A great deal of myth surrounds Percy Grainger. Much of this has been sustained by a generous serving of Grainger's high opinion about himself. Indeed, Grainger was one of the first 20th century 'spin doctors'. The element of truth in such stories, however, is equally hard to ignore. It is tantalising, intriguing, confusing, amusing. Above all, it is challenging. Grainger's autobiographical writings present the reader with a completely unapportioned view of the composer. It's not a pretty sight. In our near 21st century world of categorisation, Grainger spills over into so many areas of accomplishment, character and trait that it is hard to identify with certainty exactly who he was, and what values he represented. Yet if you read enough of these autobiographical writings, you will find revealed a vulnerable, insecure man who, while he manifested a host of contradictions and evaded every possible attempt to be categorised, nevertheless left a self-portrait which quickly becomes identifiable. Like the photographs characters depicted in Rowing's Harry Peter series, Grainger still seems to be waving at us from the past. I find it hard to imagine him dead, given the vitality of his opinions. How refreshing this is. And how refreshing it is to present this for the general public, the social historian, or the musicologist.

Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger, which was jointly edited by Malcolm Gillies, David Pear and Mark Carroll, has attempted to present a kaleidoscope of Grainger's autobiographical musings. Given the sheer volume of Grainger's writings, pruning had to take place, yet we hope that the selection isolated for publication provides a representative group of writings which, though honest: anything less was anathema to him. Of course he 'tided up', cut and edited his writings about himself. Not to have done so would surely have been impossible. He actively attempted, however, to minimise the damage such impostion might inflict on a genuine portrait of his beliefs and values. Whether he succeeded in the attempt or not is for today's reader to decide. Either way, his musings provide a wonderful mechanism through which we can view 1890s Australia and Germany, Edwardian England and the Belle Epoque, and an America of the First World War, the Second World War, and the Cold War.

My research on Arthur E.H. Nickson (1897–1946) is based primarily on his papers, which are housed at the Grainger Museum. After winning the Clarke Scholarship in 1924, he studied the organ at the Royal College of Music under Sir Walter Parratt until 1899, and returned to Melbourne after gaining the Fellowship of the Royal College of Organists in 1911. During his time in England, Nickson experienced the musical renaissance and the Catholic Revival in the Church of England at their height, his embrace of Anglican-Catholicism and his engagement with Neoplatonism can be traced back to this period. After a return visit to England in 1911, Nickson became an advocate for the organ music of Karg-Elert through recitals at St Peter's Eastern Hill — the leading Anglo-Catholic parish in Melbourne — where he was organist (1901–1916, c1928–1948). Nickson corresponded about his recitals with Karg-Elert both before and after World War I; this resulted in the dedication of a major work — Seven Poems from the Lake of Constance (Op. 90), which Nickson played at St Paul's Cathedral in London.

My interest in Nickson was first kindled when I was the assistant organist at St Peter's (1990–2001). Colin Holden wrote a history of the parish in which Nickson's influence on the liturgical music was given some necessarily limited discussion, while Peter Plush, in his centennial essay on the Conservatorium considered Nickson's influence there. The Nickson Papers showed that there was considerably more to Nickson than the literature so far had revealed. In my thesis I focussed on the published essays, which constitute a distinctive group of writings which display Nickson's principal influences and preoccupations. His view of aesthetics presents an interesting departure from Neoplatonsim, with his rejection of the Neoplatonic or Neoplatonist narrative and Anglo-Catholic sacramental theology, and it is these ideas that form the central theme in his essays and lectures. Further work remains; the limits of my project meant that I was not able to examine Nickson's music criticism in The Age.

This collection includes an eclectic range of materials. Apart from personal and family documents, there is a representative sequence of lecture notes. Some correspondence survives, notably the letters from Karg-Elert to Nickson; very few of Nickson's own letters are preserved and in this area the collection is perpetually incomplete. Nickson's essays survive mostly in their printed editions, and some scrapbooks contain some of his earlier newspaper writings, although his articles for The Age from his period as music critic (1928–1947) have not been collected in this way.

The A.E.H. Nickson Collection

Ian Kieran Crichton completed his Master of Music thesis, The Most Divine of All Arts: Neoplatonism, Anglican-Catholicism and Music in the Published Writings of A.E.H. Nickson, at the Australian Catholic University in 2004. A.E.H. Nickson's music, books, and personal papers were donated to the Grainger Museum by his family in the 1970s.
Grainger’s Museum Legends on Composers

In 1941 Grainger wrote ‘Most museums, most cultural endeavors, suffer from being subjected to TOO MUCH TASTE, TOO MUCH ELIMINATION, TOO MUCH SELECTION, TOO MUCH SPECIALISATION! What we want (in museums & cultural records) is ALL-SIDENESS, side-lights, cross-references’ (letter to H. Balliur Gardiner, 7 June 1941). But despite his frequent claims to ‘universal’ values, and the all-inclusiveness of his collection, Grainger in his Museum Legends, a series of 58 display panels, with texts, pictures and small objects, created mostly in 1938 and 1945–1946, attempted to shape his legacy. He restricted and interpreted the Museum’s public face, focussing on his maternal family inheritance, childhood, cultural influences, the Frankfurt Group, Grieg and Delius, blue-eyed composers, Arnold Dolmetsch, folk-song collecting. Many significant elements and people from Grainger’s life are omitted altogether or mentioned only in passing: his work as a pianist, conductor and teacher; the move to America and taking out American citizenship, army service and other wartime activities; politics; religion; sexuality; physical culture and vegetarianism; his sweetheart Karen Lowrey, whom he described as ‘one of Australia’s most gifted and inspired composers’, and Alec Burnard whom he had called ‘the 1st real Australian tonebrier after me — many tangled as I’, and whom he had considered appointing as Museum curator, have no Legend.

In 1940, in writing to the University Architect about enlarging the Museum building, Grainger acknowledged that ‘There are already several Australian composers whose music is known and printed all over the musical world — men such as [John] Antill & Arthur Benjamin. In my opinion their works should be accessible to Australian music students & music-lovers’. If the proposed second storey had eventuated and Grainger had lived beyond 79 years he may have made Legends on these and other Australian composers, and he certainly did collect their scores for his collection, but I think it is significant of his intentions that he omitted them both in 1938 and 1945–1946. Despite his desire to be remembered as an Australian composer, Grainger saw himself as having achieved his greatness as the inheritor of a European musical tradition, to which he was exposed at its student stage. With his eyes on his sources, and which he subsequently influenced through his own compositional innovators. The parallel history of Australian composition was of relatively little interest to him.

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