



U3AM at Home

Scandinavia of the South

Everybody enjoys the music of Melbourne's most famous musician, Percy Grainger: Country Gardens, Brigg Fair, Handel in the Strand, Molly on the Shore, etc. Catchily tuneful and melodic; but when it comes to assessing Grainger the man, he is not so easy to appraise. For most people he seems to fall between overrated and underrated, or even being regarded by some as the most underrated overrated composer of the twentieth century - if you see what I mean. His biographer John Bird writes: "It would be easy to make of him a monster or buffoon." A similar paradoxical assessment is to be found in his own judgement on his fellow countrymen: "Careless, slovenly, mind-blind, lazy, ignorant, self-indulgent, unhealthy" and yet, at the same time "retaining the happiness and kindness characteristic of Pacific-rim peoples." Grainger was in thrall to Scandinavian culture and languages (he spoke fluent Danish) and one of his hopes was that Australia would become the Scandinavia of the South.

A visit to the Grainger museum, on the campus of Melbourne University, which he founded and opened on 10th December 1938 as the future biographical store for all the details of his complex, chaotic and dynamically colourful life, from the privately intimate to the flamboyantly personal and inventively public, never fails to astonish, startle and stupefy.

I became interested in Grainger when I got to know about his attitude to the English language. For him English had been corrupted by a despised southerly Graeco-Roman influence. He took it upon himself to turn English back to its more northerly, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon origins. This was part of his wider cultural, racial obsession which divided Europeans into two ethnic groups, which he labelled blue-eyed (Nordic, healthy, virtuous) and brown-eyed (southern, ailing, degenerate). In 1948 he had taken photos of favoured composers' faces (Ralph Vaughan-Williams, Arthur Bliss, John Ireland, William Walton, et al) to demonstrate in his museum that really worthwhile composers had blue eyes. That is the dark side of Grainger which comes out clearly in his private letters and is on shamelessly public view in his museum. Throughout his life he devoted considerable time and energy to try to return English to its "true" Anglo-Saxon roots by compiling his dictionary of Blue-Eyed English. Some of his inventions are poetically evocative: eg *education* becomes *mind-tilth* and *tragedy* becomes *doom-play*. Others have little to recommend them: *undowithout-able* for *indispensable* and *been-thru-ness* for *experience*.

His view is neatly summed up in one of the thousands of letters that he wrote: "My *nature-urge* (instinct) tells me that speech (like *tone-art* (music)) ought to be *overweighingly* (preponderantly) a *forth-showing* (manifestation) of race, place & type & that nothing is gained (at least from an artist's *mind-slant* (attitude)) by making speech a *gathered-together-ness* (conglomeration) of worn-out Europe-wide *word-*

chains (sentences).” Difficult to imagine that any of this could catch on although current English usage does offer us such Anglo-Saxon alternatives as *foreword* for *preface*, *handbook* for *manual* and *playhouse* for *theatre*.

Leaving aside the questionable ethics of Grainger’s promotion of “blue-eyed” as against “brown-eyed”, he could be seen as a forerunner of what has become known as the English movement founded in 1966 in England. This project is intended as a means of recovering the Englishness of English and of restoring ownership of the language to the English people. There is also the further idea that English is a recognition and a celebration of the English part of modern English because, although it has absorbed thousands and thousands of foreign words over the centuries, there still exists a true English core to the language.

In the light of the violently passionate Brexit conflict waging which has waged in Great Britain, one begins to wonder whether Grainger’s hopes, dreams and aspirations are actually less bizarre, eccentric and outlandish than they at first appear.

Geoff Sheldon