Review of *Distant Dreams: The Correspondence of Percy Grainger and Burnett Cross 1946*–60, edited by Teresa Balough and Kay Dreyfus (Melbourne: Lyrebird Press, 2020, ISBN 9780734037947)

Simon Perry

Anyone sufficiently familiar with the various epistolary and autobiographical writings of Percy Aldridge Grainger (1882–1961)[1]—Australian-American pianist, composer, educator, and "all-round-man" of music—will know that he consistently held his idea of and experiments with so-called "Free Music" to be one of his most significant creative impulses. In particular, Free Music sat at the opposite aesthetic pole to the various popular works by which he was best known and for which he often expressed a kind of loathing (*Country Gardens*, *Handel in the Strand*, etc.). Contradicting the widely held popular image of him as a composer of "cheerful"[2] music, he once wrote:

> The worth of my music will never be guessed, or its value to mankind felt, until the approach to my music is consciously undertaken as a 'pilgrimage to sorrow'. ... I strive to make the voice-leading of my tone-strands touching & the effect of my harmonies agonized. ... The imitation of *wailing* is the concern of the voice-leadings that make up my harmonies. And that is the object of my Free Music: to provide wailing sounds of a subtlety, magnitude & refinement hitherto unknown in music. (Grainger qtd. in Gillies, Pear and Carroll 177–78, original emphasis)

While the label "Free Music" was one that he came to use with increasing frequency later in life to describe a specific and highly personal kind of aural image, his first imaginings of the phenomenon itself seem to have been initiated from childhood experiences (most specifically, hearing the irregular lapping of wavelets on the side of a boat in the Albert Park Lake in Melbourne) and to have taken ever more specific shape until they became something of an obsession in his last decade or so of life.

As its name implies, Free Music was a kind of music unfettered by the constraints of regular meter and quantized units of pitch and rhythm. From what we can understand by his descriptions of it and from residual evidence of his various experiments, Free Music was a kind of seamless polyphony of drifting tones unregulated by any framework of measured time or notion of discrete pitch interval. Grainger seems to have born these sounds vividly in his aural imagination, and not only born them but yearned to hear them in physical reality, if not perform them for others (this last is uncertain). However, as a composer he lacked the means to produce them by the conventional resources of Western art music. Quite aside from problems of notation (which he had already addressed through the production of two graphic scores in the 1930s), a particular stumbling block was that he was convinced (rightly or wrongly) that no human performers existed who were capable of playing—even by means of instruments that were not restricted to fixed intervals of any type of scale, but which could "glide", like a finger

[1] Epistolary writings are found in Kay Dreyfus, ed., *The Farthest North of Humanness: Letters of Percy Grainger, 1901–1914* and Malcolm Gillies and David Pear, eds., *The All-Round Man: Selected Letters of Percy Grainger, 1914–1961*. Autobiographical writings are found in Malcolm Gillies, David Pear and Mark Carroll, eds., *Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger*.

[2] See, for example, the interview with Grainger conducted by Wayne Howell in 1952 for NBC Radio's "Favorites of the Famous" (qtd. in Collins and Perry 18-19).

on an unfretted finger board—the minutely intricate and infinitesimally complex interplay of the Free Music of his imagination. Only by non-human means could the sound image of the creator be physically, acoustically, realised. This conviction led to Grainger's turn to technical means for the production of his imagined sounds through a series of inventions and experiments (variously described by such terms as "Free Music tone-tools", "Free Music gins", and so on).

Distant Dreams seeks to document Grainger's development of this project through his collaboration with the young American science-educator, William Burnett Cross (1914–96), whose association with Grainger began almost by fleeting chance in 1946, before burgeoning to become "perhaps, the most important non-familial relationship of the last fifteen years of Grainger's life" (Balough and Dreyfus 1). It is a welcome, and certainly overdue, addition to Grainger scholarship, for any number of reasons. It clearly fills a gap in the epistolary work that is currently published. Malcolm Gillies's and David Pear's letters volume dealing with the years 1914–61 do not include a single letter by Grainger to Burnett Cross, nor vice-versa (see Gillies and Pear). And while that volume has done a great service in expanding the reader's grasp of the "post-British" Grainger along a range of topics, its reference to the Free-Music experiments is necessarily minimal. By focussing on a singular topic of communication between two principal players, Balough and Dreyfus provide a deep and intimate view of what was possibly Grainger's final great obsession.

The volume is set out in three main sections: a succinct and quite matter of fact introduction, the letters themselves, and a final set of writings on the Free-Music machines by Burnett Cross, after Grainger's death, previously published but not readily accessible. Photographs also accompany the book, showing the machines in various stages of development, along with Cross, Grainger and Ella Grainger working on them or in other situations of obvious companionship and familiarity. Additionally, a considerable quantity of hand drawings and sketches is included.

In the introduction, the editors provide a reliable context for the main topic of the letters, including a summary of Cross's and Grainger's first acquaintance, growing partnership in the experimental work, some relevant details of Cross's life beyond his association with Grainger and some discussion of the machines themselves. As they claim, the introduction does not set out to critique the concept of Free Music itself, although one might wonder if this principle remains adhered to in the final paragraphs which claim a place for the machines in the history of "sound art" (11–12). I'm not sure it's entirely possible to disentangle Grainger's specific needs in realising his free music from the machines he and Cross invented for that very realisation. From Cross's own later description (1968) of Grainger's intentions, we learn that "Grainger wanted a composer's music, *not one for the concert hall*. As he said, he wanted to hear in actuality the sounds he had heard in his mind for many years, to determine whether they had the effect he imagined, and to adjust them accordingly" (qtd. in Balough and Dreyfus 144, my emphasis)—and, implicitly, perhaps, no more than that.

On the topic of Cross's later writing on the machines, these emerge as quite enlightening, both about Grainger and about the work. Indeed, given I read the entire volume in what is usually the stupidest way possible, from cover to cover, I found that after reading Cross's descriptions ideas and references in the letters which had failed to produce a clear mental image came into much clearer focus. In some ways, I wished I had read the last section first, or that some more basic technical descriptions had found their way into the introduction. Alternatively, there was also a kind of cryptic delight to be found from trying to piece together the technical discussions *in medias res* between the two main interlocutors, which also had its charms.

The heart of the matter, the letters, make quite compelling reading, owing not only, in no small doubt, to the equally distinctive prose styles of Grainger and Cross but also to the deft curatorial management of the editors. The editorial voice stays reassuringly in the background, providing precisely the right amount of contextual information through notes and short introductory passages, while never intruding on the conversation. This is hardly surprising, given the track record of the two individuals involved. Those familiar with Grainger's writing will know what to expect: a highly individual turn of phrase, expressions ranging from the bizarre and grotesque to the poetically succinct, smatterings of his peculiar "Nordic English" and so on. Cross's writing, as the editors point out, is a pole apart—consistent, concise, economical and never failingly elegant. He was, after all, a professional communicator.[3] What is in no doubt, from almost the very first letter, is how close Grainger (and Ella Grainger) were to Cross and how much reciprocated this feeling was. It is true that, for some of the time, Grainger compensated Cross financially for the many hours he spent helping Grainger with his "Tone Tools," but such an arrangement never seems to have compromised the genuinely felt nature of their relationship. Grainger was capable of an almost blinding egoism at times, but he clearly did not fail to recognise that Cross's enthusiasm for Grainger's ideas should not be exploited. Grainger regarded this work as one of his greatest joys; reader's will form their own impression, but I could not help but think, after reading this, that no small part of this joy sprang as much from the personal connection he and Ella enjoyed with Cross as from the work itself.

There is quite a lot of technical and pseudo jargonistic talk in the letters, especially from Grainger's end as he bounces around various ideas and proposed solutions for difficulties. This is particularly the case in the earlier letters. Cross's replies to these specific matters are relatively thin in comparison to the sometimes gushing bombardment of amateur enthusiasm he received, but always succinct and supportive. As readers and editors of letters alike will well know, these documents provide at best a remote glint of the full extent of a close relationship, and (for obvious reasons) provide records of a relationship only when the interlocuters find themselves at a physical distance. Nonetheless, the content and tone of these letter's gives an enticing hint about the nature of the conversations and problem solving that must have taken place while Cross was actually present at the Graingers' home in White Plains. As the volume of letters progress, there is also a growing pall of sadness as Grainger's increasing infirmities become apparent, and his obviously apparent inability to really comprehend the full extent of the work Cross was doing in the final, photo-electric stage of sound production. Grainger clearly appreciated the power and value of this final stage of innovation, which both he and Cross seem to have genuinely felt had solved the major hurdles they faced. But there is a subtextual melancholy to the fact that Grainger, ever the self-reliant, "all-round-man", could not really muck-in with the detailed work as he had in the earlier stages, involving piano rolls, vacuum cleaners and a superabundance of string.

The letters also detail a number of other things Cross helped Grainger with, beyond the Free Music experiments. Much of this makes for quite fascinating reading in itself, and points to Cross's unique range of capabilities—such as mastering the Lincolnshire accent of Joseph Taylor and producing a recording of Grainger's transcription of *Bold William Taylor,* or rigging

[3] He was also capable of a wonderful sense of irony. For example, witness his brief report to Grainger about a performance of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony he heard played by the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra in 1960: "The orchestra did Tchaikowksy's Fifth Symphony in a very straightforward way, as if they had never heard the news that the composer was a highly emotional type whose music should be expounded accordingly" (qtd. in Balough and Dreyfus 136).

up a continuously spooling score roller to help Grainger's piano performances—and open mindedness—as when he undertook to help Grainger's bizarre project to photograph English and Irish composer's blue eyes. All this and more are additional, yet highly telling, side bars to the main narrative. We can't know Cross's private thoughts, of course, and he was by all accounts a relatively private individual. But on the evidence here, he presents as a highly non-judgemental character. By his own admission, his understanding of what Grainger was trying to achieve, was slow to evolve, but he never seems to have doubted the integrity of Grainger's intentions or to have seen him as some kind of bizarre eccentric.

Minor questions of sound art aside, Balough's and Dreyfus's work leaves the reader to make their own judgements about the wider value and significance of Grainger's Free Music. As they point out in the introduction, questions about this significance have been addressed numerous times, and relatively recently in the work of Andrew Hugill. I think Hugill's commentary on Grainger's free music and other "modernist" tendencies make a compelling companion to the present volume, and I would recommend reading it together with the Grainger-Cross letters. This is not to say Hugill's work necessarily works as a commentary in any sense, nor that we need read the Grainger-Cross communications under its interpretative gloss on Grainger's experimentalism. A highly nuanced point, for instance, concerns a recurrent theme of the letters and a topic identified by Hugill, summed up in his quotation of a "remarkably prescient" statement (made in 1938) by Grainger himself: "Free Music demands a non-human performance":

> Like most *true* music, it is an emotional, not a cerebral, product and should pass directly from the imagination of the composer to the ear of the listener by way of delicately controlled musical machines. Too long has music been subject to the limitations of the human hand, and subject to the *interfering interpretations* of a middle-man: the performer. A composer wants to speak to his public direct. (qtd. in Hugill 234, my emphasis)

Hugill, not unreasonably, reads this positively as a vision of a "more nuanced and even 'natural' musical communication based on 'universal' principles [where] direct expression through technology had the capability to overcome many of the limitations imposed by musical conventions" (Hugill 234). I quote him somewhat out of context and in abbreviated form, to be fair. But what strikes me simultaneously to the visionary aspect of Grainger's concept is how difficult it is to disentangle its disdain for the "middle-man" from a kind of Romantic elitism and the anti-democratic tendencies of *Werktreue.*

These kinds of issues will run endlessly in discussions about all facets of Grainger's amazingly complex personal and artistic constitution, and so they should. Balough and Dreyfus provide more fuel for the fire in the current much recommended volume. It offers up considerably more substantiation than was hitherto widely available to the seriousness with which Grainger did, and we may well might, take the Free Music enterprise. It documents an extraordinarily rich personal and professional relationship, understood only previously to those who had some personal acquaintance with Grainger, Cross, or both. And it paints a picture of Cross himself, an individual of unique and wide-ranging talents, a letter-writer of some considerable quality, and, on the evidence, a devoted and decent human being.

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