

The All-Round Man: selected letters of Percy Grainger, 1914-1961

Malcolm Gillies and David Pear, eds.

Melbourne & London: Clarendon Press (Oxford University Press), 1994. \$55.00, pp.xxvi+301, ill, incl. chronology, biographical register of letter recipients, index

Despite Percy Grainger's crucial role in the musical life of Australia, and the enormous interest in him over the years, especially since the centenary of his birth in 1982, some doubts remain as to his importance as a musical figure. Was he an innovative genius, or merely a good but eccentric pianist? Is his music really that interesting? How does he compare with the canon of 'great' and 'not-so-great' composers (assuming one would want to make such a comparison anyway)?

The editors of the latest volume of Grainger's letters, *The All-Round Man*, have done a good deal to enhance the image of this somewhat problematic musician. In their choice of title and selection of letters from Grainger's maturity, they have emphasised a significant, possibly even central, aspect of his personality: his belief in the importance of being a 'Renaissance' man, even in an age of increasing specialisation. Through his letters, we can gain an insight into Grainger's long and varied life as a pianist, composer, arranger, conductor, ethnomusicologist, teacher, mentor, writer, lecturer, broadcaster, inventor, linguist and much else besides. In their editing of those letters, Gillies and Pear present a strong case for taking Grainger at face value and on his own terms, for liking him for himself alone, regardless of his professional achievements.

This process begins in the Introduction, which provides a commentary on the editorial procedures and a sympathetic evaluation of many aspects of Grainger's life and personality, including some of the more problematic issues such as his views on sex, race, and nationality. Gillies and Pear tackle these issues head-on, and are not afraid to allow Grainger to stand on his own, warts and all.

In the letters themselves, the editors have taken great care to maintain the original flavour of Grainger's literary style—including his errant spelling, grammar and punctuation—for the writing itself is always engaging, entertaining and appealing, even at those times

when the actual content is not especially salubrious. Somehow, one can deal better with Grainger's descriptions of his perversities, peccadilloes and bigotries much more easily because they are couched in an almost invariably good-humoured, honest and forthright manner; he did not hide the aspects of his life which many would consider unpleasant.

The necessary concession to comprehensibility, especially for readers unfamiliar with Grainger's style, is extensive footnoting which explains his idiosyncratic use of both English and other languages, including the invented 'Nordic' or 'Blue-eyed' English which increasingly pervaded his letters. It is a pity, though, that the editors could not somehow also preserve Grainger's underlining of words and use of different sizes of capital letters, which surely had some purpose, and certainly flair; perhaps this could have been managed through combinations of bolding, underlining and italicising in the printed text, as is found in the volume of Berg-Schoenberg correspondence.¹

Editorial input is also seen in the separation of letters into four sections, with the chronological divisions corresponding to significant moments in Grainger's life. The first section, 'My Adorable, Adoredest Mum', picks up where the first volume of Grainger letters, *The Farthest North of Humanness*,² left off—with Percy and his mother Rose's migration to the USA in 1914—and ends with the crisis of Rose's suicide in 1922. 'An Untamed Buffalo' covers the period up to the outbreak of World War II, while 'The All-Round Man' takes us up to the end of the 1940s, encompassing perhaps the most productive epoch in Grainger's life. The final section, 'My Silly Selfish Self-Indulgence', shows us the musician in his last decade, as his friends and colleagues were dying and he himself was increasingly hampered by poor health. The section titles are drawn from Grainger's letters although, when compared directly with their original context, their meaning is by no means clear.³ The editors' introduction

makes a strong case for this sectional organisation; it serves as a powerful biographical comment, reflecting what they perceive as the over-riding flavour of each era in their subject's life.

My main quibble with *The All-Round Man* is that each letter is printed in its entirety, despite the problems this entails, not the least of which are, by the editors' own admission, the 'frequent repetition of ideas and a long-windedness which would have made even Wagner blush'.⁴ We are given the usual pleasantries and greetings contained in virtually all letters, as well as such illuminating details as Grainger's changing his shoes and having his teeth X-rayed.⁵ One sometimes longs for such information to have been excised in order to make room for more than the mere 76 letters chosen to chronicle the majority of the composer's adult life. *The All-Round Man* is, after all, not a large book in comparison with the vast output of this prolific letter-writer, as well as with the first volume of letters, which covered only 14 years of Grainger's life.

One must admit, however, that it comes as something of a relief that only nine of the 2,338 extant letters to Grainger's wife were included; there are also only nine of the very many letters to his mother Rose, to whom he wrote on an almost daily basis during his frequent trips away from home. The editors have instead opted to include a great range of correspondents—45 in total, many represented by only one letter—in order to give as wide a view as possible of the composer's activities and relationships, both personal and professional. One assumes here, of course, that the letters chosen are representative of Grainger's relationship with each correspondent.

The choice of the 24 black-and-white plates, plus two cover photos, also provides an interesting insight into the subject. Fortunately for the squeamish, the illustrations in *The All-Round Man* cover only Grainger's more socially acceptable interests, with an emphasis on his professional activities; no nudity or blood-stains here.⁶ The plates range from Grainger's own artworks, through the ubiquitous photographs of Rose, to interesting shots including friends and colleagues. Of particular interest to Melburnians is the rear view of the half-completed Grainger Museum in 1938 (plate 16). Strangely, there is only one photograph which includes Grainger's wife Ella (plate 13), despite their being together for over 30 years, while there are 15 photos and one watercolour of Rose (plates 3, 8 and 11), who died only eight years into the period covered by

this volume. This does seem to reflect the two women's relative influence on and importance in Grainger's life (although one does not doubt the strength of Percy's feelings for Ella).⁷ How touching, in this context, that the editors dedicated *The All-Round Man* to their own mothers.

The editorial appendages of *The All-Round Man* are well conceived and extremely useful. The main text is replete with footnotes containing information about the people, places, and events mentioned, the many musical and literary references, bibliographical details, as well as the aforementioned explanations and translations of Grainger's writing style. Other excellent features include a detailed index, a chronology of Grainger's life, and a biographical register of letter-recipients, similar to that found in the recent edition of letters by that other iconic Australian artist, Patrick White.⁸

There is certainly something for everyone in *The All-Round Man*. The selection of the letters themselves, along with the extensive editorial content, make this volume accessible to a diverse readership ranging from the Grainger specialist to the casual browser. And it is hard not to like Grainger, the perpetual youth, whose magnetic gaze holds you from the front of the ironically blue dust jacket, with more than one eye on posterity.

Patricia Shaw

Notes

¹ See Julianne Brand, Christopher Hailey & Donald Harris, eds, *The Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence: selected letters* (London & New York: Norton, 1987), p.xxiii.

² ed. Kay Dreyfus (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1985).

³ See, for example, letter to Ella Ström, Grainger's future wife, dated 23 April 1928 (letter 24, p.94), for the original context of the phrase 'an untamed buffalo'.

⁴ Gillies and Pear, *The All-Round Man*, p.4.

⁵ See letter to Rose Grainger, 1 Sept. 1920 (letter 9, p.51).

⁶ Compare Kay Dreyfus, *The Farthest North*, several of the plates between pp.246 and 247.

⁷ See, for example, letter to Ella Grainger, 23 Nov. 1949 (letter 60, pp.237-41), in which he details exactly why he feels they are so compatible as a couple.

⁸ David Marr, ed., *Patrick White: Letters* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 1994), pp.632-46.