Grainger’s ‘Spoon River’ for Band

The history of Percy Grainger’s band version of ‘Spoon River’ is full of twists and turns, much like the Illinois river it depicts. In 1857, Charles Robinson heard ‘a rustic fiddler’ play the tune at a dance in Illinois. The publication of Edgar Lee Masters’ ‘Spoon River Anthology’, in 1915, prompted Robinson, by then 50-year-old, to send the tune to Masters. In 1919, Masters forwarded it to Grainger, who completed his orchestral version in 1929. The piece became widely popular, and Grainger travelled around the United States, performing the flashy piano part with many different orchestras.

By the late 1940s, Grainger was widely admired by band musicians, having published oft-performed band versions of his ‘Irish Tune from County Derry’, ‘Children’s March’, and ‘Molly on the Shore’. Grainger’s 1919 band arrangement of ‘Colonial Song’ had been created for Edwin County Derry, ‘Children’s March’, and ‘Molly on the Shore’. Grainger’s original orchestral version also provided indications that the band version was for Grainger’s use. The percussion parts in both versions specified instruments that were extremely rare, and nearly unique to Grainger. The steel marimba, for example, was an instrument which Grainger had helped develop. Grainger owned one of these rare instruments, which I helped develop. Grainger owned one of these rare instruments, which I was able to see at the Facing Percy Grainger exhibition, co-sponsored by the Grainger Museum.

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Grainger and the Goldman Band premiered the new version of ‘Spoon River’ on June 22 at New York University and June 23 in Central Park. Although this band version of ‘Spoon River’ was performed a few times after the premiere, it was never published, and by the 1980s, the parts were nowhere to be found; not included in the inventories of the Grainger House at White Plains, New York, nor at the Grainger Museum in Melbourne.

In 1942, while organizing the band library of Cox College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, USA, I found a shabby old folder with Percy Grainger’s return address stamp on it, Grainger’s last name in a familiar script, and ‘Rapids, Iowa, USA, I found a dusty old folder with Percy Grainger’s last name in a familiar script, and ‘Rapids, Iowa, USA’.

Facing Percy Grainger

Inside was a complete set of original parts and some photostatic duplicates. Could this be the 1933 version? After years of preparatory work, in 2007 I travelled to Australia to visit the Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne, where I found numerous clues that contributed to my conclusion that these were, indeed, the long-lost 1933 parts.

Correspondence from Goldman to Grainger helped flesh out the details of the creation of the parts, as did some of the voluminous correspondence between Grainger and his wife, Ella. The original orchestral version also provided indications that the band version was for Grainger’s use. The percussion parts in both versions specified instruments that were extremely rare, and nearly unique to Grainger. The steel marimba, for example, was an instrument which Grainger had helped develop. Grainger owned one of these rare instruments, which I was able to see at the Facing Percy Grainger exhibition, co-sponsored by the Grainger Museum.

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Grainger was preparing a band version of ‘Spoon River’, he wrote to the composer, suggesting that he would ‘be very glad indeed to use this number’. Indeed, he was very glad to use it, preparing a band version of ‘Spoon River’, he wrote to the composer, suggesting that he would ‘be very glad indeed to use this number’. The other five gallant will house permanent exhibitions (with rotating material) — each highlighting a different aspect of the Museum’s collection.

The Museum layout will include six discrete exhibition galleries, one of which will be a temporary exhibitions gallery. The other five galleries will house permanent exhibitions (with rotating material) — each highlighting a different aspect of the Museum’s collection. Additionally, space is to be allocated as a multipurpose venue for seminars, intimate performances, meetings and all related purposes focusing on Percy Grainger’s life and works. Lovell Chen, the heritage architects heading up the restoration project, has consulted with Museum staff and stakeholders to refine the particulars of space allocation. Likewise, Professor Warren Ohlson has consulted further with the University’s Cultural Collections Committee to ensure an open communication in moving forward. Thankful thanks are extended to all our members and supporters who made time to voice their valuable thoughts and concerns about the role of the Grainger Museum throughout this process. I am also deeply thankful to those generous individuals who made financial contributions during this time.

In 2007, the Hugh Williamson Foundation undertook to financially support a major project at the Grainger Museum — a project that will see the creation of a multimedia resource aimed at bringing about a better understanding of Percy Grainger as a man of wide-ranging interests and accomplishments.

To help us realize this vision, we have now engaged the (international award winning) Australian company, Megafun, who provide dedicated creative and technical support to the museum, arts and entertainment sectors. In essence, we will be working with Megafun to develop a computer-based interactive research tool through which visitors to the museum and scholars alike may delve into Grainger’s world from a multiplicity of perspectives. The applications will range from a dedicated display based in the Museum, with the capacity to act as a guide through the exhibition space as well as an extension to the Museum’s life, through to a DVD-ROM able to be used as an off-site resource for schools, libraries, and scholarly presentations.

On the past year the Grainger Museum has fielded an increasing number of inquiries from local and international researchers interested in Grainger’s folk song collecting. These have ranged from members of the public requesting to view correspondence between Grainger and their forebears investigating early recording techniques (see article by Dr Colin Symes in this issue). As a result of this trend, we are currently in the midst of creating a register of folk song ressources in the collection in order to better aid researchers in locating appropriate information — the listing will eventually be available through the Museum’s website. The Grainger Museum is also collaborating with the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) in an exciting venture aimed at making the folk song recordings in the collection more accessible. To this end the NFSA is currently transferring the wax cylinder recordings of Maori and Rarotongan folk song to CD.

Astrid Brit Krautschneider
Curator, Collections and Research
Barstow, where we were happy

T
he sleepy town of Barstow in California’s Mojave Desert along Route 66. In 1920 however, when Rose and Percy Grainger held hands, it was a bustling rail centre rather than a stop on the ‘6’ roll hot.

During their short stay in Barstow, Rose studied Spanish in preparation for a possible trip to Cuba whilst Percy took his customary long walks, worked at his compositions and sketched the landscape. Together they drove through the desert which they likened fondly to South Australia.

When Percy departed to resume his tour Rose wrote to thank him, for they had ‘not had such happy days for many years’. Percy agreed, replying that he had a little when he left as they were so utterly happy. He asked Rose to collect ‘typical Barstow wildflowers … to keep with our landscape’. Together they drove Cuba whilst Percy took his own phonographic device with him. It was to be Rose’s birthday just over a month later. In the town’s and surroundings would remain an important touchstone for Grainger, representing a time of ease and entertainment for him and Rose.

The Graingers stayed at the Casa Del Desierto, one of a chain of hotels along the Santa Fe railway known for its distinctive architecture and prime Harvey Grill watersides. They were the branch f...