

PERCY GRAINGER IN WOLLONGONG

Wollongong's reputation as something of a cultural desert is undeserved, and has been since before Hitler's war. True, I have no recollection of hearing of the visits of international artists in the last century, or the early decades of this one; but then maybe no other like place in Australia could claim otherwise. In my boyhood, say up to the mid-1930s, Wollongong had a musical background which was probably fed by the large Welsh component in its community. The late Placid Dwyer was able to get an orchestra together, and the Illawarra Male Voice Choir (largely Welsh) was deemed so fine that I once heard it compared with the Choir of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. It followed, then, that some remarkably fine artists gave concerts here: the Spivakovsky-Kurtz Trio; Horace Stevens, the bass-baritone; the Australian John Brownlee, a favourite baritone at Covent Garden; Leff Pouishnoff, a most poetic Russian pianist; and of course Peter Dawson, that baritone unrivalled in his class.

Another was Percy Grainger; and in 1982, his centenary year, it is fitting to recall his presence here. Though I am pretty sure he came twice, I can remember only one appearance. This, I think, was under the auspices of Wollongong Music-lovers' Club. Clubs such as this wax and wane, and perhaps this was a period of waning, as against other phases of great strength. This would explain why the concert took place in a private home, instead of St. Michael's Church Hall, the usual venue. But the explanation may be in the fact that the home had a fine grand piano, something unmatched in any public hall.

The home was that of Mr. and Mrs. Hans von Escher, attractively set with a view across Brighton Lawn into Wollongong Harbour. Mr. Escher was an engineer at the steelworks who made a brilliant invention, whereby he has been a citizen of the world ever since. Rather unsmiling in manner, he had a deep bass voice of impressive range and quality, and sang mostly Mozart, as I recall. His accompaniments were played by his wife, an accomplished soprano in her own right who sang under her maiden name of Hilda Boyle. She was a much more relaxed and easy person than her husband; yet between them they had everything needed to provide the wayward Percy Grainger with his requirements for a typical concert. He was of course world-famous by this time; yet anything at all might be expected of him.

I am not clear what he played first though, perhaps subconsciously, the name Grieg comes to mind. He had a habit of breaking chords—"scooping," as my music teacher of later years used to call it—instead of playing them with clear, precise attack; but that was a fault of more pianists than Percy in those years. Again, I can't be sure that he was dressed in white tie and tails—I do not believe he was—because the whole impression I retain is one of exuberance, unselfconscious unconventionality, and sheer unpredictability. His, after all, was a lecture-recital, and with his shock of unruly hair he bounced about and poured forth ideas so fast as to have his audi-

ence a trifle bemused, however well entertained.

Not that the productions of his fertile, teeming brain were always easy to take. At that time he was interested in oriental music, and had written (or transcribed) songs which made use of quarter tones, meaning that the notes to be sung—for the piano remained in tune—were half-way between semi-tones. And that meant that conventional listeners, as most of us were, could make up our own minds whether the performer, Miss Boyle, was singing sharp, flat, or (for once) just crook. It was all the fault of Percy and his oriental music; yet one must pause to think how far-seeing the musician was, even if oriental music has tended in the interim—mercifully?—to become more occidental.

But the most memorable innovation was one of his own works which required two pianos. Percy (excuse the familiarity: surely nobody could be formal with him?) played the grand, every once in a while reaching over to pluck a string or finger a short glissando on the bare piano strings. That was all very well; but this item was a duet. He had his wife in an adjoining room where the Eschers had also an upright piano, bared of its wooden bodice for the occasion, so that the charming Mrs. Grainger could pluck and stroke its exposed strings too, according to Percy's score. Before they began, Percy explained what it was all about (or supposed to be about), while his wife interjected happily from the next room, correcting him, and he argued back, and we all sat equally bewildered and entranced. I can't speak for Mrs. Grainger, because she was out of sight, however much sound came from her quarter. Percy played conventionally on black-and-white keys whilst reaching over at the bare strings, one hand at a time, plinking and plonking as his other hand played Molly-on-the-Strand-type chords, and his unseen wife simply plinked and plonked, so far as her listeners could tell, in accordance with Percy's composition.

A most exhilarating and entertaining concert with never a dull moment. But, because Percy and his wife were so far ahead of us, I am sure that, walking quietly homewards, most of his listeners would have settled for the straightforward, diatonic relief of God Save the King.

—EDGAR BEALE.