
KEYNOTE ADDRESS: DISCOVERING PERCY GRAINGER
(born Melbourne 8 July 1882 – died New York 20 February 1961)

Penelope Thwaites, AM

“I cannot appreciate music without some sense of its relation to human progress....if music is not going to play its part in making mankind more loving, compassionate, understanding, thoughtful, restrained, scientific and concentrated, I don't know why we are giving so much time to it.” Percy Grainger 1942

In her keynote speech, Penelope Thwaites retraces her own discovery of Grainger's music, from the late 1970's onwards. She presents recorded music examples which demonstrate the range of Grainger's musical explorations – from world music to early music, from the poetry of Kipling to the folk poetry of the Norse sagas, from the earthiness of ordinary folk music to the sophistication of his own repertoire as one of the great virtuoso pianists of his day.

For pedagogues, she suggests the best current references for hearing and obtaining his piano music and explores some of the challenges of Grainger's piano writing, together with suggestions for repertoire, useful for teaching at various levels. She underlines the importance of seeing Grainger as an outstanding – and also composite – figure: a strongly individual thinker, a challenger of established norms, and she suggests that these very qualities might be just what can inspire young musicians today, as they shape their own musical paths.

It is an honour and a delight to be able to speak to such a distinguished gathering on a subject to which I have given thought and research for well over three decades.

I came to Grainger's music quite by chance, in England and through an English friend and English musicians. In the 60's when I was a student at Melbourne University, Grainger's museum had been a largely closed area, and no mention either of him or his music ever crossed our paths. My only recollection is of a large portrait hung in a very dark corridor – and it does not reflect well on my lack of curiosity that I never enquired further.

But it is also fair to say that everything in those days militated against further enquiry – we students were having a marvellous time discovering and playing at least some of the great works of the classical repertoire as well as 20th century classics. My world was opening out excitingly and, pianist though I was, I well remember the thrill of, at last, joining the orchestra as second oboist and of our performance of the Beethoven Fifth, which affected me so powerfully, because *we* were making the music.

Australia's composers were not much featured in our repertoire and studies - although I do remember a sale of second hand music at the home of Margaret Sutherland. Later I was to meet her and present in London her piano Sonata – a work which has stayed in my repertoire and which I have given in many countries. But Grainger? no - not a word.

It was some years later in London that an English musician friend, William L Reed, who was advising me on possible concert repertoire, remarked – “you’re an Australian – why don’t you play some Grainger?” I was staying with friends who actually had a copy of ‘Shepherd’s Hey’ (piano version) lying in a drawer. I looked at it - decided it was rather tricky, which it is, and put it away. But that same friend later acquired a recording which has inspired so many musicians, including myself, to explore Grainger – Benjamin Britten’s 1971 ‘Salute to Percy Grainger’. The uninhibited feeling of the very first track absolutely “got” me – and that track was (in small orchestral version) – *Shepherd’s Hey*

Shepherd’s Hey

What a joyful piece of music, with a certain edge to it. Grainger once remarked enigmatically “*One reason why pieces like ‘Shepherd’s Hey’ and ‘Molly on the Shore’ are good is because. there is so little gaiety and fun in them. Where others would have been jolly in setting them, I have been sad and furious*” It sounds perverse until you learn more about his family background – and the consequent feeling he had for the folk-singers who shared their tunes, and for the harshness of their lives. He mentions this in some detail in his introduction to the wind-band piece *Lincolnshire Posy* – instancing the old man, Mr Dean, who sang to him in the workhouse. What Grainger never mentioned was that his own great grandfather, Jacob Grainger, came from a family of farmers and craftspeople in South Durham – and hence would have led much the same life as that of some of the folk-singers: hard, if not destitute.

But first, I want to touch on the sheer range of Grainger’s musical and artistic interests, because having some idea of them gives us pianists contexts in which to choose and interpret Grainger repertoire.

I want to mention Grainger’s lifelong preoccupation with setting the poetry of Rudyard Kipling. The Kipling interest began for him in Frankfurt, when his father sent him a

collection of the poems. Although they may seem an unlikely combination, the two men had much in common – including a feeling for the underdog and an enjoyment of popular culture and vernacular. You find this in the Kipling *Barrack Room Ballads*, several of which were set by Grainger. Grainger’s use of music hall idioms is perhaps the equivalent. In both cases, you get the culture from the ordinary working man (or woman). Another point of contact was a passion for the natural world – the sense that man is an interloper. The *Jungle Books*, (which I remember vividly from childhood readings by my father) create this sense, with excitement and mystery, and Grainger used, in this case, a fairly sophisticated harmonic vocabulary to produce just that atmosphere in his settings.

Morning Song in the Jungle

The words express Kipling’s idea of the natural and animal world in opposition to man – the dark belongs to the hunting animals, the day belongs to man. The continuing thought of what Grainger called a “Protest against Civilisation” describes his strong instinct to get back to the roots of things – whether it was through the music that arose from ordinary life, as in folk music (both rural and urban), or in his own relationship with the natural world. Not many highly cultivated concert virtuosos would walk, knapsack on back, perhaps some 60 miles, between performances as did Grainger. But the very artificiality of the concert mode, and his often professed nervousness about performing, could well have been a further spur to re-connecting himself in this way with what he saw as the reality of things. He would undoubtedly have been an ecologist today.

In some of the piano repertoire, his Kipling theme comes through – as in the exquisite piece for 6 hands at one piano – his *Zanzibar Boat Song*. The verse comes from Kipling’s *Plain Tales from the Hills* and characteristically, Grainger places the words and an explanation at the head of the musical score. Also, characteristically practical, he explains that the piece is designed for the teacher in the middle, with a pupil either side playing the simpler parts.

The poem reads:

They burnt a corpse upon the sand

The light shone out afar

It guided home the plunging boats that beat from Zanzibar

Spirit of fire: where'er Thy altars rise: Thou art the light of guidance to our eyes.

Grainger explains that it was the rhythm of the words 'plunging boats' that inspired the mood.

Zanzibar Boat Song

Kipling remarked to Grainger upon hearing one of his settings of his work: "up to now, I've had to rely on black and white, but you do the thing for me in colour". The understanding between the two artists is not as surprising as one might at first think: after all they both grew up in what was termed in the late 19th century "the colonies", and this gave them each a wider view of life than many an Englishman growing up in the provinces. As I've mentioned, Kipling was not the paid-up establishment supporter of empire he is frequently portrayed as. His barrack-room ballads, give an extremely earthy and sympathetic picture of the nasty, brutish and often short life of the ordinary soldier. Grainger was a socialist, or perhaps more a liberal, regularly attending lectures by Bernard Shaw. "Democratic" was one of his watchwords, and for him, Australia represented these democratic ideals. He even applied the concept musically – for example he spoke of the "democratic nature of polyphony" – where the several lines of music being pursued simultaneously were equally important.

Grainger's explorative ideas are often expressed so individually as to seem quaint to the conventionally trained academic mind. He was almost entirely educated at home and continued as a voracious reader, a gifted linguist and a questing man of ideas. No doubt some training in arranging those ideas might have meant that the academic world took him more seriously. The discipline of such training might have made him more persuasive. But the academic approach can miss the point if style and sounding clever become more important than substance. So far, Grainger has won little respect from such quarters.

In Grainger's approach, there is often a strong sense of "reaction against" things. Having thrilled to the tales of the Norse sagas, as a boy, he was indignant that this (to him) wonderful and haunting folk-lore of the Northern countries had been sidelined in favour of the developments in Middle Europe. This in no way affected his worship of J S Bach as the supreme composer, but he was far less enthusiastic about Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart. Possibly as a young rebellious adolescent studying at the Frankfurt Hochschule and chafing

against what must have been the full weight of German classical tradition, one can see where he might have been coming from. And his delight in the Norse folk-lore was more than a fetish – he actually spoke several Nordic languages and could read the sagas in their original language.

Something about what he called the “drastic” nature of these stories appealed to him – the more bloodthirsty the better. For one who proclaimed himself a pacifist, this was a curious mixture. However, in his adolescence, and under considerable pressure, he had become addicted to self-inflicted pain, finding it both a release and a stimulant. Pain and the wild release of tension inhabit much of Grainger’s music.

Here, for example, is one of his amazing choral settings - a Danish folk-tale *Father and Daughter*, quite astonishingly performed by John Eliot Gardiner’s Monteverdi singers. The strangled, yet accurate tones of the six solo high tenors, and answering double mixed chorus, and the incremental instrumental accompaniment of brass, strings and percussion, plus guitars and mandolins makes for one of the most exciting two and a half minutes. The story goes breathlessly forward, with the father questioning his daughter about the man he saw in her room. She protests it was merely a shadow, the father pursues the lover and kills him, returning with his body, whereupon the daughter sets fire to the house with the father inside it and that’s the end of him. It was completed just 100 years ago.

Father and Daughter

Grainger’s questing mind took him in search of non-Western music and he was particularly intrigued with a series of recordings on the Columbia label which included music from Java, Bali, Madagascar and India. From this Indian dance he made his own orchestral transcription.

Bahariyale V. Palaniyandi

We take ethnomusicology for granted these days, but it is worth remembering that in Grainger’s lifetime this was not the case, and his daring in making these settings is further evidence of his individualistic approach to making music. Again, he discovered the music of the Rarotongan singers and dancers, and he says that it was that music that inspired his fascinating work – Random Round, The original, for various sung or played combinations, is

an early example of aleatoric music, in that the various sections can be mixed and matched by the performers at will. However, the same elements make up an “unrandom” but still delightful version for 2 pianos and 6 players (11 hands.)

Random Round

While Grainger was making all these discoveries and experiments, we have to remember that he was pursuing a punishing schedule as a travelling virtuoso. Audiences loved him but he never ceased to be afflicted with nerves, and resented the need to pursue the profession as his major source of income. (I think this explains some of his disparaging remarks about the piano. A man who really hated the instrument (as he professed to do) could never have produced the beautiful sounds he did.) Grainger was one of the earliest pianists to record in the studio (for HMV 1908, then called the Gramophone Company). He went on to record piano rolls and to edit at least some of those recordings, before progressing to recording for the Columbia Graphophone Company in America (where he lived from 1915 until his death in 1961).

His studies with Busoni, at the age of 21, undoubtedly undergirded his already instinctively clear and unsentimental Bach playing. Let’s begin with a less known Bach recording, the Busoni arrangement:

Ich Ruf zu Dir, Herr recorded live in 1948, as an encore after a concert.

Murray McLachlan, in his terrific chapter on Grainger’s recordings for *The New Percy Grainger Companion*, goes into some detail about Grainger’s dynamic recording of the Chopin B minor sonata Op 58, and I want to play you the *Finale* from that recording because it tells us so much about Grainger’s power, his clarity (often using surprisingly little pedal) and the use he made of rhythm to build excitement. We are told that Grainger had an enormous respect for this work and that in preparation for his recording he went into severe training.

Chopin: Sonata in B minor Op 58, Finale (recorded 1925)

Finally a recording from 1948 – (a live concert, one assumes, being recorded for broadcast) which shows Grainger’s interest in an unusual approach to Baroque and pre-Baroque music. As a friend and admirer of Arnold Dolmetsch, he had a high regard for early music. Here, he plays his arrangement of William Byrd’s *The Carman’s Whistle*. The style is of course totally non- authentic, employing octave doublings and plenty of rubato. But it also demonstrates a gorgeous touch and, despite a few slips, crystal clear execution of ornaments. By the time of this recording, Grainger was over 60 and even with his legendary energy, was feeling worn out with a hectic war-time schedule of concerts across America, and a desperate longing to get on with his experiments with free-music. A certain sense of failure had begun to set in. Nevertheless, I would draw your attention to the magic moment when he diminuendos into what seems to be the end, but then continues *pp*, before attaining the final conclusion. His tiredness can be heard, but despite it, the special quality of his playing comes through.

William Byrd’s *The Carman’s Whistle*

There is so much more one could say about Grainger’s life and musical interests, but I am anxious specifically to give you further leads into the Grainger repertoire for pianists. So little of his music is known and needs to be heard. This is now to an extent possible. For general background, I commend not only the new Box Set of 19 CDs from Chandos, being offered at an extraordinarily low price – which is by far the most comprehensive survey so far, if not quite complete – but also the excellent orchestral CD by Simon Rattle with the CBSO, the Eliot Gardiner large choral/orchestral pieces on Philips Classics, and also the Hyperion discs from Stephen Layton and Polyphony, for exquisite choral performances. There is also a first class recording of orchestral works by Geoffrey Simon with the Melbourne Symphony on the CALA label.

As to the piano recordings: there is the 5-CD set from Martin Jones on Nimbus, and there have been notable one-off recordings from various artists – perhaps the most spectacular being a selection from one of our modern day Horowitzes: Marc-André Hamelin. You will only find the complete four-hand repertoire on the Pearl label, played by John Lavender and myself. The Chandos Edition contains many previously unrecorded piano works – both in the multi- piano disc with from 6-11 hands, and on my three solo discs, which trace the actual musical origin of each piano piece in chronological order. My notes, which link this

particular musical development through the solo works, can only be got on the single discs. The Box Set has more general comments, not with the relevant discs, but all together at the end.

For further details of these and many other recordings, I do recommend that you get your copy of *The New Percy Grainger Companion*. No other publication provides a completely up-to-date Catalogue, giving scoring details of each version and information about how to get hold of the music. The book's Discography and select Bibliography are also invaluable, and of course each of the specialist music chapters is there to give a survey of what is available. Just as important, the book gives some much needed revisionist assessments on some of the misleading folk-lore that has grown up around Grainger's name in the last thirty or forty years, some of which has actually got in the way of people discovering Grainger as the amazing musician he was.

THE PIANO WORKS

I would like to preface my remarks on Grainger's piano repertoire with some general comments. Grainger rejected the idea of "development" when still a teenager. For him it was linked with the outmoded systems he felt he would supersede. He never touched sonata form, but neither did he really succeed in producing an alternative to large scale construction.-hence, he produced no symphonies, string quartets, concertos, in the accepted fashion of a "great" or even of what some would call a "serious" composer.

His orchestral pieces (and some of the suites last for 18-25 minutes) often include piano as an orchestral colour, but only in the four- minute *Handel in the Strand* can the pianist be clearly deemed soloist.. Grainger was powerful enough as a performer to make himself heard in the *Danish Folk Music Suite*, and I believe he did take the concerto player's position on stage when he performed it at one of the Proms and at other concerts.. But, as in another orchestral suite *In a Nutshell*, the piano part is more concertante than concerto. Grainger makes a point of combining the piano or pianos with a huge percussion battery. The three virtuoso solo pianists in his exciting ballet music *The Warriors* have a great deal to do, and they make an impressive sight, but again, they emerge from the texture only intermittently, albeit tellingly.

But Grainger is a master of the “incremental variation technique” – perhaps best demonstrated in his nine-minute orchestral (and also two pianos six hands) work *Green Bushes*. For good pianists I strongly recommend this work. The challenge is to find all the many varieties of sound and subtleties of phrasing within a steady tempo. Varying the tempo in order to be “artistic” does not work, although Grainger’s own metronome marks may need fresh consideration. A frantic jumble is not the object (and he could be frantic). Sometimes even *he* did not bring it off, as the occasional recording reveals. Composers after all are still human!

Back to *Green Bushes*: two pianists at one piano and one pianist at the other. We also have played and recorded this on three pianos, though the balance always needs real consideration and listening, listening, listening. That was Grainger’s purpose in these multi piano works. The more hands you have, the quieter you need to play – to listen, rather than to compete. Instead of simply trying to hear yourself, and thus play louder and louder, you realise you are making a texture with one or two, sometimes three or four other pianists – one texture. Grainger himself was scathing about the pianists’s lack of teamwork, and used the multi-piano method constantly in the summer school classes he gave in Chicago and Interlochen. He was of course, quite right about the important musical value of multi-piano work. I sometimes think that also, as an only child, but as a naturally friendly and gregarious person, the loneliness of the touring solo pianist may have ground into his soul, and he longed all the more for making music with others. He often voiced his intense fear of performing. Most solo pianists know just what he is talking about, but his own honesty about it is disarming and quite comforting.

Back to his notions of form: the result was that he produced a great many short pieces for piano - three to seven minutes. Some are even shorter. But - and this is a very large but – what goes on in that short time is more varied, and concentrated and demanding than any composer I have played, as you may have gathered from some of the music in last night’s recital. When Grainger’s restless variety is allied with speed and covering the keyboard (as for example in *Shepherd’s Hey*) he is truly an exhausting composer to play! You have to picture this hyper-active man creating the music, and somehow realise the fun amongst all the super-human effort. Slow practice, as ever, is invaluable, and eliminating un-necessary movement essential to conserving energy. Viz such left hand parts as that found in

Shepherd's Hey

Grainger improvised his arrangement of *Country Gardens* when he was still doing duty in the American army in 1918, and I would guess that entertaining his fellow soldiers would have encouraged a pretty hearty approach. At any rate it worked. He continued to play it, it was published and became a huge hit, and supported him (and the several people he supported financially) for much of his life. The corollary is that he came to regard it as a musical albatross, obscuring his more interesting compositions: a familiar story.

So much of Grainger consists of difficult works that I would like to draw attention to the Schott publication *The Young Pianist's Grainger*, containing six of Grainger's own easy versions of pieces and a further eight arrangements by Ronald Stevenson. I would choose the simplified *Irish Tune from County Derry* as an excellent teaching piece. The tune weaves in and out of the interesting harmonic texture and one or two chords in the layout can be re-arranged to make it even easier for small hands.

Irish Tune

The pedal is only specified in the last line, but the player is invited to use it. This question of playing a tune, which seems such an obvious thing, is something which I believe Grainger's works – so often songs in themselves – can teach us. How often in, say, a theme of a classical set of variations do we hear a “piano-player” rather than a singer.... Pianists need to practise that sense of line and Grainger offers us many chances to do so, with some particularly lovely melodies, both traditional and of his own.

Like his tune for Australia, featured in a number of works

Australian Up-Country Song

One of the pieces I played last night *The Merry King* (suitable for a more advanced pianist) is a splendid lesson in turning the piano into singer and accompanist. He offers five verses, all much varied – the procedure he admired so much in the folk-singers he had heard. A similar

approach is employed in a charming piece called *Knight and Shepherd's Daughter*, well within the reach of a competent student.

Grainger's strong ideas on rhythm are an invaluable education. He points out the 3+1, not 2+1 of *Country Gardens*, and that "bounce" brings a real feeling of the dance into his music. You get it in *Molly on the Shore* and many other of his dance works. I have found that practising these pieces *legato* is helpful, because the unusual factor in Grainger's bouncy settings is that he includes at the same time a great deal of counterpoint – albeit in short snatches. This is difficult and demands real strength of fingers. His lifelong worship of Bach and his delightful idea of polyphony as a democratic principal, if taken seriously, means that we create a fascinating combination of musical sophistication and folk like earthiness. That is Grainger.

Like some crazy but inspired chef, he combines a selection of unlikely ingredients and – in the phrase he often used - "dishes them up" for our delectation. A prime example is his furiously hyper-active showpiece *In Dahomey*. Grainger enjoyed the pop music of his Edwardian youth – to be found at the music hall – and when a visiting troupe of black American dancers hit London he was not only a delighted audience member, but re-created the on-stage shenanigans in this piano piece. In fact the cake-walk, being enacted traditionally by black performers poking fun at their white employers, needs to go at a steady tempo, and that being the case, the detail of characterisation can come through. I think Grainger's admiration as well as his humour is clearly in evidence – you can just see the acrobatics, the fun and the surprise of the show itself.

In Dahomey

Rather like the *Scotch Strathspey and Reel*, which you heard last night, Grainger has a wonderful way of telling a story or painting a picture with his music. He once advised a young composer friend to "turn everything into music" and that is what he does himself, so vividly. *In Dahomey*, by the way, is one of the few Grainger piano works that exist only in piano version. For many solo and duo piano works pianists can gain ideas about sound colours by listening to the, choral, chamber or orchestral versions. One of these is his fascinating *Pastoral* which, in its two-piano version, makes a superb concert piece and where the pianists can equally draw on the colours of the orchestral version. I'd like to play you

part of this wonderful piece to give an idea of the two pianists together creating a rich texture, at several points appearing to go in quite different directions and in different tempi, but then reconnecting as the music builds to a terrific climax and finally disperses...with a surprise use of marimba mallet for the final *pp* notes.

Pastoral

In my chapter ‘At the Piano with Grainger’ in *The New Percy Grainger Companion*, I have made a real effort to organise a very disparate repertoire into some kind of order – any Grainger explorer will know how difficult that can be. My aim was to give some guidance on levels of difficulty and suitability of pieces for different players and purposes, and in a succeeding chapter, I also address the vexed question of how you programme Grainger.

When I look down the Catalogue at the end of the book (that catalogue is a work of extraordinary achievement by Barry Peter Ould) I see some 220 titles that represent for me a performing experience, whether solo or with others. I have been privileged to have given premieres of some of Grainger’s early works (which do contain some gems), and to enter the many musical worlds which he has brought to life and to follow some of the ideas and aspirations that motivated him.

One of Grainger’s tragedies has been that in his – perhaps unwise, if courageous - decision to be so honest about his personal life, he has been widely exploited by both media and academe in a crudely self-seeking manner. His extraordinary achievements have been masked by the cheap odour from other quarters of publicity-seeking and self-aggrandissment and the inability to accord one of our great icons the respect he deserves. The full picture is important, of course, but we are looking at a man important first and foremost for his music, and for the inclusive and wide-ranging ideas in which he believed music plays its part in life and in producing a better world.

In 1942 he wrote to the music critic, Olin Downes:

“I’m afraid I cannot appreciate music without some sense of its relation to human progress....if music is not going to play its part in making mankind more loving, compassionate, understanding, thoughtful, restrained, scientific and concentrated, I don’t know why we are giving so much time to it.”:

So let me end with the last pages of his “music for an imaginary ballet” – *The Warriors*. Here Grainger imagines the nations of the world – each in their traditional costumes - united in a massive celebration of life. A Utopian dream? Yes - but one from which we can take constant inspiration.

The Warriors (ending)

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About the Author:

Australian pianist and composer, **Penelope Thwaites**, has performed and broadcast in over twenty-five countries and is recognised as a leading exponent of Percy Grainger's music. Her extensive recordings are unique, covering Grainger's solo piano, duo piano, chamber and orchestral works. Penelope is a featured artist in the Chandos Grainger Edition and a recipient of the International Grainger Society's Medallion for her work in promoting Grainger's music. She is editor of *The New Percy Grainger Companion* (Boydell & Brewer 2010) which presents new research and insights into Grainger's music. Penelope was the artistic director of a festival at London's Kings Place Concert Halls and The British Library in February, marking the 50th anniversary of Grainger's death. After performances in London in mid- July Penelope will return to Australia for recitals in Perth and Melbourne including a Grainger Day at Melbourne University. Penelope has appeared as soloist with leading international orchestras in the UK, Europe and Australia including the Philharmonia and London Philharmonic orchestras. Since her 1974 Wigmore Hall debut, she has continued to perform a wide solo repertoire to high praise in addition to an active career as a chamber musician. Her teachers included Allan Fraser, Eric Harrison, William L Reed (composition and orchestration) and Albert Ferber, himself a pupil of Rachmaninov and Margeurite Long. A committed protagonist for Australian composers, Thwaites founded and chaired the international Performing Australian Music Competition in 2001 and 2008 in which young chamber players from 20 countries presented compositions by 80 Australian composers. She was appointed to the Order of Australia in 2001.