

- 1) Your 40-year-career as concert pianist has a very strong thread of Australian music travelling all through it. It was very soon after your debut concert (which took place in Wigmore Hall in 1974) that you started to include the work of Australian composers in your concert performances and a little bit later also in recordings. Can you tell us about this journey of discovery spanning four decades, and how were these relatively unknown additions to the program initially received?

Growing up in Melbourne and taking my four-year music degree at Melbourne University in the 60s, you could not be unaware of the composer, Margaret Sutherland. I have some of her piano scores with her flourishing signature – bought at a second hand music sale (I believe in her house). As I pondered a recital programme for 1975, I realised that although a number of Australian artists had made it to the top in classical music – we hardly ever heard them perform Australian works. Many people in England still had an out-dated picture of our country, and with the forceful Australian figures in business, film, theatre and sport dominating the headlines, “Australian composer” was not a phrase you heard a great deal.

I admired Margaret Sutherland and went to see her in 1974 to ask if I might include a short piano piece in my next programme. I remember a fairly redoubtable lady – of course she was! Any woman hoping to survive as she had, as a composer in that generation, needed to be. She gave me her Piano Sonatina – an excellent work – concise, feisty, tender, fun. It had the great quality of stopping when it had said what it had to say. I later recorded it, broadcast it, played it at the Chopin Society in Warsaw, in central Turkey, In Vienna. Such works say all that needs saying to overseas audiences about what was then a largely hidden aspect of Australia. The Sonatina – like the Sculthorpe Sonatina and other short works of composers like Arthur Benjamin, Malcolm Williamson and others were received with interest and appreciation. Especially as I only played pieces which truly spoke to me and (ideally) to an audience. I would introduce the pieces and /or supply brief programme notes. Russians in Zimbabwe, Chinese musicians in post-Mao China (1980), Poles in Warsaw, Americans in - America! - there was response. This was a new Australia.

Of course – all this has changed and grown enormously in the last 40 years, and we have to a large extent overcome that cultural cringe. But in 1980, this was not the case. I had decided to make an LP of Australia Piano Music. In choosing my repertoire – Le Gallienne, Sutherland, Sculthorpe, Williamson Benjamin and Grainger, I played works that in some particular way spoke to me, and were generally concise in doing so. I was by no means averse to adventurous writing – later including Jennifer Fowler’s *Piece for an Opera House* (two pianos with John Lavender) in a 1988 Wigmore Hall all-Australian programme and Malcolm Williamson’s gritty *Sonata for Two Pianos* – neither of them “easy listening.” But that initial solo LP in 1980 was an early marker, and created considerable interest in various parts of the world. It was undertaken by a small British Company, Discourses. We had a modest grant from the Australia Council, and made the disc in the music room of Hever Castle, Kent, as it had a resident Steinway – an adequate if not outstanding instrument, which fitted our restricted budget. I remember someone in the ABC telling me – “it’s a great idea but you’ll never get it off the ground!” I flourished the LP cover and explained that we already had. This is all pre-Tall Poppies, pre 25% Australian Music on the ABC, pre- most of the wave of Australian compositions which increasingly began to appear on disc. The bi-Centennial year 1988 was a great chance to tour my lecture recital – Australian Piano Music. It was clear that audiences were surprised and often delighted. Even the BBC had a rather sketchy idea of our composers – that too has changed. I believe things will develop further as we develop further in our approach to creating music. There are good arguments to support untrammelled experimentation. Idioms must move forward. Mistakes, along with triumphs, are part of that process. But the retreat into a rather narrow self-satisfied ivory tower that occurred – I would say from the late 50s onwards – the

sneering at “tunes”, the iron rule of the minor 2nd, major 7th, whatever, the sheer messing around that went on, did play its part in making audiences feel excluded.

Can we point to earlier times in music history when this happened? Certainly Beethoven blew many contemporary musical assumptions apart, but he still packed out halls. We should keep asking why this was so.

Schoenberg forged ahead in his revolutionary way, opening up new possibilities– (whilst mentioning, apparently, that there was still much music to be written in C major). Perhaps it was a kind of opening of the windows in a room that has become stuffy. Unfortunately some of the Gadarene impulse embodied in later musical disciples of Schoenberg disallowed any other styles and forms. Excellent composers were simply barred from being heard. It certainly happened in the 1960s and 1970s on the BBC Third Programme (as it then was). No wonder many of the young abandoned all interest and made popular music their only music. Indeed that is now the general meaning of the term “music”. It is “classical” that has become the niche. Fortunately some forceful figures are on the warpath and that may yet change.

So to the eternal question: what makes “good” music? I would say – authenticity. Every piece – even the weirdest - is derivative in some way. The point is – does it convince us and does it speak with its own voice?

I would liken some songs, some musical works to an unconsolidated recipe – all the ingredients remain identifiable as ingredients. The true composer puts his or her stamp on what he/she produces. It emerges as fresh and new.

Cries of “subjective” will now rend the air. True. How boring if we all agreed. I suppose success comes to those who provoke the widest agreement of worth. But let us remember the many “failures” who in time emerge from the shadows, thanks to the belief and devoted work of musicians convinced of their worth. Let’s go straight to the top – Mendelssohn and JS Bach.

You developed a particular relationship with several composers, for example Peggy Glanville-Hicks and, of course, Percy Grainger. Can you first tell us about your relationship with Peggy and her music – you have, for example championed and recorded her *Etruscan Concerto*?

After my fourth Wigmore Hall recital, ABC Concerts approached me and asked if I would be interested in giving the Australian premiere of Glanville-Hicks’ *Etruscan Concerto*. Of course I was intrigued and they sent me the score. There was a strange sense of recognition as I played through the Indian tune of the first movement. I had written my degree thesis on *Some Aspects of North Indian Music* and subsequently travelled around India as musical director of a show. Peggy had spent time in India, collecting folk music, and she developed the idea that melody and rhythm were now the cornerstones of music as we had advanced as far as we could with harmony. She had some authority to take this view, as she had spent years in New York, as a music journalist and composer, and as a hard-working and generous promoter of new music.

We met twice in Sydney, where she lived out the final years of her life. I loved her feisty approach, although by this time the operation for a brain tumour had taken its toll on her health. We had two long and memorable conversations which I was able to record for my private archives. She had studied with Nadia Boulanger and with Vaughan Williams and earlier in Melbourne with Fritz Hart. Her music (as the *Etruscan* middle movement demonstrates) was capable of great beauty as well as vigour and fun. She told me how much she had enjoyed writing this work. I have since played it in Australia for the ABC series, in America, a performance used on a TV film of her life, on BBC radio and in a studio

recording with the WASO – which I am proud to say has been selected by the ABC’s current Australian Music section. It is the only recording with the added, very short, cadenza, which she suggested I contribute. When she died I was able to write an obituary for *The Independent* and I was delighted to see Victoria Rogers’ book *The Music of Peggy Glanville-Hicks* (Ashgate).

I was glad to play her *Concertino da Camera* in London and to see her works chosen by young competitors in the Performing Australia Music Competition. We have seen welcome recent recordings of her opera, *Sappho* and other operatic and orchestral works on ABC Classics. But she deserves a much wider public.

- 2) It’s probably safe to say that your close affinity to Percy Grainger’s music has shaped your artistic career in a major way, with numerous recordings. Can you recall when it was that you first got to know his music?

We sang a rather charming song at school to the tune *Country Gardens* but I had no idea of the Grainger connection and certainly no idea of how far that setting, along with the later *In an English Country Garden*, was from Grainger’s vivid and intense approach to folk-song. His rumbustious piano treatment of *Country Gardens* emerged when he was in the American army during the First World War. He was later to remark: “most country gardens have a vegetable patch, so you can think of turnips when I play!” I can picture him playing it to his fellow recruits – probably on a not very refined piano.

I really became aware of Grainger’s music when I was in London - some time after completing my Melbourne music degree. An English musician friend, William L Reed, remarked to me “You’re an Australian – why don’t you play some Percy Grainger?”..I looked at the piano score of *Shepherd’s Hey*, decided it was rather tricky (which it is) and laid it aside. My interest lay with Bartok and Beethoven at the time. But in 1972 a friend lent me Benjamin Britten’s orchestral and vocal recording *Salute to Percy Grainger*. I found a world of magic. Yet still my playing was elsewhere (my 1974 Wigmore Hall debut programme was Bach, Beethoven Brahms and Mussorgsky).

What got me *playing* Grainger was reading two biographies of him and realising that this would make a fascinating lecture-recital. I learned fifteen of his pieces which traced some of the themes of his story, and that programme had quite a long life, both in the UK and internationally. One thing then led to another – recording the fabulous two-piano music with John Lavender on Pearl (soon to be re-issued), then a solo disc for Unicorn Kanchana, along with continuing performances of his music. I must stress that Grainger was one compelling thread in my career, but the wider piano repertoire in all its glory and variety has been just as important to me. Inevitably, though, in a crowded profession, anything distinctive in one’s work will tend to be thought of first. My wonderful piano teacher, Albert Ferber, who had studied with Giesecking, and Marguerite Long and played to Rachmaninov, was hugely encouraging to me in making a broad-based career. He may not even have realised that Grainger himself was a virtuoso pianist of world renown.

To return to my own story: in due course, with many concerts, broadcasts and recordings behind me, and with the expert knowledge of Barry Peter Ould – music publisher- we were able in 1995 to propose a complete Grainger Edition to the Chandos record company. Although they did not manage to complete the 25 CDs originally mooted – their 20 recordings (19 in a box set) – have almost certainly been the single most effective dissemination of this extraordinarily varied repertoire – choral, orchestral, song, chamber, piano, wind-band and more. To record much of the solo music (discovering and editing unknown works along the way), and to work with three outstanding singers on the solo songs

in that series – these were unforgettable experiences. The repertoire is unlike any other and so varied. (No wonder Grainger grew to loathe *Country Gardens* – which, in its ubiquity and success, blocked the discovery of his more adventurous and interesting works.)

It was serendipitous that all this recording was going on as the internet grew: tracks could easily be downloaded and heard. Live Grainger performances require great dedication, as they are both unusual and difficult (and sometimes costly) – though ultimately hugely enjoyable.

You are a recognised Grainger scholar as well as an interpreter of his music, and have only recently given a Grainger world premiere. Can you tell us about this? Is there still more to discover, or do you know your Grainger inside out by now?

The most recent premiere (see the next question) is one of many over the years! A past Curator of the Grainger Museum in Melbourne warned me that once you got involved with Grainger, you would be drawn on and on. She was right. I owe much to the knowledge and experience of performer and academic colleagues, and this came to fruition when I put to the publishers Boydell & Brewer the idea of a new Percy Grainger Companion. Since Lewis Foreman's 1981 Companion, a significant body of Grainger discoveries, recording, editing and research had built up.

My task as editor of this completely new volume was to try to provide a balanced selection of chapters by performers and also researchers, to reflect this thirty-year advance. Barry Ould laboured over the most detailed and up-to-date catalogue thus far. In 2011, at a festival in London marking 50 years since Grainger's death, *The New Percy Grainger Companion* was launched. It exists to aid and abet many more performances of his endlessly interesting music. I am always upset if some music college has *not* managed to acquire it – because it is the only up-to-date guide, providing the keys to Grainger performance. I am personally very grateful that Peter Sculthorpe was still around to write the Foreword, and to provide a delightful vignette of his childhood meeting with Grainger.

You're spending time in Melbourne in the near future, in order to work with ANAM's talented students. What is it exactly that you will be doing with them?

I am really delighted to be undertaking this project with young and gifted Australian musicians, studying in the city of Grainger's birth. I am sure that some of them will go on to discover much more about his musical works and about his stimulating ideas on the part music can play in life and society at large. On **Thursday 21st May** at the Melbourne Recital Centre we'll be presenting together an action-packed hour-long concert: *The Grainger You've Never Heard*. The concert will include works for brass ensemble, for strings and woodwind, for percussion and for multi-pianos. It will be a wonderful shop window both for Grainger and for the talents of these exceptional young musicians. And I am glad to say that we shall end with a newly-orchestrated Piano Concerto movement, written by Percy Grainger at the age of thirteen, when he was studying in Frankfurt. He went on to develop an extremely individual style, but here we can admire a prodigy who has learned his Mozart/Beethoven/ Mendelssohn/Schumann, and produced a great piece – full of joie de vivre. This will be its Australian premiere.

As well as a very full rehearsal schedule that week, on the preceding **Monday 18 May**, I'll be giving a talk *Discovering Percy Grainger* also at the Recital Centre Salon in which I'll play recorded extracts of a rather unexpected selection of Grainger works – all of which will add context to the concert on the following Thursday. Finally, I understand that ANAM's Director, Paul Dean and I will be holding a public conversation at ANAM on **Friday 22 May** at 11.am, – which I am told can range as widely as we like!

6) You are a composer as well as a pianist, and your 40-year career runs parallel and overlaps the 40-year existence of the Australian Music Centre

For many years I would have described myself chiefly as a song writer. I wrote songs from the age of six – mostly for family and friends, one or two for school productions and then when I was 18, a setting of Psalm 121, requested by my School (Tintern Grammar in Melbourne) which is still the School Psalm. My work in the theatre, both with amateurs and professionals, taught me a great deal about what works – both vocally and dramatically. After contributing to a number of musical revues and writing three musical plays, I was asked by the playwright Alan Thornhill if I would be interested in supplying the music for a play about a dramatic incident in the life of John Wesley. That is a story in itself, but following a West End production in 1976, the show has had 44 more productions in various parts of the world – and this year in May the German version will play at the World Methodist Conference in Berlin, as well as in Southern Germany. It is a very youthful cast, and I think any composer is especially pleased to see young people enjoying one's works.

Another interesting commission was to write a song-cycle for the same forces as the Brahms Lieberslieder Waltzes (SATB and piano duet) for concerts at Lambeth Palace. The then Archbishop, Robert Runcie's wife Lindy, a keen gardener and pianist, was raising funds to renovate that huge garden. The result was a piece with my poet father, Michael Thwaites' input as lyricist *A Lambeth Garland*. Both the original as well as a later two-piano version have had many performances and broadcasts and the whistling song for the late John Amis, has enjoyed success on his own CD *Amiscellany*. I am now more free to give time to composition and have been thrilled to complete this year a commission for The Friends of the Church of St John the Baptist, Canberra, a *Missa Brevis*, which will be premiered there on Sunday 31 May. Crafting a composition is hard – sometimes onerous work, as we all know. But if the spark of creativity has been struck at the outset, it is worth it. I felt privileged to make my own setting of those amazing – and rhythmic - Greek and Latin words.

- a) perhaps most concretely with the founding of the **Performing Australian Music Competition**, organised in London in 2001 and 2008). If we go back to where we started this interview,

Yes – it was an irony that I should end up founding and chairing a music competition, as I am not a fan of such things and am very aware of the questionable proceedings sometimes associated with them. Even the concept of competition in music performance fills me with some distaste. But we live in a world where young musicians are in desperate need of encouragement, a sense of direction and of course finance. The inexorable logic came home to me that if we wanted to demonstrate something of the variety and range of Australia's composers (and not only those living), we needed to mobilise the brilliance of young musicians and their capacity to absorb new works with the incentive of a possible prize. Reflecting on the painful fact that most would NOT be prizewinners, I realised that if they were allowed to choose their own Australian programme (20 minutes), prize or not – they would have something of value in their repertoire which would benefit them.

Here is not the place to go into detail, but suffice to say, the Australian Music Centre was a crucial and hugely helpful support in running this competition twice. To raise the money was not easy – and these things mean putting one's own projects to one side, to an extent. But the blueprint is now there, and if those with funds can yet respond to the idea, the PAMC could continue.

To hold it in London meant that we had 20 countries represented in the competitors (many of them students at the London music colleges) and we heard works by some 80 Australian composers as part of their chosen programmes. I remember listening to four days of the preliminary rounds in 2008, with you, John, (John Davis) as a much valued presence, and we

were all overwhelmed at the richness of what we heard. The six prizes were awarded by a jury unconnected with any of the competitors and by secret ballot. The winner of the 2001 Competition was a South African marimba player, Magdalena de Vries. The winner in 2008 was a Macedonian violinist, Marco Pop Ristov, who played a spell-binding Sculthorpe *Irkanda 1*. Full details and reports of these two competitions are I believe available at the AMC as well as an accompanying DVD *The Australia You've Never Heard*.

b) can you reflect a little bit on how you see the lot of contemporary classical composition today? You have been active in this area in multiple roles for a long time – do you see cause for optimism, or perhaps pessimism?

Some of my remarks at the beginning of this conversation apply here. I regret the overwhelmingly consumerist approach which has turned what we are discussing into an “industry”. Paradoxically, the very greatest music lifts us out of all that, along with the horrors of life which so many people face. That can happen in a song, or a symphony. I am currently reflecting on the power of singing – its healing, invigorating emotional and spiritual power. Plato and friends were unfashionably specific about musical power and effect. I find this a fascinating topic – because when political power starts to get too prescriptive about music (cf the Stalinist and Maoist eras) – much hideous music is produced by command. Shostakovich had to deal with this – and I find it extraordinary the way he managed to do so. But let's be realistic: he was forced to sign the death warrants of some colleagues in order to survive himself, and thus produce this music. We cannot possibly make judgements about such dilemmas, but we can recognise ourselves in a similar position, and wonder how we would react.

7) Where is it that you find your creative energy today, and

You are touching on profound questions! To make my first visit to Leipzig last year, and to hear the Matthew Passion at St Thomas's was a special, and energising experience, because of the whole history associated with it – and because of the natural singing and playing of the choir and orchestra. The thing that fires me is to observe how music can make life worth living – to feel it myself and then to share it, whether playing it or writing it. The difficulties of doing this are myriad – not least in the negative aspects of one's own nature. So my belief is that we need to find a way to moral and spiritual strength and for me this is through the Christian faith – experienced as a never-ending path of searching and discovery; of trial and error; and sometimes, fulfilment. My immediate family contains Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, atheist and agnostic views. There are many paths.

where is it that you see the most exciting developments happen in the 2010s?

Many more people these days are enabled to take a world view – we can hear almost any piece of music via our computers, and the younger generation has often a kindness and friendliness towards people of other backgrounds, which did not previously exist. In terms of music, we are more open-minded, but our challenge is to come off the fence and make a value judgement on how to make music extremely well, and then to reach out with it. I would like to see groups of brilliant classically-trained young musicians go into say 20 schools in turn – to play a fabulous exciting short work , then leave! Just let their generation hear the aural possibilities – a tragic lack in so much churned-out commercial sound which feeds day and night into ipod-connected ears.

We classically-trained musicians inhabit an Aladdin's Cave and it is for sharing.

I am not an expert in music education, but I would hope that the hard graft of musical excellence will always guide those who design courses. You cannot bluff – and this gives a sense of continuing value and purpose to one's musical life.

Penelope Thwaites at a Grainger Festival in Tokyo in 2011

