‘A Commonsense View of all Music’
'A COMMONSENSE VIEW OF ALL MUSIC'

Reflections on Percy Grainger’s contribution to ethnomusicology and music education

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For Robert Kauffman
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Preface

I am greatly indebted to Sir Frank Callaway for the pleasure and the challenge of preparing this volume for publication. First, as Professor and Head of the Department of Music, he invited me to spend March to May of 1983 on the beautiful campus of the University of Western Australia, as Misha Strassberg Visiting Fellow. And secondly, he generously gave me a superb idea for my public lectures on ethnomusicological topics: he suggested that I should comment on what Percy Grainger had had to say about so-called ‘folk’ and ‘non-Western’ musics, and in particular on the synopsis of Grainger’s broadcast lectures of 1934, from which I have taken the title of this book, *A Commonsense View of all Music*.

The selection of the quotations which head each chapter was chosen from the synopsis of Grainger’s 1934 lectures, and from his papers ‘Collecting with the Phonograph’ (1908) and ‘The Impress of Personality in Unwritten Music’ (1915). I picked out what seemed to me to be at the heart of Grainger’s thinking and of most significance in the present state of ethnomusicology and music education. I paired six phrases and one general exhortation from Grainger’s writings with topics that reflected my own interests and ‘readings of Grainger’s score’. The original lectures 3, 4 and 5 were dominated by a wide range of musical examples, and were intended to provide the sort of evidence on which the principles of the first two discursive lectures and the practical applications of the last two were based. The attempt to strike a balance between verbal discourse and listening to music has not been repeated in this book, though.

The first two chapters concentrate on fundamental discoveries of ethnomusicological research which Grainger repeatedly stressed: the complexity of unwritten, ‘folk’ music, and the
individuality and creative imagination of its composers and performers. It was wrongly thought, and still is in some quarters, that music had progressed from ‘simple’ to ‘complex’, and that the ‘simple’ musics of non-literate peoples were the products of musical collectives rather than the work of individual composers and composer-performers. My own reflections on these topics touch on the problems of evolution and ‘progress’ in music, the role of individuals in musical and general cultural change, and the significance of different kinds of activity (such as music-making) in human decision-making and social organization. I argue that Percy Grainger implicitly, and sometimes directly, claimed that musicality is a basic ingredient of human nature and that artistic praxis is not only the best means for individual personal development, but the most efficient and potent source of human intellectual and cultural life in general.

The next three chapters address the variety of musical ideas, and of their different sources, which is revealed by a study of world musics. Percy Grainger felt that this alone was sufficient reason for including them in all music education. He found three features to be particularly characteristic of ‘unwritten music’: ‘irregular’ rhythmic patterns, ‘lovely’ melodies, and ‘democratic’ polyphony. In emphasizing their cognitive, affective, and social sources in chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively, I have tried to explore further Grainger’s notion that life reflects art, rather than vice versa, and to point the way to identifying an innate, pre-linguistic mode of human thought which could be called ‘musical’.

Chapters 6 and 7 are concerned with applying the discoveries of ethnomusicology, especially in music education. Grainger’s thoughts on the sensitizing role of music in life and on the range of musics that should be used are timely, as musical performances are being increasingly used to assert national or ethnic identity and cultural hegemony, as the gaps between professional and amateur are growing wider, and as musical experience is being entrenched as a pleasant leisure activity rather than a central feature of human labour and intellectual life.

This book was designed to be a tribute to Percy Grainger as a pioneer in the fields of ethnomusicology and music education, but as such it is inevitably inadequate. It was for Grainger an article of faith that people should listen to all kinds of music and be allowed to respond to its beauty and spiritual message with
their own innate musicality and aesthetic preferences, and without the interference of words and cultural chauvinism. Though many of the examples which I played in the original lectures were from my own tape collection, there are enough published recordings of world music to obviate the need for a special accompanying tape or disc, with all the complications of copyright and the extra expense of production. Percy Grainger’s own choice of music is given in Appendix A, and in the ‘Notes on recordings’ (p. 194) I have listed some useful collections and specific recordings that relate to the text.

Similarly, I have not provided musical transcriptions, since even an exceptionally accurate score, such as Percy Grainger’s in Appendix B, does not convey the reality of performance to someone who is not acquainted with the sounds of the music. Besides, I have come increasingly to doubt the merits of printing transcriptions of music of different cultural traditions without accompanying recordings that reveal their incompleteness: transcriptions can too easily be divorced from the reality of performance in context, and the structure and meaning of the music that they portray can be grossly distorted in the cause of some academic enterprise. I have, therefore, included only a very few musical illustrations as diagrams rather than as representations of the actual sounds of music.

The quotations from Grainger’s writings are accompanied by page references from Teresa Balough’s (1982) centenary collection of his work, which is more easily accessible than the originals. Similarly, Erica Mugglestone’s (1982) translation of Guido Adler’s paper of 1885 and Warren Dwight Allen’s (1962) book are used for some references to evolutionary approaches to music history.

Specific acknowledgements are given at the end of this section for permission to use quotations and illustrations. It remains to thank those who contributed in many ways to the production of this book, but who should not be held responsible for any of its deficiencies. I am particularly grateful to my hosts at the University of Western Australia, and especially to Frank and Kathleen Callaway, Basil and Dianne Sansom, David and Paula Tunley, and Margaret Seares, who kindly shared her office with me. I thank also Wendy Trivett, Joanne Curtis, and Sharon Fryer for secretarial assistance, and Nancy McKenzie for typing the
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