-known lecturer touring college campuses can earn today. Anderson had estimated that Bjørnson would make about \$100 net for approximately 35 lectures. In spite of Bjørnson's bitter complaints from Fort Dodge, he ended up with about what Anderson had projected. Bjørnson hoped for even more because, though he had always earned well from his writings and lectures, he was, as always, seriously in debt. He had even put his beloved country estate, Aulestad, up for sale in 1880.

Complete annotations to this article, as well as the original Norwegian, are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City).