



## For pianist, change of tune, change of life

**For Norwegian pianist Knut Erik Jensen -- performing Thursday in College Place -- an encounter with Grieg opened an unexpected door.**

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**By IRIS ALDEN for the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin**

COLLEGE PLACE - Most people can name a piece of music that has in some way defined their life. For Knut Erik Jensen of Norway, that piece would without a doubt be Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor.

Jensen will be playing Grieg's famous concerto and other works by Norwegian composers at his free concert at the Melvin K. West Fine Arts Center of Walla Walla University, 204 S. College Ave., at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday.

Jensen, 28, has been playing the accordion since age 7. He had his share of musical experience playing folk and Russian accordion music, singing in choir and even playing keyboard in a metal band called Perished, which he describes as "brutal." But hearing the third movement of Grieg's concerto for the first time when he was 16 introduced him at once to classical music and the piano.

"There was something that clicked in me when I heard it ... I listened to it and I thought, 'I have to play that'," Jensen said.

And play it he did. Jensen, already a student at Heimdal Music School in Trondheim, told his teacher of his desire to play the piece. She laughed, knowing the piece would be difficult to learn for someone who had not been classically trained as a pianist. "Then I got a top grade and she said, 'You're a natural. You're not an accordion player; you're a pianist.' So I changed right there."

Jensen hasn't changed course since his initial rush of inspiration to play classical piano. Though he still listens to metal ("I actually like that," he said), Jensen's world is soaked in piano music. "You have so much music available you will never stop ... you can just swim around in wonderful music ... you can be the orchestra yourself."

Jensen's current project is to bring the tradition of Norwegian classical music to the U.S. He got the idea to tour abroad in 2007, which marked the 100th anniversary of Grieg's death. He realized that with so many Norwegians living outside Norway, there was a market for a native Norwegian to share the musical tradition of his homeland. He began contacting the Sons of Norway, an organization started by 18 Norwegian immigrants in Minneapolis in 1895 that has made its goal preserving and promoting Norwegian culture.

The Blå\* Fjell (that's Norwegian for "Blue Mountains") Sons of Norway lodge has brought Jensen to Walla Walla for his upcoming concert. The recital, entitled "Nordic Elegance," is a new program that showcases Norwegian classical music from 1900-1950. "My mission now is to try to show we have more Norwegian music than Grieg," said Jensen.

In addition to playing pieces, Jensen will talk about their composers and the history of Norwegian music, an aspect of his concerts he said has earned lots of positive feedback. Part of what is unique about the music from this time period is the influence not only of the Norwegian folk tradition, but also of French impressionists like Ravel and Debussy, the combination of which created a sound which Jensen describes as, "Norwegian folk music with French colors."

Aside from touring the U.S. and promoting Norwegian music, Jensen recently graduated as a master student from the Music Institute in Trondheim, where his focus was performing the music of Russian composer Alexander Scriabin. Jensen said he connects with Scriabin and other Russian

pianists for their passion.

Great pianists, according to Jensen, are born when the player can truly lose himself in the music. "It's a cliché, but you play from the heart. When you kind of let go of your ego and let go of your intellect, then you start to really project something divine or soulful. Those are the ones we remember."

Jensen's technique while performing is to simply let go and trust that he knows the music. "Generally I try not to think too much at all, " he said.

When asked what he loves about music, Jensen recounted a conversation he had with an Indian spiritual master he met in Phoenix, Ariz. "He said that music is here to raise people's consciousness, to set them in contact with something deeper than the everyday stuff. And I think that's the answer because I can't explain why I am drawn to it. I just am. It just gets into my system."

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