Grainger The Modernist - A Review

Suzanne Robinson, teacher of Australian music history at the University of Melbourne, and Kay Dreyfus, former curator of the Grainger Museum and recipient of the International Percy Grainger Medal (1988), have compiled a fascinating book of essays that trace the unique contributions of Percy Grainger to the history of music under the title, ***Grainger The Modernist.*** After reading this book, few could disagree with them that Grainger's complaint in 1944 (see Grainger, 'English-Speaking Leadership in Tone-Art') was a justifiable one: that despite his being "way ahead of all my time-mates, in any land, in experimentalism and go-aheadness...my name is never mentioned in any book dealing with modern music**."** One hopes that this book, published over 70 years later, will remedy that neglect.

Sarah Collins and Simon Perry suggest in Chapter 2 that Grainger's modernism may be seen as "a critique (rather than an embodiment) of the predominant historiographical conception of modernism itself." The point is that composers like Grainger who didn't discard tonality or who treasured melody, harmony, counterpoint, non-traditional instruments and novel sources of inspiration had a different notion of 'modernism' from those who set out to "emancipate dissonance" (Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, for example) and who came to define 'modernism, itself, for succeeding generations. Much of the rest of the book sets out to demonstrate this assertion in aspects of Grainger's performances, compositions and teaching.

As a touring pianist Grainger was among the first to introduce audiences to the music of Debussy, Ravel, Albeniz and Granados, music that was "modern" in the early years of the 20th Century. When Gershwin's music charmed America, Grainger not only performed the Concerto in F, but wrote and performed transcriptions of Gershwin songs as encores. Grainger's *'Porgy & Bess' Fantasy for 2 pianos* appeared soon after the opera had been heard in New York to little critical acclaim. His enormously difficult piano piece, "Cakewalk Smasher", followed upon his hearing the Black minstrel, "In Dahomey". Grainger's interest in ethnic and primitive cultures, as well as American jazz, are detailed in several chapters of this book. One would love to know how Grainger would have reacted to the proliferation of western 'pop' culture among peoples whose music he tried so hard to bring to our attention or how he would account for the embracement of western European music in countries like China, Japan and South Korea at the expense of their own indigenous music.

Most Grainger enthusiasts came to know Grainger first through his remarkable settings of English, Danish and American folk songs. They truly occupy a unique body of 'modern' music, in many cases moving harmonically and contrapuntally far from their original sources. One would have to go back to Bach's treatment of Protestant chorales to find anything comparable to the richness of harmony and counterpoint in his setting of *The Sussex Mummers' Christmas Carol*. In his two piano version of *Spoon River* Grainger creates a cacophonous volume of chords in one piano that almost obliterates the folk song in the other in much the same way that Lukas Foss, many years later, camouflaged his 'borrowed' Baroque material in his *Baroque Variations*. Perhaps the most significant and recognized contribution that Grainger made to any body of music was to that for concert band, as detailed in Chapter 13. Perhaps no other composer has left such a great body of work for this ensemble, as Phillip Allen Correll vividly recounts, and at a time when Grainger's fame elsewhere was waning. It is no accident that President Bill Clinton, an erstwhile saxophonist, singled out *Lincolnshire Posy* as his favorite piece of music in a newspaper interview.

Probably new to most readers are the detailed accounts of Grainger's efforts to broaden public awareness of music that he championed. During a course that he taught at New York University in the 1930's, he presented what must have been one of the first courses at any university in ethno-musicology. After giving students the names of "the three greatest composers who ever lived: J.S. Bach, Delius and Duke Ellington", Grainger added that Bach was dead and Delius, too ill to be present, before introducing Ellington to the class in person. In Chapter 12, Peter Schimpf quotes Suzanne Robinson's remarks elsewhere that "the combined efforts of Grainger and Henry Cowell in 1933-40 represent the frontiers of indeterminacy, electronic music, microtonal music, extended instrumental techniques, graphic scoring, mobile form and transculturalism." During his historic tour of Australasia in 1934-35, which included interviews, piano recitals and, most notably, chamber music concerts in Brisbane, Grainger promoted much early English music, as well as music of many contemporary English composers largely unknown outside of their native country.

A long, final chapter, with many illustrations, provides information about Grainger's Free Music Machines, including the Kangaroo Pouch, linking his various experiments on many topics, including micro intervals and sliding tones, to what is being done by synthesizers today. As Andrew Hugill avows at the very beginning of his Chapter 14, A Pioneer of Electronic Music: "From the vantage-point of today's era of hardware-hacking and circuit-bending, of infra-instruments

and dirty electronics, the case for Percy Grainger as a pioneer of electronic music is easy to make."

Many passages in this book include puzzling comments by Grainger on his own and other people's music, none more so than his claim that music written between 1750 and 1900 is "pretentious and platitudinous"? He sometimes describes as sad or morose his own music that listeners find unabashedly energetic and cheerful. "The worth of my music will never be guessed, or its value to mankind felt, until the approach to my music is consciously understood as a 'pilgrimage to sorrow'." One can probably never get inside Grainger's mind sufficiently to understand such statements or beliefs and not just about music: why he associated sadism and masochism with sexual gratification; why he tried to expunge Latin roots from the English language or why he associated blue eyes with a measure of value and trustworthiness. Fortunately, we don't have to in order to enjoy the music of this modern genius, as this fascinating book makes abundantly clear.

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