Friends of the Grainger Museum

Six years ago the Friends of the Grainger Museum instituted two competitions to encourage student musicians to become more familiar with the work of Percy Grainger, as well as the collection in the Grainger Museum. The competitions were a Chamber Music Prize and a Composition Prize. Over the years one or the other (and occasionally both) competitions have been held annually, producing, in the case of the Composition Prize, some wonderful new Australian music, and superb performances in what is now known as the Performance Prize. Since 2001 the prize has been open to all residents in Australia under the age of 35.

On 20 October this year six entrants competed for the Performance Prize, which was held in Melba Hall in the University’s Faculty of Music. Four pianists performed eight of Grainger’s piano works, and two ensembles (a string quartet and an eleven-piece brass ensemble plus conductor) performed arrangements of his music. It was a wonderful evening and the appreciative audience enjoyed every minute. It was the largest audience to attend the Friends’ competition since its inception, due in no small part to the work of the administrator of the Prize, Victor Sullivan. Victor is completing an arts administration course in the School of Creative Studies within the Faculty of Arts, and the Grainger Competition fulfilled the work experience component of his course.

The adjudicator was Erich Fackert, Chief Conductor of the Victorian Concert Orchestra, Principal Conductor of the Melbourne City Opera, and Lecturer in Saxophone in the Faculty of Music.

The winner of the first prize of $500 was ten-year-old Michael Byrne, a piano student of well known teacher and performer Glenn Riddle. The runner-up prize of $150 was awarded to the Clarendon Quartet, all string students studying in the Faculty of Music. The latter prize is the gift of Mr Norman Florimell, given in memory of his wife, Rosie Florimell, a former Curator of the Museum.

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Donation of a Viol with a Fine Pedigree

During the 1970s, when I was obliged to make regular visits to Britain, I sometimes attended musical instrument sales at Sotheby's in London, though rarely to bid. In 1974 I bought a bass viol at the Early Music Shop in Bradford. Returning to London by train I noticed two elderly gentlemen in the next compartment, each carrying a viol case, and spoke to them on Paddington Station. They were Marco Pallis and his lifelong companion, Richard Nicholson, founding members of the English Consort of Viols, both identifiable in a photograph of the Consort which Percy Grainger hung in his Museum. (Keen mountaineers and Buddhists, they had once carried violas over the Himalayas and introduced viol music to Tibetan monasteries.) Pallis had been a pupil, friend and supporter of Arnold Dolmetsch, and had helped him begin his instrument-making business at Haslemere. Pallis gave me some viol lessons, and became a friend.

Two years later I saw, in a Sotheby's catalogue for a sale of Important Musical Instruments on 25 November 1976, item 297: The Property of M. Groser, Esp. A Good Treble Violl by Arnold Dalmetsch, Haslemere, 1929. No. 13, the body of guitar outline ... in wooden case. Inside the case was a handwritten note on how to string the instrument, signed MP, later identified as his own work. Marco Pallis. I bought the viol for £300 — only £44.50 in those happy days — and brought it home to Melbourne. I was aware of Grainger's interest in the viol, and that he had acquired an instrument from Dolmetsch for his Museum. Unfortunately it is not a true viol, but a viola d'amore rebuilt with six strings. Since my Dalmetsch viol was made at the appropriate period, I can now redress this anomaly; it is a good little instrument, which I hope will from time to time be played as well as preserved in Percy Grainger's remarkable Museum.

Editor's note: The Grainger Museum thanks Professor Poynter for this delightful donation.

McBurney's Dolls Under the Spotlight

Some people believe that antique dolls induce nightmares, but I am completely fascinated by them, so it has been my good fortune to spend some time with a group of delicate miniature porcelain dolls in the Grainger Museum Collection. The dolls belonged to Mona McBurney who was born in 1884 on the Isle of Man and migrated to Victoria with her family in the early 1880s. She attended the Geelong Ladies College and graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1896, becoming the first woman in Australia to obtain a Bachelor of Music.

McBurney was one of the founding members of the Catalysts' Society and the Lyceum Club, networks of women who had distinguished themselves in art, music, literature, philanthropy or public service. Her compositions were regularly performed in Melbourne and she was the first woman composer to have an opera performed in Australia. She was a ground-breaking pioneer, possessed of a determined spirit, whilst also being shy, gentle and modest.

A donation of four complete musical works in manuscript forms, several of her published songs, programs and photographs was made to the Grainger Museum by the family of Mona's nephew, Archibald McBurney, through his widow Linda and son James.

As I look at these miniature dolls, some dressed in tiny replicas of the costumes created for the characters in her opera The Dalmatian, I wonder what purpose they served for McBurney. Did she position them on a scaled-down stage set to plan the performance? Or were they created afterwards, as mementos? The answer has proved elusive. As James McBurney notes, it is a pity that his father's recollections of his childhood at the McBurneys' residence in St Kilda, were never written down as he knew so much about his, having been raised by her sisters (Anne and Euphemia) after his mother died when he was two years old. Archibald would have seen the dolls in the 1890s when he visited his aunt as a boy. They made their way to him via his sisters Anne and Dorothy, both single women, as were Mona and her sisters. They treasured the dolls and kept them in a glass cabinet.

One document gives the dolls added poignancy. In 1946, through her Lyceum Club connections, a charity performance of

The Dalmatian was organised for the benefit of the Queen Victoria Hospital. This was the first full performance of her opera and the first by a woman composer in Australia; a proud occasion. Sadly the conductor Mr Alberto Zelman, according to the hospital's Annual Report, had an 'unfortunate breakdown' the day before it had to be performed without an orchestra. Sympathy was extended to ticket holders and McBurney was said to be 'grievously disappointed'. Do we not know how long lasting that disappointment was or what impact it ultimately had on her work but I cannot help but wonder if the miniature dolls came to represent not just the opera characters but also what might have been.

The Grainger Museum is looking forward to an upcoming visit from Linda Rat, author of Through the Nursery Window: A History of Antique and Collectable Dolls in Australia 1880–1970, who will provide her expert opinion on these rare miniature dolls.

Monica Syrette

Thanks to Faye Patton, Ann Southin and James McBurney for their assistance.

1 Southern Monash Medical Centre Historical Collection

Above: Three dolls from the Mona McBurney Collection.

Photo by Brian Allison

Alberto Zelman Manuscript Conserved

Paper conservator Louise Wilson from the University of Melbourne Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, has just completed 1973 piano trio manuscript by Alberto Zelman Sen. (1832–1907). Zelman's manuscript is the earliest known piano trio composed in Australia and according to conductor Richard Dallwitz, in the third earliest known chamber music composition produced in Australia. It has been approximately dated 1878 — nine years after Alberto Zelman arrived in Australia with the opera company of Lyster and Cagle, for whom he worked as a conductor.

Dallwitz, who research interests in Australian colonial music, believes the manuscript is particularly interesting given that it is the product of mid-19th century middle European music culture. It is representative of the vast influx of diverse cultural influences stimulated in the Australian east coast colonies by the gold rushes.

Prior to conservation the manuscript was in poor condition and showed extensive evidence of water staining, edge tears, adhesions of foreign material, finger marks, ink smudges and an overall build-up of dirt. Wilson's painstaking work, which was funded through the Information Division's Conservation Program (part-funded by the Friends of the Ballarat Library) involved repairing tears with Japanese tissue glued with starch paste, and in some cases entire page corners had to be rebuilt. Substantial deposits of magnetic tape also had to be removed — a tricky procedure which never completely eliminates surface staining.

It is hoped that in the not-too-distant future, Zelman's piano trio will once again be performed in public.