‘Into a cocked-hat’: The folk song arrangements of Percy Grainger, Cecil Sharp and Benjamin Britten
Graham Freeman

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At first glance, it might appear as though Percy Grainger was determined to avoid the traditional musical aesthetics to which many of his more conservative peers subscribed. Through innovations ranging from complex rhythmic structures that he called ‘beatless music’, to ‘elastic scoring’, and eventually to his microtonal or gliding ‘free music’, Grainger was determined to be a musical trailblazer, despite the fact that his status as a composer never managed to keep pace with his reputation as a pianist. But one of the very few places in which Grainger attempted to make some headway in a more commercially successful genre was in his settings of English folk songs for voice and piano. Song settings such as these, which had been a popular chamber and domestic genre as far back as Beethoven’s settings of Scottish and Irish folk songs, had flourished throughout the 19th century, and had been further invigorated by the late-Victorian folk song revival in England, during which time folk song became the soundtrack for an insistent English nationalism.¹

I begin here by providing a short history of Grainger’s study of English folk song from 1905 to 1909. I follow this with an examination of some of Grainger’s folk song settings as they compare with those of one of the more prominent arrangers of his day, Cecil Sharp. Finally, I show how Grainger’s folk song arrangements influenced those of Benjamin Britten, which stand not only as sophisticated and poignant compositions, but also as representations of the way in which Britten used both the legacy of Grainger and English folk song to enact a radical politics of emancipation.

English folk song: The ideology of pastoralism

Grainger’s folk song arrangements have their origin in his ethnographic fieldwork in England from 1905 to 1909, during which time he spent a total of 52 days collecting in Lincolnshire, Warwickshire and Gloucestershire.² The study of folk music in England in the early part of the 20th century was largely dictated by a group of scholar-antiquarians known as the Folk Song Society (hereafter FSS), who published an annual journal of transcriptions and commentary entitled the Journal of the Folk Song Society (hereafter JFSS). The FSS was the home organisation of many of the people—such as Cecil Sharp, Lucy Broadwood, Frank Kidson and Ralph Vaughan Williams—whose efforts
helped preserve hundreds of traditional English songs. Grainger’s collection of approximately 450 songs is by no means the largest among his peers, but it bears the distinction of being the first in England gathered with the aid of a phonograph. After 1906, Grainger began using a phonograph to supplement the traditional pencil-and-paper method of his colleagues in the FSS in order to create transcriptions of intricate descriptive detail far in excess of anything that had appeared thus far in the JFSS. These transcriptions were published in the 1908 volume of the JFSS in an article entitled ‘Collecting with the phonograph’, an article that stands as Grainger’s only published scholarship on that particular repertoire."

‘Collecting with the phonograph’ was not merely a collection of transcriptions with commentary; nor was the response to it by the members of the FSS particularly collegial. Grainger maintained two distinct ideas about English folk song that placed him firmly in opposition to the members of the FSS. Firstly, Grainger’s use of the phonograph to make descriptive transcriptions that documented every minute detail of the singer’s performance contrasted starkly with the editorial practices of the FSS. As Grainger put it in his article:

“To my mind the very greatest boon of the gramophone and phonograph is that they record not merely the tunes and words of fine folk-songs, but give an enduring picture of the live art and traditions of peasant and sailor singing and fiddling; together with a record of the dialects of different districts, and of such entertaining accessories as the vocal quality, singing-habits, and other personal characteristics of singers. And a knowledge of such points is every bit as indispensable to good renderings of folkmusic as is experience of the traditions of cultured music to its proper interpretation. I think that most folk-song enthusiasts who have had the good luck to hear the singing of gifted folk-singers and chantymen, must feel that much of the attractiveness of the live art lies in the execution as well as in the contents of the songs, and will surely welcome the ability of the gramophone and phonograph to retain for future ages what is otherwise but a fleeting impression.”

This perspective on English folk song, one in which the detail of each individual performance constituted the value of the song, was clearly in opposition to that of the FSS, for whom the value lay only in the song itself. For collectors such as Cecil Sharp and Frank Kidson, the worth of the song was in its existence as a sort of historical fetish-object that was to be collected, edited and restored to a state of pristine beauty. This included eliminating any aspects of individual performance practice and reducing the musical material...
to the most accessible level possible, in order to gain a wider audience for the song. Individual idiosyncrasies in the performances, interpretive subtleties and all the signature elements of the performers themselves were to be removed in order to produce a uniform, and allegedly historically authentic, rendering of the song in print. As Frank Kidson noted when referring to a song he had collected from one of his sources: ‘Like all melodies by him it is jerky and cut up. It wants all the creases ironing out and the demi-semi quavers clearing away’.7

The second issue was by far the most contentious. While previous collectors such as Sharp, Vaughan Williams and Kidson had advocated a modal melodic structure for English folk song, as well as maintaining that any microtonal deviation from this model constituted error on the part of the singer, Grainger’s intensive work with the phonograph had demonstrated to him something quite contrary, as he stated in ‘Collecting with the phonograph’:

My conception of folk-scales, after a study of them in the phonograph, may be summed up as follows: that the singers from whom I have recorded do not seem to me to have sung in three different and distinct modes (Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian), but to have rendered their modal songs in one single loosely-knit modal folk-song scale, embracing within itself the combined Mixolydian, Dorian, and Aeolian characteristics.8

In one short paragraph, Grainger had refuted a heretofore commonly accepted ‘fact’ of English folk music studies. The editorial committee of the JFSS, aware of the implications of Grainger’s statement, replied with the following caveat placed near the beginning of Grainger’s article:

The Editing Committee, in considering Mr. Grainger’s theories which are based on most careful observation, wish to point out that the general experience of collectors goes to show that English singers most rarely alter their mode in singing the same song. About the value of the phonograph as an aid to collecting there can be no doubt; whether it is sufficiently perfect as yet to be preferred as a substitute for the human ear is still a disputable point. Similar careful records and analysis of the performances of trained singers and instrumentalists would therefore be of great value in helping to determine this.9
Grainger’s article placed him in clear opposition to the orthodox position of the FSS concerning both the aesthetics and the performance practice of English folk song, and although Grainger appears not to have taken such criticism too much to heart, he moved away from the collection of English folk song shortly after the publication of his article. It is against the background of this contentious history with the FSS that Grainger began his first forays into the well-established field of folk song arrangement for voice and piano.

The style of Grainger’s folk song settings

Soon after having begun his collecting expedition in England, Grainger told Cecil Sharp: ‘I don’t wish to come forward as an arranger yet awhile, altho’ in some 15 to 20 years time I hope to myself publish a folkmusic book; settings, etc’. Grainger had already set a number of English folk tunes, mostly as found in publications such as William Chappell’s *Popular music of the olden times*, but he was reluctant yet to dive into that popular activity with the tunes he had collected. Possibly he was unwilling to divulge this information to Sharp, for although they did have a mutual respect for one another as collectors, Grainger was generally dismissive of Sharp’s musicianship. In 1909, Grainger wrote of having attended a children’s recital of morris dancing with Lucy Broadwood in Stanton, near Broadway in Worcestershire:

> The Morris dances are charming, & the 2 best tunes (those 2 I have sketched settings of ‘Shepherd’s Hey’ & ‘Country Flowers’) have dances to them just as jolly as Sharpe’s [sic] harmonic treatment of the tunes is revolting.

Precisely what it was about Sharp’s setting that Grainger found so offensive is unclear from this passage, but one can deduce from Sharp’s own words what it was that so rubbed Grainger the wrong way. Sharp’s philosophy for the creation of a folk song setting was as follows:

Sir Charles Stanford, for instance, advocates a frankly modern treatment [...] Personally, I take a different view [...] for it seems to me that of the many distinctive characteristics of the folk-air one of the most vital—at any rate, the one I would least willingly sacrifice—is that which makes it impossible to put a date or assign a period to it, which gives the folk-art the quality of permanence, makes it impervious to the passage of time, and so enable it to satisfy equally the artistic ideal of every age. Now, if we follow Sir Charles Stanford’s advice and frankly decorate our folk-tunes with
the fashionable harmonies of the day, we make very beautiful and attractive music,—as Sir Charles has undoubtedly done,—but we shall effectually rob them of their most characteristic folk-qualities, and thereby convert them into art-songs indistinguishable from the ‘composed’ songs of the day. Surely, it would be wiser to limit ourselves to those harmonies which are as independent of ‘period’ as the tunes themselves, for example, of those of the diatonic genus, which have formed the basis and been the mainstay of harmonic music throughout its history, and upon which musicians of every age and of every school have, in greater or less degree, depended; and further, seeing that the genuine folk-art never modulates, never wavers from its allegiance to one fixed tonal centre, to avoid modulation, or use it very sparingly.\(^\text{12}\)

Leaving aside for the moment the impossibility of a ‘timeless’ harmonic accompaniment that exists without any trace of an individual compositional hand, we can see the cause for Grainger’s concern in Sharp’s advocacy of a harmonic setting that contained neither modulation nor chromaticism. An example of Sharp’s arrangements will not only demonstrate this point further, but will provide a useful point of comparison for Grainger’s arrangements. Example 1 shows the first stanza of ‘William Taylor’ as arranged by Sharp:\(^\text{13}\)

True to his word, the accompaniment never wanders from the D Mixolydian mode that Sharp has assigned to the tune, while the regular and unwavering rhythm betrays perhaps the pervasive influence of the schoolhouse for which he arranged so many of these tunes, as well as his inability to move creatively beyond the simple harmonisation exercises that would likely have constituted some of his musical education at Cambridge.

Example 2 shows part of the first stanza of Sharp’s setting of ‘The trees they do grow high’ from the same publication. Here, not only does the harmonic scheme show the strictest allegiance to the mode of G Dorian, but also the lilting 6/8 rhythm is maintained throughout the entire tune:

‘Revolting’ is perhaps too strong a term for Sharp’s settings, but we could instead describe them as pedestrian or even a trifle dull. Sharp’s allegiance was to the tune first and foremost, as well as to his mission to disseminate the songs as widely as possible, particularly among children, thereby prompting him to assume that a simple and unobtrusive harmonic treatment would be best. Grainger’s settings are markedly different in this regard; the following examples provide a sufficient demonstration. Example 3 is the first stanza of ‘Bold William Taylor’ as collected from Joseph Taylor and transcribed by Grainger in his 1908 article in the *JFSS*, while Example 4 is the first stanza of the same song arranged by Grainger for voice and piano in 1930:

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**Example 3**

I’ll sing you a song about two lovers,
O, from Lich-fied-eld (field)

town that (they) came;
O the young... man’s name was Will-yum Tay-lor,
The

ma-a-den’s name was Sa-rah Gray.

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**Example 4**

Will-yum’s listed,
For... a soldier he’s gone, he’s

gone and left sweet lov-er (lovely) Sally
For te (to) sigh a-den (and)

fo’r (for) to mourn. (3) Sally’s parents thä’e (they) controlled’er.


There are a number of noteworthy elements about the piece: first, although Grainger altered a number of the more difficult metrical changes, his setting of the melody remains remarkably similar to that of the original transcription, thus providing further evidence of the value he placed on the original performance of the tune—not some supposed Ur-tune that lay behind it—as the most important manifestation of the folk song; second, Grainger imbued his harmonies with a number of harsh dissonances and a sinewy chromaticism that provide a far more colourful harmonic backdrop than that provided by Sharp, despite remaining within the bounds of
functional harmony. Such extended harmonies do not obscure or overpower
the melody, but provide a more tension-filled harmonic setting on which the
melody rests, with the most extensive moments of chromaticism propelling
the drive to the cadence at the conclusion of each stanza. Example 5 shows
the openings of the first five stanzas of Grainger’s setting of ‘Creeping Jane’, a
song he collected from Joseph Taylor in 1906:

Example 5: Percy Grainger, ‘Creeping Jane’, bars 1–2, from Thirteen folksongs for voice
and piano, New York: G. Schirmer, 1930, p. 73. Copyright © 1991 by G. Schirmer,
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Grainger took here a somewhat unusual approach concerning the
preservation of the ornamentation of the original melody, setting each varied
stanza in a score format with an identical piano setting throughout, thereby
focusing greater attention on the melody. This format also throws into stark
relief Taylor’s extensive melodic ornamentation between verses, which allows
for a valuable example for melodic analysis.

Two curious items require mention concerning ‘Bold William Taylor’. The
first is the date of composition, which is listed on the first page as taking place
between 22 April and 14 August 1908. It would therefore seem that despite
his assertion to Sharp of a self-imposed injunction against such an activity,
Grainger was in fact already composing such settings even as he spoke words
to the contrary. The second item is that despite Grainger’s philosophy about
the importance of making music accessible to people outside the elite realm of
professional musicians, his setting of this song for voice and piano is clearly
within the realm of art-music and well beyond the technical skills of most

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amateur musicians, in much the same way that his folk song transcriptions would have required a person with advanced musical training in order to make any sense of them. Grainger later set many of his arrangements of such music in an elastic-scoring format in order to make them accessible to a broader audience, but it should be noted that he was also very capable of working within the confines of an elite art-music aesthetic at the same time as he espoused views to the contrary.

Grainger’s settings of English folk song for voice and piano are indicative of yet another manifestation of the aesthetic conflict between Grainger and his contemporaries, especially Cecil Sharp and the FSS. Where Sharp was conservative and antiquarian, Grainger was progressive and experimental—some of the qualities that made him the focus of attention for Benjamin Britten when Britten began his own exploration of folk song.

**Percy Grainger, Benjamin Britten and folk song**

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) was an ardent admirer of Grainger, particularly of his folk song settings. In a diary entry for 3 March 1933, Britten recorded having heard ‘two brilliant folk-song arrangements of Percy Grainger [...] knocking all the V. Williams and R.O. Morris arrangements into a cocked-hat’.¹⁷ Britten’s primary concern at this early date was almost certainly what he perceived as Vaughan Williams’ technical incompetence as a composer, and as a conductor. It was not until 1935 that Britten would meet W.H. Auden, who would subsequently introduce him to a new world of revolutionary left-wing and avant-garde thinkers.¹⁸ This new social perspective not only heightened Britten’s political awareness, but also provided him with further incentive to oppose and obstruct Vaughan Williams. As one of the senior members of the FSS, Vaughan Williams must have represented the brand of nationalistic conservatism to which Britten and his left-wing colleagues were so vigorously opposed. As C.J. Bearman has correctly pointed out, the FSS was, since its founding in 1898, a complex and diverse organisation whose members represented a virtual cornucopia of political views along the continuum from conservative to liberal.¹⁹ Bearman further points out, however, that the FSS, rechristened as the English Folk Dance and Song Society (hereafter ‘EFDSS’) after its amalgamation with the English Folk Dance Society in 1932, lost whatever political radicalism it might have had and became a rather docile and genteel organisation for gentlefolk and dilettantish folk enthusiasts.²⁰ By the time of Britten’s political conversion in 1935, Vaughan Williams and the EFDSS were ripe for attack and denunciation from the left. Unbeknownst to them at the time, Britten and company were on the right track, for the so-called ‘second English folk song revival’, heralded by the work of A.L. Lloyd and built upon the foundation provided by historian E.P. Thompson, would
move the study of folk song very far to the left as a form of corrective for the perceived conservatism of the early collectors of the FSS.21

Over the next few years, Britten’s anger over the hegemonic role of pastoralism in English cultural life, as well as the continued celebration of Vaughan Williams as the doyen of English music, grew apace. As Michael Kennedy has pointed out, Britten was never as politically involved as were his friends, such as Auden, because he was too busy with his own musical life. It was in this arena that Britten chose to launch a salvo against folk song and pastoralism, penning an article entitled ‘England and the folk-art problem’ for the American periodical Modern Music in 1941 during his stay in the United States.22 Homesick and having already decided to return to England as soon as the dangers of trans-Atlantic travel had abated, Britten diagnosed what he saw as the general pastoral-influenced malaise of English music with the sort of objectivity brought on by geographical distance. Britten saw English music of the period as divided between two schools of thought: Elgar, who represented technical proficiency, professionalism and the assimilation of foreign influence; and those such as Parry, who stood for amateurism, pastoralism and conservatismsm, yet whose overwhelming influence continued to define the younger generation of English composers. Vaughan Williams is conspicuously absent from the discussion, but is most likely simply being tried in absentia, with Parry as his proxy. According to Britten, the failure of the latter school was its use of folk song as its primary musical material, for although such music may have provided pleasant melodies, it did not provide sufficient melodic material for complex motivic and structural organisation. Britten stated the following case:

The failure of folksong to provide contemporary England with an adequate basis for organized music is due to many factors, some general, some local. The chief attractions of English folksongs are the sweetness of the melodies, the close connection between words and music, and the quiet, uneventful charm of the atmosphere. This uneventfulness however is part of the weakness of the tunes, which seldom have any striking rhythms or memorable melodic features. Like much of the English countryside, they creep into the affections rather than take them by storm. Since the form of a work is dictated by the material, the characteristics of English folksong mentioned above are bound to have a weakening effect on the structure of the music founded directly upon it. Folksongs are concise and finished little works of art. When used as raw material they tend to obstruct thinking in the extended musical forms. Works founded on them are usually little more than variations or potpourris. Again, each
folsong has a completely suggested harmonic scheme—so that it should sound satisfactory when sung unaccompanied—and much deviation tends to produce a feeling of irritation [...] All these characteristics tend to make folksong a most restricting influence, which, as a matter of fact, is no doubt what many composers have wanted. Lacking the necessary discipline they forget that discipline must come from within.\textsuperscript{23}

Essentially, as Britten stated in the same article, ‘the more highly organized, the more interesting the music’.\textsuperscript{24} We should note that although Britten here condemns folk song as the basis for a national musical style because it does not possess the motivic complexity to be the basis upon which any serious compositional method can be formed, he is supportive of an aesthetic that values folk songs for what they are, which is, as he puts it, ‘concise and finished little works of art’. Much like Grainger, Britten saw value in the music existing on its own terms and not simply as grist for the mill of musical nationalism.

Given Britten’s severe reaction to the folk–pastoral movement, it seems curious that he should himself have begun setting English folk song when he had devalued the very idea in print. Arnold Whittall contends that Britten chose such a genre, as many composers do, in order to challenge and confront its characteristics and provide an alternative to them, or, to use a decidedly postmodern phrase, to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house—an apt metaphor when we consider the overwhelming popularity of the folk-inspired pastoral ideal among British composers of the period. As evidence for this possibility, Britten had indeed expressed frustration in a letter after having been to a concert featuring the music of Vaughan Williams:

\begin{quote}
I have never felt more depressed for English music than after that programme [...] especially when I felt that that is what the public—no, not the public, the critics love and praise.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

This statement reflected Britten’s frustration not only with the continued perseverance of the pastoral aesthetic, but also with Vaughan Williams’ shortcomings as a conductor. Yet Britten also had a larger agenda, in which the folk song arrangements played a vital role. As Philip Brett has suggested, folk song, as the prevailing musical element of the pastoral aesthetic, was something with which Britten was going to have to come to terms if he wanted to effect any change at all in English music.\textsuperscript{26} Britten’s intention, however, was not simply to fall into line with the establishment, but to disrupt the establishment from within. Britten’s sympathy for the marginal elements
of society, people with whom he was undoubtedly familiar as, among other things, a pacifist during wartime and a homosexual in a society largely (at least on the surface) intolerant of such behaviour, meant that his project of disruption was an extension of his politics of the marginalised. Britten needed to embrace folk song and gain the prestige and credibility that it would bestow upon him in order to alter that aesthetic according to his own politics. From the folk song arrangements to Peter Grimes, Britten’s artistic life was, as Brett writes, ‘an attempt to disrupt the center that it occupied with the marginality that it expressed’.27

Britten therefore used folk song as a means of both resisting pastoralism and embracing it in order to effect radical change. Philip Brett believed that Britten’s admiration for Grainger was a very important element in this project, for Britten saw in Grainger a fellow modernist who both embraced folk song and sought to disrupt from within the stranglehold of its influence over contemporary British music.28 The stark differences already observed between the folk settings of Grainger and Sharp would have been clear to Britten as not just a clash of aesthetics but of ideologies, and Grainger’s far more sophisticated treatments of the music would have endeared themselves even more to Britten given the extent to which they subverted Sharp’s guiding principles.

Britten produced seven volumes of folk songs. Volume 1 was dedicated to British folk songs and was published in 1943. Volume 2, dedicated to French songs, and Volume 3, dedicated to British songs, appeared in 1946 and 1947 respectively. These first three volumes represent music that was probably composed during Britten’s period in America between 1939 and 1942, during which ‘England and the folk-art problem’ also appeared. After an interval of just over twelve years, Britten returned to folk song with Volume 4, dedicated to Irish song and published in 1960, followed by Volumes 5 and 6 dedicated to British and English music respectively, published in 1961. Volumes 4, 5 and 6 were probably all composed in or around 1958. The final volume of English folk songs was prepared during the summer of 1976, but was not published until 1980. All these volumes of songs were initially used to provide material for the conclusion of recitals featuring himself and Peter Pears, although performances with guitarist Julian Bream persuaded him to set the sixth volume for guitar. Britten was too ill to perform by the time of the final volume, and these pieces were therefore arranged for harp for Ossian Ellis. Pears described Britten’s approach to setting folk song as follows:

His way with a folk-song is very different from that of Cecil Sharp who arranged so many for schools in the first part of the century; one of Sharp’s cherished ideas was to bring back to English children
those tunes that had been sung to and by their ancestors and he used to arrange these songs for voice and piano with very simple and regularly barred accompaniment. This would not do for Britten. He wanted to recreate these melodies with their texts for concert performances, to make them art-songs, in the tradition of Schubert and even Brahms. He therefore takes the tune as if he had written it himself and thinks himself back as to how he would turn it into a song.  

That Britten imagined the tune as though he had written it himself is itself a drastic departure from Sharp, who advocated a harmonic treatment so bland that it was to give the impression that it had been composed not by human hands but had mysteriously descended from a timeless metaphysical folk realm. Britten’s accompaniments in no way use the melody as an excuse for harmonic histrionics, but instead illuminate the melodic line and provide additional musical perspectives on the material. Example 6 shows the second stanza of Britten’s treatment of ‘The trees they grow so high’ with a melody similar to that used by Cecil Sharp in Example 1. Unlike Sharp’s treatment, in which the piano accompaniment demonstrates no signs of significant interaction with either the text or the melody, Britten supports the simple melody with an angular and dissonant accompaniment that builds from a single line in the first stanza to full chordal figures in the middle before returning to the single dissonant piano line by the end. It is here that we see Britten disrupting the pastoral aesthetic from within by jettisoning Sharp’s idea of the ‘timeless’ accompaniment and acknowledging the creative role of the modernist composer. Like Grainger, Britten advocated not the timeless edifice of the folk song as something that needed to be preserved as a fetish-object and used as the foundation of a musical style, but as a melody that could be incorporated into the subjective aesthetic of a progressive modernist composer. Britten’s treatment is far more sophisticated than Sharp’s on both a musical and textual level, and although his harmonic language and interaction with the text clearly differ also from those of Grainger, his praise of Grainger’s arrangements seems to have provided him both with permission and incentive to engage with the folk material in such a heretical manner. It was not from the strict letter of Grainger’s arrangements that Britten took inspiration, but from the spirit of resistance and disruption in which they were composed.

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As a curious and ironic epilogue, Vaughan Williams’ review of Britten’s first volume of folk settings read in part:

Are we old fogeys of the Folk-song movement getting into a rut? If so, it is very good for us to be pulled out of it by such fiery young steeds as Benjamin Britten and Herbert Murill. We see one side of a folk-song, they see the other [...] The tune’s the thing with which we’ll catch the conscience of the composer. Do these settings spring from a love of the tune? Then, whatever our personal reaction may be we must respect them [...] Welcome, then the younger generation who will push along the highway, turning now to the right, now to the left, each divagation balancing the other so that in the end the straight line is kept intact.31

Despite all the venom that Britten cast privately at Vaughan Williams, Britten’s folk settings actually met with approval from the man whose music had been the antithesis of everything he had hoped to achieve.

Britten’s folk settings for voice and piano are very much his own expressions and are neither tributes to nor emulations of Grainger’s music, despite the role that Grainger’s precedents may have played in their creation. Britten’s most significant tribute to Grainger, and the one that demonstrates that his admiration was genuine and not simply ideologically strategic, is to be found in his Suite on English folk tunes, Op. 90, from 1974. This piece contains five short movements based on songs found in the JFSS and Playford’s The dancing master. The final movement is entitled ‘Lord Melbourne’, and carries the following commentary:

Unlike the fragmentary use I have made of the other tunes in this Suite, ‘Lord Melbourne’, played by the cor anglais, is used complete. It was written down in his usual meticulous detail by Percy Grainger, to whose memory the Suite is ‘lovingly and reverently’ dedicated.32

Example 7 shows an extract of the melody to which Britten referred, while Example 8 shows Grainger’s transcription of the first stanza as it appeared in the article in the JFSS:
Despite the occasional editing of some of the more complex rhythmic values of the transcription, Britten captured Grainger’s work in almost exact detail. Britten paid tribute to Grainger by using ‘Lord Melbourne’ in its entirety as the work’s primary melodic material and by replicating the performance practice of the song as Grainger had recorded it, thereby demonstrating the inherent musical interest of Grainger’s version of the melody. Choosing to use the melody in its entirety—instead of in the fragmented forms to which the other JFSS-derived melodies were relegated—demonstrates also Britten’s respect for Grainger’s perspective.

As to why Britten chose ‘Lord Melbourne’ over other songs from ‘Collecting with the phonograph’ for such a tribute we can only speculate, but perhaps a hint lies in the text of the final stanza:

Now on a bed of sickness lie,
I am resigned to die.
You gen’rals all
and champions bold,
stand true as well as I.
Stand to your men,
take them on board,
and fight with courage bold.
I’ve led my men through smoke and fire,
but now to death must yield.\textsuperscript{33}

A tribute to the departed from the moribund, perhaps, is how we ought to understand these poignant few minutes of music, and perhaps as a sort of final parting gesture from Britten, who had no time for pastoralism, to the only other person who he believed brought anything of real modernist musical substance to folk song.
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NOTES

1 For more on this see Meirion Hughes and R.A. Stradling, The English musical renaissance 1840–1940: Constructing a national music, Manchester University Press, 2001.


5 Grainger, ‘Collecting with the phonograph’, p. 150.

6 Freeman, ‘“That chief undercurrent of my mind”’, pp. 592–606.


8 Grainger, ‘Collecting with the phonograph’, p. 158. Peter Van der Merwe has speculated that the many instances of false relations involving major and minor sevenths grinding against one another simultaneously in the music of Henry Purcell might indicate that such sevenths were actually performed as neutral sevenths. This, Van der Merwe wrote, would be the case particularly when the seventh was an apical seventh, or the climax of an ascending melodic line that returned to scale degree 6.

9 Grainger, ‘Collecting with the phonograph’, p. 159.


33 Grainger, ‘Collecting with the phonograph’, p. 203.
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