New Book: Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger

A great deal of myth surrounds Percy Grainger. Much of this has been sustained by a generous serving of Grainger’s high opinion about himself; indeed, Grainger was one of the first 20th-century ‘spin doctors’. The element of truth in such stories, however, is equally hard to ignore. It is tantalising, intriguing, confusing, amusing. Above all, it is challenging. Grainger’s autobiographical writings present the reader with a completely unexpurgated version of the composer as a personal entity. His autobiography is so complete that one can trace the development of his ideas, values and beliefs, obtaining the complete musical journey of a composer, a musicologist. The Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger, which was jointly edited by Malcolm Gilles, David Pear and Mark Carroll, has attempted to present a kaleidoscope of Grainger’s autobiographical musings. Given the sheer volume of Grainger’s writings, pluralising had to take place, yet we hope that the selection isolated for publication provides a representative trage of a very unusual man. Grainger would have sought honesty: anything less was anathema to him. Of course he ‘tidied up’, called and edited his writings about himself. Not to have done so would surely have been impossible. He actively attempted, however, to minimise the damage such impostion might inflict on a genuine portrait of his beliefs and values. Whether he succeeded in the attempt or not is for today’s reader to decide. Either way, his musings provide a wonderful mechanism through which we can view 19th-century Australia and Germany, Edwardian England and the Belle Époque, and an America of the First World War, the Second World War, and the Cold War.

My research on Arthur E.H. Nickson (1899–1946) is based principally on his papers, which are housed at the Grainger Museum. After winning the Clarke Scholarship in 1914, he studied the organ at the Royal College of Music under Sir Walter Parratt until 1899, and returned to Melbourne after gaining the Fellowship of the Royal College of Organists in 1919. During his time in England, Nickson experienced the musical renaissance and the Catholic Revival in the Church of England at their height; his embrace of Anglo-Catholicism and his engagement with Neoplatonism can be traced back to this period. After a return visit to England in 1914, Nickson became an advocate for the organ music of Karg-Elert through recitals at St Peter’s East Ham — the leading Anglo-Catholic parish in Melbourne — where he was organist (1901–1906, 1918–1946). Nickson corresponded about his recitals with Karg-Elert both before and after World War I; this resulted in the dedication of a major work — Seven Psalms from the Book of Compline (Op. 96), which Nickson played at St Paul’s Cathedral in 1924.

Of real excitement was the announcement in June by Pro-Vice Chancellor (University Relations), Professor Warren Bobbington, that the University was prepared to spend $1.9 million refurbishing the Grainger Museum. All Friends will be heartened to know that the Museum is under threat. It should be pointed out that the refurbishment will take another two years, however by the end of 2008 at the latest, it is likely that the Museum will once again be a place that celebrates the life of Percy Grainger and his contemporaries, as well as a setting for performances and displays. To this end, the Friends of the Grainger Museum will shortly put into place a plan that will see it converted into a Members’ group, one that will provide strong support for Grainger’s legacy yet still represent his many admirers.

Facing Percy Grainger’s Future

The A.E.H. Nickson Collection

Nickson experienced the musical renaissance of Karg-Elert through recitals at St Paul’s Cathedral in 1924.

My interest in Nickson was first kindled when I was the assistant organist at St Peter’s (1901–2001). Colin Holden wrote a history of the church in which Nickson’s influence on the liturgical music was given some necessarily limited discussion, while Peter Frankenstein’s centenary essay on the Conservatorium considered Nickson’s influence there. The Nickson Papers showed that there was considerably more to Nickson than the

Ian Kieran Crichton completed his Master of Music thesis, The Most Divine of All Arts: Neoplatonism, Anglo-Catholicism and Music in the Published Writings of A.E.H. Nickson, at the Australian Catholic University in 2004. A.E.H. Nickson’s music, books, and personal papers were donated to the Grainger Museum by his family in the 1970s.

Ian Kieran Crichton

A simulacrum of Percy Grainger has been richly rewarded recently with important events celebrating his great contribution to Australia’s cultural heritage. On 6 July 2006 an exhibition titled Facing Percy Grainger opened at the National Library of Australia in Canberra. When this closed on 15 October some 20,000 people had viewed it, making a most successful Library exhibition indeed. Curated by David Pear and Brian Allison, the displays of over 200 items were mostly treasures from the Grainger Collection at the University of Melbourne. Seeing music from Britain, Denmark, Russia, China, Africa, America and the Faeroe Islands, as well as sea-chanties including my favourite work of the night, ‘Shallow Brown’, ‘for solo male voice and unison male choruses with room-music ensemble’ It was thrilling to hear over two hours of Grainger’s arrangements sung and played so beautifully and to know that these sounds were being broadcast throughout Australia.

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Dr Ros McMillan
President of the Friends
of the Grainger Museum

Professor Warren Bobbington addresses a capacity crowd at the opening of Facing Percy Grainger. Photo courtesy of the National Library of Australia

Wondrous music of Karg-Elert provided the starting point for this year’s Family Day program at the Grainger Museum. On 12 August 2006 the folk music of Grainger was performed at a delightful concert broadcast live on ABC Classic FM from the Iwaki Auditorium in Melbourne. Titled ‘A World Beyond Country Gardens’, the concert featured the nine voice vocal ensemble a21, a 7-piece chamber orchestra formed by Glenn Pleld. Vincent Plush was the concert curator. A capacity audience heard Grainger’s arrangements of folk music from Britain, Denmark, Russia, China, Africa, America and the Faeroe Islands, as well as sea-chanties including my favourite work of the night, ‘Shallow Brown’, ‘for solo male voice and unison male choruses with room-music ensemble’. It was thrilling to hear over two hours of Grainger’s arrangements sung and played so beautifully and to know that these sounds were being broadcast throughout Australia.

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Grainger’s Museum Legends on Composers

In 1941 Grainger wrote ‘Most musicians, most cultural endeavors, suffer from being subjected to TOO MUCH TASTE, TOO MUCH ELIMINATION, TOO MUCH SELECTION, TOO MUCH SPECIALIZATION! What we want (in museums & cultural records) is ALL-SIDENESS, side-light, cross-references’ (letter to H. Balfour Gardiner, 7 June 1941). But despite his frequent claims to 'universal' values, and the all-inclusiveness of his collection, Grainger in his Museum Legends, a series of 58 display panels, created mostly in 1938 and in 1955–1956, attempted to shape objects, created mostly in 1938 and 1955–1956, attempted to shape his narrative legacy. Even Australians whom he admired and whose scores he acquired, such as his student Katharine Kity Parker whom he described elsewhere as ‘one of Australia’s most gifted and inspired composers’, and Alec Burnard whom he had called ‘the 1st real Australian tonebinder after me — many tangled as I’, and whom he had considered appointing as Museum curator, have no Legend.

In 1940, in writing to the University Architect about enlarging the Museum building, Grainger acknowledged that ‘There are already several Australian composers whose music is known and printed all over the musical world — men such as [John] Amul & Arthur Benjamin. In my opinion their works should be accessible to Australian music students & music-lovers’. If the proposed second storey had eventuated and Grainger had lived beyond 79 years he may have made Legends on these and other Australian composers, and he certainly did collect their scores for his collection, but I think it is significant of his intentions that he omitted them both in 1938 and 1955–1956. Despite his desire to be remembered as an Australian composer, Grainger saw himself as having achieved greatness as the inheritor of a European musical tradition, to which he was exposed at its source, and which he subsequently influenced through his own compositional innovations. The parallel history of Grainger’s composition was of relatively little interest to him.

Dr Belinda Nemec
Cultural Collections Co-ordinator


Recent research into a photograph of Percy Grainger’s first lover, Lilith Lowrey, has brought attention to the richness and breadth of the photographic collection Grainger amassed throughout his lifetime. It has also highlighted a particular subsection within the collection — sophisticated studio photographic portraits of celebrities by ‘society’ photographers.

The studio portrait of Lowrey by London society photographer, Ernest Walter Husted (1868–1949) is a beautifully crafted example of its type. Formally posed, the sitter is lit with flattering diffused lighting. The background is of a neutral tone, and the light is focused on the subject’s face, accentuating the eyes and cheekbones. The sitter is wearing a long-sleeved dress, and her hair is styled in soft, wavy waves.

Grainger also had a significant interest in photography, and he acquired a very expensive present. In 1909, a single portrait sitting with Lilith Lowrey would have been a little over £3. Considering the world’s first fashion photographer, de Meyer was one of the most sought after photographers of the Edwardian ‘glitterati’. Grainger was probably introduced to de Meyer by French society portrait painter Jacques-Emile Blanche around 1902–1903 and the two men became friends. Baron de Meyer produced very elegant promotional photographs of Grainger as well as a series of portrait miniature — almost adoring — soft-focus portraits in the then current Pictorialist Style.

Communicating a society photographer was an expensive undertaking. When Grainger’s lover Margot Harrison offered a photograph of herself by Australian photographer H. Walter Barnett (1862–1934) as a gift in 1913, she acquired a very expensive present.

Despite humble beginnings, alongside a youthful Tom Roberts (the Heidelberg school painter) in the studio of Stewart & Co. in Melbourne, Barnett combined a brilliant business mind with an extraordinarily gifted photographic eye, to become one of the most fashionable society portraiture in Melbourne, New York and London respectively.

Jack Cats (who worked for Barnett) records in his book, The Story of the Camera in Australia, that in 1909, a single portrait sitting with Barnett cost £5. It was at this time that the average weekly working-class wage in Australia would have been a little over £5.

Other celebrated photographers represented in the Grainger Collection include Gertrude Kasebier, Count Jean de Strelecki, Arnold Genthe, Mina Moore and Aimé Dupont.

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Nemec, Dr Belinda

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