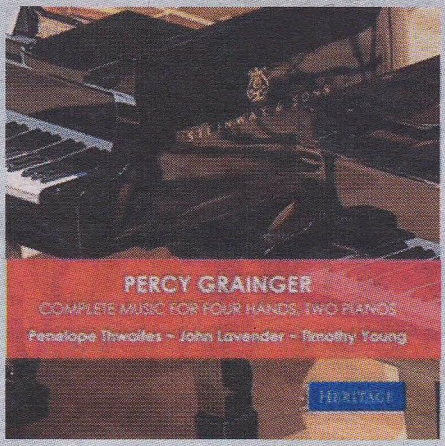
classical

Percy Grainger: Complete Music for Four Hands, Two Pianos

Penelope Thwaites, John Lavender, Timothy Young
Heritage

★★★★½



Just when you thought there couldn't be more music in Grainger's closet left to record, along comes this extraordinary set of the complete music (it claims, optimistically) for two pianos or piano four-hands: three pianists, four albums, 60 works, 39 first recordings, 290 minutes of music. Grainger's inexhaustible industry for the keyboard, as pianist and composer, is well documented and laid out here in meticulous notes by Penelope Thwaites, high priestess of the universal order of Grainger-rangers, in authentic editions lovingly prepared by Barry Peter Ould, the prince of bardic edition and the Grainger estate. So this enterprise is impressive for its authenticity, if not its finality: not just unadulterated Grainger, but also Grainger versions of medieval music, Elizabethan virginal music, Palestrina, Bach and many of his favourite composer chums — Balfour Gardiner, Cyril Scott, Delius and Gershwin, even a version of Addinsell's *Warsaw Concerto*.

It is revelatory to hear some of Grainger's better-known pieces, multi-movement works such as *Lincolnshire Posy*, *In a Nutshell* and the various folk-music settings in their bare frames, without Percy's sumptuous orchestral wardrobe. Equally, it is surprising to hear music whose titles are known mainly in printed catalogues. The piano voicing elevates Grainger's reputation as a contrapuntist, following in the lines of Bach and the baroque masters, whose music he adored. Some of the Youthful Tone-Works — such as the rollicking seascape *The Crew of the Long Dragon* (1908) — point to more mature and expanded structures. The listener can tire of a succession of short pieces, each rarely more than five minutes. Fortunately, there are several works here — the rambling *Hill Song No 1*, the affecting arrangement of Delius's *Song of the High Hills* and a few others — that give the lie to the notion of Grainger as a miniaturist. It is a delight to hear a truly prescient work, the Pastoral third movement from *In a Nutshell* (1915), all nine minutes of it, which points directly to Ives and the American experimental tradition where Grainger truly belonged.

The first three albums were recorded by Thwaites and John Lavender in London (1989-91), whereas the fourth volume was recorded by Thwaites and resident Melbourne pianist Timothy Young in the Melbourne Recital Hall early this year.

The difference in the age of recordings is barely discernible, but the clarity of the Melbourne pianos is apparent. Otherwise, it is hardly possibly to fault this historic set of recordings, another milestone in the legacy of Grainger whose complete music has had to be recorded beyond our shores (the Naxos series of 24 discs, and now these four albums on Heritage). Surely it's time for Australia to step up to the crease. Where are our own musicians and recording companies?

Vincent Plush