

COMPOSER OF THE MONTH

Grainger

An Australian musical icon was born 133 years ago in Melbourne, but as a nation we still know too little of his music. Pianist **Penelope Thwaites** is still discovering an authentic Aussie original

Percy Aldridge Grainger was born in Brighton, Victoria, on July 8, 1882. He made his concert debut in 1894 at the age of 12, departing for Europe soon afterwards to study piano and composition at the Hoch Conservatorium in Frankfurt. He moved to London in 1901, performing at major concert venues and festivals, as well as publishing the first of his compositions. Grainger's fame continued to grow with his move to America in 1914 where he toured extensively before settling in New York and becoming an American citizen. Yet his heart remained in Australia, and when establishing a museum exploring his life and its myriad creative influences, he insisted it be built in Melbourne, the city of his birth. The establishment of the Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne in 1938 is testament to that determination. Percy Grainger died in White Plains, New York in 1961. His legacy as a performer, composer, experimental music maker and folk song arranger places him squarely in the firmament of Australia's musical greats.



LIVED 1882-1961

MOSTLY IN MELBOURNE, LONDON, NEW YORK

BEST KNOWN FOR COUNTRY GARDENS, A LINCOLNSHIRE POSY, THE WARRIORS, SHALLOW BROWN

SIMILAR TO VAUGHAN WILLIAMS, HOLST, WARLOCK



Percy and Ella Grainger performing in Australia, 1934

“A bit of a drawing-room composer, wasn't he?” I was chatting to a cultured acquaintance, a regular concertgoer. Memories returned of playing in Grainger's wildly colourful 'Music for an Imaginary Ballet' *The Warriors* – its vast orchestra, massive percussion and three grand pianos raising the roof at London's Royal Festival Hall (and later in Rotterdam's famous De Doelen concert hall.)

I recall the Australian premiere of his *Thanksgiving Song* for chorus and orchestra. We instrumentalists had completed our part and were able to listen in rehearsal to the second section: an off-stage chorus and ensemble, travelling around the outer corridors of the Adelaide Town Hall, singing a repeated refrain, pausing, but still singing

“SIX PIANISTS AT TWO PIANOS PLAYED HIS RARATONGAN-INSPIRED RANDOM ROUND”

at the open doors at the back of the hall, then fading gradually as the doors were quietly closed. There was silence. We were in tears.

I remember the effect of shared experience, where in works like Grainger's riotous *Tribute to [Stephen] Foster* (where the choir at one point plays tuned glasses), orchestra, choir, soloist and conductor finally

draw the audience in as well to sing. In a more intimate way, this also happens in his setting of *Ye Banks and Braes* where the audience is invited to whistle (if in tune, a lovely effect.) Historically, this did provide one time when Grainger could indeed be described as “drawing room.” At a salon concert in his youth, and detecting a fault in the piano, the Edwardian hostess saw her instrument taken apart by the young Grainger, then re-assembled, followed by a performance of *Ye Banks and Braes* with the assembled society audience whistling along.

In 2011 some 300 performers took part in a celebration of Grainger's music in London to mark 50 years since his death. A hundred of them came from the various London music colleges, exploring his chamber arrangements, including works by Ferrabosco and Josquin Desprez, some arranged for saxophones – an unlikely idea, but surprisingly effective. His Mexican, Indian, Balinese and Javanese arrangements were heard. Six pianists at two grand pianos played his Raratongan-inspired *Random Round*, and the atmospheric *Zanzibar Boat-Song*. Choral groups presented folk-song settings and original works at a concert and a choral workshop. A pianist presented a programme of Grainger's works on piano rolls, while a Theremin expert with her pupils was able to demonstrate both the composer's interest in unusual instruments but also his experiments with what he termed 'Free Music' – his vision that pre-

dated later electronic music developments. The Royal Artillery Band, overflowing the stage and in full military uniform, gave an intensely moving performance of Grainger's powerful anti-war piece *The Power of Rome and the Christian Heart*, a work he wrote when serving in the American army during the First World War. So far it has appeared nowhere in our Australian WWI commemorations. In the band world, particularly in the USA (and, I discovered, in Japan), Grainger is a name to revere. His military sojourn in the Coast Artillery Corps gave him the opportunity to study all the instruments, and to go on to write for them with particular expertise and imagination. He often visited and played with the elite band of the West Point Military Academy and adapted several works for them.

Of Grainger's 300 plus works (listed in detail in the incomparable catalogue by Barry Ould at the back of *The New Percy Grainger Companion*) some 220 represent for me a performing experience, either solo or with others. Over the last 40 years, it has been a path of endless discovery and delight. To have recorded some 250 tracks, including many premieres, has been consuming in time and research. But such is Grainger's approach that many musical ideas remained with him throughout his life, constantly reworked or in part incorporated into other pieces. Slowly, one begins to get an overview of a musical world that is quite individual.

The largest investment of my time and work has been in the solo and duo piano works. The solo works are often challenging because of the stretches (Grainger had a large hand) and a virtuosity to match that of the composer. But if technical challenges can be surmounted (and we have a great many technically brilliant young pianists) these works contain rich instruction. In fact, Grainger produced works as a student in Frankfurt, several of which are awaiting more performances – in particular the *Klavierstucke* in D, E Minor and A Minor. Further up the technical scale, the big suites – *The Danish Folk-Song Suite* and *In a Nutshell* – could and should be tackled by some of our best young pianists at tertiary level. The colour possibilities in this music are endless and the orchestral versions of these works (which include big piano parts) should also be heard.

For keen amateurs with more modest aspirations it is possible to order from Schott-Music *The Young Pianist's Grainger*, which contains his own shortened and simplified versions of works, along with adaptations by his admirer and fellow virtuoso, Ronald

Stevenson. These simplified versions are still interesting and novel, and useful too, in studying balanced texture, rhythmic spring and finger dexterity. Schott also produces volumes of a selection of the full solo and duo piano works. And their catalogue is greatly supplemented by that of Bardic Edition, which now holds many Grainger copyrights. The duo piano works often feature one part which is considerably simpler than the other, making several of these pieces ideal for teacher and pupil, providing there are two pianos (the enjoyable *Two Musical Relics of My Mother* falls into this category). The piano duet *Let's Dance Gay in Green Meadow* (Faber Music) is based on a Faeroe Islands dance song and is lovely to work at and to play. The duets *Walking Tune* and *Harvest Hymn* are also useful and attractive at a modest technical level. Many educational institutions do have two pianos, and some of the six-hand

and most of the eight hand versions can be enjoyable as well as instructive. Playing together and striving to produce one texture is a real exercise in musicianship. The four most demanding six-hand works are versions of orchestral pieces: *The Warriors*, *Jutish Medley*, *English Dance* and *Green Bushes*. For good pianists at tertiary level, each of these works in different ways is exciting to play – and potentially, musically revelatory.

It can be challenging to engage with Grainger – not only as a performer, but as a listener – because his music – whether orchestral, vocal, for wind-band, for chamber groups and certainly for pianists – often makes strenuous demands. And a poor performance, naturally, may immunise one against it. I was not a fan of his superb *Jungle Book* settings until I experienced a really excellent performance. And it took an Eliot Gardiner and his Monteverdi singers and

ensemble to produce a knockout experience of the Danish folk-setting *Father and Daughter*. On that recording you can hear the pressure in speed, articulation and tessitura on the voices – but as they rise to the

“IT'S COMFORTING TO KNOW THAT GRAINGER THE VIRTUOSO DID NOT HIT EVERY NOTE”

challenge, the excitement is quite something.

It is comforting to know that in setting himself constant challenges, Grainger the virtuoso did not always hit every note, but the sheer vitality of his playing brings his performances intensely alive. There are so many quite remarkable ones: for

RECOMMENDED DISCS...



Solo Piano Works
Penelope Thwaites p
CHANDOS CHAN9895

Part of a 19 volume collection, which includes some of Penelope Thwaites definitive piano interpretations.



Choral Works
Monteverdi Choir and
Orchestra/John Eliot
Gardiner
PHILIPS 4466572

A revelatory and highly energised account of a handful of Grainger favourites, plus some real discoveries.



The Warriors
BBC Philharmonic Orchestra/
Richard Hickox
CHANDOS CHAN9584

Grainger's wild and whacky ballet in first rate sound under Richard Hickox.

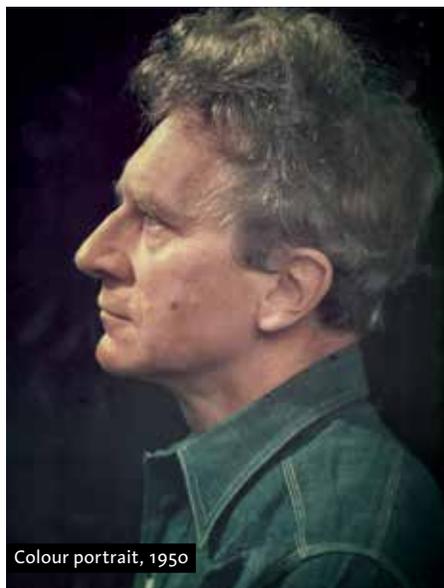


Grainger plays...
Percy Grainger p
APR7501 (5CD)

A box of archive performances showing Grainger as pianist in his own music and that of friends like Grieg and Delius.



Grainger talking to the Hobart band



Colour portrait, 1950



Percy as a bandsman, Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn in 1917



Grainger with a Free Music Machine

example, his recording of the Chopin B Minor Sonata Opus 58. His tone is a joy to hear – clear, golden and drawing out a full piano tone rather than hammering the instrument mercilessly. (The only time he, puzzlingly, does this is in his potentially beautiful *Lullaby* from *Tribute to Foster*.) His Bach playing is superb in its crystal clear part-playing. Here again, Grainger's musicianship can truly inspire. These recordings have now been issued on CD.

Continuing my own recordings for the Chandos Grainger Edition, I found myself partnering three discs of Grainger songs with some duet/trio additions. Grainger's songs are practically never heard on the airwaves and they are beautiful. There are of course many folk-settings. Some are fairly straight-forward. Others – such as *Hard-hearted Barb'ra (H)ellen* are almost in the nature of an operatic scena. The pianist here, and in others like *Early One Morning*, *The Power of Love* and *Bold William Taylor*, has an equal and vital role, providing background and commentary to the text. They demand virtuosity to a degree and a sense of bringing the drama alive together with the singer. As one reviewer

commented, this becomes real chamber music. The accompaniments cannot be simply rattled off. They demand detailed work, sensitivity and agreement between singer and pianist. It is inexplicable that these songs are heard so little, for Grainger's harmonic sophistication, combined with the melodic and dramatic strength of the song itself can make for a truly powerful result.

The ever useful Internet is usually the starting point for his music and *The New Percy Grainger Companion* is designed specifically to give all possible information on what music is out there and how to approach it, as well as how to obtain scores. ●

Penelope Thwaites AM is a leading exponent and scholar of Grainger's music. A graduate of Melbourne University, she has made her home in London where she appears regularly in the major concert halls. Concert pianist, composer, editor, broadcaster, festival curator and prolific recording artist, she is the editor of *The New Percy Grainger Companion* and her 17th Grainger recording will be released next year. Penelope was awarded the International Grainger Society's Medallion in 1991 and The Order of Australia in 2001

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