

Percy Grainger
and the
Intimate Saxophone

Dr. Paul Cohen



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Percy Grainger's relationship with the saxophone extended far beyond academic and compositional appreciation. His enthusiasm and personal involvement were such that he owned two saxophones, (curved soprano and baritone), learned to play them, and even taught his wife, Ella, the baritone saxophone.

Grainger's first encounter with the instrument occurred during a folk-song research expedition in England. In a letter to his friends recalling this event he wrote:

“Around 1904 Balfour Gardiner & I heard our first sax-reed (a tenor) near Frome, Somerset. A man in a country band played one to us. And I knew then & there, that I was hearing the world's finest wind tone-tool —the most voice-like, the most mankind-typed, “

When Grainger enlisted in the United States Army as musician third class (summer of 1917), he chose to audition on the soprano saxophone! When the time came to join, Grainger apparently bought a soprano, learned the *Blue Bells of Scotland* (his entire repertoire), walked to Fort Totten (New York), and enlisted as a bandsman. He kept secret his identity as an internationally acclaimed concert pianist for some months, and concentrated his efforts on playing saxophone and oboe, while exploring the instruments and possibilities of the wind-band. It was here that he composed his remarkable “Children's March: Over the Hills and Far Away” which, in the original orchestration, (since revised by the publisher) includes parts for soprano and bass saxophone, and contra-bass sarrusophone! This original version has been republished by Southern Music, and can now be heard as Grainger originally intended. His love for the saxophone grew over the years, and he often expressed his unbridled enthusiasm to all who would listen. In a preface to one of his most famous works he wrote:

“ . . . to my ears the saxophone is the most expressive of all wind instruments—the one closest to the human voice. And surely all musical instruments should be rated according to their tonal closeness to man's own voice! . . . ”



Percy Grainger in 1917 pictured with his mother, Rose, near Fort Hamilton New York.



Percy Grainger with an alto saxophone in the Coast Guard Band

Of all the saxophones, the soprano was his favorite. Publicly and privately he expressed his admiration for the distinctive and beautiful merits of what was becoming a neglected instrument. In 1949 he wrote:

"The neglect of the soprano saxophone is an extraordinary example of musical shortsightedness; for what is any family of instruments without its soprano? Personally, I consider it the most beautiful and characteristic voice of the entire saxophone family. It has a rich bucolic timbre that enables it to take, in the band, a place similar to that occupied by the oboe in the orchestra. "

With *Lincolnshire Posy*, Grainger sought to highlight the saxophones — particularly the soprano — and to illustrate their tonal beauty and musical desirability. In the preface to the score he added:

"Bandleaders will note that the main solo in 'Rufford Park Poachers' may be played either on a flugelhorn or cornet (Version A) or on soprano saxophone (Version B) . The soprano saxophone is to be preferred—that is, if its player has assurance enough to throb forth this melody with searching, piercing prominence. This solo was written, partly, in the hopes of convincing bandleaders and bandsmen of the supreme desirability of this glorious instrument — to my mind the loveliest of the whole saxophone family. Its bucolic intensity is a golden gain to the wind band. "

Even deeper feelings toward the soprano saxophone are revealed by his personal account of a concert of his music. Written to friends in 1942, Grainger uses his writing style of "blue-eyed English", in which English words derived from Latin and Greek were purged from his vocabulary. (This was Grainger's attempt at purifying the English language from seemingly culturally corrupt influences. Thus, quartets became "foursomes," "louden" replaced "crescendo," and "middle-fiddle" replaced "viola.") In the following excerpt, Grainger provides the conventional English term (in parentheses) alongside his "blue-eyed English."

"In the fall, my whole Danish Folk-Music Suite, for organ piano & blent-band (orchestra) was given for the first time anywhere, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Up to then the suite had lacked its first number (The Power of Love) which the sketched (& even tone-discd [gramophone] in its kindred form for voice and room-band) had never been ready for blent-band. Some of you will recall that Delius had said I was wrecking my tone-art. using pipe organ & reed organ as much as I did & do. And I must up-own, many early forth-plantments of my pieces that used organ were not very hope-giving. But the organ was played in Grand Rapids more balm-bringingly than I have ever heard it before, & the blend of the she-high sax-reed (soprano saxophone)-singing the main tune of The Power of Love-with the organ was one of the most unforgettable hope-fulfillments (satisfactions) of my life."

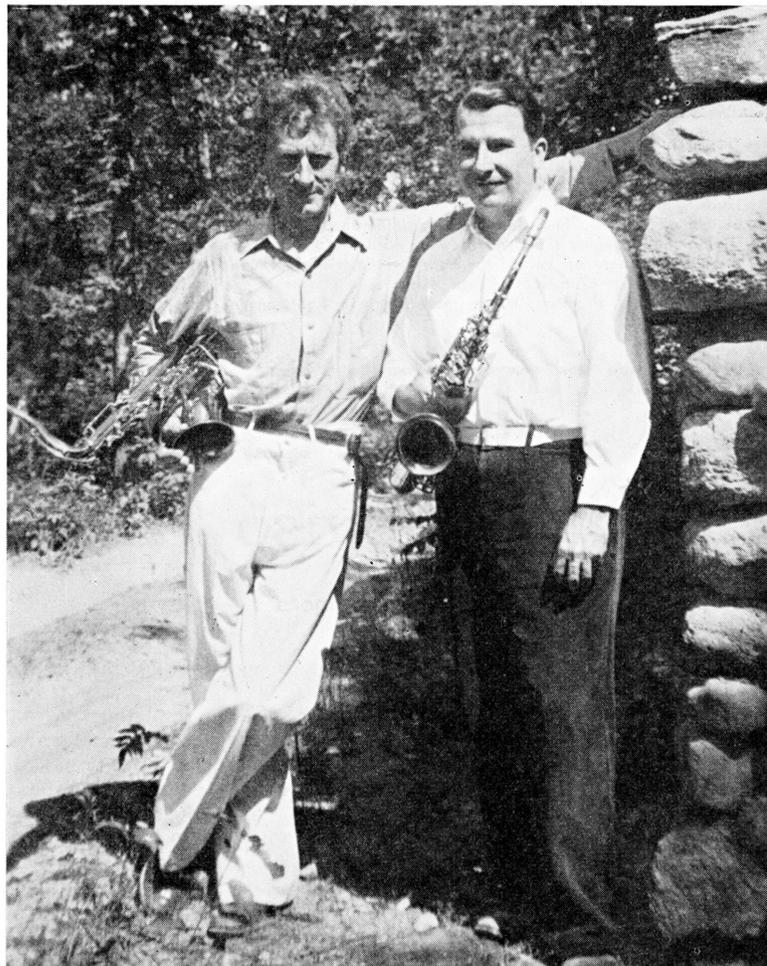
In addition to his wind-band and chamber-music writing, Grainger was very much an orchestral composer. Naturally, the saxophone did not escape his attention either in his orchestrations or his prose writings. In an essay entitled "To Conductors and to those Forming, or in Charge Of, Amateur Orchestras, High School, College and Chamber-Music Bodies," Grainger wrote of the possibilities of the saxophone in the orchestra:

"if the saxophone (the crowning achievement of Adolphe Sax, that outstanding genius among wind-instrument creators and perfectors) is not the loveliest of all wind-instruments, it certainly is one of the loveliest-human, voice-like, heart-revealing. It has been used in symphonic music by Bizet, Vincent D'Indy, Richard Strauss, and others with lovely results. It has been used in jazz orchestras with excellent effect. Yet it has not yet been taken up into the symphony orchestra. Why not? What are we waiting for? Apart from its glorious orchestral possibilities as a saxophone, it is a most useful substitute for trumpet, French horn, bassoon-even for trombone. "The average amateur, school, and music school orchestra usually holds artistically unsatisfying rehearsals because of gaping holes in its wood-wind and brass sections. These missing melodies, missing chords, lessen the musical benefits of such rehearsals to those taking part in them. Those in charge of such orchestras should make every effort never to rehearse with incomplete texture (with important voices left out). Texture and balance are, musically speaking, much more important than tone-color! "All the brass instruments can be replaced or supported by saxophones - always for study rehearsals and often with effect for concerts also. Generally, more than one saxophone will be needed to replace each brass instrument with correct balance." Let it be admitted that there are many passages originally written for French horn that sound better on that instrument than they do on E-flat alto or alto saxophone. On the other hand, there are other passages, also originally written for French horn, that happen to sound as well, or better, on E-flat alto or alto saxophone as they do on French horn. Let us experiment widely with all such cases, using E-flat altos and alto saxophones on French horn parts until we have substituted experience for prejudice."

Percy Grainger and Cecil Leeson

It was at Interlochen (Michigan) where Grainger worked with a professional classical saxophonist, and where his only work for saxophone and piano, a spirited version of *Molly on the Shore*, was sketched. In the summer of 1937, both Grainger and Cecil Leeson, (the pioneering American classical saxophonist), were on the faculty at Interlochen. Leeson immediately prevailed on Grainger to perform with him on faculty recitals. Eventually Grainger agreed, and after a particularly rewarding rehearsal, Leeson asked “Mr. Grainger, don’t you think the saxophone and piano go well together?” Grainger replied, **“No, I don’t. The piano is such a funny, clattery sort of instrument it doesn’t really go with anything.”**

During another rehearsal Grainger “suddenly stopped, turned sideways on the bench, crossed his legs, and looking directly at me said, with his characteristic inflection, **“I think that that is about the most satisfactory musical sound there is.”**



Percy Grainger and Cecil Leeson at Interlochen, 1937.

Grainger is holding a tenor saxophone, most likely a Martin.

Leeson is holding his Martin alto.

After a successful saxophone and piano recital, Leeson again asked: “Now, Mr. Grainger, don’t you believe that the saxophone and piano go well together?” Grainger then replied: **“No, the saxophone is so much the better instrument of the two that when the piano comes in it just sounds like a lot of little ants crawling around.”**

Leeson tried to convince Grainger to write a work for him. When asked about writing a concerto for the saxophone, Grainger replied, **“I am sorry, but as an Australian and a socialist I am against putting any one instrument ahead of another.”** But by the end of the summer Grainger agreed to an alto saxophone and piano setting of *Molly on the Shore*. He completed the piano part and a few pages of the saxophone part. Grainger then sent it to Leeson with the instructions to fill in the remaining measures as Leeson saw fit and as they had discussed. This was a collaborative arrangement, finished in 1938. Leeson performed the work numerous times, including at least two performances with Grainger at the piano.

Despite efforts from both of them, it was never published. I discovered the original manuscripts (Leeson and Grainger each had a copy, both incomplete.) I reconciled the manuscripts and restored *Molly* to a performance edition true to what Grainger and Leeson performed. This restoration is published by *To the Fore Publishers*.

Percy Grainger and Sigurd Rascher

Grainger also enjoyed a decades-long friendship with Sigurd Rascher, the eminent concert saxophonist, who lived just a few hours north in Shushan, New York. (Grainger famously lived at 7 Cromwell Place in White Plains, New York.) Rascher prized his friendship with Grainger, as they mutually respected their artistry, buoyant energy and commitment to their musical craft and mission.

The following are two special tales of friendship. Carina Rascher reminded me of how Mr. Rascher surprised Grainger on a trip to Australia. Rascher was travelling on an extensive tour of Australia in 1938, performing concertos and solo works with orchestra as well as solo recitals. Grainger, who was Australian by birth, was returning for one of his many visits. Percy was to arrive in the morning by passenger ship. Rascher obtained permission from the Portmaster to allow him to board the ship early in the morning before passengers disembarked. In front of Grainger’s cabin door, Rascher started playing *Molly on the Shore* with several distinctly wrong notes, upon which Percy burst out of his cabin, dressed only in his underwear and was speechless at the sight of his old friend Sigurd Rascher!

Mr. Rascher told me that years later when he visited Grainger at his home, Grainger (who was not a youngster anymore) would insist on doing pullups in a door jam from a pullup bar. Both men were uncommonly physically fit and in full command of their powerful intellect for their lifetimes, and both enjoyed letting their younger peers be fully aware of their robustness. Rascher did perform Grainger’s ensemble music, both in the early years of the Rascher Saxophone Quartet, and with the Rascher Saxophone Ensemble in concerts and recordings.



Percy Grainger and Sigurd Rascher, Detroit 1942.

From the Rascher Reader, SUNY Fredonia, Lee Patrick, editor

Grainger's involvement with the saxophone extended into his home life as well. When the American composer Henry Cowell gave Grainger a 60th birthday present, it was in the form of a little original composition written for the occasion. Cowell's medium of choice - the combination that would give Grainger the most pleasure - was the saxophone. The work "60" written in 1942, is scored for saxophone trio - SAB - and undoubtedly was played by Percy, Ella and Cowell during the birthday celebration. "60" is published by *To the Fore Publishers*.

Candid photo of Percy and Ella Grainger playing a duet. Percy is playing his soprano saxophone, (or soprano sarrusophone). Ella is playing an Eb contrabass sarrusophone.



It is quite likely that Ella Grainger played soprano saxophone as part of her musical life with Percy. There is a very early Evette Schaeffer (Buffet) straight soprano saxophone in the Melbourne Grainger Museum. It is not clear if this was in addition to the curved soprano Percy acquired for his Coast Guard Band audition in 1917, or a replacement some years later.

In a remarkable photo from Susan Edwards Colson, we see a box of soprano saxophone reeds for Ella, with a most loving note from Percy:

*To Ella, my darling princess of art,
from her worshipping husband.
Percy
Springfield, MO, Dec. 7, 1940*

Was there ever a more endearing note for a box of reeds?



A box of soprano saxophone reeds for Ella Grainger, with a note from Percy Grainger.

From the Grainger House in White Plains, New York

Photo by and courtesy of Susan Edwards Colson

Percy Grainger's relationship with the saxophone seems to have been intensely personal, but always joyous and fruitful. His frequent use of the entire family of saxophones, in addition to his numerous and enthusiastic writings about the instrument, speak eloquently of his feelings and thoughts. It is from his informal correspondence and anecdotal references, however, that one begins to appreciate the depth of passion and importance that the saxophone played in his life. This is charmingly illustrated in a letter to his friends in which his compositions for saxophone ensemble are discussed. He once again used his "blue-eyed English."

"Some folks have hook-worms inside them: & I understand that the hook-worm has to be at-rest-set (satisfied) before the man can come into his own. My hook-worm is tonal fun. No tone-fun, no Percy. And this summer, I got my tone-fun out of the Sax-reed (saxophone) group at Interlochen. Yet it has taken from 1904 to 1943 to have my hopes of sax-reed team-work fulfilled. Every other summer there was some spoke put in the wheel of my sax-reed hopes — either the group was un-whole, or it could not get together to rehearse, or they wanted to rehearse quite other things from those I wanted to try out on them. But this summer I had my way. As wont-some, I had taken to Interlochen our 2 sax-reeds — the she-high (soprano) & the he-mid-low (baritone). The sax-reed teacher (Rollin Silfies) took the she-high himself (most sax-readers shun the she-high like a pest) & did most sweetly on it (among other things he played the long she-high sax-reed single in Rufford Park Poachers in my Lincolnshire Posy). In his big group we had 1 she-high, 3 or 4 she-lows (altos), 3 he-highs (tenors), 1 he-mid-low (baritone), 1 he-low (bass). This was something to work with! So I wrote out parts. . . (& this was almost the only writing out of parts I did this summer at Interlochen)."

No one could ask for a more committed champion of the saxophone! Grainger and his music reveal what many saxophonists have known all along about the merits of their instrument. His writings elevate the status of the saxophone to a level equal to the most traditional of orchestral instruments, while his compositions ably demonstrate - with invigorating, superbly crafted music - the extent to which his vision of the saxophone could be fulfilled. From this perspective, the study and performance of Percy Grainger's music is an experience replete with musical enrichment and renewed celebration.

A handwritten signature of Percy Grainger in black ink, written in a cursive style. The signature is set against a light gray and white checkerboard background.

Selected Music for Saxophone by Percy Grainger

Grainger included the saxophone in many of his orchestra, band and chamber works and arrangements. The list below is a sampling of his more notable pieces. All of these works were either written, arranged or adapted by Percy Grainger - they are all original from Grainger. None of these are arrangements by others.

Molly on the Shore (alto saxophone and piano) ***To the Fore Publishers***
Recorded by Paul Cohen on the CD ***American Landscapes***

Lisbon (from Lincolshire Posy) - SAATB saxophones - ***To the Fore Publishers***
Recorded by Paul Cohen and the New Hudson Saxophone Quartet
on the CD ***New York Rising***

The Lonely Desert-Man Sees the Tents of the Happy Tribes ***To the Fore Publishers***
A. alto saxophone and piano
B. chamber version; alto saxophone and marimba and guitar ensemble

Prelude and Fugue No. 5. (Book II, Well-Tempered Clavier) ***JS. Bach/arr. Grainger***
SATB saxophone quartet ***To the Fore Publishers***

Annunciation Carol (SAATTBBs) saxophone ensemble ***To the Fore Publishers***

The Immovable Do (SAATTBBs) saxophone ensemble
Ye Banks and Braes (SAATTBBBs) saxophone ensemble



Paul Cohen is one of America's most sought-after saxophonists for orchestral and chamber

concerts and solo recitals. He has appeared as soloist with the San Francisco Symphony, Richmond Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, Charleston Symphony and Philharmonia Virtuosi. His many solo orchestra performances include works by Debussy, Creston, Ibert, Glazunov, Martin, Loeffler, Husa, Dahl, Still, Villa-Lobos, Tomasi, and Cowell.



He has also performed with a broad range of orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera (NYC), American Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Santa Fe Opera, New Jersey Symphony, Oregon Symphony, Long Island Philharmonic, Group for Contemporary Music, Greenwich Symphony, Charleston Symphony, New York Solisti, Philharmonia Virtuosi and the Manhattan Chamber Orchestra.

He has recorded three albums with the Cleveland Symphonic Winds under the direction of Frederick Fennell and a CD of the music of Villa-Lobos with the Quintet of the Americas as well as recordings with the Saxophone Sinfonia, Philharmonia Virtuosi, New York Solisti, Paul Winter Consort, North-South Consonance,

and the New Sousa Band. He collaborated with Paquito d'Rivera in a 2017 CD release of a lost work by Cuban composer Caturra. His most recent recordings include *Quiet City*, which includes premiere recordings of works by Ornstein, Lunde and Harlley, as well as *Breathing Lessons*, a CD of new works for saxophone quartet. In 2016 his CD, *American Landscapes*, was released featuring three centuries of American music for saxophone including the newly discovered concerto by the 19th-century American composer Caryl Florio. In 2018 his CD, *Common Ground*, features chamber music with strings, winds and piano, including premiere recordings of works by Aldridge, Shawn and McPeck. In 2019 *New York Rising*, featuring recent saxophone quartets written for Dr. Cohen was released, including first recording of Grainger's *Lisbon*. Earlier recordings include *Vintage Saxophones Revisited*, featuring the premiere recording of Cowell's *Hymn and Fuguing Tune #18*. Dr. Cohen is featured on a 2016 CD release of the saxophone music of Henry Cowell and Percy Grainger, as soloist and chamber player on alto and soprano saxophones.

Dr. Cohen has rediscovered and performed lost saxophone literature, including solo works for saxophone and orchestra by Loeffler, Florio and Dahl (for winds), as well as rare chamber works by Grainger, Ornstein, Sousa, Cowell, Siegmeister, and Loeffler. As arranger he has written *The Renaissance Book* for saxophone quartet (Galaxy Music); *Four Piano Blues* by Copland for saxophone quartet (Boosey and Hawkes); and, as editor, has prepared the ossia passages for the *Concerto for Saxophone* by Ross Lee Finney. His company, **To the Fore Publishers**, (www.totheforepublishers.com) publishes his arrangements and settings for saxophone ensemble as well as original, historical, and contemporary saxophone works from selected composers. Dr. Cohen frequently presents lectures illustrating his talks with rare instruments, manuscripts, and archival material from his extensive private collection.

The Presser Music Company recently published his arrangement for saxophone choir of *Variations on America* by Charles Ives and the Schumann setting of Billing's *When Jesus Wept*. Boosey and Hawkes just issued Cohen's saxophone quartet arrangements of music *Simple Gifts*, and *Our Town* by Aaron Copland. He also has authored *The Altissimo Primer* a specialized technique book.

Dr. Cohen holds an MM and DMA degree from the Manhattan School of Music. His teachers have included Galan Kral, Joe Allard, and Sigurd Rascher. He has published more than one hundred articles on the history and literature of the saxophone worldwide. His seminal column, "Vintage Saxophones Revisited," was featured in the *Saxophone Journal* from 1985 - 2002.

Dr. Cohen (Paulcohen.saxo@gmail.com) is currently on the faculties of Manhattan School of Music, Rutgers University, New York University, Columbia University,

The PC Readers

Reprints of articles by Dr. Paul Cohen

Book I

Tonal Aspects of Chamber Music Playing
A High Altitude Reconnaissance
The Saxophone Music of Henry Cowell
The Original Concerto (1949) by Ingolf Dahl

Book II

The Magnificent Contrabass Saxophone (1984)
The Saga of the F Alto Saxophone

Book III

The Saxophone Music of Charles Loeffler
Percy Grainger and the Intimate Saxophone
The Improvisations of Paul Desmond
Further Improvisations of Paul Desmond

Book IV

Vents, Waves and Octave Splits Part I and II
Early Professional Women Saxophonists
Professional Women Saxophonists from the 19th Century

Book V

Sousa and the Saxophone
Sousa Saxophone Corps
Owen Kincaid and the Saxophone Section
On the Road with the Sousa Saxophone Soloists

Book VI

Voices of the Slide Saxophone
The Royal Slide Saxophone (Voices Part I)
Voices of the Slide Saxophone Part II
Voices of the Slide Saxophone Part III

Book VII

Lyons and Healy and the Stencils
Kings All!
The King Curved Sopranino

Book VIII

The Six Brown Brothers (Parts I-III)
Billy True and the One Man Saxophone Section

Monographs

Percy Grainger and the Intimate Saxophone

The Secret Life of the original (1949)
Concerto for Alto Saxophone by Ingolf Dahl

All PC Readers and Monographs are available in PDF format.

Books and CDs

The Original (1949) Saxophone Concerto of Ingolf Dahl

The Altissimo Primer (to follow Rascher's "Top Tones")

Vintage Saxophones Revisited CD

a narrative tour of the early history of the saxophone
with rare recordings, illustrations and demonstrations of rare saxophones
first recording of Cowell's "Hymn and Fuguing Tune #18 for soprano and contrabass

American Landscapes CD

Introduction Theme and Variation for saxophone and orchestra (Florio, 1879)
Molly on the Shore (Percy Grainger)
Sonata for Soprano Saxophone (Steve Cohen)

New York Rising CD

New Hudson Saxophone Quartet
Lisbon (Grainger) SAATB saxophones
Our Town and Simple Gifts (Copland/arr Cohen)

Common Ground CD

Chamber Music for saxophone, winds and strings
Quartet for an Outdoor Festival (soprano saxophone, violin, cello, piano) - Aldridge
Hymn Variations (soprano saxophone, violin, cello, piano) - Noon
Trilium Suite (soprano saxophone, violin, cello, flute, clarinet, piano) - Mc Peek
Terpsichord (alto saxophone, clarinet, violin, cello, piano) - Shawn

Heard Again for the First Time CD (release date fall 2020)

Concerto for Alto Saxophone (original 1949 version) - Ingolf Dahl
Concerto #2 (alto saxophone, bassoon, harpsichord) - Roesengen-Champion
Ballade Carnavalesque (flute, oboe, alto saxophone, bassoon, piano) - Charles Loeffler
Trio (flute, alto saxophone, piano) - Steve Cohen

Contact Paul Cohen

420 Lantana Avenue
Englewood NJ 07631
201-970-7594

paulcohen.saxo@gmail.com

*Cover photo: Grainger in 1917 with
his curved soprano saxophone as a member
of the Fort Hamilton Coast Guard Band, Staten Island, New York City.*

(final final 2020)