

Margaret Hee-Leng Tan—*The Free Music of Percy Grainger*

1971, 65 pp. The Juilliard School diss.

David S. Josephson

[*Ed. Note:* This is the third in a series of writings conceived by Professor Josephson as an essay in bibliography, seeking to provide the foundation for a thorough and broadly-based study of the life and work of Percy Grainger. The first essay, "Percy Grainger: *Country Gardens* and Other Curses," is in *Current Musicology* 15 (1973): 56–63. The second, a review of Thomas Carl Slattery's 1967 dissertation on the wind music of Grainger, is in *Current Musicology* 16 (1973): 79–91.

During the interval between the writing of the present review and its publication, Dr. Tan's thesis appeared in print as "Free Music of Percy Grainger," *Recorded Sound* (The Journal of the British Institute of Recorded Sound) 45–46 (January–April 1972): 21–38. For the convenience of the reader, references below are given first to the appropriate page or pages in the thesis, then to those in the published article. Aside from the transformation of two long quotations from Grainger and Burnett Cross in the thesis into articles printed under the authors' names in the same issue of *Recorded Sound* (and so identified by the reviewer), the two guises of Dr. Tan's essay are virtually identical.]

Margaret Hee-Leng Tan's dissertation on Percy Grainger's "Free Music" is the second American doctoral thesis to have taken the composer's music as its subject. Its aim is "to enable Grainger to be viewed in a historical perspective befitting his many daring and original accomplishments" (p. 2; *Recorded Sound* [RS], p. 21). Her essay is divided into four chapters, a "selected bibliography," and an appendix of musical examples.¹ The first chapter ("Introduction") offers the reader the mandatory biographical sketch. The second deals with the principles of "Free Music." The third compares Grainger's experimental writings with those of some of his contemporaries. The fourth chapter—the bulk of this brief dissertation—elaborates on certain early experimental compositions and on a few of the machines through which Grainger attempted, toward the end of his life, to put his ideas into practice.

Dr. Tan's essay is the third to deal with the "Free Music," following the fine contributions on this thorny subject by Richard Franko Goldman and Ivor Dorum.² All three writers delve into the early Graingeriana that throws light on the later experiments, so that some overlapping of material is unavoidable. Dr. Tan is the first author, however, to include in the list of seminal early works the *Train Music* (1900–01) and *Random Round* (1912–14) and to discuss one of the important late machines, the "Estey reeds tone-tool" of 1952. Of especial value are long extracts from important writings by Grainger that are not otherwise easily accessible: namely, extracts from the

Australian radio lectures of 1934–35 (pp. 11–12; *RS*, p. 24),³ from a statement on “Free Music” found at the Grainger Museum in Melbourne (pp. 13–14; Percy Aldridge Grainger, “Free Music,” *RS*, p. 16), and from a remark on the first *Hill-Song* in typescript at White Plains (pp. 39–44; *RS*, pp. 31–33). The description and set of drawings of the last “Free Music” machine contributed by Burnett Cross (pp. 60–61, figs. 1–4; Cross, “Grainger Free Music Machine,” *RS*, pp. 17–21) are especially fascinating. Cross worked closely with Grainger during the 1950’s in devising these marvelous electrical mechanisms, and he describes their complicated operations with admirable clarity.

But the borrowings do not end here. There are extensive quotations from Grainger’s article on “The Impress of Personality in Unwritten Music”⁴ as well as from Goldman’s article and other readily available writings by Grainger’s contemporaries. The frequency and length of these borrowings is unwarranted, and they often interrupt an argument rather than illustrate or give point to it. In fact, in the second and fourth chapters—the very two that bear directly on the subject of “Free Music”—these quotations account for far more of the material than does the original writing. One’s consequent suspicion that the author has not mastered her subject is all but confirmed by the unhappy evidence of massive and unacknowledged borrowings from other writers. Whole sections of Goldman’s article appear without citation—their origins hidden by the juggling of Goldman’s sentences, with ensuing damage to the logic of his argument—as do passages from the chapter on Grainger in Roger Covell’s *Australia’s Music*⁵ (pp. 8–10, 19–20, 25–26, 47–48, 50, and 63—or *RS*, pp. 23–24, 26, 27–28, 34, 35, and 37—include appropriations from Goldman; pp. 26 and 37—or *RS*, pp. 28 and 31—from Covell). Significantly, it is in the opening paragraphs of the three main chapters, which set the tone and direction of the thesis, that the bulk of the wholesale borrowing occurs. The very core of Dr. Tan’s argument—the setting forth of the principles of “Free Music”—is lifted almost entirely from Goldman. One is astonished that this matter escaped the notice of the persons responsible at Juilliard. They ought to have examined at least the Goldman essay; it did appear, after all, in their own house organ, *The Juilliard Review*, and Dr. Tan cited it properly several times in her dissertation.

In lesser matters as well, symptoms of poor scholarship cast shadows on the enterprise, from the minutiae of citations to the sweep of whole arguments. On the most basic level the evidence is unequivocal. No footnote is given for the extended quotation from Grainger’s Australian lectures,⁶ or for a statement by the composer on folk song (p. 24; *RS*, p. 27). On occasion, a citation is given that is of no practical value to the reader: for example, “from the typescript of an unpublished lecture, delivered on a [lecture] tour of Australia in the 1930’s” (p. 29n; *RS*, p. 28n). Where is that typescript? At other times we are given uncited information for which we must trust Dr. Tan alone: thus, “in 1935, [Grainger] transcribed for tuneful percussion some Balinese religious ceremonial music” (p. 30; *RS*, p. 29)—no title, no location

of manuscript, no musical example. Perhaps the information is correct, but we have reason to be skeptical. In the introduction Dr. Tan arouses our wonder when she states that

it was through Grainger's folksong recording activities, using an Edison cylinder phonograph, that Bartók was introduced to the method and came to collect several thousand folk tunes with Kodály in this manner in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Rumania during the first decade of this century (p. 3; *RS*, p. 22).

An astounding fact, if correct, for which Grainger has never been given credit. The assertion is based on a letter from Storm Bull written in 1967—some thirty years after Bull had studied with Bartók—concerning a matter that had occurred some thirty years earlier still. Furthermore, Bull mentions Bartók's reference to an article written by Grainger just after the turn of the century "in which Percy had described his folk-music research in Haiti." Grainger wrote no such article, nor to my knowledge did he ever visit Haiti or collect its music. Perhaps Bartók was referring to the article on Lincolnshire folk songs,⁷ which appeared, however, one or two years *after* the publication of the first Bartók-Kodály collection of *Twenty Hungarian Folksongs*. But Bull's error here throws doubt on his entire statement quoted by Dr. Tan. His declaration of Bartók's debt to Grainger is highly suspect, and in the absence of corroborating evidence it certainly cannot bear the weight of her assertion as quoted above.

The biographical sketch which ends the introduction, dependent wholly upon secondary sources, contains no such surprises. Neither does it offer any new information, aside from its gratuitous absorption of Delius into the English folk-song movement (p. 5; *RS*, p. 22), and from its one contribution to the Grainger mythology, namely, that he returned to the collecting of English folk song in the years following the First World War (p. 6; *RS*, p. 22).

Concerning the "Free Music" itself, this thesis does shed some valuable light. In the second chapter Grainger's own writings bring considerable weight to bear on the subject, and Dr. Tan demonstrates the connection between Grainger's early experiences with non-Western musics and the development of his experimental ideas. If the comparative arguments of the third chapter—which attempt to relate Grainger's work to that of Cowell, Ives, Harry Partch, and Varèse—promise more than they manage to deliver, they are nevertheless interesting in their broad focus. The fourth chapter follows Grainger from his early sea and hill songs through the *Random Round* to the mechanisms of his colleagues—the player piano, the Theremin, and Arthur Fickenscher's Polytone—and finally to Grainger's own machines. It was an absorbing and noble quest, all the more affecting in that Grainger did not live to reach its end. But Dr. Tan's treatment of it is disappointing. She passes over his preliminary investigations of the Aeolian organ with perforated rolls and explores only four of the later machines that Grainger and Cross built. Of these four, furthermore, the explanations for only two come

from her own pen; those for the other two are taken from Goldman and Cross. Most disappointing of all, Dr. Tan fails to convey the sense of adventure and improvisation that lay behind these machines. There was whimsy here and a wonderfully alert musical fantasy, which must be captured in any discussion of the "Free Music." Ivor Dorum succeeds admirably in this respect and has the good sense to pluck meaning from Grainger's seemingly capricious names: "'Hills and Dales' Air-Blown-Reeds Tone Tool," "Clothesline Side-ridge No. 1," "'Kangaroo-Pouch' Method of Synchronizing and Playing Eight Oscillators." But Dr. Tan has not read Dorum (nor, for that matter, Slattery), as her brief bibliography attests.

* * * * *

To have to review once again a major work on Grainger so unfavorably brings no joy. But the two dissertations that have been examined in the pages of this journal are among the longest essays on his life and work; and disappointment in them is only increased by the fear that their sheer size will mark them as central documents in future Grainger scholarship. A fascinating composer has been interred too long in a rubble of misconceptions and prejudices; and work of poor scholarship, no matter how fine its intentions, will simply delay and render more difficult the enormous task of restoring Grainger's accomplishments to the light they richly deserve.

NOTES

¹ Copies are available upon application to the Grainger Library Society, 7 Cromwell Place, White Plains, New York. The copy I have used for this review lacks the appendix of musical examples.

² Goldman, "Percy Grainger's 'Free Music,'" *The Juilliard Review* 2 (Fall 1955): 37-47, and Dorum, "Grainger's 'Free Music,'" *Studies in Music* 2 (1968): 86-97. See also *Current Musicology* 15 (1973): 60-63.

³ Not 1933, as Dr. Tan states.

⁴ *The Musical Quarterly* 1 (1915): 416-35. See also *Current Musicology* 15 (1973): 59.

⁵ Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967, pp. 88-103. See also *Current Musicology* 15 (1973): 62.

⁶ The passages are similar to, but not identical with, passages from *Music: A Commonsense View of All Types* ([Melbourne]: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1934), pp. 11-13, cited in *Current Musicology* 16 (1973): 89.

⁷ "Collecting with the Phonograph," *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 3 (1908-09): 147-242. See also *Current Musicology* 15 (1973): 59.