

articles

Percy Grainger: Country Gardens and Other Curses

David S. Josephson

[*Ed. Note:* This is the first in a series of writings conceived by the author as an essay in bibliography, seeking to provide the foundation for a thorough and broadly-based study of the life and music of Percy Grainger.]

The lead obituary in *The New York Times* on 21 February 1961 began: "Percy Grainger, Composer, Dead/Creator of *Country Gardens* . . ." An editorial eulogy in the *Times* on the following day noted that "pieces like his *Country Gardens* will be delighting audiences long after some of the highly touted music of more 'advanced' composers is long, long forgotten." A recording published shortly before Grainger's death was given the title *Country Gardens and Other Favorites*.¹

The sad litany always begins with *Country Gardens*, and it invariably continues with *Colonial Song*, *Handel in the Strand*, *Irish Tune from County Derry*, *Mock Morris*, *Molly on the Shore*, *Shepherd's Hey*. Culled from a seemingly bottomless chest and published in any number of marketable arrangements, these charming little conceits provided their creator with a handsome income, but at the same time they obscured utterly the spirit and accomplishments of the man and slowly drove his reputation into the ground. Their popularity is only one of a tangle of sources that have distorted our perception of Grainger. Certainly he himself was partly responsible for that distortion, just as he was for the gradual narrowing of his reputation as a pianist to exponent of the Grieg Piano Concerto (which he considered "hardly one of its composer's most exquisite works"²) and a handful of other pieces, despite his mastery of an immense and unconventional repertory. Indeed, his last recording documents an intensely vital performance of *Country Gardens* and an absolutely harrowing one of the Grieg Concerto.³

Now, however, with the passing of more than a decade since Grainger's death, it is high time to rescue the name of one of the brilliant musical lights of our century. We need not grind any axe. His was in the last analysis a limited genius, his creative breath short, his noble final experiment with what he termed *Free Music* a failure. Grainger was an erratic man, elusive, private, and vulnerable. But he was a character unique in the annals of 20th-century music: composer, arranger, teacher, writer, editor, linguist, collector and scholar of folk and ethnic musics. Blessed with a wonderfully imaginative ear and a radical, far-ranging mind, Grainger embraced Machaut and Duke Ellington, Russian folksong and Zulu dance.

To deal with the man is difficult. Perhaps we remain too close to our subject. The prejudices against which he fought remain to a great extent our prejudices, within both the concert hall and the classroom. The musical

frivolities into which he poured his consummate craft remain frivolities, not yet having gained the respect that comes with vintage. Much of the rest of his music yields its treasures unwillingly and often demands instrumental resources which we can gather only with difficulty. We must break through the isolation of the man, imposed in his youth by his sudden success and bewildering experiments, in later years by the stigma of old-fashionedness, and throughout his life by his stubborn convictions and eccentricities. Another problem is that Grainger's music is not readily accessible. Much of it remains scattered in manuscripts, and of that which was published a great deal is either out of print or irregularly available. There is little chance that this situation will soon be remedied; yet, until it is, our knowledge of Grainger's music will remain incomplete and our appraisal of it one-sided.

A more immediately fruitful approach to understanding Grainger is bibliographical, although here too one encounters some difficulty. During his long active career, Grainger's vast range of musical activities insured him continual printed notice. Much of it, however, was laudatory and repetitive, and marred by garbled stories and outright misinformation. We must be careful even with primary materials. Grainger took a rather casual, not to say cavalier, attitude toward reporters and seems to have enjoyed exercising his wit on hapless interviewers. During one discussion taped for the BBC, he was asked: "You've never really gone in very much for sonata . . ." "I've never touched it," he answered. "Never touched it? Why?" "Well," he hesitated, "the Italians were on our side in the First World War, were they?" "Yes." "Yes, well then that spoils my story. My story was that I wouldn't write anything that has an Italian title." Transparent enough. But later in the interview, his voice perfectly serious, Grainger mentioned that at the age of ten he went to study in Germany because the German language was closest to Icelandic. Now, in a certain context that statement does not seem preposterous: his mother's reading of Nordic epics marked them decisively upon the boy's consciousness and provided him with an artistic ideal which he would henceforth embrace—"shapely yet 'formless,' many-sided yet monotonous, rambling, multitudinous, drastic, tragic, stoical, ruthlessly truth-proclaiming."⁴ But it *was* preposterous. Rose Grainger took her son to Frankfurt am Main only because she wanted him to receive the best possible musical training and thought that he would get it there.

In this interview and elsewhere, Grainger's memory seems to have played tricks on him, so that his dating of earlier events was often unreliable. For instance, he attributed his lifelong interest in folk music to the influence of Lucy Broadwood, a towering figure in the young English Folk-Song Society (founded in 1898), whose lecture "On the Collecting of English Folk-Song," delivered to the Musical Association in March 1905, introduced him to the enormous variety and beauty of English folk music and to the high challenge and promise involved in its discovery and analysis.⁵ In fact, however, surviving autograph manuscripts dispute Grainger's attribution and push back

his interest in traditional music to at least 1898, when he was sixteen years old. In that year he sketched the first of a series of settings of *Old English Popular Music*, "Willow, Willow" from Augener's *Minstrelsy of England*; set "Thora von Rimol," a song from *The Saga of King Olaf*; and composed a sailor's chanty, *The Secret of the Sea*, on a text by Conan Doyle.⁶ In 1900 came fourteen settings from the *Scottish Songs of the North*; in the following year, sketches for the *Scotch Strathspey and Reel* and for the Swedish folk tune *A Song of Vermland*; in 1902, his first version of the *Irish Tune from County Derry*⁷ and still more Scottish songs; and in January 1905, the earliest settings of tunes found in a printed anthology of Faeroe Island folksongs.

Grainger's faulty memory concerning Miss Broadwood, however, was not without cause; for she was instrumental in introducing him to the authentic experience of collecting (rather than merely setting) folksong, as well as to the work of a wide circle of musicians and scholars who were bringing their enthusiasm and professional knowledge to bear on the task. Grainger joined the Folk-Song Society, and his exposure to the ideas, discussions, and techniques of its members was to prove decisive. Early in April 1905 he traveled with his new colleagues to the town of Brigg and embarked on what was to become one of the monuments of English ethnological research, his collection of Lincolnshire folk music. The difference between the scrupulous transcriptions of the Brigg songs that he published in the Society's *Journal* on the one hand, and the earlier, rather homogenized Scottish settings on the other, gives eloquent testimony to the impact of his encounter with Miss Broadwood.⁸

The mixed blessings garnered from interviews are evident in a three-part series on Grainger published in *The New Yorker* early in 1948 and quoted all too often since.⁹ Rich insights and interesting statements abound, but at the same time we struggle with Grainger's blithe spirit. He dismisses his father as "an interesting fellow, although a confirmed drunkard," an incredible statement in view of the crucial and far-reaching influence of the man's character, behavior, and marital relationship on his son's personal life. The interviewer embraces the flippant tone of his subject. In writing of Grainger's distaste for the piano ("For what possible reason should we be limited to what we can hit with ten fingers?"), he regales us with the information that the composer "wrote a number that requires the player to lean over and use his nose now and then, but playing it is strenuous, and even dangerous, and it hasn't gone very well." No words obscure more effectively the spirit of a man who questioned the dominance of the piano in concert life and spent years devising mechanical and keyed alternatives to it, but who also played the instrument supremely well, taught it, and wrote about its technical challenges.¹⁰

Unlike the interviews, Grainger's published writings are invariably serious and rewarding. Even the minor articles—his contribution to the Carl Engel *Festschrift*,¹¹ his early reminiscences of great musicians "with whom I have had the privilege of coming in contact,"¹² his "Appreciation" of Strauss,¹³

and his brief late essay on Grieg,¹⁴ as well as the forewords to his compositions and editions—reveal something of his restless, probing mind.

Among the major writings, one with the delightful mouthful of a title “The Culturizing Possibilities of the Instrumentally Supplemented *A Cappella* Choir” gives evidence of Grainger’s broad historical knowledge of performance practice and of the professional experience, wide reading, and exquisite taste that he brought to the subject.¹⁵ The craggy integrity with which he argued here against contemporary concert life remains as striking today as it must have seemed thirty years ago. In “The Impress of Personality in Unwritten Music,” Grainger ranged from primitive music to modern, displaying a remarkable familiarity with non-Western music, descriptive sources, and ethnographic materials, as well as a keen sensitivity to the tribal concept of personal ownership of songs and dances.¹⁶ In this essay he tentatively explored many ideas that were to find partial fruition in the *Free Music*. Furthermore, he so thoroughly assimilated his insights into the music of one particular people, the Rarotongans in the South Seas, that he used their music as the model for one of his most striking works, *Random Round* (1912–14).

The most remarkable article published by Grainger was his earliest, written at the age of twenty-six. “Collecting with the Phonograph” consists of a long introduction on his recording and transcribing techniques and his insights into folksong and singers, followed by his transcription of twenty-seven songs and their variants, as well as copious notes appended to each.¹⁷ Grainger had followed up his first trip to Brigg with collecting expeditions to Sutherland and Sussex in the autumn of 1905. He returned to Brigg with Miss Broadwood and other collectors in 1906 and there transcribed his first major collection of songs. Enthralled by the characters he met and at the same time disappointed by the inadequacies of traditional transcribing techniques, he came alone to Brigg at the end of July with a new-fangled wax cylinder phonograph. The article documents his experiences during these two trips and during a third Lincolnshire sojourn and a trip to Dartmouth in 1908. Grainger’s life-long fascination with machines was already in evidence in his discussion of their advantages and drawbacks. He envisioned a mechanical device

that would record on paper (as the phonograph does on wax) all sounds played or sung into it, giving the number of vibrations of each note, precise rhythmic durations of notes (by accurately proportioned line lengths—much like the slits in pianola music) and pauses, dynamics, vowel-sounds and blends.¹⁸

Still, he used the primitive machine at his disposal to throw light on the pitch and key of performance, interval relationships, and scale variants; on fluctuations of tempo, lengths of rests, and precise degrees of rhythmic irregularity; on dynamic details, melodic variations, and the articulation of notes; on dialects, vowel-sounds, nonsense syllables, and details of note-

to-syllable allotment; and on the component notes of what he called “twiddles and ornaments.” Such minute attention to details flowed from a desire to document the singer and his idiosyncrasies along with the song. Grainger noted that each singer considered the songs that he performed his own property and could not help but mold it to reflect his own character¹⁹; therefore Grainger would record several versions of each song and also note the variants and even the bantering asides of the singer.

H. G. Wells, after traveling with Grainger in Gloucestershire in 1909, remarked that he tried to record not their songs but their life.²⁰ It is no wonder, then, that Grainger’s printed transcriptions are so much more complex and fascinating than the others found in the early volumes of the *Society Journal*, or that in his later settings of many of these songs he favored those versions that were most irregular and characteristic of the singer. This article is the most impressive testament of his scrupulous editorial work. Its advocacy of the phonograph provoked a strong reaction within the Society, and a brief was prepared in reply. Yet, his essay changed the course of English ethnomusicological method and technique.

The research for this article proved decisive, too, in Grainger’s creative life. The melodic quality of much of his original music seems to breathe the folk idiom in its directness, its irregular rhythm and phrasing, its underlying simplicity and tunefulness. The folk influence may also help to account for his reluctance to attempt to develop and sustain large formal musical structures. One wonders what it was that so attracted and held Grainger to the scope of folk music. Although several of his contemporaries shared his love of folksong, they were not so charged by it in their creative life. Part of the answer may lie in the patterns of his life: he left a broken home at the age of twelve to live first in an alien German society and then in London; he did not settle permanently until he was in his thirties, and even then a year rarely passed without his crossing the Atlantic or Pacific. Grainger was a restless and unrooted spirit. Folksong, on the other hand, has everything to do with roots, with the land and its memories. His trips through Britain and Scandinavia were veritable searches for human and musical roots. And so in his later settings he took care to note the date, singer, and place of the original song, printed the melody and often its variants, and only then went on to decorate it with superb craft, taste, and invention, yet with utter integrity and faithfulness to the singer and his song. Grainger’s British and Danish folksong cycles are treasures of 20th-century music, the neglected monuments of a cherishable composer.

* * * * *

Of the voluminous bibliography of secondary material concerning Grainger and published during his lifetime, the extended treatments can be counted on the fingers of one hand: Richard Franko Goldman’s article in *The Juilliard Review*²¹; Charles Hughes’s in *The Musical Quarterly*²²; D. C. Parker’s genial study, *Percy Grainger*²³; and Cyril Scott’s essay in an early issue of *The Musical Quarterly*.²⁴ Scott was uncommonly perceptive. He alone,

recognizing the decisive impact of Kipling on the young composer, correctly attributed to it the first fruits of Grainger's idiom. He noted a certain sentimentality in Grainger's character which permeated his melodies and drew him back to old sketches and "often, things of no apparent value"—an accurate assessment of Grainger's collecting mania which the passing of time and the evidence in the composer's home in White Plains have reinforced. Scott understood Grainger's "vulgarity" as expressions of strength, natural being, and refusal to pose. The simple works, he observed, were not written to please the public; rather, they were expressions of a "certain obvious simple part of his childlike nature." Finally, Scott perceived sharply that Grainger "is not an evolving artist, but one who branches out more than actually grows." The different idioms and techniques in his music were thus a function of mood, not of growing maturity. Scott awaited the day when Grainger would complete the more serious sketches, the *Bush Music* and *Train Music* among them, for these were "the beginnings of what promise to be very great works."²⁵ Grainger never did.

Aside from these major writings there remains a great deal of secondary material, ranging widely in utility and literacy, published on Grainger during his lifetime and since. Much of it is hidden away in articles and books of a general nature and in newspaper reports and articles. The sum total of these published resources pales, however, beside the enormous amount of manuscript material available for study. Although this material is scattered throughout Europe, America, and Australia, and some is not easily accessible (Grainger's letters to Grieg, for instance, are found in the public library of Bergen, Norway), the bulk lies in three repositories: the Grainger Museum in Melbourne, the composer's home in White Plains, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The Grainger Collection at the Library of Congress alone possesses a considerable number of music manuscripts and sketchbooks; the entire collection of Grainger's British folksong wax cylinder recordings and his other folk and ethnic recordings from Scandinavia to New Zealand; recordings that document his own performances and music; thirty cartons of letters in alphabetical order of the correspondents; other letters still unordered; two large files of letters from his friend Karen Holten and photostats of over 600 letters to her (most of them in Danish); some twenty-five cartons with diaries and sketchbooks, academic records, drafts of articles, postcards, calling cards, newspaper and magazine clippings, tax records, royalty statements and other financial documents; and three unpublished autobiographical studies. The first of these studies, a series of sketches for a work with the revealing title *The Life of my Mother and her Son*, was the issue of a profound need to purge his grief at Rose Grainger's suicide. Seventy-five pages long, it was begun in August 1922 as a passionate diary and slowly evolved into a commonplace book containing copies of her letters, cards and inscriptions, miscellaneous expense accounts, and various factual and reminiscing entries. This outpouring was abandoned after ten years; it was replaced by a far larger and

more detached study, *The Aldridge-Grainger-Ström Saga*, written during the fall and winter of 1933 while Grainger was on the high seas with his wife and friends.²⁶ Containing probably close to a half-million words cramped into some 230 large pages, it is an invaluable document, discursive, rambling, intensely personal, perceptive, comprehensive—in short, a basic tool for a study and understanding of the man's life. The third document, an eighteen-page typescript written in January 1947 and entitled *Bird's-Eye View of the Together-Life of Rose Grainger and Percy Grainger*, retraces the ground of the first essay, this time in a more orderly and detached fashion.

The other major repositories of Graingeriana are the British Museum, the National Libraries of Ireland and Scotland, the New York Public Library, the Royal Library in Copenhagen, and the libraries at the University of Rochester (New York) and Upsala College (New Jersey). Given this dispersion of materials, Grainger scholars can be thankful for the duplication of some of the major documents: the autobiographical studies at the Library of Congress just cited, for example, are copies of the Grainger Museum originals, while the British Institute of Recorded Sound (London) has copies of the Grainger wax cylinder collection at the Library of Congress. Furthermore, the British Museum, the New York Public Library, and the University of Rochester have published bibliographies of their music manuscript holdings, and there is an incomplete published list of music in the Library of Congress.²⁷ Also at our disposal, of course, are the printed card catalogues of the British Museum, the Library of Congress, and the New York Public Library. But that is all. To my knowledge, no *complete* catalogue, published or in manuscript, exists of any of the major collections aside from the British Museum, or of any of the minor collections aside from the two mentioned above. As a result, we are on our own, for the most part, in an impenetrable jungle of materials. Especially lamentable is the lack of scholarly and bibliographical communications from the Grainger Museum and from the Grainger Library Society at White Plains. (One would like to know, to choose a random example, which repositories besides the British Museum have copies of the rare little volume of *Photos of Rose Grainger, and of 3 Short Accounts of her Life by Herself . . .*, privately printed and circulated by Grainger after her death—a most valuable source of information for his early years.)

The task of absorbing, assessing, and balancing the collection of materials on Grainger, and then piecing together a rounded study of the man, is staggering. It could be most fruitfully explored in its early stages through bibliographical studies and guides and through scholarly essays on specific areas of his life and work. Furthermore, because of the wide scattering of materials, it will have to be a communal effort, one whose contours are just now beginning to achieve some definition in the fine work of a small number of Australian and English scholars. From Grainger's homeland have come recently a lucid and penetrating summary examination by Roger Covell²⁸ and a fine historical essay on the *Free Music* by Ivor Dorum,²⁹

while from England we now have a sturdy edition of a score of Lincolnshire folksongs by Patrick O'Shaughnessy³⁰ and a trenchant musical appreciation by Ates Orga.³¹ Dissertations dealing with the wind music and the *Free Music* have been written during the past few years in the United States; one of these will be discussed in the second part of this bibliographical essay, to appear in the next issue of this journal.

NOTES

- ¹ Available now on Mercury Wing SRW 18060.
- ² "The Culturizing Possibilities of the Instrumentally Supplemented *A Cappella* Choir," *The Musical Quarterly* 28 (1942): 165.
- ³ Vanguard VRS 1098.
- ⁴ Robert Lewis Taylor, "Profiles: Musician," *The New Yorker*, 14 February 1948, p. 33.
- ⁵ *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 31 (1904-05): 89-109.
- ⁶ White Plains, New York, Grainger Library Society MSS.
- ⁷ Grainger found the tune in *The Petrie Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, ed. George Petrie (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1855-82).
- ⁸ The Brigg songs are found in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 2 (1905-06): 79-81; the Scottish settings, in the Grainger Library Society MSS.
- ⁹ Taylor, "Profiles," 31 January 1948, pp. 29-37; 7 February 1948, pp. 32-39; 14 February 1948, pp. 32-43.
- ¹⁰ "Reaching Your Goal at the Keyboard," *The Etude* 59 (1941): 79-80, 134.
- ¹¹ "The Specialist and the All-Round Man," *A Birthday Tribute to Carl Engel* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1943), pp. 115-19.
- ¹² "Glimpses of Genius," *The Etude* 39 (1921): 631-32, 707-08.
- ¹³ Henry Finck, *Richard Strauss, the Man and His Works* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1917), pp. xvii-xxv.
- ¹⁴ "Edvard Grieg: A Tribute," *The Musical Times* 98 (1957): 482-83.
- ¹⁵ *The Musical Quarterly* 28 (1942): 160-73.
- ¹⁶ *The Musical Quarterly* 1 (1915): 416-35.
- ¹⁷ *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 3 (1908-09): 147-242.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ¹⁹ Recognizing this fact, Grainger insisted on sending royalties to those surviving singers whose songs he had used in published arrangements.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Grainger, *The Musical Quarterly* 1 (1915): 420.
- ²¹ "Percy Grainger's 'Free Music,'" *The Juilliard Review* 2 (Fall 1955): 37-47.
- ²² "Percy Grainger, Cosmopolitan Composer," *The Musical Quarterly* 23 (1937): 127-36.
- ²³ New York: G. Schirmer, 1918.
- ²⁴ "Percy Grainger: The Music and the Man," *The Musical Quarterly* 2 (1916): 426-27.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 432, 427, and 428, respectively.
- ²⁶ Aldridge was his mother's maiden name; Ström, his wife's.
- ²⁷ Pamela J. Willetts, "An Autograph Manuscript of Percy Grainger," *The British Museum Quarterly* 25 (1962): 18-19, and "The Percy Grainger Collection," *The British Museum Quarterly* 27 (1963-64): 65-71; Philip L. Miller, "Percy Grainger Gift," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 66 (1962): 415-16; Ruth Watanabe, "The Percy Grainger Manuscripts," *The University of Rochester Library Bulletin* 19 (1963-64): 21-26; Edward Waters, "Music," *The Library of Congress Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions* 20 (1962-63): 35-37.
- ²⁸ *Australia's Music* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967), pp. 88-103.
- ²⁹ "Grainger's 'Free Music,'" *Studies in Music* 2 (1968): 86-97.
- ³⁰ *Twenty-One Lincolnshire Folk-Songs from the MS. Collection of Percy Grainger* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).
- ³¹ "Percy Grainger 1882-1961," *Music and Musicians* 18 (March 1970): 28-32, 34, 36, 38-40, 70.