

# Composers of Great Band Works

by Dr. Brian Harris, Bandroom.com Publications

## George Percy Grainger (1882 - 1961)

### Lifeline

- born in Brighton, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia
- was the only child of a middle-class family.
- from age 5 to 10 he received piano instruction from his mother.
- his mother insisted upon and supervised his two hours of daily practice.
- his academic schooling was given by a neighbor.
- at 10, studied with Louis Pabst, a European concert pianist who retired in Melbourne.
- at 13, he (with his mother) went to Germany to study music in Frankfurt.
- at 19, due to his mother's failing health, they moved to London.
- two years later, he embarked on a concert tour of Australia and South Africa.
- at 23, he attended a lecture by Lucy Broadwood, sparking his interest in folk-song.
- the first all-Grainger concert featured his choral settings of folk-song (aged 29).
- when W.W.I broke out, Grainger (age 32) and his mother left England for New York.
- at 35, he assumed full American citizenship.
- four years later, his mother, whose mental health was diminishing, committed suicide.
- was married (at age 46) to Ella Ström, a Swedish artist and socialite.
- the wedding was during a concert intermission at the Hollywood Bowl, before an audience of 22,000.
- *Lincolnshire Posy* was completed and premiered in March, 1937 (Grainger was 54).
- in later years, he often agreed to make concert appearances for free in exchange for the performance of one or more of his works.
- around the age of 74, he was diagnosed with abdominal cancer.
- died peacefully, with his wife at his side, aged 78 years.



### Anecdotes and Trivia

- his father (John) was a successful architect, but tended to drink to excess.
- his mother (Rose) used a horsewhip on her husband when he came home drunk.
- was overwhelmingly influenced by his mother.
- was world-famous in his lifetime as a concert pianist and arranger of folk-music.
- was known as an energetic, eccentric individual.
- was more interested in composing than performing.
- he regarded piano-playing as a chore and an unpleasant way to earn a living.
- played saxophone in the US military as a bandsman during W.W.I.
- one of his favorite hobbies was going to movies.
- became a vegetarian in his early forties.
- rejected the use of Italian as the language for score markings and instead used colloquial English (slowing off, louden lots, slightly faster, clingingly, etc.).
- felt that performance and listening to many types of music were the basis of music education.
- was ambitious to become the first notable Australian composer.
- built and furnished a museum devoted to himself.



### Suggested Readings

*Percy Grainger* by John Bird (1976)

*The Percy Grainger Companion* by Lewis Foreman, ed. (1981)

*Percy Grainger: the man behind the music* by Eileen Dorum (1986)