

Beyond Brigg Fair: Music Making with Grainger's Ghosts

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[SLIDE 1. TITLE PAGE]

Introduction

Australian jazz musician and arts intellectual Paul Grabowsky states, “One thing that musicians have to learn to understand is their own process and how to *own* it”. This process, he explains, “only starts to reveal itself in hindsight, and over a considerable period of time.” (Grabowsky, 2010) As part of my PhD research at the University of Sydney, I composed *A Day at the Fair*, a 16 part song cycle. This involved “processing” a corpus of English folk songs from recordings by Joseph Taylor, which had been either made by or facilitated by the Australian musical maverick Percy Grainger between 1906 and 1908 during the first English folk music revival.

In this presentation I will discuss and illustrate my creative interaction with Taylor's recordings—what Hans-Georg Gadamer would call my “encounter with an unfinished event”(Gadamer, 1975, p. 90).

[SLIDE 2 – CREATIVE PROCESSES]

I will trace, in the terms of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, the dynamic relationship between Taylor's captured performances, my compositional “play” on these, and my ensembles' subsequent interpretational play on the musical score I produced (see Benson 2011, 301). Gadamer would claim that the “being” of Taylor's folk songs “is in motion”, and through such compositional and interpretational processes the songs would experience an “increase in being” (see Benson 2011, 301). As I will indicate, in various fascinating ways the spectre of Percy Grainger mediated this “increase” at each stage of the development of *A Day at the Fair*.

[SLIDE 3 – DEVELOPMENT SPIRAL]

My presentation will retrace the processes involved in bringing *A Day at the Fair* into being as a creative work, beginning with i) my encounter with the original text – Taylor's songs as

recorded, ii) learning each of these aurally, iii) creating a scored version by “improvising” upon each of Taylor’s songs, in the sense of re-imagining each of these for quintet, and iv) “improvising” upon these scores in performance, in the sense of “bringing the scores to life”, as well as in the jazz sense of augmenting the scores through “in-the-moment” extemporisation.

Drawing on Gadamer’s dynamic conception of the artwork and on ideas from the ethnomusicology of jazz I will relate how, in a number of unplanned ways, my composition, *A Day at the Fair*, developed an affinity with Percy Grainger beyond the obvious debt it owes to him as the original collector of Taylor’s songs. My aim is to convey how in my creative practice informed research I am attempting to ‘understand my own process’ and (tentatively) point to what I believe it means in relation to the wider, global context of jazz.

The development of *A Day at the Fair*

In my search for a corpus of interrelated English folk songs on which to base an extended musical composition, I encountered the activities of the London based Folk-Song Society. (My interest in looking for such material was sparked by, among other things, the positive critical reception of my 2008 project titled *Bearing the Bell*, which comprised the reworking in a jazz idiom of a set of hymn tunes by the English Tudor composer, Thomas Tallis). In 1908 Percy Grainger contributed an article to the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, “Collecting with the Phonograph”, in which he outlined his newfound confidence in the device as the most efficient and accurate way to document and preserve folk songs.

A footnote in Grainger’s article led me directly to a set of twelve songs that would form the foundation of a new work I intended to compose.

“I delight to say that the Gramophone Co. has started making records of genuine folk singers. They have begun with Mr. Joseph Taylor, of Saxby-All-Saints and have recorded his renderings of the following songs, which will very shortly be available”

[SLIDE 4. GRAINGER FOOTNOTE]

[SLIDE 5. PHOTOS - TAYLOR/GRAINGER/FOLKSINGERS]

Of the 12 tunes listed in this footnote, 11 had been re-released on vinyl in 1972 by Leader Records, under the title, *Unto Brigg Fair* (Taylor, 1972); inexplicably, the twelfth tune, 'Georgie', had been omitted from this re-release. It is possible that a copy of 'Georgie' from Taylor's 1908 London recordings is still in existence, however to date I have been able to locate one. (I will return to this missing tune later).

[SLIDE 6. IMAGE - UNTO BRIGG FAIR COVER]

I began learning each of Taylor's songs by ear from the *Unto Brigg Fair* record; this was a deliberate effort to continue the traditional means of folk song transmission, an approach it shares with jazz. From this point I became involved in a concentrated period of composition and the subsequent setting of the new material for jazz quintet.

The Taylor recordings are of unaccompanied vocal performances, each comprising a single melodic line that in most cases is no more than 8 bars long. This afforded me considerable freedom in the blending or integration of elements of the folk song tunes with my own musical ideas, and structures and techniques derived ultimately from the language of jazz.

Grainger's Ghosts

Before discussing specific aspects of the work, I will briefly address the unplanned and unexpected ways in which Percy Grainger's musical legacy shadowed the development and subsequent performances of my work, *A Day at the Fair*. In retrospect it seems fitting that this musical eccentric and his curiosity regarding both folk and jazz music is associated with the "play"-fullness involved in bringing my suite into existence.

In the context of exploring reinterpretations of iconic jazz works recorded by Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane, ethnomusicologist and jazz musician David Borgo refers to the blending of

existing musical constructs and their augmentation in performance, which can result in new content and new meanings (Borgo 2004, 13). While Borgo doesn't have in mind the kind of cross-genre blending involved in *A Day at the Fair*, the processes and potential results he discusses relate directly to my work. These he describes as follows:

Composition projects the content from each of the inputs into the blended space, completion fills out the pattern in the blend by referencing information in long-term memory, and elaboration involves extending or applying the now fully formed blend into new domains or new situations. (Borgo 2004, 12)

Borgo interprets the idea of long-term cognitive memory as “one’s lifetime of musical and cultural experience” (Borgo 2004, 13), however this idea could also fold in the less explicitly performance-oriented domains of Percy Grainger’s uninvited—yet not unwelcome—“presence” surrounding my creative reworking of songs he collected more than a century earlier. These, I believe, contributed significantly to “increasing” (in Gadamer’s sense) the meaning potentials of the original folk songs and the ways I processed them—from aural learning, to re-composition in a jazz idiom, to rehearsal, and ultimately live performances (and critical review), which involved further musical elaboration.

First, was the discovery, due to a chance conversation, of a French Mustel orchestral harmonium kept in storage at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and believed to have been owned and played by Grainger in several concerts there in May of 1935.

[SLIDE 7. PHOTO - MUSTEL HARMONIUM]

Following restoration work, I used this harmonium in the Sydney performance of my piece in October last year. Further, and fittingly, this performance took place in Verbrugghen Hall, the Conservatorium’s main concert space and the venue of Grainger’s 1935 performances.

Knowledge of Grainger's interest in English folksong and his connection with the Folk-Song Society led me to call on the assistance of the Grainger Museum in Melbourne, in particular with my search for a recording of *Georgie*, the track mentioned in Grainger's footnote and omitted from *Unto Brigg Fair*. After an extensive search of the museum's archives, a cassette copy of Grainger's 1906 phonograph field recording of Taylor performing *Georgie* was uncovered. I now had recordings of Joseph Taylor singing all twelve of the songs listed in the Grainger footnote. In the process, Grainger Museum curator, Brian Allison, offered the Museum as the venue for the premiere of my work as well as the use of Grainger's Estey harmonium for the performance.

My work, *A Day at the Fair*, I propose, indirectly alludes to and also illuminates aspects of Grainger's restless musical eclecticism. Moving to America in 1915, Grainger became an early champion of the saxophone, taking up the instrument as a United States army bandsman.

[SLIDE 8. PHOTO - GRAINGER IN ARMY BAND]

Also, as early as 1924, and around the same time as George Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue* but before other leading American and European composers, Grainger was an early advocate of jazz. At a New York University lecture Grainger delivered in 1932, he invited Duke Ellington and his band to assist in demonstrating some of his ideas about musical development, introducing Ellington as "one of the three greatest composers who ever lived" (Bird, 1999, p. 240).

[SLIDE 9. PHOTO - GRAINGER/ELLINGTON/MILLS]

While the "blending" (Borgo 2004, 12) of jazz and English folk music remains uncommon, the conception and realisation of *A Day at the Fair* has allowed "new content and new meanings to develop" by strengthening, through compositional and improvisatory play, a number of apparently disparate threads woven by Grainger many decades ago around these musical idioms and their sound worlds.

***A Day at the Fair* in greater detail**

[SLIDE 10. MELBOURNE CONCERT PROGRAMME]

You will notice that there are now 16 pieces listed rather than the 12 items of the Grainger footnote. In explanation, I begin and end the work with 'A Sprig of Thyme' in order to convey a sense of completion and resolution. Both of my versions are in Taylor's key of A major, and to further link my work with the Taylor recordings, the opening piece begins with unaccompanied saxophone, as if echoing Taylor's solo voice. The three other additional pieces are original compositions, inspired by the traditional melodies.

'Georgie'

I would now like to more closely examine two of the traditional melodies in my song cycle and explain how I approached the task of re-working and orchestrating them.

First, I would like to play 'Georgie', the missing 12th track from Grainger's footnote but located for me by the Grainger Museum.

[SLIDE 11. 'GEORGIE' – GRAINGER TRANSCRIPTION]

[PLAY TRACK – TAYLOR'S "GEORGIE"]

[SLIDE 12. PHOTO - EDISON PHONOGRAPH]

Move to piano and play the original 8 bar melody followed by slowly playing and explaining how the melody was stretched by adding space between the phrases and by repeating the 2nd last phrase, this results in the opening melody now lasting 21 bars. A 12 bar bridge was also added – play this.

The final form of the piece conforms to the established song form of AABA common to many standard jazz compositions and an obvious link to the jazz language shared by the members of my ensemble.

[SLIDE 13. 'GEORGIE' – APPLICATION OF JAZZ LANGUAGE AS PROCESS]

[PLAY TRACK – ROBSON'S 'GEORGIE' FROM SYDNEY CONCERT]

'Brigg Fair'

The second track I would like to consider in more detail is 'Brigg Fair', which, of all the traditional tunes in my song cycle is probably the most widely familiar. Its popularity is due in part to Grainger's own 1906 treatment of the song as a solo for tenor voice and vocal chorus but perhaps it is more familiar as an orchestral arrangement by Frederick Delius.

Upon hearing this striking melody it is easy to understand its attraction. To me, this simple tune achieves a feeling of understated melancholy and I wanted to retain this quality in my own arrangement while again, stretching the form and creating some harmonic movement for the soloists.

[SLIDE 14. 'BRIGG FAIR' – GRAINGER TRANSCRIPTION]

Here is the 1908 Gramophone Co. recording of Joseph Taylor singing 'Brigg Fair'—the slide shows Grainger's transcription of the performance.

[PLAY TRACK – JOSEPH TAYLOR'S 'BRIGG FAIR']

[SLIDE 15. 'BRIGG FAIR' – APPLICATION OF JAZZ LANGUAGE AS PROCESS]

In considering 'Brigg Fair' as another example of my compositional approach, after learning the piece from the Taylor recording by ear, I played the minor melody over a tonic drone. To me, this melody suggested both a slow-to-medium tempo and a straight 8th note rhythmic feel. I composed a new section by modulating via a I Dominant to IV minor. At this point an extended minor blues harmonic form suggested itself, that is, rather than the common 12 bar cycle, I chose to use a 24 bar harmonic cycle. I keep the traditional melody intact by stretching the duration of the tonic chord to 16 bars while it (the melody) is heard, and reduce it to 8 bars during the improvised solos. The blues, itself a folk form, was a musical structure I was interested in adapting and incorporating in some way throughout my practice-research in order

to created a stronger relationship between my own musical language and the traditional folk song material.

My final harmonic structure for 'Brigg Fair' delays the arrival of the V7 chord via a sequence of 3 additional harmonic changes. First, moving down a major 3rd to Ab maj7(#11), then a tri-tone to D7 (functioning as V7 of V7), but delaying the V chord a little longer by moving up a half step to Ebmaj7 (the relative maj), before finally sounding the V7 chord in an altered form.

[SLIDE 16. 'BRIGG FAIR' – LEAD SHEET (ROBSON ARRANGEMENT)]

Melodically, the new form can be considered in three parts:

- Section A – The original melody (8 bars duration)
- Section B – New melodic material in 2 question and answer phrases (8 bars duration)
- Section C – New melodic material over 4 x 2 bar harmonic sequence (8 bars duration)

This new harmonic form is used both for the melody and subsequent improvisations

[SLIDE 17. 'BRIGG FAIR' – TIMELINE AND ANALYSIS OF ROBSON SYDNEY PERFORMANCE]

Before concluding my presentation with a clip of 'Brigg Fair' taken from the performance at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music on the 24th of October last year, I offer the following brief summary thoughts.

In attempting to better understand my own creative process through my research, I have drawn on ideas from both Gadamer's hermeneutics and jazz scholarship. The ideas of "being in motion" and "increase in being" as well as "blending" and the construction of new meaning is leading me to consider some of the ways jazz practice in Australia does not simply comprise a set of responses to the main streams of the jazz tradition in the northern hemisphere.

As Borgo writes, musical blends "may become established in conventions of thought and, in turn, allow for other distinct blends to emerge"(Borgo, 2004) Perhaps it is time to consider that

creative activity in the South constitutes an alternative model of and for jazz sound and practice, one that enriches jazz cultures globally.

[VIDEO CLIP OF 'BRIGG FAIR']

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