Object of desire: Portraits of Percy Grainger from his London period
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This article looks at five portraits of Percy Grainger from his London period (1901-14), the ‘London portraits’: one by Rupert Bunny, one by Jacques-Emile Blanche, one by John Singer Sargent and two by Adolph de Meyer. Two are paintings, two are photographs and one is a drawing. Despite the differences in media and technique, they are a particularly interesting group of portraits that warrant comparison, as they represent Grainger during the seminal phase of his career and they all arose from similar circumstances. These portraits reflect the formative nature of Grainger’s London years, projecting images that are variously ambiguous and idealising, illustrating both the complex social position Grainger assumed as feted performer for London’s upper classes, and the construction of his public profile as a virtuoso pianist. Further, all the artists of the London portraits were of either confirmed or suspected homosexual orientation, a significant factor in their interest in Grainger as a subject, and an important influence on the way they each represented him.

In 1901, the year that King Edward VII took the English throne, a talented young musician from Australia, Percy Grainger, together with his mother Rose, moved to London. There, at the age of 19, Grainger began his professional career as a concert pianist, in what was then the largest city in the world—home to artists, musicians and writers from all over Britain and Ireland, America, Australasia and Europe. Although Grainger ‘hated & loathed the pomp-world’ of London’s high society, in order to survive and support his mother he had to thrive in its elite environs. Soon enough, he was playing the part of the celebrity virtuoso—the society pianist—to perfection. But Grainger felt conflicted about his life as a performer, as John Bird has stated: ‘Though at times he gave the impression of being enraptured with concert life, many factors contributed to a rapid disillusionment with his chosen career and instrument’.2

Despite Grainger’s often harsh assessments of them, in many ways his London years were his halcyon days. They were highly significant artistically and personally as well as professionally, for they would bring Grainger into contact with many of the people and influences that would shape the rest of his creative life. He was fortunate to be admitted into a very tight-knit and exclusive society; as David Pear has highlighted, ‘Chelsea, in London, was a
small world! Everyone seems to either have been related to, known, made love to, painted, sung to, or composed for, everyone else’. Grainger’s success in establishing his reputation as a pianist in Edwardian London owed a great deal to the support of several well-placed acquaintances.

Operatic soprano Nellie Melba was Australia’s supreme musical celebrity in London, and one of Grainger’s most influential supporters. It was thanks largely to Melba’s recommendations that Grainger quickly became ensconced in London’s At Home, or private recital, circuit. It was also through Melba that Grainger would soon make the acquaintance of the expatriate Australian artist and fellow Melburnian, the painter Rupert Charles Wulsten Bunny.

Before long, Grainger had established several other strategic alliances. He found a friend and patron in the celebrated American society portrait painter John Singer Sargent, and was taken as a lover by another of his chief patrons, the influential socialite Lilith Lowrey, who was 20 years his senior. Mrs Lowrey subsequently introduced him to Queen Alexandra, whose patronage was the ultimate seal of approval, but Grainger made another, more significant acquaintance through Mrs Lowrey: that of the French portrait painter Jacques-Emile Blanche. It was probably Blanche who would soon introduce Grainger to the society photographer Baron Adolph de Meyer.

De Meyer, Blanche, Sargent and Bunny would all come to produce portraits of Grainger during the first decade of his time in London, a phase that would last until the outbreak of war. These ‘London portraits’ are the subject of this article.

Anne-Marie Forbes has suggested that from about 1910, Grainger ‘rapidly matured as both an artist and musician’, before reaching his professional peak in the early years of his career in New York. I contend that the London portraits reflect the formative nature of Grainger’s London years, projecting images that are variously ambiguous and idealising, reflecting both the complex social position Grainger assumed as feted performer for London’s aristocratic, upper and upper-middle classes, and the construction of his public profile as a virtuoso pianist.

Whilst recognising that Grainger formed strong friendships with the artists who produced the London portraits—friendships based on a mutual interest in art and music—I point out that all these artists were of either confirmed or suspected homosexual orientation, and suggest that this was a significant factor in their interest in Grainger as a subject, and an important influence on the way they each represented him, contributing to and amplifying both the ambiguous and the idealising qualities of their respective depictions of the young musician.
The Bunny portrait

Although he had dabbled in portraiture early in his career, Melbourne-born artist Rupert Bunny (1864–1947), who spent most of his life in Paris, painted the bulk of his portraits during his two-year stay in London from 1902 to 1904, in the heyday of the Edwardian portrait. Many of his subjects were Australian expatriates, especially musicians, such as soprano Nellie Melba and contralto Ada Crossley. Bunny was an accomplished pianist, who is said to have sung baritone in Grainger’s youthful compositions, which were aired in the privacy of the Grainger apartment during the early London years.

Bunny painted two oil portraits of Grainger. The first is a relatively small bust, completed in c. 1902. The larger portrait (often dated c. 1902–04 or c. 1903) was probably completed in 1904, as Rose Grainger’s diary entry for 21 July that year states: ‘Percy sat for Bunny, who is again painting his portrait’. Although smaller in scale, the earlier work is a more formal and less interesting depiction of its subject than the later and larger portrait. The latter is a more detailed and suggestive image, and will be the subject of the following description and analysis.

Bunny’s 1904 portrait of Grainger is consistent with the majority of the artist’s portraits, in its concern with surface appearance, seemingly supporting Deborah Edwards’ view that ‘Bunny’s psychological engagement with his subject is constantly minimal’. Whilst the painting may appear superficial, Christopher Allen has claimed that Bunny’s ‘fine portrait of Percy Grainger ... is the image of a complex human being’. It is indisputable that Grainger was a complex human being; I argue that Bunny’s painting of him is correspondingly a complex and enigmatic portrait.

Bunny presents Grainger in a mode that is simultaneously formal and relaxed. Thus it is possible for Brian Allison to characterise the painting as a formal ‘society portrait’, while Michelle Bonollo suggests that it has the ‘informality of a character sketch’. Grainger is shown from the knees, seated at a slight angle to the picture plane, with his face turned squarely to the front. He leans casually to one side, a sheet of music dangling from one hand.

Grainger wears an impeccable, grey, three-piece suit, with a gold watch chain, white shirt, gold cufflinks and blue tie. The details and folds in his apparel are beautifully rendered, demonstrating Bunny’s characteristic attention to visual detail. Light hits the subject’s forehead and well-groomed hair, while his strong brow casts a deep shadow over his eyes. His lips are a luscious red and his cheeks are rosy; his hands too are conspicuously pink. The blue tie is perhaps a deliberate attempt to compensate for the shadow’s obscuring of Grainger’s eye-colour. The greys of Grainger’s suit and the undifferentiated grey background give the portrait a tonal quality, consistent with the prevailing artistic fashion as well as Bunny’s style at this time.
Figure 1: Rupert Charles Wulsten Bunny, *Percy Grainger*, c. 1904, oil on canvas, 99.2 x 83.6 cm. Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne

The Blanche portrait
Anglophile French artist Jacques-Émile Blanche (1861–1942) was a prolific portrait painter, ‘a sort of French Sargent’.16 His subjects included many of the key figures of the art, music and literary worlds of France and England at the turn of the 20th century, including musicians Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc and
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Stravinsky. According to Darius Milhaud, who was among Blanche’s musician subjects, ‘everybody that was somebody had his or her portrait done there’.17

Grainger met Blanche in 1902, while accompanying Mrs Lowrey on a visit to Dieppe, where the artist held court for half the year, hosting socialites and sharing his studio with artist friends including Degas, Whistler, Beardsley, Sickert and Sargent. With the end of the Napoleonic wars in the 1840s, Dieppe, on the Normandy coast, became a popular destination for artists from London as well as Paris, and by the turn of the century, the town was a flourishing artists’ colony, frequented by writers, painters, musicians and composers from both sides of the channel.

Blanche and Grainger formed a friendship, and in the summer of 1906, four years after their first meeting,18 Blanche painted Grainger’s portrait in his London studio, during the artist’s annual pilgrimage to the English capital for ‘the season’. A former pupil of French composer Charles Gounod, Blanche was a keen and talented amateur pianist, with a deep and discerning interest in music and a particularly perceptive and critical appreciation of Grainger’s compositions.

Blanche’s large oil portrait of Grainger is typical of the artist’s portrait style, which combined naturalistic and decorative approaches.19 It is a half-length seated portrait with the subject compressed against the frontal plane; though he is positioned at a sharp angle, Grainger’s torso is rendered with a flatness characteristic of the decorative style of the period.

Like the Bunny, the Blanche portrait features a tonal palette composed primarily of greys and browns, with subtle variation between the different layers of Grainger’s clothing and the murky background, reflecting the artist’s concern with colour harmony. These tones contrast with Grainger’s deep blue eyes and rich red lips, the latter also enhanced by the dark red of his tie. His face and hair are illuminated against the general darkness of the canvas.

Grainger is smartly dressed in a suit jacket, waistcoat, shirt and tie, but in contrast to the fine application of paint on his face, his body—particularly his hands and arms—is roughly painted and distorted. This effect occurs elsewhere in Blanche’s work, such as in his portraits of Maurice Ravel and Jean Cocteau. It was probably intended to suggest animation; as Gabriel Weisberg has pointed out, Blanche often sought to capture his sitters in a ‘lively attitude’, inspired by Manet’s dynamic and fluid approach to paint and subject.20
Figure 2: Jacques-Emile Blanche, *Percy Grainger*, 1906, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 73.7 cm. Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne
The de Meyer portraits

Edwardian times were marked by an unprecedented profusion of visual imagery, from illustrated periodicals to advertisements, to postcards, to the birth of film. It was also a time when, as Bonollo has stated, ‘self-promotion, projecting the right image and maintaining influential connections, were the necessary marks of success’.21 Hence Allison has highlighted that ‘the photograph—specifically the sophisticated studio portrait—was currency within an intricate game of social positioning’.22 The society photographs of Adolph de Meyer exemplify the Edwardian chic, the heady atmosphere that suffused London’s leisure class, of ‘capitalism fecundated by aestheticism’.23

Although his background is murky (sources variously cite German, French and Scottish origins), Adolph de Meyer (1868–1949) came to epitomise the Edwardian gentleman when he moved to London and married Olga Caracciolo, who was reputed to be the illegitimate daughter of King Edward VII. It was through his marriage that de Meyer acquired his title and became the unofficial photographer of the royal family.24 In Who’s Who for 1905 de Meyer lists music, painting and lastly photography as his ‘recreations’.25

De Meyer photographed, in addition to society figures, artists and performers including Melba and the star of the Russian Ballet, Vaslav Nijinsky. De Meyer probably met Grainger in 1902 or 1903. He was a regular visitor to the Graingers’ London lodgings; he engaged the young pianist regularly for performances at his At Homes, took piano lessons from him, attended his concerts and showered him with praise, money and gifts.

De Meyer photographed Grainger between 1903 and 1908, producing the first publicity photographs of him. Although Grainger commissioned some promotional portraits from de Meyer, many of his photographs were not produced for explicitly commercial purposes, reflecting the friendship between the photographer and his subject and, I argue, betraying de Meyer’s strong feelings for Grainger.

The following discussion will focus on an image taken in c. 1903 (Figure 3), and another taken in c. 1906 (Figure 4), which provides a striking counterpoint to the first. The c. 1903 photograph is disarmingly candid and unaffected; its subject faces the camera squarely and gazes directly out from the sharply focused and closely cropped image.

By contrast, the c. 1906 photograph presents an artfully constructed image of celebrity. Grainger is transformed. He is depicted in a dramatic, assertive pose, his torso sharply angled and tilted forward, his arms firmly folded across his chest, and his face fully turned towards the front and inclined steeply forward. His head and torso are compressed against the picture plane, heightening the aesthetic as well as the emotional effect of the image.

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diagonals of his shoulder and folded arms create strong lines, which enhance the dynamism of the image.

**Figure 3:** Adolf Edward Sigismund de Meyer, *Percy Grainger*, c. 1903, platinum print mounted on paper, 25.5 x 14.0 cm. Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne
Not only is the pose in the c. 1906 portrait overtly contrived, but the print is also highly produced, utilising the effect of ‘etherealisation’, or the softening of edges around a sharp centre field, to enhance the sense of mystique, exemplifying de Meyer’s skilful grasp of the popular pictorialist techniques of negative manipulation. This effect is combined with dramatic back-lighting, a distinctive feature of the photographer’s style; the light catches in Grainger’s tousled golden hair, which is a distinctly more brilliant shade of pale than in the c. 1903 photograph.26

Figure 4: Adolf Edward Sigismund de Meyer, Percy Grainger, c. 1906, platinum print mounted on paper, photograph 23.0 x 16.0 cm. Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne
The Sargent portrait

Society portraiture boomed in England during the first decade of the 20th century, and its leading exponent was the cosmopolitan American-born artist John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), who was based in London throughout the Edwardian period. Sargent met Grainger in about 1903, at the height of his own fame and fortune, and quickly became one of the musician’s most valued champions and patrons. He regularly invited Grainger to play at his illustrious At Homes, where he encouraged him to perform his own compositions. He also encouraged other fashionable hosts to feature Grainger in their private recital programs. This was an effective ploy, for it ensured the coveted presence of Sargent himself on these occasions.  

Sargent was a highly accomplished pianist, whom Grainger regarded as a superior interpreter of Spanish music. His love for Spanish music is conveyed in one of his most famous and brilliant paintings, El Jaleo, which catapulted Sargent to success when it was exhibited in the 1882 Paris Salon. Sargent also sought out friendships with musicians, most notably the French composer-pianist Gabriel Fauré.  

Drawing was Sargent’s metier. He was a master draftsman, a virtuoso of line and tone, who always made extensive sketches before embarking on a painting. He began producing small charcoal portraits, mostly busts and heads, in the 1890s. Despite their apparent spontaneity, Sargent’s charcoal portraits, like his paintings, were executed with great discipline and method. His sittings would take up to three hours, during which time he encouraged his subjects to walk around the room, talked to them constantly and was even known to invite their critique of his work as it progressed.  

Not only did Sargent’s modest charcoal portraits arguably show him at his best as an artist, in the ‘seizing and intensifying of essential characteristics’, as James Lomax and Richard Ormond have explained, they also commanded just as much prestige as his grand oil paintings, particularly when, in 1907, the artist attempted to retire from painting portraits altogether. Like his oils, Sargent’s charcoals featured society figures and statesmen, including King Edward VII on his deathbed in 1910, as well as artists, actors, dancers and musicians. But according to Patricia Hills, ‘among the best of these sketches were those done of his friends’. Trevor Fairbrother elaborates on this idea, asserting that, ‘If the subject interested him both personally and formally, he excelled’.  


Sargent drew several sketches of his close friend Fauré, among many others, but it is his portrait of Grainger that perhaps best exemplifies Fairbrother’s claim. As Bird has asserted, it is ‘perhaps the most remarkable

Figure 5: John Singer Sargent, *Percy Grainger*, 1908, charcoal on paper, 53.1 x 45.2 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (3319-4), gift of Percy Grainger, 1956
portrait of Grainger and the one most often associated with him as a young man’. Sargent renders the young musician’s head in sharp profile, contrasted against a deep shadow, highlighting his chiseled features. His elongated neck tapers off, exaggerating his elegant physique and noble bearing. According to Kay Dreyfus, the portrait was completed in late March or early April 1908. It was very well received by its subject, who deemed it ‘quite excellent’.

**Ambiguous images**

With the exception of the c. 1906 de Meyer photograph, all of the London portraits exalt Grainger’s natural youth and beauty, producing pronounced homoerotic overtones. These same qualities, I argue, also contribute to a disempowering effect, which can be interpreted with respect to Grainger’s role in London society, as a professional artist who was also expected to be an obliging entertainer and a charismatic conversationalist, at the beck and call of his employers. This role was determined by Grainger’s reliance on patronage.

By the early 20th century, when Grainger arrived in London, patronage was not a major factor in the lives of most musicians living in the city; commercial concert life had been established there since the 1860s, but this was dominated by orchestral music. Continuing the Victorian custom, solo recitals typically remained private affairs, hosted by the well-to-do, who favoured visiting virtuosi and celebrity musicians.

As I have explained, with the help of his connections, Grainger was admitted into this exclusive ‘pomp-world’. With his fresh, irreverent flair and showmanship, the young Australian captured and sustained the attentions of London’s high society, whose patronage was critical to the establishment of his career in the English capital. But as Pear has pointed out, ‘He appears to have been seen as more of a casual amusement than a genuine member of their social milieu’.

The power dynamics at play in this situation—manifested most explicitly in Grainger’s affair with Mrs Lowrey—are emphatically invoked by the ambiguity of de Meyer’s c. 1903 photograph and the Bunny and Blanche portraits. The c. 1903 de Meyer photograph and the Blanche painting have an arresting intimacy and inscrutability, the forlornness and vulnerability in Grainger’s eyes suggesting a contradictory mix of naivety and loss of innocence.

The raw quality of the c. 1903 de Meyer photograph makes it possibly the most homoerotic of all the London portraits. The young Grainger emanates fragile, youthful masculinity, from behind a strange, disconcerting smock. In fact it is the same smock that de Meyer was pictured wearing in a photograph taken the same year by the eminent photographer Gertrude Käsebier (Figure 6).
Figure 6: Gertrude Käsebier, *Baron Adolph de Meyer*, c. 1903, silver gelatin print inscribed on mount in ink by de Meyer; 27.5 x 19.3 cm. Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne
By projecting himself onto Grainger—flirting with being the young artist, adored by society and himself in particular, and at the same time casting Grainger in his role, as society royalty—de Meyer not only betrays his deep affection for and identification with the young artist, but also highlights Grainger’s predicament as an object of society’s fascination and infatuation. Indeed, to some extent the interest shown in Grainger by his four portraitists, particularly Sargent and de Meyer who were also among his most devoted patrons, can be regarded as an extension of London society’s love affair with him in general.

In contrast with the c. 1903 de Meyer photograph, in Blanche and Bunny’s portraits Grainger is dressed to impress. Although Bunny gives as much attention to Grainger’s suit as to his face, whereas Blanche concentrates Grainger’s beauty in his face, both artists highlight the lustre of their subject’s hair, enhance the red of his lips, and place him in a passive attitude. In these ways, the artists amplify Grainger’s androgynous allure. Moreover, the doll-like face of the Blanche and the rosy cheeks of the Bunny add an infantalising dimension, reinforcing the depiction of Grainger as the object of the viewer’s desire.

The same feminising qualities that I have suggested have a disempowering effect in the Blanche and Bunny portraits also serve to align these portraits with images of virtuosity, which draw much of their potency from the sexual ambiguity they project.

The piano virtuoso of the 19th and early 20th centuries was a confusing creature who confounded the rigid gender boundaries that underscored society during this period. He (confining ourselves to the male variety) was active and powerful, yet the passionate gesticulation in which he would indulge vastly exceeded the confines of acceptable male behaviour. This transgressive appeal was often enhanced by his ambiguous appearance, usually typified by unconventionally long hair.

Portraits of the young Liszt, the archetypal virtuoso and a particular hero of Grainger’s, encode virtuosity in a calm, pensive, sometimes brooding attitude, complemented by a well-groomed and effeminate appearance. Thus the image of the virtuoso sublimates the energy and exhibitionism of the spectacular showman performer into a paradoxically restrained and aloof guise. Bunny’s characterisation of Grainger draws on this image of virtuosity, presenting him in a manner that is at once refined and serious, sensitive and authoritative, and just a little bit provocative. It closely recalls the 1832 portrait of the suave young Liszt by Achille Devéria (Figure 7).
Figure 7: Achille Devéria (artist), Charles Motte (publisher and printer), *Portrait of Franz Liszt*, published August 1832, lithograph on ivory China paper laid down with chine collé on white wove paper, 38.7 x 30.6 cm (image); 54.6 x 40.7 cm (sheet). Art Institute of Chicago, through the prior acquisition of the Mr and Mrs Potter Palmer Collection, 1991.131. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago
The ambiguity of the Bunny and Blanche portraits also manifests in the artists’ depictions of Grainger’s hands. Hands are always significant in portraits of instrumental musicians; they are the performer’s tools of trade—the agents of creation, expression, virtuosity. The presence or absence and the character and attitude of Grainger’s hands and arms are crucial components of the images projected by all the London portraits.

The prominence of the hands in both the Bunny and the Blanche portraits, in combination with the infantalising qualities of the faces, helps to project an image of Grainger as a prodigy, still reliant on his tools of trade for self-definition. Moreover in the Bunny painting the positions of Grainger’s hands, whilst appearing to reinforce his casual and slightly seductive pose, also draw attention to their usual occupation: playing the piano. One hand holds the music; the other rests on Grainger’s knee, exposing his long, strong fingers, spread as if on a keyboard.

By contrast, the absence of Grainger’s hands in the Sargent portrait, and the concealment of his hands in Grainger’s authoritatively folded arms in the c. 1906 de Meyer photograph, serve to emphasise his face, which is endowed with strength in both portraits, projecting an image of Grainger as a genius or a self-evidently heroic figure, who no longer needs to prove anything.

It is striking that in several images of piano virtuosi such as Liszt, Paderewski and Brahms, one or both hands are depicted in a pose which is at once relaxed and affected, similar to the hand from which dangles the sheet of music in Bunny’s Grainger portrait, ‘listlessly but emphatically’, as Bonollo has aptly described it. If this is the paradoxically understated hand of the virtuoso, then the more dynamic hand resting on Grainger’s knee in the Bunny portrait recalls the active hand of the prodigy. Bunny’s Grainger is thus caught somewhere between prodigy and virtuoso, as indeed the young pianist was at the time this portrait was painted.

Bunny’s portrayal of Grainger’s hands provoked a curiously violent reaction from the subject’s mother. Having seen the portrait at an exhibition at the Institute of Oil Painters in October 1904, she wrote to her son: ‘I hate your portrait—the hands look too awful—I hate it—really am sorry for Bunny’s and for your sake’. Perhaps Rose was subconsciously responding to the tensions to which I have alluded. We will never know. But it is in the Blanche portrait that the depiction of Grainger’s hands is more obviously confronting.

The distortion and abstraction of the hands and arms in Blanche’s portrait of Grainger not only serve to render them as expressive zones, but also give an impression of power and might, at odds with the vulnerable character given to their owner’s face. Grainger had a slight build, consistent with his fine face, but by exaggerating the size of his shoulders, arms and hands,
Blanche’s portrait arguably conveys the force that characterised Grainger’s performing style as well as his ideas, musical and other. At the same time, the uneasy relationship between Grainger’s facial expression and hands suggests his discomfort with his emerging career as a pianist, similar to the way in which his apparently tenuous grasp of the sheet music in Bunny’s portrait might convey ambivalence. Moreover, as Pear has suggested, Blanche’s rendering of Grainger’s hands compellingly symbolises the unformed state of his career, his image, his maturity.  

**Idealising images**

It is revealing to consider the London portraits in relation to society portraiture—that is, portraits commissioned to glorify the ruling elites—for theirs was the world that Grainger entered during his time in London. All the London portraits were created by artists who also moved in this world as producers of ‘society portraits’. Like their portraits of the aristocracy and nouveaux riches, Bunny’s, Blanche’s, Sargent’s and de Meyer’s portraits of Grainger promoted the wild young colonial boy within these exclusive milieux. By virtue of Sargent’s status and the corresponding prestige attached to his portraits, his charcoal of Grainger epitomises the strategic potential of the portrait in Edwardian times, as ‘evidence of race and the right to rule’.  

De Meyer’s social standing also lent his portraits of Grainger a certain social currency. Blanche’s and Bunny’s portraits conform to the conventions of society portraiture in both their format as large, formal oil paintings, and in their representation of Grainger in accordance with Edwardian ideals. Thus the Bunny and Blanche portraits, despite their ambiguities, also present idealising images of Grainger.

According to Paul Thompson, Edwardian identity was shaped by four things: race or nation, gender, age or generation, and class. Race was the most important of these factors for Grainger’s sense of identity, followed by gender. Age and class were less salient categories in Grainger’s view of himself and the world, yet they played an important part in his reception in Edwardian London. Whereas for most Edwardians recognition and status typically increased with age, in the business of virtuosity youth is a powerful advantage, and Grainger’s youth was central to his image in the London years.

Grainger had a zealous commitment to his own masculinity, both on and off the platform. Like Beethoven and Liszt before him, his ‘muscular pianism’ often pushed the piano to its limits, and critics frequently admired his ‘virile force’. Grainger’s physical approach to performance extended to his famous habit of walking, if not running, between engagements, earning him the nickname ‘the running pianist’. Yet as I have suggested, and the
Bunny and Blanche portraits show, Grainger’s beautiful features, enhanced by his youth and long golden hair, often disrupted these shows of masculinity. 

Race was of paramount importance to Grainger’s sense of identity, especially his belief in his own genius, which he defined as the epitome of racial perfection. The projection of race was a prime objective of Edwardian portraiture. The Blanche and Bunny portraits, with the advantage of colour, emphasise Grainger’s bright blue eyes, blonde hair and pale, rosy complexion, against the darker tones of the rest of the canvases. To Edwardian audiences these traits would have connoted not only racial, but also by extension moral, ‘purity’.48

Although he did share the prevailing sense of racial superiority, Grainger repudiated the idea of class, extolling the virtues of ‘Australian democracy’. Yet he was the knowing beneficiary of England’s notoriously class-conscious society, a situation that he claimed was a constant cause of conflict for him. The image of the society gentleman that the Blanche and Bunny portraits sought to project could not have been further from ‘the democratic, rough-and-ready image which Grainger claimed he wished his public to have of him’, according to Pear.49

The Blanche and Bunny portraits show Grainger in a kind of costume: the fashionable suits he would have worn for the At Home engagements (where he claimed he never in fact felt at home at all).50 As Bonollo has stated, the Bunny portrait is ‘both an exemplary product of its time and a reflection of the image the composer felt compelled to live up to’.51 In this way, the Bunny, and similarly the Blanche portrait, despite their ambiguity, are idealised images in the tradition of the society portrait, which present Grainger not so much as he saw himself or claimed he wished to be seen, but rather as others would have seen him.52

The Sargent and de Meyer portraits also idealise Grainger, representing him in the guises of musical genius and Pre-Raphaelite hero respectively. Whereas in de Meyer’s c. 1903 photograph, the 21-year-old Grainger is dressed up almost like a child, in the c. 1906 image he is presented as not just a confident and mature man, but as a genius. As Tia de Nora has claimed, in the late 18th century ‘the composer-as-genius was reconceived as a figure who could command unprecedented autonomy and deference’.53 In portraits of ‘genius’, the face dominates, with the eyes and hair becoming key loci for the inscription of Romantic subjectivity. As already noted, the hair is often also an important element in images of virtuosi.

From Beethoven’s wild, unkempt curls, the pre-eminent symbol of the composer’s alleged inner turmoil, to Liszt’s long, glossy mane, embodying the refined yet passionate nature that had such an intoxicating effect on women, Romantic portraits of musicians established the hair as a key site for the
articulation of individuality, creativity, inspiration, greatness—in a word, mystique. Grainger, with his exuberant golden locks, fused the untamed and inspired traits of the great Beethoven, with the paradoxical effeminacy, formidable power and sex appeal of the legendary Liszt.

In all the London portraits, Grainger’s hair takes pride of place, its bright lustre and vibrancy transmitting a message as rich in musical as in racial connotations. Whilst in the Blanche, Bunny, Sargent and particularly the c. 1903 de Meyer portrait, Grainger’s hair is voluminous yet tamed, in the c. 1906 photograph it is comparatively deranged, closely mimicking Beethoven’s hair in the famous 1819 portrait of the archetypal Romantic genius by Josef Karl Stieler (Figure 8). The back-lighting of the photograph also serves to electrify Grainger’s radiant hair, portraying it as the embodiment of his creativity. The illumination of his hair, moreover, portrays Grainger as the ‘Australian sun god’ the press was wont to call him.\textsuperscript{54}

Figure 8: Joseph Karl Stieler, \textit{Ludwig van Beethoven}, 1820, oil on canvas, 72.0 x 58.5 cm. Beethoven-Haus, Bonn
The iconography of Beethoven established not only the hair, but also the eyes, as focal points in the construction of the image of genius. In de Meyer’s c. 1906 portrait, Grainger has the unmistakable eyes of genius—the intense upward gaze of Stieler’s Beethoven. Along with this gaze and the abundant and ostentatious hair, the strong masculine brow, prominent nose and straight lips emphasised in the Stieler Beethoven are all reproduced in the c. 1906 de Meyer Grainger. By association with this popular and much-imitated image of Beethoven, this portrait of Grainger represents him as a genius. Thus, in contrast with the other London portraits, it carries a strong connotation of masculinity.

Sargent’s portrait projects an innate authority that contrasts with the contrived confidence of de Meyer’s c. 1906 photograph and gives Grainger an air of self-possession that is lacking in the Bunny and Blanche portraits. It recalls the image of handsome, heroic youth emblazoned on ancient coins and medallions, or the mythical figures of Apollo and Adonis, frequently invoked by the press in reference to Grainger. It truly captures ‘the brilliant moment in life, the moment of youth and graceful triumph … of dignity, of success’, celebrated in a 1916 description of Sargent’s charcoals.

The emphasis on the subject’s long neck and the patch of dark background shading in Sargent’s portrayal of Grainger invite comparison with his 1911 charcoal of Nijinsky (Figure 9), an icon of male beauty and a virtuoso performer who, like Liszt, embodied both power and grace. In both portraits the angle of the head and the heightened tonal relations convey a strong sense of drama, pride and, above all, idealised beauty.

Figure 9: John Singer Sargent, Vaslav Nijinsky in Le pavillon d’Armide, 1911, charcoal on paper, 61.6 x 47.3 cm. Private collection
Finally, I propose that Sargent’s portrait of Grainger draws some of its authority from identifying the young Australian with his older counterpart, the Polish celebrity pianist Ignacy Paderewski, who was famed as much for his looks as for his piano playing. Paderewski was a popular subject of portraiture, particularly among British artists of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, who celebrated what they saw as pure, uncorrupted beauty and held Paderewski to possess ‘the perfect Pre-Raphaelite head’.59 He inspired the ardour and the pencil of Edward Burne-Jones, who referred to the pianist as his ‘archangel’. Burne-Jones’ 1892 portrait drawing of Paderewski, which captures his handsome profile (Figure 10), provides a possible precedent for Sargent’s depiction of Grainger.

Figure 10: Edward Burne-Jones, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, 1892, pencil drawing on paper, 34.7 x 31.0 cm. National Museum in Warsaw
It is reasonably likely that Sargent would have been familiar with the Burne-Jones drawing because he met Paderewski when both men were among the requisite array of great artists who adorned London’s most fashionable salons, and he was also friendly with Burne-Jones. The resemblance of Sargent’s Grainger to Burne-Jones’ Paderewski reinforces the sense of natural authority that Sargent’s portrait projects, implicitly casting Grainger as the noble, heroic, Pre-Raphaelite ideal, not to mention elevating his status as a pianist by association with the recognised master.

Evidence suggests that the Sargent portrait was effective as a promotional tool. Only months after it was completed, copies had reached Australia ahead of Grainger’s second Australasian tour, and by the end of 1912 the image was apparently still in circulation in Europe. Two years later, when the Graingers moved to New York, Rose sent for the printing block of the portrait, suggesting the intention to issue reproductions in America, where the portrait may have inspired a drawing of Grainger (based directly on Burne-Jones’ portrait of Paderewski) published on the cover of *Musical America*. The effectiveness of Sargent’s portrait in the construction and propagation of Grainger’s public image at this critical early stage in his career can be partly attributed to Sargent’s fame, but also attests to the clarity and confidence of the image.

Conversely, the ambiguity of the Bunny and Blanche portraits may explain why these images appear to have been poorly received by Grainger and his mother and seem not to have fulfilled their potential as promotional tools. By contrast, de Meyer’s photographs of Grainger were widely distributed by Grainger’s publisher, agents and himself, and the c. 1906 photograph appears to have had an influence on subsequent publicity photographs of Grainger throughout his career, which recreate the ‘genius effect’, emulating the tilt of the head, the intense upward gaze and the electric hair.

From the ambiguous to the idealising, the five London portraits I have discussed are all compelling images of the young Percy Grainger that provide a revealing insight into the dynamics that shaped his seminal London years, as well as the influence of this period on the formation of his public image, along with so many aspects of his personal, professional and creative life.

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NOTES


3 Bitterness increasingly tarnished Grainger’s reflections on this period as it receded into his past, especially in his most negative autobiographical tract, ‘My wretched tone-life’, written in 1953, in which Grainger states with reference to the London period: ‘It is hard to face an audience that you hate, playing music that you hate or despise, also knowing you are unfit to play it’. (Percy Grainger, ‘My wretched tone-life’, 1953, cited in Pear, Carroll and Gillies (eds), Self-portrait of Percy Grainger, pp. 170).


5 Melba was approximately 20 years Grainger’s senior and her family had been close acquaintances of the Graingers in Melbourne when the singer was growing up.


7 Sargent was a life-long bachelor and numerous scholars have argued that he was homosexual (see particularly Trevor Fairbrother, John Singer Sargent, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). De Meyer was acknowledged to be homosexual, despite being married (Philippe Jullian, ‘De Meyer’, in Robert Brandau (ed.), De Meyer, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 13). Although both Bunny and Blanche were married, Deborah Edwards has suggested that Bunny was homosexual (Deborah Edwards (ed.), Rupert Bunny: Artist in Paris, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2009, p. 23), and Blanche’s biographer has suggested that his marriage was never consummated (Georges-Paul Collet, Jacques-Émile Blanche, le peintre-écrivain, biographie, Paris: Editions Bartillat, 2006). Although there is no real suggestion that Grainger was homosexual, many of his close male friends, in addition to these artists, were, and several older men were unquestionably enthralled by him, Grieg going so far as to declare, ‘I love him, almost like a woman … a god’. (Edvard Grieg, cited in Thomas Slattery, Percy Grainger: The inveterate innovator, Illinois: The Instrumentalist Company, 1974, p. 50).

8 Bird, Percy Grainger, p. 84.

9 Bunny dated very few of his works and left no systematic records, so his oeuvre contains many works that have not yet been conclusively dated.
Rose Grainger, Diary entry, 21 July 1904, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne. Rose’s statement also suggests that Bunny’s earlier portrait of Grainger was not in fact a sketch for the larger and later painting, as is often assumed.


The use of a restricted palette was characteristic of this particular period in Bunny’s oeuvre (David Thomas, Rupert Bunny 1864–1947, Melbourne: Lansdowne Australian Art Library, 1970, p. 40). The same colours, although in different distribution, dominate Bunny’s portraits of Melba and Crossley, who appear in white dresses with pale pink shawls, against a murky background.


Bonollo, Untitled article.


Jullian, ‘De Meyer’, pp. 14, 19. The de Meyers would become the unofficial impresarios to the other ‘royalty’ of Edwardian England, the Ballets Russes, when they brought the company out to Covent Garden in 1911. Subsequently, de Meyer would become the first fashion photographer for Vogue magazine.


Grainger maintained his dazzling blonde hair with the help of peroxide. (Bird, Percy Grainger, p. 51).
In 1926 Grainger wrote a long tribute to Sargent in which he claimed that ‘to have Sargent’s approval and support was a wonderful boon to any struggling artist; highly beneficial from a practical, mundane standpoint, and deeply comforting on purely artistic grounds’, emphasising the importance of the relationship with Sargent for Grainger’s development, both artistically and professionally. (Percy Grainger, ‘Sargent’s contribution to music’, manuscript, 6–8 May 1926, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne).

According to Grainger, Sargent also sponsored the careers of Claude Debussy, Ethel Smyth, Francis Korbay, Leon Delafosse, Charles Martin Loeffler, Isaac Albéniz and Grainger’s close friend Cyril Scott. (Grainger, ‘Sargent’s contribution to music’).


Sargent had declined the commission for the official coronation portrait in 1901.


Various sources date this portrait to anywhere between 1905 and 1910. It is often dated to ‘about 1910’ as this is the date given on the mount board on which it is usually pictured. 1908 is the date given in Dreyfus (ed.), *The farthest north of humanness*, p. 211. This date is also supported by a reference to the portrait in an article published in the *British Australasian* on 11 June 1908 (copy held in the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne).


De Meyer gave a dedicated copy of one of these photographs of himself to Grainger, supporting the suggestion that he explicitly sought to identify himself with Grainger.

Bonollo, Untitled article.

Rose Grainger, Letter to Percy Grainger, 15 October 1904 (Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne).

Grainger’s hands were in fact relatively large, like those of many famous pianists, encompassing the interval of a tenth.


46 *Morning Leader*, 2 February 1902, copy held in the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.


48 The phenomenon of Jenny Lind demonstrates the power of racial rhetoric in the reception and mythologisation of the foreign celebrity musician in 19th-century London. Although ‘the Swedish nightingale’ made her London debut more than 50 years before Grainger made his, she was perceived to embody and exalt the very same racial traits with which Grainger would identify so strongly. See George Biddlecomb, ‘The construction of a cultural icon: The case of Jenny Lind’, in Peter Horton and Bennett Zon (eds), *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, vol. 3, England and USA: Ashgate, 2003, pp. 45–61.


50 The effect recalls photographs from the period, of theatre and music hall stars who were often shown in fashionable clothing, posed in the manner of society portraits.

51 Bonollo, Untitled article, p. 232.

52 This effect contrasts with a portrait of Grainger painted by his wife, Ella, about 30 years later, entitled *Laird of art*, which shows him in the towelling clothes he made and loved, his bearing dramatically more proud and autonomous than in the Bunny and Blanche paintings. Grainger began experimenting with towelling clothes in 1910, during the London period, suggesting that his heart was a world away from the society in which he camouflaged himself so skilfully.


54 Pear, ‘Percy Grainger as “educator-at-large”’, p. 4.

55 The upward gaze is a recurring trope in representations of Beethoven, used to symbolise divine inspiration (Buettner and Pauly, *Great composers, great artists*, p. 52).

56 This resemblance is noted by Tony Palmer in ‘The accidental Wunderkammer: Decorative arts and curiosities from the Grainger Collection’, *University of Melbourne Library Journal*, vol. 8, nos. 1/2, July 2003, p. 9.
These comparisons met with much approval from Rose, whose great expectations for her son, legend has it, had compelled her to seek the company of images of Greek statues while pregnant with him.


Zamoyski, *Paderewski*, p. 56.

This is fitting, as Grainger strongly identified with the values and aesthetic of the Pre-Raphaelites.

Rose Grainger, Letter to Percy Grainger, 13 October 1908, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.


The evidence suggests that Blanche’s portrait of Grainger remained in the artist’s possession until 1939, when he offered it to Grainger for his museum in Melbourne. Rose’s reaction to Bunny’s portrait suggests that it may not have graced the walls of the Graingers’ London apartments where it might have been seen by their influential guests.

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