



PERCY  
GRAINGER  
FOLK MUSIC

CLAIRE BOOTH  
CHRISTOPHER GLYNN

# PERCY GRAINGER 1882–1961

## FOLK MUSIC

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**58.11**

**Claire Booth** soprano (piano duet: 18)

**Christopher Glynn** piano (solo: 3, 5, 8, 10, 13, 16; duet: 18)





## A WORD FROM THE MUSICIANS

We've been performing together since meeting in Oxford in 1994, exploring a wide range of music along the way from Bach to Berio, as well as quite a bit of new music, but little has captured our imagination quite as much as a battered old yellow volume of folk song settings by Percy Grainger. On delving into it again recently, we found him as fascinating a composer and character as ever, and wanted to bring his songs to a new audience.

If ever there was a composer to divide opinion, it's Percy. Some will always be hesitant about his 'heartoutbursts'. But to fall in love with this Marmite music, as we have done, is to discover a band of enthusiasts who love it for all its unique qualities.

There are so many layers to discover. Firstly, the original folk tunes are beautiful and evocative, with vivid stories to tell. There are also the wonderful characters who relayed them, like the fascinating Joseph Taylor of Brigg, whose singing (listen to it on YouTube) breaks every rule of 'proper' vocal technique with wonderfully memorable and expressive results. Surely there is something 'classical artists' ('dull dogs', according to Percy!) like us can learn from it? Last, but far from least, there is the way that Grainger clothes the old tunes in music that is unmistakably his own – full of colour, emotion, mischief and evocative power. Without him, most of these folk songs and singers would have remained a footnote in history. From the simple beauty of *A Sprig of Thyme* to the tragic adventures of *Bold William Taylor* and *Hard Hearted Barb'ra (H)Ellen*, Grainger's music gets to the human stories behind the music and makes its characters come alive.

Never far in the background is the fascinating character of Percy himself, and the peculiar passions and eccentricities that form an inescapable backdrop to the thing that really matters – his music. It's a heady mix, with fierce grandeur found alongside high-spirited fun, and lyrical beauty next to tragic intensity. Some of these arrangements are for voice and piano, some for piano alone; and the last sees Claire make a cameo appearance as piano duet partner! We hope you will enjoy listening to this music as much as we have enjoyed exploring it.

**Claire Booth and Christopher Glynn**

# GRAINGER AND THE FOLK

It was Grieg who saw it first. ‘What an idealist, what a child,’ he exclaimed on meeting Percy Grainger in 1906, ‘and, at the same time, what a great and highly developed view of life. He will do his best work for the folk song.’ It must have been a fascinating encounter: the grand old man of Norwegian music and a precocious, opinionated, 24-year-old pianist–composer from Australia. Five years earlier, Percy Grainger had arrived in London, made an impressive debut as a pianist, and sent ‘darling old Grieg’ a fan letter, along with some folk song settings for mixed voices. The ‘little great man’ (as Grainger called him) was flattered by Percy’s enthusiasm for his land and music, thought his folk song settings ‘splendid’, and his piano playing the greatest he had ever heard. He became a father figure to the young composer, encouraging him above all towards folk song.

The ground had been prepared by Grainger’s upbringing in Australia, where his mother, a piano teacher, nurtured a formidable technique on the instrument – a concert he gave aged 12 was described by the Melbourne critics as ‘nearly flawless’ – along with a love and obsession for Icelandic sagas and Nordic culture in general. Here are the roots of Grainger’s lifelong obsession with ‘blue-eyed’ racial purity; also of an unhealthy closeness to, and dependence on, his mother. But it was Rose who raised the funds that enabled the 13-year-old Grainger to leave Australia for study in Germany. His piano professor there was needled by his keyboard precocity, but another awakened Percy’s interest in folk song and, aged 16, he discovered the tune *Willow Willow* in *Chappell’s Old English Popular Music* and provided it with his own piano accompaniment. He takes the falling fifth with which the melody opens and the modal inflections of its gently tumbling lines, and weaves them into an accompaniment that both derives from and underlines the latent qualities of the melody. His love for the tune is obvious, but does not inhibit him from putting his own stamp on it, such as the ravishingly sensual chromatic progression at the words ‘write this on my tomb, that in love I was true’. Grainger’s career as a folk song arranger was underway and Grieg was right: it would produce the best of him.

Another early success came with the *Irish Tune from County Derry* in 1902. Grainger’s concept of ‘elastic scoring’, whereby his music was constantly revisited, revised and ‘dished up’ for almost any imaginable combination of players, means it exists in versions for full orchestra, two different sizes of military band, ‘large room music’ and wordless chorus. But the piano solo version is in some ways the most characteristic, as it brings out something of Grainger’s highly individual style at the keyboard. The famous tune is for the most part placed in the middle of a many-voiced texture, from where the pianist’s thumbs must pick it out from among the surrounding ‘tone-strands’ and counter-melodies which Grainger – already a self-proclaimed ‘musical democrat’ – wanted to make as equal as possible.

By 1903, Grainger’s career as a touring pianist was in full swing, but he still found time to dip into Sir Walter Scott’s collection *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* in search of folk material. One of the songs he found there, *Lord Maxwell’s Goodnight*, recounts one of the bloodiest family feuds in Scottish history. Grainger took the first half of the tune from the *Minstrelsy* and added a soaring second half to balance it. Another discovery was a dark Scottish ballad called *The Twa Corbies*. This had words but no tune, so Grainger invented a melody to follow every dark twist in the macabre tale of a ‘new-slain knight’ whose body is left to the crows.

In contrast, another self-penned ‘folk’ melody, *Walking Tune*, breathes an air of contentment. It was thought up as ‘a whistling accompaniment’ to Grainger’s tramping feet while on a walking tour of Scotland, then dished up for wind ‘5-some’ and later for solo piano. On the other hand *The Sussex Mummers’ Christmas Carol* is a genuine folk tune, originally taken down by Lucy Broadwood – one of the great pioneers of the English

Folk Song Society – who heard it sung door-to-door by wassailing ‘tipteers’ deep in the Sussex countryside. These ‘outway songsters’ had a processional tune of real nobility to end their seasonal plays, and Grainger responded with a magical setting for piano, dedicated ‘lovingly and reverently’ to the memory of Grieg.

Until now Grainger had discovered his folk songs in books. But the influence of Lucy Broadwood, especially her famous lecture ‘On Collecting English Folk Songs’, inspired him to go out into the field, beginning with a trip to Brigg in 1905. He was bowled over by what he heard there. ‘These folk singers were the kings and queens of song!’ he declared. ‘No concert singer I ever heard, dull dogs that they are, approached these rural warblers in variety of tone quality, range of dynamics, rhythmic resourcefulness and individuality of style.’ From this point onwards, we find a gallery of supporting characters in the music of Grainger – the ‘rural warblers’ – whose folk songs he collected, arranged and immortalised.

Joseph Taylor of Saxby All Saints, Lincolnshire, was perhaps the greatest of them all, ‘a perfect artist in the very purest style of English folk song singing’ with an ‘unlimited storehouse of melodies’. His cautionary tale *The Sprig of Thyme* puns gently on ‘thyme’ (traditionally a symbol of virginity) and ‘time’. By this time Grainger had moved beyond the pad-and-pencil technique of Lucy Broadwood and become the first collector to make live recordings of folk singers in the field, using an Edison wax cylinder phonograph. It meant he could transcribe every detail of the ‘twiddles and bleating ornaments’ with which Joseph Taylor instinctively decorated his melody, not to mention using phonetics to make a simulacrum of his Lincolnshire dialect. But for all the science with which he collected folk songs, Grainger never forgets the human feelings that lay behind them; neither was he ashamed of his own in response: his settings express and encompass both. *The Sprig of Thyme* is for the most part simply and gracefully harmonised, but at the words ‘time it’ll bring all things to an end’ there is a harmonic progression of extraordinary richness – an expression, perhaps, of how moved Grainger was by both the song and its singer.

1906 was a bumper year in the field. Lucy Broadwood and Grainger jointly collected the song *Died for Love* from Joseph Taylor on 28 July, noting the ‘exquisite tender gaiety and gentle dance-like rhythmic lilt’ of his performance. Grainger brought the same qualities to his own setting – a three-part invention that gurgles away and reminds us that in the Percy-pantheon of composers Bach had pride of place (he placed himself ninth, just ahead of Mozart and Tchaikovsky!) A few days later, George Leaning of Barton-on-Humber contributed *The Pretty Maid Milkin’ Her Cow*, which Grainger introduces with simple, murmuring quavers in the piano and a harmonic progression that belongs in no textbook. Another Lincolnshire tune, *Knight and Shepherd’s Daughter*, was collected in the same year from William Roberts of Burringham-on-Trent and dished up for solo piano. Grainger takes it at a canter, depicting the insouciant confidence of a knight who ‘fain would have his will’, but also the softness of the maiden who finally yields to him. At the close, in a moment of unabashed eroticism, the knight’s tune is heard ‘inside’ her ‘harped’ chords. Back in Brigg, Grainger heard *Six Dukes Went Afishin’* sung by George Gouldthorpe in the Union Workhouse. It inspired one of the most simple and beautiful of all his folk song settings, with a courtly gait and characteristic moment of sensuality at the mention of ‘roses so sweet’.

It was dedicated to the tenor Gervase Elwes, who lived in Lincolnshire and often accompanied Percy on song-seeking expeditions.

*Bold William Taylor* was collected and arranged two years later. An enigmatic opening chord in the piano sets the scene for the story of Sally Gray, beginning ‘innocently and smoothly’, then livening into a brisk, light march rhythm which is kept up through all 12 verses. The astonishingly inventive piano writing reflects every twist and turn of Sally’s cross-dressing adventure – all the way to the final bar, where the fatal gunshot rings out as the player is instructed to ‘Bang fist or palm heavily on the lid of the piano’.

Another tale of heartbreak, *Hard Hearted Barb'ra (H)Ellen* took shape during the years of an intense and often troubled relationship with the Danish music student Karen Holten, whom Percy eventually married in 1916. It has 13 verses in which the same tune is repeated, with minor variations and inflections in the voice part, while the piano part runs the gamut of emotions in the story. Voice and piano gradually diverge, perhaps to express Barb'ra's blithe indifference to the fate of the boy whose death bell is heard tolling, appropriately out of time and out of sync with her melody. The softening of her own heart comes with the 'harped' piano chords of the ninth verse, before Grainger builds to an extraordinary and passionate climax.

Three other tunes dished up for piano in the same period give a fascinating glimpse into Grainger the 'keyed-hammer-string-player'. *One More Day, My John* is an end-of-voyage sea shanty that looks forward to the sight of land. The player is asked to press down three notes silently before the piece begins, catching their dampers with the sustaining pedal to create a 'wafted far-away lilt'; and some chords have as many as four different dynamic markings applied to different notes simultaneously. The amount of detail is astonishing for a piece that Grainger says is intended to serve merely as a 'preliminary canter before any piece in any key'. No less evocative is what he makes of a fragment of the old English tune *My Robin Is to the Greenwood Gone*, which had been a favourite basis for sets of variations by Renaissance composers. In 1912, Percy took it for a 'ramble' of his own. The wayward dreamscape he produced has the indefinable 'sense of flow' that his great friend Delius thought 'the only thing that matters'. Here is the *yin* to the *yang* of Grainger's most celebrated piece – *English Country Gardens*. Cecil Sharp had collected this Morris dance in 1908, so Grainger insisted he should take half the royalties when the arrangement he created ten years later made a lollipop out of a

folk-tune. Audiences loved it – and Grainger played it marvellously, but soon tired of having to wheel it out as an encore. 'A typical English country garden is more likely to be a vegetable plot than used to grow flowers', he remarked, 'so you can think of turnips as I play it...'

Grainger was a strange man. His eccentricities are an inescapable part of his story, and the catalogue of his oddities is well documented. There was the obsession with towelling clothing and intense physical activity, such as running between cities on concert tours, leaping down flights of stairs landing to landing, or over the top of the piano as he arrived on stage in gym kit. A collection of whips and bloodstained shirts in Melbourne's Grainger Museum testifies to a life-long affair with flagellation. His views on the superiority of Nordic 'blue-eyed' races led him to try to purge the English language of all Latin influences in favour of endearing Graingerisms – like 'tone-wright' (for composer), 'middle-fiddle' (for viola) and 'louden lots' (for crescendo) – but also had a darker side. We may or may not agree with his biographer John Bird when he says 'Percy Grainger was mad', but those he knew and loved him best, like the composer Cyril Scott, who talks of the 'defects of his qualities', understood that his strangeness was inextricably tied up with the original cast of his ever-fertile mind.

But of Rose's madness there can be little doubt. What Percy called their 'Together-Life' ended when she committed suicide in 1922, jumping from a skyscraper in New York City and leaving a note signed from 'your poor insane mother'. Shortly afterwards, Grainger heard a tune called *Kjaerlighedens Styrke* on a 'folk-fishing' trip in Denmark, where it was sung ('grippingly, piercingly, heart-searchingly') into his recording device by Ane Nielsen Post. She could only remember one verse, but both she and the song reminded Grainger of his mother, and he had what he needed to create a miniature psychodrama. *The Power of Love* begins with an extended piano prelude that seems to evoke the landscape of the Danish fjords; then the mist clears and the voice enters with a 'soul-seared' tune. After a 'heart-searching' interlude, the second verse simply repeats the words of the first, descending a semitone in pitch but raising the emotional temperature, before the music finally softens into the nostalgic reflections of a piano 'tail piece'. This 'Yule-gift' to his late 'beloved mother' is surely full of the turbulent feelings that Grainger felt for

the

woman with whom he was himself entwined ‘from root to top’.

The arrangement of *Early One Morning* has a similar strange intensity and could be by no one else. Grainger had first set the tune when he was 16 – the same year as *Willow Willow* – but returned to it again and again throughout his life until he arrived at the version published in 1940 in New York, by which time he was in a second, more successful marriage to a Swedish poet, Ella Ström. The piano introduction moves from minor to major, as Percy makes much of the contrast between the innocent maiden and her uncomplicated tune, and what he once called ‘the doom-fraught undertow that lurks in all deep love.’ There is something truly anguished about the final verse, where the piano takes the melody and the singer vaults to the highest register to vocalise the maiden’s pain. ‘Music is the art of agony,’ Grainger once said. ‘It derives, after all, from screaming.’

The extraordinary dying strains of *Early One Morning* are, like so much of Grainger’s music, an encounter between simplicity and sophistication. ‘There is not much get-together between the pomp world and the yeoman’, Grainger once said, but his music stages just such a meeting, as the art of folk singers from backwaters across rural England is heard in parallel with the ‘heartoutbursts’ they provoked in Percy’s deeply complex psyche. This mercurial all-or-nothing was, as Peter Pears said, ‘a “committed” composer in the fullest sense, committed to skills and feelings based on human associations, to shared enthusiasms and experiences, to simple joys and sorrows.’ H.G. Wells put it even better: ‘Percy, you are trying to do a more difficult thing than to record folk song: you are trying to record *life*.’

**Christopher Glynn**





## GRAINGER'S SUNG TEXTS

### 1 Bold William Taylor

I'll sing you a song about two lovers,  
O from Lichfeeddeld town thā came;  
O the young man's nāme was Willyum Tāylor,  
The māaden's name was Sally Grāy.

Nō for a soldier Willyum's 'listed,  
For a soldier he 'as gone,  
He's gone and left sweet lovelī Sally  
Fōer te sigh adden fōer tō mourn.

Sally's parents thāe controlled 'er,  
Filled 'er 'eart fōll of grēef and woe;  
And then at last she vowed an' said  
For a soldier she would go.

She dressed herseddelf idden man's apparel,  
Man's appariddel she pot ōn;  
Adden for to seek bold Willyum Taylor,  
And for te seek him she 'as gone.

Wōn dāy as she wās exercisin'  
Exercisin' amongst the rest,  
With a silver chēan hung down her wāastcoat  
And there he spied her lilywhite breast.

And then the capten he stepped up to her  
Āst her what had brought her there:  
'I've come te seek my own trēō lover,  
He has proved tō me sevēre.'

'If you've come te seek yer own true lover,  
Prāy tell tō me his name.'  
'His name it is boddeld Willyum Taylor,  
O from Leitchfeeddeld town he came.'

'If his nāme it is bold Willyum Taylor,  
And he has prōved tō you sevēre,  
He's got married to adden Irish lady  
He gōt married the ōther yēer.

'If you rise earlī in the mornin',  
Early by the brēk of dāy,  
Then yōu shall spy bold Willyum Taylor  
Walkin' with this lady gāy.'

Then She rose earlī in the mornin',  
Early by the brēk of dāy,  
And there she spied bold Willyum Taylor  
Awalkin' with this lady gāy.

And then she called for a brāce of pistils,  
A brāce of pistils at her command,  
And there she shot bold Willyum Taylor  
With his bride at his right 'and.

And then the capten he was well plēe-zed,  
Wās well plēe-zed what she had dōne;  
And there he made her a gret comaddender,  
Aboard of a ship āver all his men.

### 2 Six Dukes Went Afishin'

Six Dukes went āfishin' dōn by yon sēā sāed;  
Wōn of them spied a dead bōdy goin floatiddin  
with the tide.

They wōn said to itch ōther thē-ese words Ā've  
heard them sā:  
'It's the Rōēyull Duke of Grant'am what the tide  
'as ē wshed awā.'

Thā tōk him ūp to Portsmōth, to a plāce whēre  
he was nōn:  
From there up to London, to the plāce where he  
was born.

Thā-a tōk ōt his bowils and stretch-ed ōt his fēet,  
And they balm-ed his body with rosis se sweet.

He nō lies betwixt two towers, he nō lies in  
cold clā  
When the Rōēyull Queen of Grant'am went  
weepin' awā.

### 4 Lord Maxwell's Goodnight

Adieu, Madame, my mother dear,  
But and my sisters three, O!  
Adieu, fair Robert of Orchards tane,  
My heart is woe for thee, O!  
Adieu the lily and the rose,  
The primrose fair to see, O!  
Adieu, my ladye and only joy,  
For I may not stay with thee, O!

Tho I hae slain the Lord Johnstone  
What care I for his feid, O!  
My noble mind their wrath disdains,  
He was my father's deid, O!  
Both night and day I labor'd oft  
Of him avenged to be, O!  
But now I've got what lang I sought,  
And I may not stay with thee, O!

Then he tuik off a gay gold ring,  
There at hung signets three, O!  
'Hae, tak thee that mine ain dear thing,  
And still hae mind O' me, O!  
But if thou take another Lord  
Ere I came over the sea, O!  
His life is but a three days lease,  
Tho' I may not stay wi' thee, O!

The wind was fair, the ship was clear,  
That good Lord went away, O!  
And most part of his friends were there  
To give him a fair convey, O!  
They drank the wine, they didna spair,  
E'en in that gude lord's sight, O!  
Sae now he's o'er the flood's sae grey  
And Lord Maxwell's ta'en his goodnight, O!

### 6 The Pretty Maid Milkin' Her Cow

It was early one fine summer's morning  
When the birds sat and sung oden each bough,  
I heard a young damsel thus singing  
Thedden as she sat milkin' her cow.

She sang with a voice so melodious,  
Which made me scarce able to go  
For my heart it e was smother'd e with sorrow,  
By the pretty maid milkin' her cow.

### 7 The Sprig of Thyme

Wunst I had a sprig of thyme,  
It prospered by night and by day  
Till a false young man came a-courtin' te me  
And he stole all this thyme away.

The gardiner was standiddin by;  
I bade him chēoose for me:  
When the lily and the violet and the pink,  
But I really did refuse them all three.

Thyme it is the prettiest thing  
And time it e will grow on,  
And time it'll bring all things to an end,  
Addend so doz my time grow on.

It's very well drinkin' ale  
And it's very well drinkin' wine;  
But it's far better sittin' by a young man's side  
That has won this heart of mine.

### 9 The Twa Corbies

As I was walking all alane,  
I heard twa corbies making a mane;  
The tane unto the t'other say,  
'Where sall we gang and dine today?'

'In behint yon auld fail dyke,  
I wot there lies a new-slain knight;  
And naebody kens that he lies there,  
But his hawk, his hound and lady fair.

His hound is to the hunting gane,  
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl hame,  
His lady's ta'en another mate,  
So we may make our dinner sweet.

Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,  
And I'll pike out his bonny blue een;  
Wi' a lock o' his gowden hair  
We'll theek our nest when it grows bare.

Mony a one for him makes mane,  
But nane sall ken where his is gane:  
O'er his white banes, when they are bare,  
The wind sall blaw for evermair.'

### 11 Died for Love

I wish my baby it e was born,  
Lyn' smiling on its father's knee,  
Add-nd I was dead and in my grave,  
And green gress growin' all over me.

Dig me my grave long, wide and deep,  
Put a marbil stone at my head and feet;  
But a turtle-white dove put over above  
For to let the world know that I died for love.

### 12 The Power of Love

A green growing tree in my father's orchard  
stands,  
I really do believe it is a willow tree,  
Its branches twine together so close from root  
to top  
And so do likewise true love and fond heart's  
desire in summertime.

### 14 Willow Willow

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,  
Sing willow willow willow:  
With his hand in his bosom  
And his head upon his knee.  
O willow willow willow willow,  
O willow willow willow willow  
Shall be my garland;  
Sing all a green willow, willow willow willow;  
Aye me the green willow must be my garland.

He sighed in his singing and made a great moan,  
Sing willow willow willow:  
I am dead to all pleasure,  
My true love she is gone.  
O willow willow willow willow,  
O willow willow willow willow  
Shall be my garland;  
Sing all a green willow, willow willow willow;  
Aye me the green willow must be my garland.

Take this for my farewell and latest adieu,  
Sing willow willow willow,  
Write this on my tomb,  
That in love I was true.  
O willow willow willow willow,  
O willow willow willow willow  
Shall be my garland;  
Sing all a green willow, willow willow willow;  
Aye me the green willow must be my garland.

### 15 Early One Morning

Early one morning just as the sun was rising,  
I heard a maid sing in the valley below:  
'O don't deceive me, O never leave me!  
How could you use a poor maiden so?'

Remember the vows that you made to your  
Mary,  
Remember the bow'r where you vow'd to be true.  
'O don't deceive me, O never leave me!  
How could you use a poor maiden so?'

17 **Hard Hearted Barb'ra (H)Ellen**  
In Scotland I was bred adden born,  
In Scotland was e my dwellin';  
And there I courted a pretty mäd,  
And her name was Bahbre (H)Ellen.

I courted her for a month or two,  
Thinkin' I should gän her favour;  
But never to me did she prove kind,  
For all the coort I paid 'er.

Then I sent a servant to er e house,  
The house that she did dwell in;  
Sayhin' 'My master wants te speak with you,  
If your name be Bahbre (H)Ellen.'

Aw slowly, slowly she got up,  
And slowly she came nigh him;  
And all she said, when she came there:  
'Yoong man, I think you're dyin.'

Then he stretched oat his lily-white arms,  
Thinkin' to pull her to him;  
She turned her back and went awä.  
Then he cried: 'Hard hearted Bahbre (H)Ellen.'

As she was walkin' the 'igh church-yard  
She heard his death bell tollin';  
And every toll it seemed to sä  
'Hard-hearted Bahbre (H)Ellen.'

As she was walkin' the streets along  
She met his curpse acomin'.  
'Lä doan, lä doan this curpse of clä,  
That I may gaze epun 'im.

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DDD



'Glynn's eloquent playing' and 'Booth's expressiveness so intense, the colours of the voice so beautiful' (*Guardian*) shine in equal measure on this programme of iconoclast and musical innovator Percy Grainger's incredibly nuanced settings of British folk tunes for both accompanied voice and piano solo.



# PERCY GRAINGER 1882-1961

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CLAIRE BOOTH SOPRANO (piano duet: 18)

CHRISTOPHER GLYNN PIANO

Total time: 58.11

Booklet with sung texts enclosed

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