

OBITUARY

PERCY GRAINGER

Percy Grainger died in White Plains, New York, on February 20th, 1961, at the age of 78. Born in Melbourne, Australia, July 8th, 1882, he made his formal debut as pianist in London in 1900, and in the United States in 1915. He ranked among the first virtuosi of his time, but his was a highly original intelligence that ranged widely, and his deepest interest was in musical composition.

Early in 1914 Richard Strauss played some of Grainger's orchestral music in Berlin, but the outbreak of World War I prevented this powerful support from having any sequel. Moreover, Grainger's extraordinary fame as a pianist, and also the settings of folk songs that he made so popular (*The Irish Tune from County Derry*, *Country Gardens*, *Shepherds' Hey* and a few others) so interfered with the public view of his own compositions that these were only beginning to be properly assessed toward the end of his life.

One of the things that interested Grainger as a composer was the possibility of bringing popular instruments into wider use. For example, he freed the guitar of its limited harmonic possibilities by writing for a guitar family of instruments in differently-tuned sections. He also applied himself to the fascinating problem of controlling, and writing for, sliding tones. The large loom-like contrivance for these experiments, on the general principle of the perforated piano roll, filled his living room for many years. Eventually the collaboration of an engineer made possible a translation of the difficulties into the much easier terms of electronic sound-production. Grainger was aware of the sliding choral music of Albania, but he spoke of traditional sources rather as a support for his ideas than as their source.

While he himself once wrote that folk music, and his contact with folk singers, were the major influences on his creative life, at another time he declared that folk music had nothing to do with his compositions at all. This was certainly true in the sense that no traditional music was quoted in his own music (as distinct from his folk-song settings). There can be no doubt, however, that the melodic styles of folk music (from England and Scandinavia in particular) had great influence on his musical taste, and his knowledge of folk traditions encouraged him to invent forms and types of development that were independent of the techniques of classical sonata-form.

Grainger's connection with the folk-song movement in England dates from 1906 when he joined the Folk Song Society, although he had been interested in folk song for many years previously. In the summer of 1906 he made, in Lincolnshire, his first cylinder-recordings of folk song in England, and his account of the use of the phonograph in field work appears, together with some of the Lincolnshire songs, in No. 12 of the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* (1908).

It was on this first trip that he met Joseph Taylor, and soon after he played the cylinder-recording of Taylor's singing of "Brigg Fair" to Delius, who used the tune in his famous rhapsody. When, about this time, Grainger was approached by HMV to make commercial records of his piano-playing, he stipulated that commercial recordings of the singing of Joseph Taylor be issued also, and that they be kept available. He himself went to Brigg to escort Mr. Taylor, then in his eighties, to the London studios of HMV. These important recordings are unfortunately no longer available to the general public.

I first met Percy Grainger about 1938, when he wrote to me in San Francisco, asking if he might hear some of my field recordings. After his usual daybreak arrival, he spent eight or ten hours listening with the utmost concentration. What he was at the moment interested in was, characteristically, a thing he smilingly called "the opposite of the song"—that is, the *silences*. Were the pauses between phrases and stanzas rhythmically free, or were they organized in (silent) beats or regular fractions of beats?

On this occasion, Grainger first heard of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, and it was largely the Library's willingness to distribute (at cost) copies of recorded material to students that seems to have determined him to have all his original cylinders copied there. Accordingly, in 1940 he made a trip from White Plains to Washington with some 400 cylinders, which included his earliest English recordings, some from Raritonga (from New Zealand Maori), and from a 1932 trip to Denmark. In 1949 he arrived in Washington again with approximately ninety more cylinders that had been deposited in Denmark. These included the fruits of three trips made with Ewald T. Kristensen through Jutland in 1922, 1925 and 1927.

These 500 odd cylinders have been copied by the Library of Congress on to eighty-one 12-inch disks, plus eight 16-inch disks, and together make up the famous Grainger Collection.*

Grainger was a radiant person, of great physical buoyancy and loyalty of heart. He was reasonable and natural in his behaviour as few men are willing to be, and because he had also, to a high degree, that particular attribute of genius which heightens the sense of life in everyone around him, he was greatly sought after, and widely loved. He seems to have decided at a very early date not to be circumscribed by the peripheral demands of public fame, because his interests were too many, and too important to him, to permit any waste of time; his widely-reported "eccentricities" were only the logical result of that sensible decision.

Ineffably courteous in conversation, he was the special foe of one-sided or over-simplified statements, and could be depended upon to point to both white and grey areas in any situation that one had ventured to suppose was black. It is impossible to write of him now without expecting the quiet voice to offer smilingly, behind one's shoulder, the contrary aspects of all that has been said.

SIDNEY ROBERTSON COWELL

I should like to add to Mrs. Cowell's sympathetic notice my tribute to Percy Grainger as a pioneer in the study of folk song and my appreciation of his generosity to fellow-workers in the field.

The article and transcriptions of tunes in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* to which Mrs. Cowell refers show that he had an insight into the traditional style of folk singing which was far ahead of his time. His analysis of the manner in which the folk singer fits his words to the tune is something which could be studied with profit by scholars of the present day.

Of his generosity I have good cause to speak, for it was owing to his voluntary relinquishment of a proportion of the royalties on his piano arrangement of "Country Gardens"—a tune collected by Cecil Sharp—that I was able to publish in 1932 the two-volume edition of *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*.

MAUD KARPELES

Percy Grainger was a good and faithful friend of Denmark and played an important role in collecting and popularizing our old folk songs. It is encouraging to find a man of world-renown discovering beauty and merit in the kind of music one loves oneself, and the music Percy Grainger concerned himself with is now safely preserved, since he presented the Royal Library of Copenhagen with copies of his transcriptions, recordings, etc.

Grainger was not only a great composer and pianist, he was also a peculiarly and highly gifted personality whom it was a privilege to know. Among other things he was

* Copies of his collection of records, as well as photostat copies of the notation of the English and Danish songs, with notes and bibliographical material, are deposited with the British Institute of Recorded Sound, 38, Russell Square, London, W.C.1. A photostat-copy of the English collection is also deposited in the Vaughan Williams Library at Cecil Sharp House, 2, Regent's Park Road, London, N.W.1. M. K.

a linguistic genius who spoke and wrote a variety of languages. Though he only stayed in Denmark for brief periods and at long intervals, he spoke and wrote Danish in a beautiful and personal style and at the same time he mastered the two other Scandinavian languages, Swedish and Norwegian.

He first visited my wife and myself in 1927, and we have been friends ever since that day. Since then we corresponded regularly over the years, and met in Britain and Denmark when he was in Europe. The last time was at Aarhus in 1957, when he was the soloist in a performance of Grieg's piano-concerto before a packed house. By then he was 75, but his performance was as brilliant and beautiful as ever.

Grainger won fame for his interpretation of Grieg's music at an early age, and it was at that time that the old composer wrote of the young pianist: "I was 64 before it fell to my lot to listen to Norwegian piano music being interpreted with such genius and sympathy."

In 1922 Grainger met and made friends with the eminent Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen, whom he greatly and justly admired. They travelled together, collecting tunes and texts, Tang Kristensen taking down the texts, while Grainger noted down the tunes. Once they visited an old man who knew a number of rare songs. All went well until his son came home—a member of a stern religious sect who reproached his father for singing such worldly songs. The old man did not dare to sing any more. Tang Kristensen grew angry and took the son severely to task for preventing such noble and beautiful songs from being transmitted to posterity, and for denying his aged father the pleasure of singing the songs of his youth. It was a long and thorough castigation that Tang Kristensen delivered before he left the house. But who was outside in the car when he came out? Percy Grainger with the father! While the others were quarrelling, Grainger had taken the old man outside and recorded the missing songs.

In 1948 he wrote me that it was his intention to cease giving recitals and to devote his time to composition, since he had given concerts for 56 years; but it turned out that he could not live without concerts. He was "a heaven-inspired musician," and later wrote that, over a long period of time, he had slept for 27 nights in every month in railway-trains—he travelled neither first-class nor in a sleeping-car. His habits were frugal in the extreme, and he spent his considerable income on the collection of folk music and for the benefit of music and musicians generally, in many different countries.

In November, 1949, he wrote as follows:

"It is strange that personalities as dissimilar as Hjalmar Thuren, Tang Kristensen, H. P. Hansen, yourself, and I should have been linked together through our love of popular art and our endeavours to have this glorious art appreciated in various parts of the world. . . . We feel as it were that we are under an obligation to popular art, we wish it to be recognized, and that was really the idea underlying my Danish Folk Music Suite: 'The Power of Love,' 'Lord Peter's Stable Boy,' 'The Nightingale,' 'The two Sisters,' 'Choosing the Bride,' 'The Dragoon's Farewell,' 'The Shoemaker of Jerusalem,' and 'Husband and Wife.' This longing to see these songs known and loved all over the world has drawn us to each other and made us friends."

POUL LORENZEN
