

## Love Me, Love My Letters

A request by the ABC to contribute to a Radio National program on love letters, led the Grainger Collection curator, **Brian Allison**, to unexpected places when he started reading Percy Grainger's epistolary musings on the nature of love.

Reading someone else's love letters is like skipping through a cottage flower garden in steel capped boots. Being a party to the intimate thoughts of two lovers without sanction, has the feeling of belligerent trespass about it, or at least that is the notion that sprung into this writer's mind as he was about to read one of Percy

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First page of a letter from Percy Grainger to Ella Grainger, 17 November 1931.

Aldridge Grainger's love letters on the ABC's Radio National.

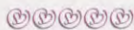
'That's an absurd notion', would be the obvious retort. 'The composer put them in the public arena — in his own archive — in his own personally funded Museum, to be precise!' While convincing, this counter-argument did not immediately lessen my growing sense of voyeurism. The experience did, however, spark further reflection upon what exactly constitutes a love letter and how

Grainger's many letters to wife, mother and lovers fit into the conventions of intimate written communication.

Within the genre of letter writing, which the French refer to as *écritures intimes*, the love letter can be defined as an individual's written communication with a cherished other, whose absence physically (geographically), or emotionally (love unrequited), has caused a state of unfulfilment and therefore anxiety.

Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper reported in December 2003, 'A passionate letter from Lord Nelson to Lady Emma Hamilton in which he confesses to having an erotic dream about her fetched more than £117,000 at an auction at Christies in London yesterday.' The undisclosed buyer was investing in a very significant autograph letter by one of the western world's greatest admirals and partners in one of the history's more celebrated love affairs.

Yet in literary terms the letter is not remarkable and follows a basic formula of numerous love letters throughout the history of writing. In quite humble language, one lover is saying to the other, 'I am distraught by the tyranny of distance that keeps us apart.' Nelson writes, 'Separated from all I hold dear in this world, what is the use of living if indeed such an existence can be called so ...' He continues by declaring he can neither eat, nor sleep, and confesses his lustful dream.



The Australian composer Percy Grainger (1882–1961) spent a large percentage of his adult life as a touring concert pianist and visiting musical pedagogue. His prolific letter writing bridged the gap existing between the often lonely world of performer on the road and the security of home and intimates. Unlike Lord Nelson, Grainger's intimate writings to his lovers were rarely cries from the heart. His letters written during the Edwardian years to lover Karen Holten are so regular and frequent that they almost function as a diary or journal chronicling his thoughts and daily events. At times the letters take on the guise of essays or proclamations.

Holten rarely received declarations of undying love from Grainger, but tended to receive rational evaluations of his love for



Ella Ström, 1927. Silver gelatin photograph by E.O. Hoppe.

her and vice versa. This is love letter as 'dialectic'. The letter chosen to broadcast to the nation via ABC Radio National (chosen because it is a deviation from the popular conception of a love letter) has the revealing central passage written in 1910,

*You are Nature  
I am art.  
You have feeling  
I have taste.*

*You try to get me to serve nature  
also I try to get you also to try  
to make nature serve me.*

*Your love for me includes the  
hope that in me your  
naturalness, virtue, &  
natureworship will find a fruitful  
earth, & that I shall help to  
make your life rich in  
concentrates [sic] love, birth,  
purity etc.*

*My love from you springs  
largely from the hope*

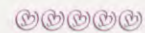
*That I find in you a playground  
for my unnatural, purely  
selfpleasing resultless  
sensuousness, & that I find in  
you a comrade to listen to my  
immoralities, my general  
wantonness.*

Distance has given him great time for reflection and he comes to the crux of the matter,

*I don't mean I want you to leave  
my life, but I mean:*

*I hope there shall never come a  
child between us ... nor her  
body lose its young form ...*

*It is selfish and badmanly of me,  
of course, but its also selfish  
and badwomanly of you to wish  
the reverse.*



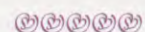
A love letter need not be a romantic utterance. Many of Percy Grainger's letters to his mother stand as testament to this. Curiously these letters are often couched in ebullient terms absent in communications with his lovers.

He would express a longing for her company when he was touring. On 5 August 1909 he finishes a letter, 'I am so healthy and happy and love my mum so desperately.' Contrary to popular assumption, the almost legendary closeness experienced by Rose Grainger and her son was not incestuous, yet he often wrote to Rose as if she was his intimate partner.

In 1912, in response to an 'incident' between mother and son and his lover Karen that has never been fully explained, Percy wrote to Rose in a state of heightened anxiety,

*... I was able to feel within me  
my love for you burning as  
steadily and inevitably as on  
any day of my best behavior  
towards you. If only you could  
see into my heart of that time,  
my own life's-partner ...*

Rose Grainger died from suicide in 1922 and her son wandered into what may be referred to as his 'wilderness years'. He had a breakdown and his stream of prolific letter writing almost dried up.



While on a tour of Australia in 1926, he met the painter and Swedish beauty, Ella Viola Ström-Bandelius, and his romantic sensibilities were reawakened — and perhaps reoriented. Their courtship culminated in the dramatic and romantic ritual of a marriage ceremony in front of 25,000 people in the Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles, during one of Grainger's concerts. The flush of the 'honeymoon' years followed with Grainger writing regularly to Ella while he was on tour — his letters written in phrases not uncommon to numerous other lovelorn writers throughout history.

Though still tending towards the analytical, he wrote to Ella in Whiteplains, New York, from Phoenix, Arizona on 17 November 1931,

*My sweet-souled, hard-boned,  
soft-fleshed darling,*

*Many men have said to a woman 'I am crazy about you'.  
But are they as crazy as I am about you, after 4 years of love-life?  
After a few days of being sundered from you, my heart goes wildly, my maw-works go on strike, my nerves tremble ...*

French cultural theorist Roland Barthes suggests all love letters are simple variations on one theme, '*Je pense à vous*' (I think of you). In most cases this is an indisputable (and obvious) fact, but this writer would suggest that there are a small percentage of letters where the writers are saying, 'I am thinking of me, thinking of you, thinking of me.' In this circumstance, the writer uses language or presents a statement, which is wholly provocative and aims to elicit a predicted response in the reader — the knowledge of this response sparks off a gratuitous pleasure in the letter's author at the time of writing. In this convoluted activity, Grainger excelled.



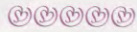
Percy Grainger and Ella Ström 1928.  
Sepia toned silver gelatin photograph. Photographer unknown.

The composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart played this game in the scatological letters he wrote to his cousin 'Basle' — Maria Anna Mozart. Grubby phrases and clever word-play were designed to shock and provoke a reaction, or an equally challenging response from his cousin. It has never been fully gauged to what degree love or sexual pleasure was shared between the cousins, though it is apparent that Mozart gained a degree of self-pleasure from the act of writing the letters.

One extreme of this form of 'lust' letter takes on auto-erotic dimensions. James Joyce's erotic letters to his wife Nora in 1909, which have been often compared to Mozart's Basle letters, appear to be written as a direct surrogate for the sexual act.

Within a few years of marriage, the tenor of Grainger's letters to his wife degenerated from gleaming phraseology such as 'Godgiven little playmate' into statements of unprintable and almost violent

obscurity, where he corrupted the language of the conventional love letter to debase her. The pleasure stimulated by this act — the anticipated awareness of his lover's response — no doubt provided Grainger with excitement that was a (lukewarm) substitute for the other sado-masochistic activities in which he was known to engage.



Grainger has been coined an 'autoarchivist' — he assiduously preserved incoming letters, copied outgoing letters and later in life, tried to retrieve many of his writings to friends and associates dating from when he was a young adult.

Any discomfort felt by this writer as Grainger's evaluation of his own love life was aired to the ABC radio audience, should have been allayed by the knowledge that Percy wanted people to read his letters. Trespass into Grainger's private world, or the presence of a voyeur retrospectively shadowing his intimate affairs, would probably have been encouraged — it may even have given him pleasure. In his 28th year in February 1908, long before he established the Grainger Museum (the final repository of his life's work) he wrote to his lover Karen Holten:

*So the little sweetie thinks she can take all my extremely interesting letters to the grave with her, if she dies. My letters shall be admired by a yet-unborn generation; can't you see that I always write with an eye to a possible public?*

Brain Allison has been the Curator of the Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne for five years.

*Note: All letters quoted from Percy Grainger's correspondence are held in the Grainger Collection at the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.*



Percy Grainger and Ella Grainger, nee Ström on their wedding day, 9 August 1928. Silver gelatin photograph by Frederick Morse.

### Further Reading

- Kay Dreyfus, editor, *The Farthest North of Humanness: letters of Percy Grainger 1901–14*, South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1985.
- Malcolm Gillies and David Pear, editors, *The All-Round Man: selected letters of Percy Grainger 1914–1961*, New York, Clarendon Press, 1994.
- Martyn Lyons, 'Reading Practices, Writing Practices: love letters and *ecritures intimes* in nineteenth century France and Australia', in *The Culture of the Book: essays from two hemispheres in honour of Wallace Kirsop*, edited by David Garrioch, et al, Melbourne, Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand, 1999.
- Robert Spaethling, *Mozart's letters, Mozart's Life*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2000.
- Colin Wilson, *The Misfits: a study of sexual outsiders*, London, Grafton, 1989.