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# Louden Hugely: The Piano Music of Percy Grainger

Jackson Carruthers

*The University of Akron*, [jcc88@zips.uakron.edu](mailto:jcc88@zips.uakron.edu)

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LOUDEN HUGELY:  
THE PIANO MUSIC OF PERCY GRAINGER

Jackson Carruthers  
School of Music  
Honors Research Project

In the pantheon of early twentieth-century piano music as it stands today, the names of composers such as Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev, Rachmaninov, and Bartok stand apart from their contemporaries as being the giants of the medium. One would be hard-pressed, even foolhardy, to argue that these five composers' works are undeserving of their exalted positions in the modern repertoire. However, there also exist other composers who wrote quantities of highly idiomatic, artistically interesting piano music that has been largely ignored by concertizing artists and, in turn, the greater classical establishment. Among these composers is Percy Aldridge Grainger (1882-1961), who was born in Australia, educated in Britain and Germany, and spent much of his adult life in America. A brilliant concert pianist in his own right, Grainger left to posterity a wide variety of works for the piano reflecting his unique compositional aesthetic and pianistic technique.<sup>1</sup> While well-respected and highly popular during his lifetime, Grainger's piano music has fallen on hard times of late. In light of the many winsome qualities of the music, and the admirers it attracted during Grainger's life, this is hard to justify. Furthermore, it seems that many pianists (and their audiences) are missing out on numerous compositions that are well worth hearing.

Percy Aldridge Grainger was born in Melbourne, Australia, on July 8, 1882, to local architect John Grainger and his wife Rose Aldridge Grainger. John Grainger was a heavy drinker and womanizer, and much of the responsibility for raising young Percy fell to his mother, Rose, who was to occupy a highly influential position in her son's life until her death in 1922.<sup>2</sup> Percy displayed both musical and artistic talent from a young age, and his mother, an amateur pianist, gave him his first instruction on the piano at the age of five.<sup>3</sup> At the age of ten, Grainger was

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Stevenson, "Grainger and the Piano." In *The Percy Grainger Companion*, ed. Lewis Foreman. 113-122. (London: Thames Publishing, 1981), 113-114.

<sup>2</sup> John Bird, *Percy Grainger*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

taken for lessons to Louis Pabst. Pabst, born in Germany, was a highly respected pedagogue in Australia and brother of Paul Pabst, who taught in Russia and was among Rachmaninov's teachers.<sup>4</sup> Three years later, in 1895, Grainger and his mother left Australia for Germany, where Grainger had been advised to study.<sup>5</sup>

In Germany, thirteen-year-old Grainger enrolled at the Hoch Conservatorium in Leipzig, where he came under the tutelage of James Kwast. Grainger does not appear to have gotten along with Kwast very well, and later reflected that he had learned little from him.<sup>6</sup> Kwast, however, does not seem to have harbored any ill will towards Grainger, who certainly gained a significant footing in the standard repertoire (as it existed in late-19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany) during his time in Leipzig. In addition to his difficulties with Kwast, Grainger also did not get along with the Conservatorium's composition teacher, Ivan Knorr.<sup>7</sup>

However, the years in Leipzig were decisive in Grainger's formation as a musician. While there, he met the Britons Roger Quilter, Cyril Scott, and Balfour Gardiner, who were to have a profound effect on his outlook and with whom he would remain associated for the rest of his life.<sup>8</sup> In 1896, Grainger met Karl Klimsch, a successful businessman and owner of a lithography business, who was to have a significant impact on Grainger's compositional outlook. Klimsch criticized Grainger's early attempts at composition as "florid" and encouraged him to follow melodic inspiration above all else.<sup>9</sup> At this time Grainger also began to formulate some of his ideas about what he was to call "free-music," to which he would return later in life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Lloyd, "Grainger 'In a Nutshell.'" In *The Percy Grainger Companion*, ed. Lewis Foreman. 15-21. (London: Thames Publishing, 1981)," 16.

<sup>6</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> In fairness to Grainger, Knorr appears to have been a somewhat mean-spirited, spiteful individual, cf. Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd, "Grainger 'In a Nutshell.'" 16.

<sup>9</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Slattery, *Percy Grainger: The Inveterate Innovator*, (Evanston, IL: The Instrumentalist Co., 1974), 21.

By the end of his time in Germany, Rose Grainger's health had begun to decline seriously, likely as a result of syphilis.<sup>11</sup> Worried about providing for his mother, Grainger decided to undertake a career as a concert pianist. Grainger also resolved not to publish much of his compositional output until later in life, fearing a backlash from the musical establishment against the novelty of his writing. Since he depended upon this establishment for his livelihood, this decision served as a preventive measure against undermining his earning potential as a concert artist.<sup>12</sup>

Grainger spent a total of eight years in Germany. In 1901, he and his mother left for London. Grainger made his first public appearance there in June of that year. He made his debut with orchestra in February 1902, soloing in the First Piano Concerto of Tchaikovsky. Grainger had considerable success as a concert artist in the United Kingdom, and, in 1903, was invited to study with the great pianist Ferruccio Busoni. While Busoni and Grainger shared a mutual admiration of each other's playing, in personality they could hardly have been more different—the high-strung, emotional Grainger versus the cerebral Busoni.<sup>13</sup> During his time with Busoni in Berlin, Grainger seems to have been more interested in working on composition than pianistic technique, much to the frustration of Busoni.<sup>14</sup> Despite their personal disagreements, Grainger developed a love for Busoni's transcriptions of Bach organ works—a devotion approaching that of Busoni's arch-disciple Egon Petri—and Busoni himself felt that “such works really suit you.” Grainger was to learn much about playing Bach from Busoni, then the foremost exponent of

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<sup>11</sup>Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 39.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>13</sup>Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 77.

<sup>14</sup>Slattery, *Percy Grainger*, 37.

Bach on the concert grand.<sup>15</sup> Busoni also helped to validate Grainger's compositional output, including the newly-written *Hill Song No. 1*.<sup>16</sup>

Following his studies in Berlin and a concertizing tour to Australia, Grainger returned to London. It was at this point that he made the acquaintance of the composer/conductor Charles Villiers Stanford (Grainger made a magnificent transcription of Stanford's *Irish Dances*), and the conductor Hans Richter. He also concertized widely throughout Great Britain, playing, among other things, the piano music of his friend Cyril Scott, of whom he would remain a lifelong champion.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in 1905, the three final pieces of Grainger's artistic outlook fell into place: the folk song movement in Britain, and the music of Edvard Grieg and Frederick Delius. After his return to England, Grainger had been increasingly drawn to the folk song movement, attending lectures and going on trips into the English countryside to notate songs. It was during this time that Grainger struck up a correspondence with Cecil Sharp, the father of folk song collecting in Britain. He also made the acquaintance of Ralph Vaughan Williams, another giant in the movement. While he never became a close associate of Sharp or Vaughan Williams, Grainger did profit compositionally and materially from the association.<sup>18</sup> At the same time as his compositional outlook began to be fully formed, Grainger the performer began feeling increasingly dissatisfied with his career as a concert pianist, growing frustrated with his nervousness before the public and what he regarded to be an unreliable memory. He also began

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<sup>15</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> Slatery, *Percy Grainger*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Mellers, *Percy Grainger*, 63.

to nurse a certain discontent with the limitations of the piano, which would continue for the rest of his life.<sup>19</sup>

The Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg had been first introduced to Grainger's music around 1904. In 1906, on visiting London, he was asked if there was any musician residing there whom he would like to meet. Ill and tired, Grieg at first demurred, but on further consideration asked for Grainger. What resulted was a symbiotic relationship of great importance in Grainger's musical existence. Both had the utmost respect for the other's musicianship, both as pianists and composers. Grieg found in Grainger an almost-ideal interpreter of his piano works (especially the Piano Concerto), and a worthy fellow composer with a mutual burning passion for folk song.<sup>20</sup> Grainger, for his part, considered Grieg to be, with Bach, his favorite composer, and had a great sense of identification with Grieg's compositional output.<sup>21</sup>

A year after their meeting, Grieg wrote of Grainger in his diary, "what an artist, what a man! As a pianist I don't know whom I should compare him with among the very greatest, but any comparison fails when the really great is considered. He is himself. I am possibly weak when it comes to him, because he has really realized my ideas about piano playing... As a god, he is above all sufferings, all struggles."<sup>22</sup> The two would stay in close contact until Grieg's death in 1907, an event which deeply affected Grainger. It was not for nothing that Grainger's series of British Folk Music Settings were "lovingly and reverently dedicated to the memory of Edvard Grieg."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 100-102.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-120.

<sup>21</sup> Mellers, *Percy Grainger*, 63-64.

<sup>22</sup> Edvard Grieg, Diary Entry August 5, 1907, in *Portrait of Percy Grainger*, ed. Malcolm Gillies and David Pear, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Percy Grainger, *The Music of Percy Grainger for Piano*, (New York: G Schirmer, Inc., 1962), 1.

In 1907, at the London residence of the painter John Singer Sargent, Grainger was introduced to Frederick Delius.<sup>24</sup> Grainger and Delius, despite significant differences in personality and temperament, seem to have been kindred spirits in the realm of music and compositional philosophy. Grainger showed Delius a number of his compositions, including his arrangement of the folk song *Brigg Fair*. The tune, and Grainger's setting thereof, so impressed Delius that he dedicated his subsequent orchestral composition *Brigg Fair, An English Rhapsody* to Grainger.<sup>25</sup> Grainger and Delius were to remain fast friends until Delius' death in 1934, and Grainger would frequently visit Delius at his residence in Grez-sur-Loing, France.

Delius, writing around 1910, said, "Percy Grainger is the most gifted of all your young composers I have met... He does quite remarkable things, and is most refreshing."<sup>26</sup> The great pianist Harold Bauer wrote in a letter to Grainger, the day after a recital he had given in 1945 (playing, among other things, Ravel's *Ondine*, which is dedicated to Bauer):

Of course you know and will never forget Delius' admiration for you. He revealed it to me one day in one of his characteristically explosive moments. We were talking about a number of contemporary composers whose work was attracting considerable attention—'What is lacking in every one of them,' burst out Fritz, 'is the one *indispensable* quality: originality. [...] There are just a few who have this quality and one of them is Percy Grainger. I consider him a genius and one of the greatest composers.' [...] Frankly, I thought he was exaggerating, but later on I realized that he had said no more than the truth. Don't imagine, because all this went through my mind during your concert yesterday, that I was not listening—Everything you did was colored with that '*one indispensable quality*' and I enjoyed it all immensely..."<sup>27</sup> (Italics are Bauer's)

Despite this strength of sentiment on his behalf, by 1963, only two years after Grainger's death, Harold Schonberg, longtime music critic of The New York Times, could write in his well-known book *The Great Pianists* that "Because [Grainger] wrote so much music of the *Country*

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<sup>24</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 110.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick Delius to Ethel Smyth, undated (about 1910), in *Portrait of Percy Grainger*, ed. Malcolm Gillies and David Pear, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Harold Bauer to Percy Grainger, February 19, 1945, quoted in Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 220.



*Gardens* and *Molly on the Shore* variety, many refused to take him seriously as a pianist, especially toward the end of his days, when his career before the public was long over. The younger generation of pianists used to chortle when his name was mentioned.”<sup>28</sup> While Schonberg went on to say that “no chortle was ever more unjust or misplaced,” the dig at Grainger’s compositional ability remained. Grainger himself felt that, by the 1930s, the pianistic establishment had consigned his music to being that of a salon composer akin to Scharwenka or Moszkowski, and was deeply troubled by this.<sup>29</sup> Grainger had very little interest in mindless titillation through technical fluency or saccharine harmonic progressions draped in flashy scales and arpeggios. His ultimate interest was in being a great creative innovator, not a composer of cheap, inconsequential settings of pretty melodies. A mixture of concern with this prevailing attitude and Grainger’s own worry that he had not written his rightful share of masterpieces led, starting in the 1940s, to his increasing experimentation with what he called “free music,” at the expense of other compositional forms.<sup>30</sup>

Grainger’s music explores many avenues left relatively untraversed by his more famous contemporaries. Drawing from such disparate sources of inspiration as Bach and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Grainger made exquisite and unique use of inner voices, frequently burying melodies deep within thick chordal textures.<sup>31</sup> These melodies were often indicated for the performer’s ease of interpretation with plain-English sayings such as “the tune to the fore,” eschewing the customary Italian, French or German indications used by many other English-speaking composers of the time.<sup>32</sup> Grainger did not merely compose “arrangements” of English folk-tunes

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<sup>28</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 217.

<sup>29</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 56.

<sup>30</sup> Slattery, *Percy Grainger*, 161.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>32</sup> Mellers, *Percy Grainger*, 159.

or the odd American vaudeville song—he preferred to say that he “dished up” his final product.<sup>33</sup> He also pioneered the use of the fist to play tone clusters, a technique which would become stock-in-trade for many later composers of piano music.<sup>34</sup> He was especially meticulous and particular about pedaling, which is notated in great detail in his compositions and in his editions of other composers’ music (e.g. his edition of the Grieg Piano Concerto).<sup>35</sup>

Grainger’s piano writing is always consummately idiomatic, and he made many helpful notes that show considerable practical knowledge of the difficulties that performers would encounter. These illustrate, for instance, that certain notes of chords may be omitted if problematic, or that the exact ending notes of glissandi are unimportant. However, despite his complete fluency in the medium of piano music, most of Grainger’s piano works were not originally composed for piano.<sup>36</sup> The idea of a composer freely transferring works between piano and other instruments (or ensembles thereof) was nothing new or unusual. To name just two examples, Liszt and Ravel were known to make orchestrations of their piano works and make piano transcriptions of their orchestral works.

However, in contrast to Liszt and Ravel, and despite his active pianistic concertizing and recording of his own works, Grainger went so far as to say that he made piano versions of his best-known pieces in only response to the requests of his publishers.<sup>37</sup> In fact, he was actively bothered by others thinking that he composed specifically for piano and then made subsequent arrangements for other instrumental combinations.<sup>38</sup> A quick scan through his pianistic *oeuvre*

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<sup>33</sup> However, given the many permutations through serial “dishing up” experienced by almost all of Grainger’s major compositions, the idea that Grainger *ever* arrived at a final product is rather dubious.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 176.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Rezits, “Grainger the Pianist,” In *The Percy Grainger Companion*, ed. Lewis Foreman. 177-184. (London, Thames Publishing, 1981), 181.

<sup>36</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Stevenson, “Grainger and the Piano,” 114.

<sup>38</sup> Malcolm Gillies, David Pear, and Mark Carroll, *Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 182-183.

will confirm that *Country Gardens* was originally scored for two whistlers and “a few instruments,” and that *Molly on the Shore* first saw the light of day in a setting for “string four-some.”<sup>39</sup> In his prefatory remarks heading the piano score of *Harvest Hymn*, Grainger notes that “the root-form of this tone-work is for Elastic Scoring (2 instruments up to massed orchestra, with or without voice or voices). All other versions (for piano duet, piano solo, and so on) are off-shoots from the root-form.”<sup>40</sup> There are, however, notable exceptions to this prevailing norm, such as the wickedly difficult and grandiloquently rumbustious *In Dahomey*, which remained in manuscript until long after Grainger’s death.

Grainger is somewhat unusual in the realm of classical composers, in that he wrote relatively little music that was not in one way or another based on a pre-existing melody,<sup>41</sup> and that aside from *Lincolnshire Posy* and *The Warriors*, he wrote very little that could be considered a large-scale work.<sup>42</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, in his study of Grainger, notes that “although Grainger had, in his way, a brilliant head, he was essentially a man of heart whose ‘people’s music,’ embracing folk and pop tunes, eschewed formalism, let alone academic convention.”<sup>43</sup> In the minds of some, this might be an indictment of his creative faculties. One certainly wonders what Grainger’s modern standing among pianists would be if he had simply written a twenty-minute-long concerted piece for piano and orchestra and called it a concerto, or if he had written a multi-movement solo work and dubbed it a sonata. Perhaps the arbiters of musical taste would judge

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<sup>39</sup> Grainger, *The Music of Percy Grainger for Piano*, 1-7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> In a way, this is almost a throwback to the Medieval or Renaissance periods, though no one seems to be apt to criticize Dufay, des Prez, or Ockeghem on this account.

<sup>42</sup> Mellers, *Percy Grainger*, 150-151.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

him differently.<sup>44</sup> But the closest Grainger ever came to producing a concerted work (much less a sonata) in his adulthood is likely his piano-and-orchestra version of *Handel in the Strand*.

Grainger's piano music can roughly be divided into three categories: purely original compositions, folk song settings (British, Danish, American, and otherwise), and transcriptions—"free rambles" in Grainger-speak—on works by other classical composers. He also produced quite fascinating solo piano transcriptions of movements from Grieg's Piano Concerto, Schumann's Piano Concerto, Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto and Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto. Grainger personally regarded these as hack work done to keep the interest of a fickle publishing industry that preferred him to write more commercially salable pieces along the lines of *Country Gardens*.<sup>45</sup> That said, it seems that Grainger was a bit overeager to sell himself short. Far from watering down the originals for the use of dilettantes, these are quite challenging adaptations, full of ingenious effects.

Grainger's original music shows clear traces of influence, though not indebtedness, to his folk influences, as well as the writing of Grieg and Delius. Like his contemporary Bartok, the folk idiom was always in the back of Grainger's mind informing his creative thought and compositional process, though the final product could not be more different.<sup>46</sup> Throughout his works, Grainger always finds ways of manifesting his love for unique effects and unexpected dynamics or harmonic progressions. The delightful *The Immovable Do*, inspired by a sticky key on the composer's harmonium, makes use of the sostenuto pedal to hold out an octave C for the length of the piece, creating a ghostly pedal point by means of sympathetic vibrations— a most

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<sup>44</sup> After all, Vaughan Williams' most famous concerted work, at least where the general public is concerned, is not a concerto, nor is his most famous orchestral composition a symphony. But at least all the academics can testify that the composer of *The Lark Ascending* and the *Greensleeves Fantasia* could indeed write a "proper" concerto or symphony when he set his mind to it.

<sup>45</sup> Slatery, *Percy Grainger*, 188.

<sup>46</sup> Stevenson, "Grainger and the Piano," 114.

inventive piece of writing that presaged similar use of the pedal by many subsequent composers. *Handel in the Strand* is a series of variations on a fragment from Handel's *Harmonious Blacksmith*, treated to great effect in proper London music-hall style. The non-virtuoso *Harvest Hymn* captures a quaint pastoral feeling. The *Lullabye from Tribute to Foster* has effervescently shimmering passagework that seems to suggest the play of moonlight.

In the series of British Folk Music Settings, which number over 40 (not all for piano), are some of Grainger's most hackneyed and unjustly maligned works, such as *Molly on the Shore* and *Country Gardens*. Included with these are some beautiful and rarely-heard gems, such as the *Scotch Strathspey and Reel*. *Country Gardens*, the 22<sup>nd</sup> work in the series, arose in 1918 from improvisations Grainger made on a Morris Dance tune collected by Cecil Sharp. In time, *Country Gardens* would come to be immensely popular, setting sales records for the publisher (G. Schirmer) and causing Grainger no small amount of annoyance over persistent requests to play it at his concerts.<sup>47</sup> *Country Gardens* was not the only Morris tune that Grainger set. In his delightfully zesty version of *Shepherd's Hey*, he rather dryly asserts that it is "not suitable" to dance Morris Dances to.<sup>48</sup>

*Molly on the Shore* (figure 1) makes use not only of the eponymous Irish reel tune, but also of another, *Temple Hill*. Throughout, the two are combined in various ways as melody and counter-melody. Again, Grainger's use of the sostenuto pedal is novel and highly effective. The ending of *Molly on the Shore* displays Grainger's humor quite well, as the music gradually quiets down to a *pianississimo* during the last statement of the theme but concludes with the ending chord played *subito fortissississimo*.

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<sup>47</sup> Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Grainger, *The Piano Music of Percy Grainger*, 23.

Figure 1: Grainger, *Molly on the Shore*

Typical of Grainger's innovative and free-thinking spirit, in the piano version of *Irish Tune from County Derry* (figure 2), Grainger creates a superb effect by putting the melody in the bottom voice of a series of chords played by the pianist's right hand. This is helpfully highlighted by way of the melody being printed in larger notes than the rest of the accompaniment, taking a cue from Chopin's so-called *Aeolian Harp* Etude, Op. 25 No. 1 (figure 3). While a severe challenge for the pianist to voice adequately, the end result is quite striking. In the score, one can also see a highly typical Grainger tempo marking. The puckish Grainger has, in this case, seen fit to parenthetically include an Italian "translation" of the plain English, typeset in a smaller font beneath the English.

The tune is thro'out printed in bigger notes.

SLOWISH, but not dragged, and wayward in time. M.M. ♩ = between 72 and 104.  
(*Rubato il tempo, e non troppo lento.*)

Right-Side Pedal. up... down...

Figure 2: Grainger, *Irish Tune from County Derry*

Allegro sostenuto (♩ = 104)

Figure 3: Chopin, Etude Op. 25 No. 1, "Aeolian Harp"

In addition to his settings of British folk music, Grainger also set a quantity of Danish and American music. His *Jutish Medley*, a collection of folk songs from Jutland, is substantial and makes use of several melodies that Grainger collected himself in 1922 and 1927. He also set the American fiddle tune *Spoon River*, which is to be played "with 'pioneer' persistency."<sup>49</sup> Throughout his settings, the identification with the original folk material is transcendent and pervasive. The pianist and Grainger scholar Ronald Stevenson wrote: "I believe [Grainger] based every aspect of his playing and piano-writing on the folk-musician's model."<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>50</sup> Stevenson, "Grainger and the Piano," 114.

Grainger also published a fair number of what he called “free rambles” on various classical melodies. In these, Grainger could hold his own with some of the best makers of transcriptions, including Godowsky.<sup>51</sup> His rambles on *The Man I Love* and *Love Walked In* by Gershwin and the *Rosenkavalier Love-Duet* by Strauss are lusciously written and idiomatically realized. Grainger, ever the musical chameleon, gives us a very jazzy Gershwin and an appropriately romantic Strauss, but still contributes his distinctive touch to the writing. It is of interest to compare Grainger’s *Blithe Bells* (figure 4), a setting of *Sheep May Safely Graze* from Bach’s Cantata No. 208, with the transcription of the same piece made by Egon Petri (figure 5). While both versions are certainly excellent examples of the transcriber’s art, Grainger throughout exercises his penchant for thick textures and the play of contrapuntal melodies, while Petri sticks to a more literal reading of the score. Indeed, from the beginning, Grainger substitutes tenths for the harmonizing thirds of the flutes, imparting a unique bell-like effect.

Quietly flowing ♩ = 76  
 Top voice glassy, somewhat to the fore

mp  
 p

pp

P. A. Grainger, containing no big stretches, see page 8.

S. P. ....

Figure 4: Grainger, *Blithe Bells*

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 121.



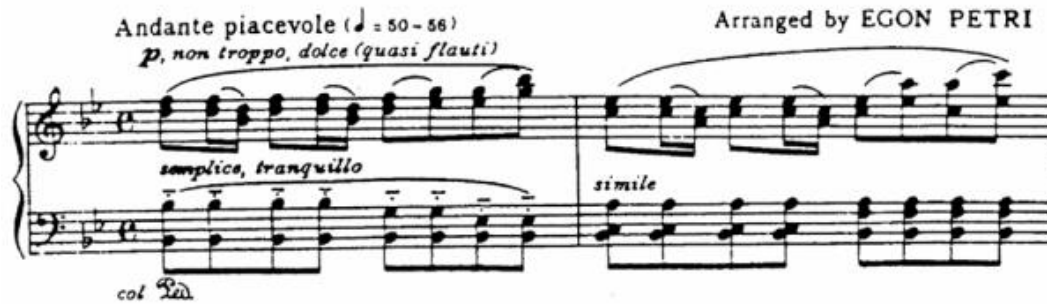


Figure 5: Bach/Petri, *Sheep May Safely Graze*

One might also place in this category the aforementioned “cakewalk smasher” *In Dahomey*, “using tune from Darkie Comic Opera ‘In Dahomey’ by Will Marion Cook and tunes from Arthur Prior’s ‘A coon band Contest’” (figure 6).<sup>52,53</sup> Grainger was quite fond of ragtime and jazz idioms, and this technical tour de force is a concert rag of a very high order.<sup>54</sup> Among the challenges for the pianist to surmount are large upward and downward glissandi in imitation of a trombone, notated with a large loop through the staff, along with blistering passagework and explosively percussive chords. For the glissandi, Grainger even includes a helpful technical hint for execution, as well as a rather innovative original method of notation.



\* [finger nails (back of hand) for slide up;  
thumb nail for slide down (see footnote)]

Grainger's own note here is perhaps ambiguous. It reads:  
'finger nails upwards (back of hand) thumb downwards.'

Figure 6: Grainger, *In Dahomey* (editorial note by Ronald Stevenson)

<sup>52</sup> Percy Grainger, *In Dahomey: Cakewalk Smasher*, (New York: Henmar Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>53</sup> The modern-day idea of political correctness was clearly somewhat foreign to Grainger.

<sup>54</sup> Stevenson, “Grainger and the Piano,” 118.

Grainger was not concerned just with virtuoso fireworks. Ever the innovator—and also a shrewd businessman; the practice increased his earnings from sheet music sales—he made arrangements of his music for didactic purposes, producing (sometimes multiple) simplified versions for small hands and beginners. He also explored much territory in the realm of multi-piano composition, for which he had a particular love.<sup>55</sup> For those unable to handle the tenths in the solo version of *Blythe Bells*, Grainger conveniently splits them up between both pianists in the two-piano version. He also produced a two-piano version of *Lincolnshire Posy* and wrote a two-piano fantasy on Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. In addition to his own works, Grainger made an arrangement of Bach's Organ Toccata BWV 540 for three pianos, with the added suggestion of doubling the parts and using no fewer than six pianos, if desired.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the beauty and “accessibility” of his music,<sup>57</sup> and his many compositional innovations both instrumental and theoretical, Grainger remains a mostly neglected figure today, best known within the world of the wind band.<sup>58</sup> As the Biblical saying goes, a prophet has no honor in his own country (or, in Grainger's case, among his fellow pianists).<sup>59</sup> Grainger remains an oddity for the modern musician in large part because he was always trying to push boundaries and go against the musical norms of the time, but did so in a way that was markedly different from other innovators like the members of the Second Viennese School or John Cage. By the time of his death, Grainger was a dinosaur, far removed from the dry academic serialism so prevalent in the 1960s. Furthermore, Grainger's output sits so far outside the expectation of what a major composer is supposed to write that it is very easy indeed to dismiss him as an inconsequential and strange man who was incapable of writing anything other than miniatures. If

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Slattery, *Percy Grainger*, 174.

<sup>57</sup> A rather vogueish modern term that one feels Grainger probably would not have cared for.

<sup>58</sup> Gillies and Pear, *Portrait of Percy Grainger*, XXXI-XXXV.

<sup>59</sup> John 4:44.

he was incapable, it was only because writing in large formal structures was the very antithesis of Grainger's ideals as a composer; it ran directly against his nature.

Grainger's primary interest, above all others, was in being unique and different, almost for the sake thereof.<sup>60</sup> He owed allegiance to no particular school of compositional thought, and had no desire to cater to the tastes of others. Following the dictates of his own musical conscience was far more important to him. Grainger, by his own admission, had no great interest in exploring deep profundities *à la* Mahler, channeling intense emotions like Tchaikovsky, or summoning the mystical ecstasy of Scriabin, to name but a few. Grainger freely admitted that he was not an inspired writer of melodies, or even a great orchestrator (though both of those are highly debatable). Rather, he said that his expertise was in the piquancy of his harmonies.<sup>61</sup> One might go so far as to say that his use of harmony for sheer coloristic effect is in a way similar to Impressionists, like his beloved Cyril Scott or Debussy, though the actual instrumental writing is often quite different. "My effort... was to wrench at the listener's heart with my chords," he wrote.<sup>62</sup> In this Grainger has few equals, and there are very few boring harmonies in his music—the writing always shows the absolute attention of a burninglly intense mind.

Keeping this in mind, if the modern musician is to fully appreciate Grainger, it is well to try to understand his compositional intent as much as possible. Grainger might not have been a monumental, epoch-defining composer, but he himself was more than willing to admit his own limitations and frailties, and his music lacks the pretension of so many near-great composers. Grainger might never have stormed the Olympian heights of composition, but he could and did write surpassingly beautiful, engaging music. In this regard, and for the gorgeous and unique sonorities his writing elicits from the piano, Grainger can hold his own with any of his more

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<sup>60</sup> Gillies, Pear, and Carroll, *Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger*, 165.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-177.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Gillies, Pear, and Carroll, *Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger*, 177.

illustrious contemporaries. It seems the case that many modern pianists are inclined to agree with Harold Schonberg's assessment and dismiss Grainger as a composer of "light music." Grainger, and indeed likely Delius and Grieg, would bristle at the thought. Light, entertaining pieces are but one small facet of Grainger's output. He was capable of so much more—and amply evidenced that capability in his music. For these reasons, it seems a shame that his music has fallen into such neglect in the present day.

In considering Grainger, it is necessary to temporarily rethink the modern age's preoccupation with the towering monuments of art. Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Fallingwater might not be an architectural or engineering marvel in the same gigantesque way as the Empire State Building or the Hoover Dam are, but does that make it any less beautiful and significant as a house, or impeach Lloyd Wright's skill as an architect? Likewise, Grainger's music needs to be appreciated for what it is. In it, the willing musician will find a large store of distinctive gems which will not fail to delight the open-minded.

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