Book review


Reviewed by Eleanor A.L. Tan

Thirty years is a long time to wait for *The new Percy Grainger companion* to come along, and what a more timely arrival as we approach the 50th anniversary of Percy Aldridge Grainger’s death on 20 February 2011 (1882–1961). Since the earlier *Percy Grainger companion* (Lewis Foreman [ed.], London: Thames, 1981), many significant studies on Grainger have come forth. Those by Dreyfus, Balough, Dorum, Gillies, Clunies Ross, Pear, Lewis and others have been instrumental in laying the foundation for further Grainger research as they reveal the man through his letters and autobiographical writings. And so it rests on the shoulders of Penelope Thwaites and her contributors to illuminate the beaten path that many feet have travailed in search of Grainger. This latest publication on Grainger continues to exemplify the paradoxes and possibilities that are the man himself.

*The new Percy Grainger companion* is a companion, not a critical evaluation, and the authors make no pretence to offer an analytical study of Grainger’s works. The book is divided into three parts: The music, Grainger in context, and Appendices. In the first part, the authors share their practical and research experiences on Grainger and locate their understanding within the context of his extensive writings on music and performances. The second part offers a glimpse of Grainger within the social and cultural milieu of his times, from his childhood in Melbourne to his final years in New York, while the third reproduces his writings on music, ‘To conductors’ and ‘Statement on free music’, earlier published in John Bird’s *Percy Grainger* (Oxford University Press, 1999), as well as information on Grainger’s lineage. Of the 18 chapters, four are by the editor Thwaites (two of which are co-authored). Paul Jackson and Barry Peter Ould have each supplied one chapter and co-authored another, while we have single contributions from Timothy Reynish, Stephen Varcoe, Murray McLachlan, David Walker, Roger Covell, Bruce Clunies Ross, Stewart Manville, Lewis Foreman and Teresa Balough. Others contributing as co-authors include Geoffrey Simon, James Judd, James Koehne, Brian Allison, Astrid Krautschneider, Kay Dreyfus, Ronald Stevenson, Rita Boswell and Peter Sculthorpe. From this list we recognise a handful as industry experts who have performed and recorded Grainger. This is where *The new Percy
Grainger companion distinguishes itself from other publications on Grainger. The practical organisation of the first part by medium (and on specific works) enables the reader to benefit from their experiences on programming and performing Grainger.

However, the writing style in the early chapters tends to flirt from descriptive comments to suggestions on performance and onward to programming concerns. Thus, the contributions by Jackson, ‘Grainger for choirs’, and Varcoe, ‘Singing Grainger solo’, are welcomed for their sustained discussions on performing Grainger, which they help us appreciate through contextual accounts of performance practices. Thwaites’ ‘At the piano with Grainger’ is delivered in a masterclass style, with pertinent comments on characterisation and performance solutions, and supported by visually delightful score illustrations featuring Grainger’s quirky English terms.

A voluble nature is sensed through Grainger’s instructions for performance, which are always explicit and direct instead of symbolic, thus leaving less room for doubt over his intentions.

Of interest to the Grainger scholar is Ould’s ‘Putting Grainger into print’. While it reveals how his initial fascination with the music printing process turned into a lifelong dedication to the complete Grainger edition, Ould also shares with us Grainger’s creative processes through his sketches, his notational idiosyncrasies in scoring, and his evolving compositional style. Dreyfus’ captivating (and humorous) description of the Grainger Museum in 1974 (pp. 153–156) rekindles the memory of my own visit more than two decades later in 1999; though warmer and well lit, the museum still felt dank and dark. The contribution by Stewart Manville (husband to Ella Grainger from 1972 to her death in 1979) is a welcome chapter. Despite its brevity of five pages, it offers an intimate (and at times delirious) peep into the house that was Grainger’s residence in the last four decades of his life. And true to the spirit of the all-round man, the house ‘filled a multiplicity of purposes as studio, laboratory, music warehouse, business office, and certainly in providing the comfort and stability of a permanent residence’ (p. 169). One can readily imagine 7 Cromwell Place as a hive of musical and other activities when Grainger was alive.

This book provides an up-to-date catalogue of Grainger’s works as well as a select discography, with useful timings of each work listed. The discography is an extension of the earlier discography by Bird, offering both Grainger’s historical performances as well as contemporary performances of Grainger. However, those who require such information on Grainger’s historical recordings as catalogue numbers and matrices should consult Bird’s discography. Ould’s contribution of ‘CD transfers’ and ‘Performances by others’ is much appreciated as it is updated with the transfer of piano rolls to
CD and the 25-CD *Chandos Grainger edition*, a major publication from the last decade justifiably absent in Bird. Also appreciated is the ‘Catalogue of works’, particularly with its provision of the many extant versions of Grainger’s works. His *Molly on the shore*, for instance, is listed with 16 different versions available. Such information reveals not only Grainger’s practical aesthetic (baroque) but also his pedagogical intent to make his work accessible to all, whether for novice or specialist ensembles, as he believed that ‘A large amount of the best music we have in the world does not sound much better when twenty Kreislers play it than when twenty ordinary people play it.’

Grainger’s Timeline is interleaved with his own compositional life and differentiated from the Gillies/Pear chronology (Malcolm Gillies, David Pear and Mark Carroll [eds], *Self-portrait of Percy Grainger*, Oxford University Press, 2006) as it juxtaposes Grainger’s reflection on the significance of his musical development with significant life events. My preference is for the more objective Gillies/Pear chronology which is uncluttered by Grainger’s sometimes ‘debatable’ belief in his musical worth, which, in his opinion, ‘influenced Schoenberg, Stravinsky, & the whole modern movement (atonalism, irregular barrings, etc.)’, albeit through Cyril Scott’s Piano sonata (p. xx). In his chapter on ‘Music for wind band’, Reynish reiterates that Grainger’s ‘melodic and harmonic approaches predate the future innovations of Schoenberg and Debussy’ (p. 21). The Timeline also contains the unsubstantiated statement (perhaps betraying the author’s partisan stance?) that Grainger’s highly successful American debut in 1915 launched a ‘hectic performing career, continuing at its height up to, during, and immediately after the Second World War’ (p. xxi). In truth, his mother’s suicide in 1922 sapped Grainger’s will to perform, let alone live, and he did not scale the heights of his early American career, though there was a resurgence of a performing career during World War II.

Nonetheless, *The new Percy Grainger companion* has many other commendable features. The conversational tone of writing, particularly in the first section on Grainger’s music, will appeal to both new and old fans. Credible investigative work by Rita Boswell and Thwaites is evidenced in Appendix III, ‘The family trees and family groups’, with the usual details of birth and death, baptism, marriage, occupation and address provided. This section provides a scaffold for us to understand the two halves that make up the multi-faceted Grainger. *The new Percy Grainger companion* also includes informative programs of Grainger performances (Thwaites, ‘Programming Grainger’), and excellent score and picture reproductions. The scores (many of which include Grainger’s performance notes) are illustrative of his detailed attention to musical character and dynamic nuances (pp. 25, 83, 111). But credit must go to Thwaites for successfully threading a discourse on Grainger’s life, works and
performances into a coherent tapestry. The chapters, first appearing as individual strands, are soon woven into a convincing narrative of Grainger’s aesthetic. Evidently, the integral strand that permeates throughout is Grainger’s belief in the practical and educational value of music:

Many of these early pieces of music (alive as the day they were written, and performable by small solo groups of wind instruments or by larger band groups, such as the saxophone family, the clarinet family, the complete reed band, the brass band) are ideal for giving soloistic chamber-music opportunities to the more skilful band members, and for bringing tonal variety into band programmes. (Jackson and Ould, ‘Towards a universal language’, p. 77.)

In other words, ‘… if you don’t have a sarrusophone, a dulcitone, a hecklephone or a bass glockenspiel, don’t worry, just use what you do have’ (p. 11), as Simon succinctly suggests what Grainger was wont to instruct.

Dr Eleanor A.L. Tan is Deputy Head of Music at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore. She received her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees at Indiana University, Bloomington, and did further postgraduate studies at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester. Tan’s parallel interests in musicology are reflected in her PhD candidature at the University of Queensland, completed under the supervision of Malcolm Gillies, her thesis concerning Percy Grainger and the virtuoso tradition of piano performance. At present, Tan is documenting the work and life of Cultural Medallion recipient, the artist and musician Kam Kee Yong, for the National Library Board, Singapore.

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