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THE ILLUSIONED EAR
Disembodied Sound & The Musical
Séances Of Francis Grierson
BY MATT MARBLE



Jesse Shepard / Francis Grierson, 1890

Several days ago, Grierson had just completed one of his extraordinary piano performances, during which he channeled the creative energies of deceased musical geniuses and presented previously unheard compositions from beyond. As the music ceased, Grierson became very still, as was his habit... but after a long moment, his audience grew restless, and Tonner went to the piano to shake his friend. Grierson was dead, aged 79, most probably from heart disease exacerbated by malnutrition.

West Adams, LA Obituary, June 1, 1927

FROM THE VALLEY OF SHADOWS

Music is a metaphysical illusion, whose secrets are often felt but never uttered.

Francis Grierson, *Celtic Temperament* (182)

The life of Jessie Shepard (a.k.a. Francis Grierson), born Benjamin Henry Jesse Francis Shepard, is shrouded in mystery and hearsay. Today he is almost completely unknown. However, at the turn of the nineteenth

century, in America and abroad, he was an acclaimed singer and pianist, essayist, psychic medium, and mystic philosopher. His mystical perspective was forged during the zeitgeist brought on by the popularity of H.P. Blavatsky's Theosophical philosophy and the rising popularity of Spiritualism, the popular and controversial practice of contacting and communicating with the spirits of the deceased. Both had entered into American consciousness by the second half of the nineteenth century. Like Blavatsky, whom he knew personally, Grierson believed there was an invisible spirit world coexisting with the phenomenal world; and, via Spiritualism, he believed he could channel and communicate with the spirits of the dead. As a pianist and singer, Grierson claimed that his music, almost entirely free-improvised, was channeled from the spirits of deceased composers - such as, Chopin, Mozart, Schubert, Liszt, and numerous others - while referring to spirit communications with other historical figures in his séances and writings. His performances were so compelling that he quickly found himself traveling extensively, singing at Notre Dame, and giving private concerts for kings and queens across the globe. By his mid-20s Grierson was beginning to enter into popular consciousness, being featured in newspapers and tabloids: he was "the strangest" sensation.

By 1887 Grierson was so highly regarded that two admiring benefactors offered to custom design and build him a Victorian-style mansion, the Villa Montezuma, in San Diego. Grierson lived in the Villa two years before deciding to move to Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century Grierson was focusing more and more on writing, and with his first publication in English he made explicit the personal transformation he was then undergoing. He changed his name from Jesse Shepard, the "psychic pianist", to Francis Grierson, world traveler and essayist. Under this new identity, Francis Grierson - as he'll be referred to throughout this essay - went on to publish over 10 books and numerous articles for magazines and newspapers. He would be lauded by esteemed minds, such as William James and Edmund Wilson, while he befriended significant artists of the period, such as architect Claude Bragdon, composer Arthur Farwell, and writers Alexandre Dumas, Maurice Maeterlinck, Stephane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Walt Whitman. Mallarmé once proclaimed that Grierson did "with musical sounds, combinations and melodies what Poe did with the rhythm of the words" (Wilson, 74); as Maeterlinck announced Grierson to be "the supreme essayist of our age" (73).

Adding to the mystique of his medial music practice and prophetic

writings, Grierson's appearance over the years offered as much mystery to the onlooker: rouged cheeks, a waxed or orange-dyed mustache, wigs, a ruby ring surrounded by diamonds (and other expensive jewelry given by the royalty he entertained), and a fur coat made of 3,000 squirrel skins. He was known by many notable artists and royal powers as a genius, a madman, or both; but he fascinated the majority he encountered. Dumas had told Grierson during his passage through Paris in the 1860's, "[w]ith your gifts you will find all doors open before you." And for quite some time that is exactly what the young Grierson found.

Nevertheless, as he aged and the times changed, his confident esotericism would begin to lose the interest of the public eye, especially during the last two decades of his life. Despite several flurries of success and adulation in his later years, Grierson ultimately lost his audience. After a significant stay in Europe, from 1913 on he lived in Los Angeles where he was consumed by poverty and malnutrition. On May 29, 1927 Grierson died as he played the final piano chord of an improvisation during his last concert in LA. At the age of 79, he left the material world utterly forgotten, and he has largely remained so to this day. While a biography and a smattering of essays and mentions have recalled his name over the years, these have largely occurred in obscure academic journals or as anecdotes in books and articles. Tapping into the ubiquitousness of the information age as well as engaging the progressive forum of sound practice that Ear|Wave|Event offers, *The Illusioned Ear* hopes to bring Grierson's life and work to the attention of a contemporary audience.

While it may remain easy for many to dismiss Grierson, like so many other mediums from the same period, as a charlatan, that would not diminish the intrigue nor the artistic value of his creative work, despite its inaudibility. As Edmund Wilson once noted, "[o]ne's impression is, in fact, that Grierson himself was never quite able to account for the mysterious resources, subconscious or extra-human, on which he was able to draw" (Wilson, 77). And as sound artist and author Joe Banks repeatedly notes in his recent book, *Rorschach Audio*, these illusioned auditions of spirit are fundamentally a creative activity, engaging in perceptual ambiguities, imaginative projection, and often theatrical persuasion to varying degrees of success (or awareness). As the title of his work alludes, Banks associates Spiritualist sound practices with the intuitive readings of Rorschach ink-blot tests used in psychology. The abstract images of these tests leave open a space for subjective intuitive interpretation. Focusing primarily on EVP

[Electronic Voice Phenomena], developed by Latvian writer and Spiritualist Konstantins Raudive in the 1940s, Banks claims that "EVP experimenters [and other technicians of medial illusion] are or were, in effect, creative artists, producing, through their audio experimentation, forms of sound art and poetry" (Banks, 114).

"EVP," says Banks, "is a religious belief system based on the misperception of illusions of sound" (Banks, 102). The technologically-derived EVP was an outgrowth of the techniques of illusion developed through the séances of American Spiritualism and, preceding them, the multimedia horror shows of the European phantasmagoria, combined with the accessibility of audio recording technology. Readers are encouraged to read Banks' work, which resonates throughout this essay. While Grierson was steeped in American spiritualism, which we will explore further, we will also be looking into the techniques of illusion in the phantasmagoria to better understand similar approaches in Grierson's own work.

Throughout this essay, these techniques of illusion are highlighted to show how they, despite their esoteric nature, served as a cultural synthesizer of psychological and spiritual catharsis, artistic creativity, and popular entertainment. In Grierson's work and in so many other instances in cultural history, the disembodiment of sound has served an amphibious perception of Rorschach-like imagery, calling upon the willing subject to rummage through resonances of perception within their interior, and, if nothing else, discover a true feeling. As the first part of this essay focuses upon Grierson's life and philosophy, the second part draws connections to contemporary music and sound art. We'll be looking at the role of echo in popular music, the metaphysically devised *intonorumi* of the early twentieth century Italian Futurist, Luigi Russolo, and the disembodied choir of Janet Cardiff's contemporary sound installation, *Forty-Part Motet*. Through this mosaic of historical perspectives, the manipulation of sonic disembodiment, at the heart of Grierson's musical séances, is seen to be a key factor in cultural patterns of paranormal interest, as well as in experimental advances in the art of sound. Francis Grierson, it now seems, was the prophetic prototype of American experimentalism.

As most prototypes are forgotten and replaced by their successors, so has been the case with Grierson. Pioneering an independent and experimental music practice, before Charles Ives and Henry Cowell, Grierson was one of the first American "maverick" composers. Preceding the evolution of jazz into "free improv" and the "aleatoric" developments of

avant-garde composition, Grierson was one of the first American “free improvisors,” devising his music spontaneously, without forethought, systems, or the templates of formal tradition. And through his musicales and séances he offered - as the work of many séance directors did - prescient uses of multi-media, spatialized sound, site specificity, and other techniques.

All of Grierson’s experimental advances were derived from his metaphysical approach to music. Through spontaneous improvisation he felt directly attuned to receive inspiration and contact with the spirit world. The resulting music was to be an inspiring feat of channeled intuition, remaining - for the audience, as well as for Grierson himself - a “spiritualized pleasure” (Grierson, HU, 178). While Grierson’s music was never known to be recorded, and thus remains inaudible to us now, I invite the reader’s audition to join his illusioned ear. For, somewhere between theology and theatre, Grierson’s impassioned writings and medial music point towards an auditory imagination that is rare and inspiring in any era.

SIGNS OF DIVINE PREPARATION



Francis Grierson at piano (San Diego History Center Collections)

In the late [eighteen-]fifties the people of Illinois were being prepared for the new era by a series of scenes and incidents which nothing but the term “mystical” will fittingly describe. Things came about not so much by preconceived method as by an impelling impulse. The appearance of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was not a reason, but an illumination; the founding of the Republican party was not an act of political wire-pulling, but an inspiration; the great religious revivals and the appearance of two comets were not regarded as coincidences, but accepted as signs of divine preparation and warning.

Francis Grierson, “Proem,” *The Valley of Shadows* (VS, b1)

Born in Birkenhead, England, on September 18, 1849, Grierson and his family moved to the prairies of Sangamon County, Illinois, where they would live for 10 years. Growing up in a log cabin, Grierson’s youth was largely spent wandering in the soon-to-be colonized wilds of Illinois, amongst a din of animals and flowers, sounds and silences, lights and shadows. Grierson’s memory of America reads like a history book, one he would drench in poetic reverie. Fugitive slaves stayed at his family’s log cabin, which was an Underground Railway outpost; and he was in attendance at the Lincoln-Douglas debates in Alton. He witnessed the pre-war days, the onslaught of the American Civil War, and the emergence of industrialism. Grierson, always identifying as a foreigner or non-American, found himself in a first-row seat watching America undergo its birth pangs. What’s more, through his European travels he would witness the fall of France’s second empire, which he saw as the end of the “wonderful, romantic movement” (Grierson, PP, 145), as well as the passing of Queen Victoria in London, where he witnessed her funeral procession.

Most of our knowledge of Grierson’s youth is only to be found in his reflective writings, which were not put to paper until later in his life. In *The Valley of Shadows* (1909) Grierson’s childhood and America’s history are both retroactively portrayed through the Claude glass of ominous mystery and prophetic fervor. Everything in the environment could be read, as he noted in his introductory “proem,” as “signs of divine preparation.” Grierson was raised in this prophetic language. Within this pervasive supernaturalism, he was immersed in local Methodist camp meetings, where wild impassioned preaching was recalled by one historian to be “more psychopathic than the witchcraft mania” (Simonson, 19). The only books he knew growing up were the Bible and an Anglican prayer-book. Later identifying with the Catholic faith, this direct exposure to a highly emotional Christian form of worship, emphasizing personal experience and communication with the Divine, would only reinforce Grierson’s growing

attraction to the mystical. But his unique spiritual affinities would not find their voice until he discovered the piano.

After their initial stay in Sangamon County, Grierson's family went on to live in several other Illinois locations, including Alton, St. Louis, and Chicago, as well as a brief stay in Niagara Falls, New York. Reflecting on his year living in Niagara Falls with his family, Grierson recalls that it was there that he first played the piano in 1863. At age 16 he was acutely aware of his spiritualized musical ability: "In fooling over the keys I happened to strike a full chord, and I at once realized the influence and direction of something independent of my intellect and will... Little did I dream when I awoke to a realization of my hidden faculty on that Sunday at Niagara Falls of the ordeals attendant on a wandering life which was to endure as a sort of apprenticeship for more than forty years" (Simonson, 23). Never formally trained, Grierson developed his music through pure intuition and impulse, which he was embracing more and more and learning to hone.

After his pianistic revelation at Niagara Falls, Grierson pursued the instrument with passion. He recalls one of his earliest public concerts, during a brief visit to New York City in 1868, as being a spontaneous public intervention. As he walked past a lecture hall on 35th and Broadway, he saw a piano through the departing crowd and instinctively ran to it:

There was not time for a prelude. With an allegro accompaniment, and chords that produced the effect of a piano duet, I attacked a high C and held it long enough for the people in the street to stop and listen. In less than two minutes people began to rush back into the hall and continued coming until my audience must have been nearly as large as the audience that had left. (Simonson, 24)

Inspired by his own progress as well as the attention and money he was beginning to receive from such public improvisations, Grierson continued giving impromptu recitals in New York, Boston, Baltimore, and other major cities along the East coast. In 1869 his European travels and concert touring began with concentrated force. He would later recall his state of mind at the time as follows:

I moved along on the stream of experience under the illusion that society was full of poetry and romance. To me the world was a sort of dream, and through it I walked, a living but sealed book of illusions. My head was full of unwritten Arabian Nights adventure, and in my ignorance I imagined that the world was full of charming and generous people willing to aid art for art's sake, and to further truth for truth's

sake... A desire to see the world was born with me; it was an instinct... It seemed quite natural to go about alone in foreign countries, without funds in the bank to draw from, and without rich relatives to help me in time of trouble. To see, to hear, and to know the world for myself, that was the 'instinct.' (Grierson, CT, vii-viii)

He first went to Paris, where he would perform for the 80-year-old Daniel Auber. A renowned composer and head of the Paris Conservatory of Music, Auber took Grierson under his wing and arranged all manner of performances for him, as Grierson dove into the artistic salon culture of Paris amongst Dumas, Mallarmé, and others of the period. Grierson was even commissioned by composer Leon Gastinelle to sing the lead voice in Gastinelle's mass, dedicated to the Emperor for his royal birthday celebration, and performed at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in 1870. A year later Grierson's intuition led him to London where his improvisatory musicales gained further attention.

Grierson's twenties were spent wandering across the globe, with notable forays in Baden-Baden, Cologne, and St. Petersburg. His travels and performances had him crossing paths with the highest peaks of wealth, nobility, and celebrity and the lowest ranks of poverty, vulgarity, and anonymity. Grierson's family moved to London in the early 1870s where he joined them for a while, before further international travels through London, Paris, Australia, Chicago, San Francisco, and elsewhere. Grierson maintained this nomadic lifestyle until the end of the 1880s.

Until 1889 I was a wanderer through the world with a knapsack filled with ornaments which none cared to look at. But in waiting for better days I accepted the situation. I had to wait twenty years, every month of which was replete with some form of hard work, rude experience, mingled success and failure, and trials of every description. But, as I said before, I was my own world of romance. I had to create it, without knowing how or why. (Grierson, CT, xiv)

As soon as he had left the Illinois prairies, Grierson voraciously digested philosophy and literature, both classical and contemporary. And he wore his idols on his sleeve. Over the years he proclaimed and revered the mystical personas of Novalis, William Blake, J.W. Goethe, Abbé Joseph Roux, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others. Still, he could be incisively critical of his idols, as when he accused Emerson of being overly intellectual, having never walked in the "valley of the shadow" (Grierson, CT, 93). But his earliest and most enduring hero was Abraham Lincoln, whose mystic prowess was memorialized both in *Valley of the Shadows* (1909) and more

explicitly in his *Abraham Lincoln, Practical Mystic* (1918). He saw in Lincoln a man that was in touch with his own interior as well as with Divine Will, a prophetic leader who was key to realizing the spiritual destiny of man in America. In one of his *Abraham Lincoln*, Grierson compiles quotations of the ex-president and others' commentary or recollections combined with the author's own reflections. His mystical portrayal of Lincoln is clear in the choice of quotes he offers, such as this one by the ex-president himself:

Somewhere there is a fearful heresy in our religion, and I cannot think it lies in the love of liberty and in the aspirations of the human soul. I hold myself in my present position, and with the authority invested in me, as an instrument of Providence. I have my own views and purposes. I have my convictions of duty and my ideas of what is right to be done. But I am conscious every moment that all I am, and all I have, is subject to the control of a Higher Power. (Grierson, AL, 11)

In many ways, Grierson identified with Lincoln, as a prophet, a genius, and a leader. In Grierson's later writings, his critique of culture, politics, and the arts is always one drawn towards synthesizing the zeitgeist and calling for a mystically driven renaissance, or as one reviewer put it, he was "engaged in making the time conscious of its own spirit" (Grierson, PM, 15). Grierson was insistent that genius was needed for the spiritual development of man. "Genius, which is the supremest personal force in the world of thought, is a central sun of itself, back of which the essence of the unknowable rules and acts in mysterious, inscrutable, and eternal law" (Grierson, CT, 166). Elsewhere he offers what might as well have been his own guiding methodology, if not a suggested method for others. Those on the path of genius, like Grierson and his heroes mentioned above, have four tenets: "First, he has confidence in himself; Second, he has confidence in others; Third, he feels that in the eternal mysteries there resides a law and a force which may be revealed by flashes of intuition; Fourth, he knows that the world is not standing still" (Grierson, IA, 175).

Genius, for Grierson, was not composed of the intellectual so much as the mystical. The etymology of the term itself [Latin, *genius*] originally referred to a "guardian deity or spirit which watches over each person from birth", or to a person who has "prophetic skill". And it was mysticism, in general, that provided the broader context for Grierson's philosophy in both his life and his music. As he declared in his introduction to *The Valley of Shadows*, he believed there was a spiritual renaissance of mystical character occurring across America, and beyond, during the turn of the nineteenth

century. In *Modern Mysticism* (1899), Grierson defines "mysticism" as follows:

Mysticism is the astronomy of the soul; and a mystical mind is an intellectual telescope probing for specks of truth in a universe of eternal mystery. The non-mystical is dissipated by centrifugal force; but mystical thought is centripetal in its action, ever aspiring towards the central and the ideal, yet always in an epicycle. No sooner does poetic intuition penetrate to a new conception of Nature's enigma than the mind becomes conscious of revolving inside a new circle of unsolved problems. Paradox and illusion are the riddles, the tempters, and the tormentors of the poets, for the deeper the soundings the more imperative the mystery. (15)

As for many, Grierson's mysticism was rooted in meditative reflection of the intuitive and imaginative realms of his own inner space. He was insistent on prioritizing the mystical role of this interiority, shunning the ephemeral garb and fads of culture and tradition; or, in his own words, "[t]here is but one Universal mode of thought, that of interior consciousness freed from schools and systems" (Grierson, MM, 14). Grierson spent many hours in meditation, honing his relationship to his intuition and prophetic calling:

Meditation is the secret of refined and durable intelligence, without which no prophet ever preached, without which the passions and sentiments of poetry are only a passing impulsion, composed by the dilettante in a day, to be read and assimilated by the novice in an hour. The presence of meditation gives grace to solitude and courage to patience; it acts like an arbiter between the personal power and the reason which dominates the brain and the egoistic pleasures that dominate the heart. Study is agitation, movement, like the juice of grape in fermentation, but meditation is like the pure wine which sharpens the wit and gives power to the wings of genius. Meditation contemplates the past, appropriates the present, and anticipates the future. (Grierson, CT, 125)

Others encouraged Grierson's extremely independent approach to life. Auber had urged the young pianist: "Don't study. Perhaps if you study music, you will lose, or at least spoil, your strange gift" (Wheeler, 135). By his own inclination or with Auber's advice in mind, Grierson never took up formal study of music. But he continued studying and practicing his "strange gift". And as he aged, Grierson became intent on probing the philosophical implications of this strangeness. His own philosophy was highly syncretic and idiosyncratic, expressed in patches and swaths through various reflective essays over the years. But clairvoyance and mystery would form the center

There is a psychic and magnetic correspondence through all things. Viewed hastily, everything looks like chance; but the deeper we go into the meaning of the things which appear casual, the plainer does the law of phenomenal relativity become. Perhaps the chief cause of inharmony among people is the ignorance of the world concerning the attractive and the repulsive forces in trivial as well as in great things. If we could become clairvoyant and psychometric, the harmonious relation of people and things would become apparent; colours, sounds, and perfumes would blend in an endless symphony of chromatic tones and tints, and we should recognize law where we now see nothing but chance or chaos. (85-86)

Certainly no man can call himself a thinker who refuses to do battle with the mysterious forces which encompass us round about, as palpable as the air we breathe. If there were no mysteries there would be no such thing as science, and if book-learning contained all practical wisdom there would be no such thing as intuition. Everything is like everything else. There is but one source; but an infinite variety of appearances. The soul of the universe is one - its manifestations are without limit in variation. Phenomena produce mystery; the whole conscious world is engaged in the unraveling of mystery. (169)

How is one to make them [the popular audience] see the difference between a spiritual and esoteric improvisation and music played from notes from a cold-blooded, reasoned, and so-called classical mode?

The STRANGEST MAN in the WORLD!



Fine Job.
 "Bill's got a fine job now, announced the old man to a neighbor one morning: 'a fine job! Sweating money, that.'"
 "What's he doing?" asked the other man.
 "He's a night printer," the old man answered. "Oh, a fine job! He works nights and serves his neighbor, and then he sleeps all day and serves his food."—
Yiddish Companion.

Throughout his musical career Grierson's pianistic improvisations would also often take programmatic concepts or thematic scenes as guides to a given improvisation, e.g. in 1912 he would improvise upon "the sinking of the Titanic." More commonly, over the years, he would use the orientalized imagery of foreign lands and cultures - Egypt, Assyria, Palestine, Greece, et al - as well as the creative nostalgia of ancient times to conjure unique and unprecedented musical experiences by improvisatory interpretation. These improvisations on a mental theme would often be combined, in the same concert or musicale, with pieces by Chopin or pianistic excerpts from European operas. Grierson himself had a youthful admiration for the music of Wagner. But according to Grierson, who would write a scathing essay on the phenomena of "Parsifalitis," Wagner never realized "the desired esoteric serenity"; rather, he praised French impressionism, "[s]ince Debussy began his work, orchestral music has become more absolute, more transcendent, forcing technique and counterpoint to take an inferior place" (Grierson, IA, 113). Grierson's own perspective on the importance of music and its' role in society, which he stated in *The Invisible Alliance* (1913), was something he had felt from his initial years as a musician.

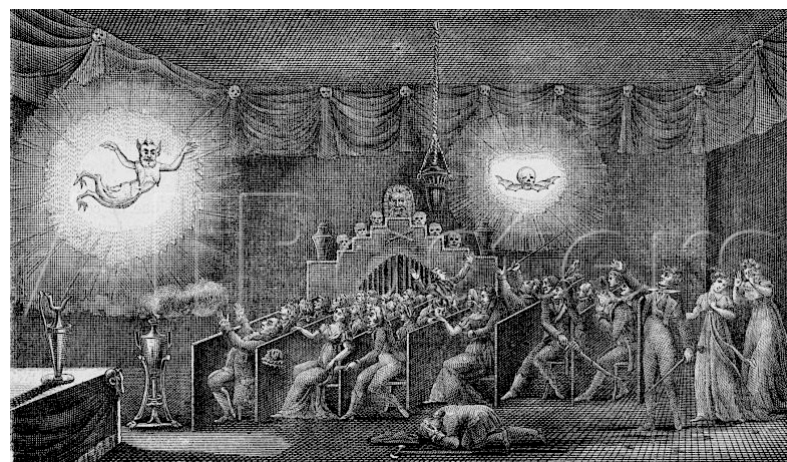
[N]ow once more in the history of civilization the signs point to a union of music, literature, and philosophy, with music as the key to all. If such a union is consummated it will metamorphose the world of art, literature, and psychology. One thing may be taken for granted - music, in our day, has become for many thousands of people a refuge against the onslaughts and delusions of materialism, and just in proportion as opinions become more positive, people will become more and more attracted to the harmony created by rhythmic sounds. But more than all else, music is becoming a psychic necessity. (115)

By the time Grierson had entered his 20s, the "psychic necessity" of the prophetic path that he felt in music was joining forces with a ghostly pastime. During his first travels in Europe, Grierson's improvisations would begin to take the voices and musical auditions of the spirit world as their thematic material and generative vehicle. Likely having been exposed to séances during his visits to major east coast cities, let alone the superstition and prophecy he encountered in backwoods Methodist preaching, it was in 1871, during a stay in Russia, that Grierson received first-hand training in séance direction by locally renowned spiritualist. Three years later, Grierson resided at a farm in Chittenden, Vermont, where he met the founders of Theosophy, Madame Helene Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, and joined them

in an intensive residency focusing on spirit communication. Through his own pianistic mediumship, Grierson's notoriety would only increase over the next two decades.

But prior to Grierson's séance techniques and the American popularity of Theosophy and Spiritualism in general, Europe had been exercising a similar form of ghostly performance as pure popular entertainment. More in the spirit of a horror film or a haunted house, the nineteenth European phantasmagoria conjured all sorts of ghosts and monsters through multimedia illusions. The mysterious illusions of the phantasmagoria, as we'll see, carry forward into Spiritualist practice.

PHANTASMAGORIC AFFINITIES



Robertson's phantasmagoria, Paris, 1797

Everything in theatre is illusive, except the audience. [...] A theatre is a cauldron of emotional witch-broth; the things that are done pertain to magic. [...] It is the world of illusion, where an act or a scene may reflect a magic ray of reality in a sphere as vast as imagination and as potent as life and love. But to the actors themselves there is no mystery. It is the playgoer who has entered the region of artifice, the realm of light and shade, the abode of fancy and fascination, where enigma, mystery, and emotion are one, and where the problems of life revolve in a kaleidoscopic world of romance and realism. A theatre is a hot-bed of paradox.

Francis Grierson, "Theatrical Audiences" (CT, 100)

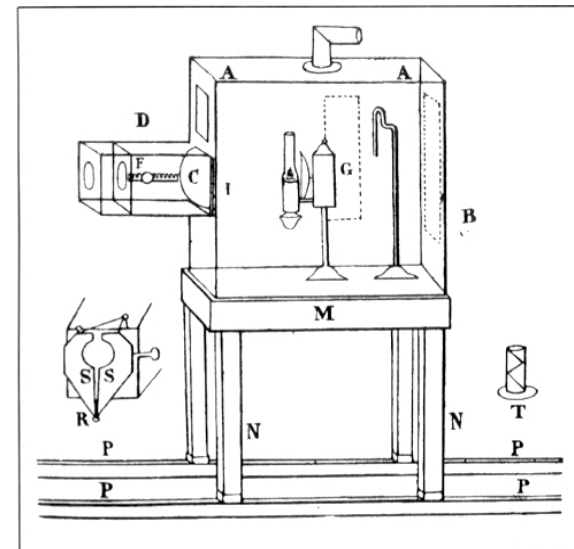
Phantasmagorias were a proto-cinematic and theatrical form of entertainment, involving performers, costumes, projectors, mirrors, and props, that depicted ghosts, monsters, and other phantoms aimed to frighten and fascinate. The term itself was coined by a French dramatist; derived from its likely combined Greek and French roots [Gr., *phantasma*; Fr., *agora*], “phantasmagoria” literally meant “a crowd of phantoms”. Phantasmagorias were widely popular in Europe during the nineteenth century and they effectively amplified the interest in the performance of phenomenal fantasies and the desire to believe in spirits in European consciousness. This led to the development of a vast array of techniques aimed at creating convincing, and fear inducing, illusions. One of the most notable is that of ‘Pepper’s Ghost’ - named after its inventor, John Henry Pepper - now commonly used in haunted houses, magic tricks, and live musical performances. Using an angled sheet of glass, set off-stage, and a lantern-projected image, the audience will see an transparent image appear to hover on the stage. This effect has been consistently used since its invention, most recently adapted to 3D holographic technology, which allowed the superimposition of a deceased Tupac Shakur to “perform” live with Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg at the Coachella festival in 2012, and has given rise to the completely holographic Japanese pop star Hatsune Miku.

During its heyday, the most popular, influential, and elaborate phantasmagorias were those staged by Etienne Gaspard Robertson. Like many directors of theatrical illusion, Robertson would often begin his shows by denouncing so-called superstitious impostors, with the emphasis being placed on the verity of his own projections: Robertson’s phantoms were “real.” And like many phantasmagoric works, Robertson’s phantasmagorias anticipate aspects of twentieth century experimental art; they aren’t a far cry from modern acousmatic listening or contemporary sound and performance art. Author Theodore Barber describes one such show in evocative detail:

Robertson quickly extinguished the light so as to plunge the room in total darkness for the next hour and a half. This in itself was frightening, but to increase the terror he proceeded to lock the doors. The audience then heard the noise of rain, thunder, and a funereal bell calling forth phantoms from their tombs, and [Benjamin] Franklin’s Harmonica, a form of musical, water-filled glasses, provided a haunting sound which served both here and throughout the show to mask the noise of the goings-on behind the scenes. During these sound effects, Robertson was setting up his magic lantern behind the screen, rear projection being in fact a key to his performance. The audience could see the

slides on a cambric screen that had been made slightly diaphanous by coating it with a varnish of white starch and gum arabic, but the lanternist and the actual workings of the show remained hidden. Another brilliant touch was that he sometimes rear projected his slides on to smoke, creating an eerie effect. (75)

The phantasmagoria was a synthesizer of progressive technology, multi-media creation, and performative illusion. Its key ingredient was the “magic lantern,” a precursor to the slide projector, and, by its application, a proto-cinematic tool, originally invented by philosopher and esotericist, Athanasius Kircher. Many creators of phantasmagoria devised their own lanterns to suit their needs. Robertson called his projector the ‘Fantascope.’ Using an Argand oil lamp, the Fantascope also had the possibility of creating “zoom” effects and, a shutter mechanism to alter the intensity of light, and mechanical slides to give more dynamic motion to his projected images. His slides were painted with transparent oils and the images were set in relief to the slides’ black background, which gave them a floating appearance in a dark room. Multiple projectors allowed for the superimposition of different images and perspectives. Robertson and other cohorts would also give voices to these images.



Robertson's Fantascope: G) Argand lamp, F) adjustable focus, SS) shutter mechanism, D, optical tube (Barber, 75)

Phantasmagorias were scarce in America; they were present, but largely outmoded by the middle of the nineteenth century. Their failure to be imported was in part due to the increasing popularity of an analogous practice, Spiritualism; while the technology of the magic lantern was being outmoded by the beginnings of early cinema and the first film cameras that were rapidly evolving at the time. While phantasmagoria's had little direct influence on the development of Spiritualism in America, the former remains a significant antecedent for their shared merging of entertainment and art in the metaphysical illusionism of sound and image. Both phantasmagorias and Spiritualist séances projected disembodied images and sounds in a physical performance space. Interestingly, while the visual projections of the phantasmagoria anticipates experimental practices in early film, Spiritualism anticipates experimental practices in modern music and contemporary sound art.

AMERICAN SPIRITUALISM & SÉANCE THEATRICS

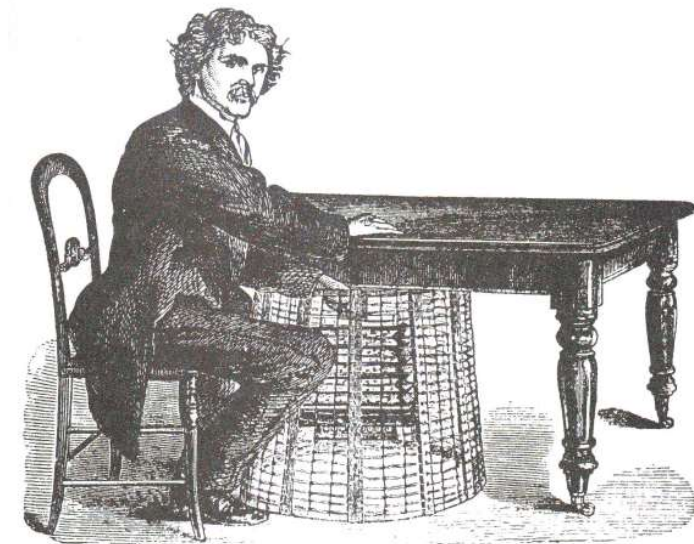


The popularizers of American Spiritualism, The Fox sisters

Spiritualism took on a widespread interest almost as soon as it manifested in NE America around 1845 with the ghostly “rappings” famously reported by the Fox sisters. From the huge waves of war, poverty, and illness, Americans had seen so much death that the longing for spiritual contact must have felt universally acceptable and passionately expressed. Spiritualism, then, came as a welcome icebreaker to these emotional burdens and longings. The Fox sisters claimed to hear “rappings” or knocking sounds they claimed were made by visiting spirits, whenever they made inquiry of a “Mr. Splitfoot.” They went on to make a good bit of money performing their rappings at various homes as well as at P.T. Barnum’s museum and other public venues. Perhaps their greatest performance took place on October 28, 1888. At the New York Academy of Music, no less,

Maggie Fox confessed that their entire mediumship had been a hoax from the beginning, and she proceeded to demonstrate how the ‘rapping’ sounds were made, not by spirits, but by the strategic cracking of her toe joints.

Meanwhile other spiritualists carried on the cause, with more explicit deceptive forgeries of spirit communication. One, “Miss Vinson,” would suspend musical instruments from her ceiling, and in the darkness of her séances, reach up and pluck the instruments, which to the ignorant audience members were presumed to be played by spirits (Britten, 246). Many such revenantly posed sounds pervade séance history, and were often manipulated or offered up as ‘credible’ signs of spirit contact. An unreliable though common credibility test, the “accordion test,” involved placing an accordion out of arm’s reach (e.g., in a cage, covered with a blanket, etc.). In the dark the accordion would then be mysteriously played by the spirits. In truth however, the sound was made by devised means of pumping air via a foot pump, or imitated by a mouth organ, among many other methods of illusion. This was notoriously performed by mediums Henry Slade and Daniel Dunglas Home for numerous séances as well as for questionable scientific scrutiny. Homes incidentally used a one-octave mouth organ to disembody the voice of his caged accordion.



Daniel Dunglas Home performing the accordion experiment

Similar tests and proofs often involved a guitar, piano, bell or percussion, among other musical instruments. The famous magician Harry Houdini, in later life, saw it his calling to weigh truth from falsehood in spiritualist practices. But he never found any nearness of being convinced of their credibility. In regard to the sonic dimension, in 1924 Houdini wrote of the auditory ambiguity of the auditor's sound localization, which aids the medium:

As to the delusion of sound [...] Sound waves are deflected just as light waves are reflected by the intervention of a proper medium and under certain conditions it is a difficult thing to locate their source. Stuart Cumberland told me that an interesting test to prove the inability of a blindfolded person to trace sound to its source. It is exceedingly simple; merely clicking two coins over the head of the blindfolded person. (Houdini, 7-8)

Grierson's séance study with Russia's grand medium, General Jourafsky, in 1871 was facilitated by Princess Abelmelik, who was an admirer of Grierson's. While there is no way to know what exactly Grierson learned from Jourafsky - whose own life is largely undocumented - Grierson's own séances would prove highly convincing for his audiences, and especially to the European nobility. Before the turn of the century, his acclaim was overflowing positive in nearly every country in which he performed. Over 20 years after Grierson's initial séance study began, Prince Adam Wisiniewski would recall a musical séance that Grierson lead in Paris on September 3, 1893:

After having secured the most complete obscurity we placed ourselves in a circle around the medium, seated before the piano. Hardly were the first chords struck when we saw lights appearing at every corner of the room... The first piece played through Shepard [a.k.a. Grierson] was a fantasia of Thalberg's on the air from 'Semiramide'. This is unpublished, as is all of the music which is played by the spirits through Shepard. The second was a Rhapsody for four hands, played by Liszt and Thalberg with astounding fire, a sonority truly grand, and a masterly interpretation. Notwithstanding this extraordinarily complex technique, the harmony was admirable, and such as no one present had ever known paralleled, even by Liszt himself, whom I personally knew, and in whom passion and delicacy were united. In the circle were musicians, who, like me, had heard the greatest pianists in Europe; but we can say that we never heard such truly super-natural executions. (Willin, 54)

Interestingly, Grierson would go through long periods of denouncing the

merits of Spiritualism. Just as Blavatsky had accused him of being a charlatan, so Grierson saw such deceit in the majority of mediums, who used phenomenalist means to beguilingly win their audience's belief. Later on, around 1887, Grierson would publicly denounce Spiritualism and deny that séances had ever occurred at the Villa Montezuma. Grierson recounted these distrustful sentiments in his letters to Claude Bragdon:

The phenomenologists are the gravest danger we have to face, even in this enlightened age. People who see in my music a phenomenal wonder may be innocent enough in themselves, but they are no company for me, and they will not assist in my mission and my message, or in anything whatsoever! The spiritists are on the lowest plane of all. A spiritist regards a man of genius as a mere machine to be worked, as a slave works, and small sums of money are handed to a medium as if wisdom and inspiration could be bought like coffee. There is no virtue in anybody who is wanting in reverence. (Bragdon, 154-156)

Here, as he would often in his later years, Grierson dismisses popular Spiritualism as a form of weak will, bending to the phenomenal gimmicks of money-grubbing charlatans. "Wisdom and inspiration," he wrote to Bragdon, "[cannot] be bought like coffee" (Simonson, 78). Nevertheless, Grierson would return to mediumistic practice towards the end of his life when he published a collection of channelled voices from beyond the grave. Mostly historical and political personages - including, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and others - Grierson's last published book, *Psycho-phone Messages* (1921), offered a contrasting embrace of Spiritualism after he had been dismissing it for several years. "The psycho-phonic waves," he writes in the introduction, "by which the messages are imparted are as definite as those received by wireless methods" (Grierson, PM, 16).

Grierson's draw to Spiritualism was rooted above all in his metaphysical perspective on inspiration, which in music belonged to the realms of intuitive performance and improvisation. Spontaneous improvisation is treated with absolute importance due to its direct proximity or union with the living moment of inspiration, which for Grierson was considered Divine. When he speaks of the nature of his performances, as many performing musicians have since noted, he speaks in terms of immediate and contextual energy. "When I give a musical recital I get 'waves' from the audience, and they get them from the piano. Each recital is one that satisfies the peculiar nature of those present at the particular time. I

interpret what is 'in the air.' We get each others' viewpoint" (Wheeler, 135).

In *Celtic Temperament* Grierson nostalgically and extensively recalls an affirmation of the fundamental importance of spontaneous improvisation as he encountered it in Bayreuth in 1891 - having, at the time recalled, drawn upon the resources of free improvisation for 20 years of séance work and years of musical performances.

My sojourn in Bayreuth [...] proved to me how much more potent spontaneous inspiration is to that which is written and printed. I had personal experiences among German friends and residents in Bayreuth which were worth more to me than all that had happened previously. The true magic is generated at the first contact of inspiration. But this instantaneous impression is only possible in the impromptu arts: oratory and improvisation. When we hear a great orator speak we receive the psychic power which comes with the first contact of thought; when we read the printed speech we get the form without the spirit - it has been stripped of the thing which made it vital. When a musical inspiration is written, printed, and rehearsed, it can never have the same effect as one that comes to the hearers direct. Even a Bayreuth orchestra has to produce Wagner's inspirations in a sort of phonographic way; they are simply repetitions. The psychic wave which produced them has rolled back and receded from our presence forever, to pass on, perhaps, to some far invisible shore, there to assume another form and a fresh outflowing.

It was only after my sojourn in Bayreuth that the law of spontaneous contact was made plain to me. The spontaneous phenomena of life are the things which dominate the affairs of the heart and intellect. At Bayreuth I put away the doubting, half skeptical, half convinced feeling as to my own gifts, a feeling that had possessed me all through my career up to this time, in spite of repeated successes. I now at last came face to face with the truth: the spirit is more potent than the form, the thing that is first heard more potent than that which is written; the force that arrives spontaneously dominates and controls all conventional forms of art and thought. The best that is written is still only a small part of the inspiration and the man. (xvi-xvii)

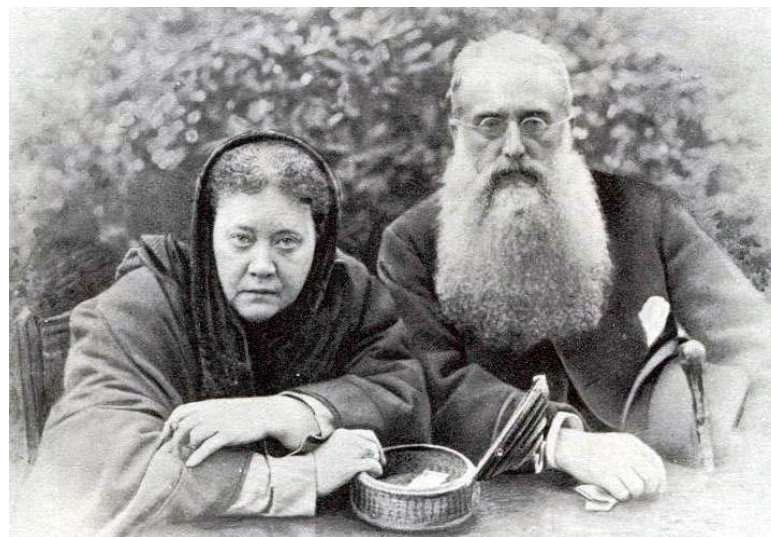
While Grierson's sentiments would be echoed decades later by the emerging participants of the "free improvisation" communities in both Europe and America, it was earlier, in 1920s England, that his illusioned ear found an unsuspected musical heir, when a seven year old girl named Rosemary Brown began to receive, in the form of spontaneous composition, inspired musical dictations from deceased composers, such as Franz Liszt. "I've always had the ability," she recalls, "ever since I can remember, to see and hear people who are thought of as dead." Like Grierson, Brown locates

the source of her mediumship to in an internal inspiration.

Well, it seems to me to come from a central source of inspiration, as if there were spheres of music, and I think it is channeled down to me, as perhaps it is channeled down to other composers, by various intermediary beings, spirits, whatever you like to call them. And in this instance, I think there are people who have been composers upon the earth, trying to channel the music to me. (Douglas, 2001)

Ultimately, Grierson's own practice, in his dual role as performing artist/medium, to some degree relied on the same persuasive techniques as the charlatans he criticized. But he believed that the role of the artist was "to give spiritualized pleasure," for it was art that served as "a complete union ... between the spiritual and the material" (Simonson, 85). Now, stepping back to the 1870s, after Grierson's séance study in Russia and his rapidly successful practice as a performative performing medium, his séance experience would be further expanded as he went on to spend considerable, if controversial, time with the founders of the widely influential Theosophical movement.

THEOSOPHY



The founders of Theosophy, Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, 1888

It was in 1874 that Grierson first met the founders of Theosophy, Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel-Olcott, during a 10 day stay at the Eddy Farm in Chittenden, Vermont, a national forum for Spiritualist practice. Theosophy was a highly influential spiritual movement that was proclaimed by its mouthpieces as originating in Ancient Egypt. Through spirit guidance Blavatsky et al were called to aid the rebirth of this ancient spirituality and spread it throughout America and beyond during the turn of the eighteenth century. Essentially Blavatsky, in collaboration with Olcott, et al., had researched and synthesized the spiritual and occult traditions of numerous ages and cultures across the world, finding and thematizing mutual concepts and themes; and it is from this intellectual- experiential synthesis, as well as proclaimed spirit communications, that the philosophical teachings of Theosophy were formed, first put into writing by Blavatsky in her *Isis Unveiled* (1877). These teaching were honed through subsequent writings and were offered with the greatest detail in her *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). In the latter text, Blavatsky outlined three primary tenets of the Theosophical perspective, with my own summary below each original tenet:

I. An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable Principle on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude. It is beyond the range and reach of thought — in the words of Mandukya, “unthinkable and unspeakable.” To render these ideas clearer to the general reader, let him set out with the postulate that there is one absolute Reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned, being. This Infinite and Eternal Cause — dimly formulated in the “Unconscious” and “Unknowable” of current European philosophy — is the rootless root of “all that was, is, or ever shall be.” It is of course devoid of all attributes and is essentially without any relation to manifested, finite Being. It is “Be-ness” rather than Being (in Sanskrit, Sat), and is beyond all thought or speculation. (Blavatsky, SD, 14)

[All phenomena of the terrestrial, material world have a shared source in the infinite and eternal Universal consciousness. All visible manifestation has its source in the invisible absolute.]

II. This second assertion of the Secret Doctrine is the absolute universality of that law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, ebb and flow, which physical science has observed and recorded in all departments of nature. An alternation such as that of Day and Night, Life and Death, Sleeping and Waking, is a fact so common, so perfectly universal and

without exception, that it is easy to comprehend that in it we see one of the absolutely fundamental laws of the universe. (17)

[Our recognition of the universal phenomena of periodicity offers itself as a perception of the infinite and eternal law of Universal consciousness.]

III. The fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root; and the obligatory pilgrimage for every Soul — a spark of the former — through the Cycle of Incarnation (or “Necessity”) in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic law, during the whole term. In other words, no purely spiritual Buddhi (divine Soul) can have an independent (conscious) existence before the spark which issued from the pure Essence of the Universal Sixth principle, — or the over-soul, — has (a) passed through every elemental form of the phenomenal world of that Manvantara, and (b) acquired individuality, first by natural impulse, and then by self-induced and self-devised efforts (checked by its Karma), thus ascending through all the degrees of intelligence, from the lowest to the highest Manas, from mineral and plant, up to the holiest archangel (Dhyani-Buddha). (17)

[Each individual soul is an indivisible aspect of the Universal soul which manifests itself through the karmic cycle of reincarnation.]

More broadly Theosophy emphasized the comparative religious study, the scientific study of the supernatural, and the benevolence of non-sectarian unity and Universal brotherhood. The Theosophical Society of New York was founded in 1875 to spread their word and to foster this brotherhood, as well as to offer a forum for the study of comparative religion, and the scientific investigation of the paranormal. It is important to consider Blavatsky’s philosophical tenets, not only for her direct relation and influence on Grierson, but because Theosophical philosophy would influence the inception of nearly all occult and esoteric practices in twentieth century America - including the New Thought, New Age, Christian Science, and other alternative spirituality movements - while being a primary influence in the development of American experimental music.

Among the many composers influenced by Theosophy we find Henry Cowell, Arthur Farwell, William Grant Still, Dane Rudhyar, Katherine Ruth Heyman, Alan Hovhaness, Cyril Scott, Luigi Russolo, Ruth Crawford-Seeger, Edgard Varèse, and others. Theosophy went hand in hand with and helped to define the “ultra-modernist” music of the 20s and 30s. First performed at a Theosophical community in San Luis Obispo, *The Tides of*

Manaunaun (1917) was a solo piano work of Henry Cowell's in which he had developed his radical use of the "tone cluster" to express the mystical and mythical significance of the Irish god, Manaunaun. In his *Lousadzak* (1944), Alan Hovhaness, who had attended the same Theosophical community as Cowell, developed an early 'aleatoric' technique to express a vision that his spiritual teacher had described; Hovhaness called this technique "spirit murmur." Inspired by Theosophical conceptions of the afterlife, William Grant Still composed his *Summerland* (1936), while Theosophy only reinforced the use of dreams, meditation, and musical prophecy in Still's creative process. Examples, such as these, endlessly manifested themselves in American music during the early twentieth century. Blavatsky herself had written stories - such as "The Ensouled Violin" and "The Cave of Echoes" - concerning the occult experience of music, while she had made similar remarks in many of her writings. Amongst the pervasively European-styled imitations of composers of the eastern US states in the nineteenth century, Grierson was simply ahead of his time in applying these esoteric and widely influential philosophies directly and with experimental effect to his music. However, despite their shared affinities, Blavatsky had decided that Grierson was a phony, while Grierson expressed a similar distrust of her.

Here, it is worth noting that Blavatsky was instructed, by her spirit guide, to move to America specifically in order to test the truth and falsity of spiritualism. The development of Theosophy was born from this particular spiritual guidance. She did this by attending and assessing numerous séances, often returning to accusations of spiritual weakness and deceit in both the performers and the audience. Blavatsky, herself a talented pianist, was unimpressed by Grierson's mediumship. She and Olcott had only recently met around the time they met Grierson. In fact, in Blavatsky's first letter to Olcott, the latter recalls Blavatsky urgently warning him "not to praise the mediumistic musical performance of one Jesse Shepard [a.k.a. Grierson] - whose pretense to having sung before the Czar, and other boasts she had discovered to be absolutely false - as such a course on my part would 'injure Spiritualism more than anything else in the world'" (Blavatsky, 36). Judged to be inauthentic in the eyes of Blavatsky, Grierson nonetheless continued to impress and fascinate. Meanwhile, Grierson recalls Blavatsky as an ominous foreboding figure:

Her kinky hair, her wide, almost flat nose, and thick lips, harmonized well with her swarthy skin. Her movements were languid and slow. She never smiled, nor did she ever display a sense of humor. Her dress was

ill-fitting, the fabric colorless, and of a nondescript character. The two things about her that attracted my attention were her slovenly appearance and her great staring eyes... I saw them a cold, callous grey. They suggested something hidden and forbidding, something between viper and vampire. (Simonson, 31)

Despite his tenuous relationship with Blavatsky, Grierson absorbed aspects of Theosophical thought into his own; his writings were published in Theosophical journals; and he would meet with Blavatsky at various intervals for the next few years. Later, when he would live in Los Angeles, Grierson would spend considerable time at the Theosophical Society in nearby Ojai. Always the outsider, the young nomadic Grierson continued in his idiosyncratic way, and by 1887, he began to settle down, as he arrived at an opportunity that no one could have suspected, the construction of his own spiritual palace: The Villa Montezuma.

GRIERSON'S SPIRITUAL PALACE: THE VILLA MONTEZUMA



The Villa Montezuma, 1925 K Street, San Diego, CA (San Diego Historical Society)

In the 1880s, after his extensive tour of Europe, Grierson gave a series of musical séances at the parlor of Mrs. H. H. Crocker in Chicago,

where he was quickly becoming a sensational “psychic pianist.” An attendant of the séances reported that Grierson demanded that no more than 12, or at most 14, persons be admitted, with each being charged \$2. Grierson covered the windows and locked the doors to perform his séance in complete darkness. Once seated Grierson had all attendants hold each other’s hand. And in this particular instance, once all attention was given to him, he announced that he was being controlled “by a band of Egyptian spirits, the leader of whom had lived on earth when the pyramids were young, and who gave what was then, and has constantly been, Mr. Shepard’s leading performance. After this, he sang in two voices, a feat which has astonished so many listeners, ‘Sontag’ (some familiar spirit) singing in one voice and the Egyptian in the other. Another ‘spirit’ accompanied on harp. Between the musical pieces, Mr. Shepard, ‘under the influence’, gave tests, describing spirit friends, etc.” (Simonson, 34). A Mr. Tonner has described Grierson’s musical performances as follows:

He would pass from a suave melody of the Italian school, or from a symphonic movement of the German, to a languid melody of the East, the pomp and melancholy of Nineveh or Babylon. And it is said that at certain wonderful moments, he could add the strangest, most inexplicable voice, that did not follow the music but went along with it, almost independent of it, rising up from out of the middle chords of the piano, faintly at first, and at last filling the room with indescribable and thrilling tones. (Grierson, VSb, xxiv)



Lawrence Waldemar Tonner

Lawrence Waldemar Tonner met Grierson, 15 years his senior, in Chicago around 1885. Born into Danish nobility, Tonner immigrated to the US and became a naturalized citizen in 1875. Among his many jobs, he would notably work as translator and an aid for Herbert Hoover. But ultimately Tonner would become Grierson’s lifelong secretary and clandestine lover. While their homosexual relationship was kept private, being known only by intimate friends, their public relationship was purely professional. Not long after meeting Grierson, Tonner would regularly accompany him on his musical séance tours.

During these tours Grierson passed through Vermont, where he would meet and befriend the High Brothers. William and John High were deeply impressed by Grierson’s psychic abilities, so much so that they encouraged him to move to San Diego, where they proposed - or Grierson persuaded them - to finance and build him a ‘palace’ where he could continue to work on his music and commune with the spirits. Some accounts claim it was through the spiritual contact with William High’s deceased wife, that messages were given (by Grierson’s channeling) encouraging the High brothers to mortgage their belongings and finance the building of the Villa. Built in 1887, the Villa Montezuma was made in the style of a Queen Anne Victorian mansion. Persian rugs, stained glass windows (one depicting Grierson as a saint), and ornate woodwork fill the building. Grierson and Tonner then relocated to San Diego to live in the Villa for the unforeseeable future.

Grierson held many séances at the Villa Montezuma, where several guests reported to have heard “drums, tambourines, and trumpets sounding all over the room; other guests reported hearing choirs of voices led by Grierson’s own soprano voice soaring among the higher notes” (Grierson, 12). But in actuality these sounds were most likely not played by the spirits, or even by Grierson. As one historian remarked, “[h]idden chambers and crawl spaces behind walls and fireplaces [of the Villa] may have helped [Grierson] produce the mysterious voices often heard during his concerts” (Davis, 35), i.e., by placing other musicians cued to perform in these locations. This architectural auditory illusion is very similar to the visual technique of ‘Pepper’s ghost’, which we met in the European phantasmagoria. With attention placed in one space, a visual or auditory image is placed in an alternate space, which illusively appears to exist in the shared attentional space of the audience.

In his letters and writings, Grierson clearly holds onto to his spiritual beliefs, critiquing others, while never explicitly admitting to such 'gimmicks' or theatrical techniques in his own practice. At the same time, while Grierson was primarily performing thematic improvisations and musical séances, he could also be heard performing operatic extracts and his own compositions. These were often put on, often outside the concert hall, with a flare of multimedia and communitarian context. One recount of a musicale in the Villa makes this clear:

On New Year's Eve, [Grierson] gave one of his most noteworthy receptions. Each room of the house was decorated with a different kind of flower that harmonized with the room's decor: there were orange blossoms, roses, lilies, holly, and ferns. After the guests had enjoyed refreshments, Shepard played and sang selections from the operas of Meyerbeer, Wagner, Mozart, and Verdi; and he concluded the performance with a composition of his own, the Grand Egyptian March. This was apparently an impressionistic composition, in which Shepard simulated the sounds of marching armies, trumpets, drums, tambourines, battle clashes and cannon booms. It was a real tour de force which never failed to impress the audience; and Shepard performed it often. (Crane)

This palatial life was short-lived. After being unable to pay the interest accruing on his mortgage and foreclosure of the Villa was imminent. Through deceptive aims, Grierson however managed to persuade the High Brothers to trade the Villa in exchange for what amounted to be an abandoned country store in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The Villa however still exists today, preserving Grierson's memory. Now considered a nationally registered historic place, the Villa, also known as "The Jesse Shepard House," has operated as a museum of Victorian architecture and the life of Jesse Shepard for over 30 years. Throughout the twentieth century the Villa became a venue of community education, arts, and private events, a place where couples were married, where archeologists dug up a buried Victorian fountain, where African-American artists gathered for salons, where the local neighborhood celebrated holidays such as the Mexican 'Day of the Dead', and where children learned the history of San Diego as well as various arts-and-crafts, including how to make Victorian quilts. In February of 2006, after years of restrictive visitor hours, low attendance, and financial struggle the museum was closed without warning. It has been closed to the public since this time.

Meanwhile, back in 1889 Grierson and Tonner were looking to

escape the ordeal with the High brothers and the California Spiritualist community. Shortly before the Fox sisters announced their hoax at the New York Academy of Music, Grierson was undergoing a transformation of identity at the Villa Montezuma. It was at this time that he became



Villa Montezuma, images of the interior (San Diego Historical Society)

increasingly critical of the phenomenalism of Spiritualist practices, and sought to distance his association with them. As he slowly began to withdraw from séance culture, he placed increasing effort into writing and publishing. Grierson's draw to Paris was for practical reasons, to keep writing and publishing. He and Tonner had just visited Paris in 1888 in order for Grierson to arrange for the publication of his first book of essays, *Pensées et Essais* (1899), written in French. Especially in regards to one of these essays, "La Revolte Idéaliste," Grierson received numerous letters of praise from some of France's most notable writers and academes of the time. Expressing something broader and more symbolic than this new literary path alone, "Jessie Shepard," as he was still known then, officially changed his name to "Francis Grierson," the name he would carry for the rest of his life - "Francis" was his given middle name, while "Grierson" was his mother's maiden name. As mentioned in the introduction, Grierson's new identity was publicly declared with the 1899 publication of his first English book, *Modern Mysticism* (1899). In this book Grierson speaks, perhaps, to one reason for his sudden change of artistic medium and name:

Intuitive knowledge, coupled with worldly experience, gives a natural leaning towards reticence. A certain indifference renders a man of much intuitive or worldly knowledge silent at the very moment when superficial wits are the most positive as well as the most triumphant. [While...] those who possess an intuitive mind are commonly misunderstood by their relatives and very often by their friends. (114-115)

Grierson's sensitive ear had, for so long, been attuned to his interior and to the external influence of spirits, while he witnessed more outspoken and dubious voices leading the public, in his mind, astray. Grierson was ready to talk. And his new identity was that of a very confident and opinionated world traveler who sought to be a spokesperson for a world-view that did not sell the watered-down veneer of mysticism and intuitive prowess, but spoke loudly from its very heart to a mass audience through the power of the printing press. Grierson wanted to communicate the belief that all aspects of life - art, politics, and religion, etc. - were directly affected by a higher power, the spirit world. Moreover he believed that the artist/genius, such as himself, could serve as the medium between the spiritual and terrestrial worlds. Through this mediation he could assist in the unfolding of prophecy, and writing had become his means to do so.

Following *Modern Mysticism* Grierson penned several well-selling books, typically collections of essays, aphorisms, travel accounts, portraits of

renowned figures he'd met, and his opinions on culture, many of which we have previously encountered in this essay. And though all of these works, except for *The Valley of Shadows*, are no longer in printed circulation, the curious reader may freely access many of them in digital form via Archive.org and/or books.google.com. Following is a list of books published during Grierson's lifetime:

Pensées et Essais (1889)
Modern Mysticism (1899)
Essays and Pen-Pictures (1889)
The Celtic Temperament and Other Essays (1901)
The Valley of Shadows (1909)
Parisian Portraits (1910)
La Vie et Les Hommes (1911)
The Humor of the Underman and Other Essays (1911)
The Invincible Alliance and Other Essays (1913)
Illusions and Realities of War (1918)
Abraham Lincoln, Practical Mystic (1918)
Psycho-Phone Messages (1921)

Grierson's most posthumously prized piece of writing, *The Valley of Shadows* (1909) - 10 years in the making - is a personal memoir of his childhood in the pre-Civil War prairies of Illinois. Theodore Spencer called it "a minor classic" (Simonson, 105). Edmund Wilson wrote extensively on the book in a *New Yorker* review and in his own book, *Patriotic Gore*. The book received and continues to receive rich praise, as one of the most detailed first-hand accounts of that period in American history. But more than nostalgic memory or historical documentation, Grierson worked intently to communicate the *spirit* of the time. Here he reflects on this work and its relationship to Spiritualism in the following letter to Claude Bragdon:

Since you speak of having read the *Valley of the Shadows* I may say that only the most clairvoyant minds can penetrate to the inner meanings of the book. The others read it as a fine novel. It took me ten years to write, and all my fortune to the *last* shilling. When the last page was finished the last shilling was spent. But, as you are quite able to understand, books like mine are not, and never will be, written for *money*. I was nearly two years waiting for the proper mood in which to write the portrait of Lincoln as he stood against Douglas at Alton. There is not a mechanically written page in the book [...] I am no believer in chance.

When my parents left England for America and went direct to Illinois in the midst of the great psychic movement, they had no idea why they went. My parents had not the slightest notion of what I was or what I was to do. There were no schools. No one ever taught me *one thing*. *The Valley of Shadows* had to be written by me, or not written at all. The fundamental reasons and conditions of that time had to be recorded in that *particular* form. But spiritists and others also must not think any portion of that book was ever dictated by any spirit. The art that is not felt is not art at all, but something else. Genius is self-conscious or it is nothing. (Bragdon, 154-156)

Reviewers who doubted his genius often accused Grierson's writings and musical séances of vanity, falsehood, and formlessness. Still even his detractors have often acquiesced to admitting a powerfulness and artistry in the manner by which he was able to create a palpable mood or atmosphere through his writing. In like manner, Grierson's music remained dependent upon the creation of deeply convincing moods. With this construction of atmosphere in mind, our historical look at phantasmagoria and séance theatrics have prepared us to better understand Grierson's musical séances from the perspective of performance and theatre, that "emotional cauldron of witch-broth." Grierson alludes to this in an essay called "Theatrical Audiences" (*Celtic Temperament*, 1901):

A playhouse is like a human entity; every theatre has its soul; each has its own form, colour, and influence. Theatrical superstition springs from an ignorance of the psychological laws which rule here as elsewhere. It is not then merely in the physical formation of a theatre that the secret lies, but in its personal so-cial attraction. Attraction or repulsion, all depends upon a unity of material and mystical law. The material de-pends upon the structural form, the mystical on a combination of subtle moods and influences too illusive to be grasped by any save those who feel them without being able to explain them. (Grierson, 100)

Whether through music or the written word, Grierson had become adept at conjuring these "subtle moods" within his work. His poetic language, theatrical illusions via spatialization of sound, suggestive imagery, and musical technique, while more widely conceived as spiritualist entertainment, were designed to enhance a credible sense of mystery as well as revealing how he thoughtfully translated spiritualism and esoteric spirituality into his own artistic voice and aesthetic.

THE SEER IN SECLUSION

The truth is, my finest music is esoteric! And more so today than before.
How can the big public understand?
It is impossible.

Francis Grierson (Bragdon, 157)

FAMED :: SEER :: HERE :: IN :: SECLUSION.

Praises Hoover; Calls Socialists Disciples of Materialism.



Francis Grierson.

A profile on Grierson, L.A. Times, March 8, 1920

Having left America for Paris, where he and Tonner would live from 1889-1896, Grierson continued traveling and touring, lecturing frequently and performing occasionally. He and Tonner then settled in London, living there between 1896-1913. It was during this time that Grierson wrote the majority of his published works, largely though the publishing house of John Lane. In 1913, after several decades in Europe, the couple decided to move back to the States, ultimately settling in Los Angeles, CA in 1920, where they would

stay for the rest of their lives. Speaking to the decline of interest in his work, only three more published books would follow upon their return to California. They struggled financially, often not able to eat dinner, and subsisted by Tonner's teaching French lessons and Grierson's metaphysical lecturing, as well as also by the support of friends. Tonner and their friend, a Hungarian refugee, Count Michael Teliki, also ran a dry cleaning business together, but to little financial gain.

As Grierson was focusing more and more upon his writings, he continued giving concerts, still theatric but more programmatic and imagery-driven than emphasizing any communion with spirits. In 1914 Edwin Bjorkman gave a detailed description of a Grierson concert which took place that year in New York City. With no mention of spirits, Grierson appears to have returned to his younger practice of improvising according to suggestive imagery and programmatic themes.

Although the audience had hushed in advance, I think it took most of those present several seconds to realize that the performance had begun. My own impression was one of intense surprise, as if the music had caught me unawares, issuing I knew not whence. It opened with a procession of chords - haunting, monotonous, primitive. It was as if the horns and drums of some African village had become civilized without losing their original weirdness - as if their uncouth noises had become miraculously transformed into genuine harmonies while still echoing the strife of primeval passions. Something more than sound issued from that piano: it was a mood 'uncanny', yet pleasing, exalting, luring...

"This is an ancient Egyptian improvisation —" Apparently Mr. Grierson had spoken, and his words were passed around in whispers. Again a complete change of atmosphere followed. The form of the previous pieces had been comparably vague; now the design of the composition was sharply outlined - and as it revealed itself, the perfection of that design became increasingly evident. The music was quaint, but not Oriental in any accepted sense. Its opening passages were characterized by harmonies that I can only describe as 'brittle' and that suggested the violin rather than the piano. Then the music swelled and became strangely urgent - I felt there was an image that wanted to break through - a consciousness of some might presence - and all at once it was there: "The Nile!"

Again Mr. Grierson spoke: "A fantasy on the destruction of Pompeii." Immediately I was carried into the serene beauty of the southern night, with its sky of unfathomable blue and its burning stars. Then, without preparation, and yet with no sense of any break or leap, the massive, crystalline chords of the first movement changed into a dance measure of irresistible charm. The sudden transition was as daring as it was

natural. The tripping rhythm that set my heart bounding with exhilaration seemed the very embodiment of the revelry and thoughtless merriment of the doomed city. Gradually, however, it took on a note of anguish, which in its turn was lost in thunder and lightning. At last the piano roared with the power of a hundred bass drums, but in that storm of sounds that assailed my ears there was not one discordant note. It was the supreme rage of the elements rendered supremely beautiful. (Grierson, VSb, xxv-xxvi)

Meanwhile, though his name and works were losing attention to the greater public, he nonetheless remained precious in the hearts of like-minded seer/artists. Fellow American mystic and composer, Arthur Farwell, who wrote and lectured frequently on intuition and musical metaphysics, was greatly inspired by Grierson, proclaiming him to be "the most authentically psychic and most daringly far-seeing critical musical personality of the time" (Wheeler, 135). In 1913 Grierson recollected the following in a letter to Farwell:

The exterior can only show what springs from the interior. The mind is double. The greater the work to be done, the more profound must be the consciousness of the subconscious. We are only beginning to get a glimpse of our secret selves as through a glass darkly. What we took for supernaturalism is beginning to be revealed as natural law working up from the secret springs of the subconscious.

Music is the most psychic and mystical of the arts. Only now are we beginning to realize its full meaning... There are four planes of music. On the first plane we get an expression of simple sentiments or emotions; on the second, joyfulness; on the third, the dramatic and the heroic; on the fourth we enter the serene. The last is the most psychic of all, and by far the most difficult to reach. When I am on this plane, I lose sight of my audience, consciousness becomes quiescent, space ceases to exist, and time disappears in the mystic rhythms that belong to the transcendental. The reasoning faculties have little to do with my musical gifts. Passivity and quietude are the leading essentials. The less I think about music the better my music is. I never practice at the piano. If I did, my power to improvise would cease. (Grierson, VSb, xxvii)

During his last decades it was not uncommon for Grierson to be accused of charlatantry in regards to his psychic abilities. Beyond Blavatsky's scathing denouncements, other new age pioneers such as guru George Gurdjieff's disciple A.R. Orage, who after publishing many of Grierson's articles in London's *New Age* magazine, ultimately came to doubt his psychic abilities (Wilson, 76). Having left the Villa Montezuma, Grierson's Victorian palace of spirits became a local "spook house." Meanwhile, the sales of his

publications drastically diminished and by two years after his death almost all of his books were out of print. In his old age Grierson continued lecturing, most commonly on metaphysical topics: "Theosophy," "The Fourth Dimension," "Cosmic Consciousness," and other esoteric interests as well as self-help topics. In one instance he lectured on "eternal youth," which only made his rouged cheeks and wig seem like a laughable parody to the audience. In regards to his music Grierson grew less confident - or interested - in his ability to make a connection with any substantial audience. "The truth is, my finest music is esoteric! And more so today than before. How can the big public understand? It is impossible" (Bragdon, 157).

More embittered and politically conservative in his old age, Grierson was disgusted by the swinging youth culture he began notice arising as he moved into the 1920s. After decades of pioneering free improvisation, Grierson was quick to disdain the "barbaric" sounds of jazz. Distrustful of both African-Americans and Germans, he was misguidedly advocating for Anglo-American unity. Having been soured by this perspective and the reactions he was receiving concerning these writings, Grierson withdrew from whatever spotlight he still had a foot in and returned to his old haunts. Through the support of old friends and the more occult-friendly culture of California, his passion for Spiritualist practice was renewed. This culminated in his final published book, *Psycho-phone Messages* (1921), in which Grierson documents the communications he'd been receiving as a medium, citing communications he had had with notable historical, political, and artistic figures, such as General Grant, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and numerous others. Moreover, he proposes in the book the desire for a telephonic technology devised for spirit communication. Interestingly, around the time of the book's publication, Thomas Edison was thinking along the same lines:

I don't claim that our personalities pass on to another existence or sphere. I don't claim anything because I don't know anything about the subject. For that matter, no human being knows. But I do claim that it is possible to construct an apparatus which will be so delicate that if there are personalities in another existence or sphere who wish to get in touch with us in this existence or sphere, this apparatus will at least give them a better opportunity to express themselves than the other crude methods now purported to be the only means of communication with those who have passed out of this life. I merely state that I am giving the psychic investigators an apparatus which may help them in their work, just as optical experts have given the microscope to the medical world (Simonson, 132).

Grierson himself toyed with inventing a "psychometric" device that could measure the "height and depth" of thought and feeling. Anticipating our own experience of using the internet, he sought a telepathic situation in which one could, as he described, "sit quietly in an obscure corner of the world and launch his psycho-electric currents of thought in a thousand directions" (Simonson, 80). Also around this time Grierson had begun organizing a collection of poetry for publication. Unfortunately, his previous publishers were neither interested in his clairvoyant litanies nor his metaphysical poetry - he published *Psycho-Phone Messages* on his own, hard-punched, dime.

Regardless, Grierson continued pursuing his esoteric interests with as much or more enthusiasm as before, up until his last years. He played often at various Missions around L.A., and during his last year of life he attended the newly founded Theosophical Society of Ojai, California. This society had migrated from its 1912 inception in L.A. to Ojai, where in 1926 its inauguration was overseen by Madame Blavatsky's successor, Alice A. Bailey.

Though Grierson's age and ill health were catching up with him, he continued performing and hosting musicales at his home. And in the unplanned dramatic ending of Grierson's final concert, he died as theatrically and mysteriously as he lived. While this event was summarized at the beginning of this essay, Waldemar Tonner recalls his first-hand account in more detail:

It was Sunday evening, May 29th. We had a number of people invited for a musical recital at our home - about thirty. A collection was to be taken up. Mr. Grierson had played a number of his marvelous instantaneous compositions on the piano and had given the company a talk on his experiences and impressions of France and Italy. He turned to the instrument and announced that the next and last piece of the evening would be an Oriental improvisation, Egyptian in character. The piece was long, and when it seemed to be finished he sat perfectly still as if resting after the ordeal of this tremendous composition. He often did that, but it lasted too long, and I went up to him - he was gone! His head was only slightly bent forward, as usual in playing, and his hands rested on the keys of the last chord he had touched. There had not been the slightest warning. He had seemed in usual health (he always had some indigestion), he had eaten well to gain strength for the evening, and he had been smiling and laughing with the company even a few moments before he passed away. (Grierson, VSb, xxxvi-xxxvii)

Despite being well-fed on his last day of life, Grierson's death was attributed

to heart disease via malnutrition, largely brought on by his poverty. During his last years he was known to have pawned off much jewelry and other expensive gifts given to him by royal European nobility, including a gold watch that was given to him by King Edward VII. Shortly before Grierson's death, Tonner had privately published a pamphlet, "The Genius of Francis Grierson" reflecting on Grierson's accomplishments and "genius." In this pamphlet Tonner recounts Grierson's travels and successes, both musical and literary, with a compilation of quotes from favorable reviews and letters. We are reminded of Maurice Maeterlink's claim that Grierson was "the supreme essayist of our age," Sully Prudhomme's assessment that he "his work was the expression of a penetrating and powerful originality," William James' praising his writings as being "full of wisdom," among others (Tonner). Grierson's endless supporter, during and after his death, Lawrence Waldemar Tonner passed away in 1947.

In his essays Grierson wrote often of the manifestations of "genius" in culture, often in reference to those he admired. And while Tonner and others would eagerly apply the title to Grierson, his own conception of genius placed its source not in the talents and ego of 'the genius' but at the mercy of unknown mysteries, the font of all his creations: "Genius, which is the supremest personal force in the world of thought, is a central sun of itself, back of which the essence of the unknowable rules and acts in mysterious, inscrutable, and eternal law" (Grierson, CT, 166). So it was that Grierson understood the guiding of his pen. And in regards to his music he most assuredly felt as Wallace Stevens described in his "Peter Quince at the Clavier":

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the selfsame sounds
On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound.
(Stevens, 89-90)

Forever falling in love with mystery, Grierson wanted more from his sounds than they could naturally provide. And so he disembodied them, diffusing his autonomy so that his sounds could be imbued with feelings and moods, drawn from or rather sent forth from the invisible realm of spirits, channeled from elsewhere. Genius or not, Grierson's intuitive drive, his techniques of illusion and love of mystery, and the idiosyncratic expression of his mystical perspective were artistically unprecedented and ahead of their time,

anticipating numerous influences and advances that would be realized in twentieth century music and art following his death.

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE



Francis Barraud, painting one of 24 replicas of the original Gramophone logo

Disembodiment, which was of prime importance in the experience and culture of phantasmagorias and séances, would be re-emphasized by the emerging industry of media technology that was rapidly evolving at the turn of the nineteenth century. During and after Spiritualism's popularity came the phonograph (1857, patented by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville) and, a bit later, commercial radio (1906, cf. Reginald Fessenden). Suddenly the voices of the living and the dead could be disembodied and heard coming from any number of technologically manifested locations. Perhaps no image more perfectly represents the curious reception and audition of these voices than the Gramophone's iconic logo. Entitled "his master's voice" (coined in 1899), the logo portrays a dog cocking its ear in bewilderment as it hears the sounds emerging from the conical speaker of a Gramophone.

These inventions were children of the radical discoveries made in the centuries before: Isaac Newton's discovery of gravity (1687), Benjamin Franklin's discovery of electricity (1750), and Charlières and Montgolfières' discovery of "miraculous" gases that would be used in the first balloon aviation (1783). These astounding discoveries gave way to intense awe and speculation by proto-spiritualists, such as Franz Mesmer, whose advocacy for the phenomena of "animal magnetism" and an etheric "fluid" fueled the supernatural affinities that would take root in America during the late 1800s (Darnton). As theories and discoveries slowly gave birth to unprecedented machines and technologies, popular fascination continued to give way to a kind of theological evaluation of these developments, but, even more, they opened people's minds to embracing or inventing other unknowns and a broader, more mystical, worldview.

In his extensive writing on disembodied voices in *Dumbstruck*, Steven Connor notes this theatrical and spiritual intersection, as well as their intertwined role with technology. The projected sounds of the Spiritualist séance and the voices emitted from reproductive audio technologies are described by Connor as a "vocalic body": "Our assumption that the object is speaking allows its voice to assume that body, in the theatrical or even the theological sense, as an actor assumes a role, or as the divinity assumes incarnate form" (Connor, 36). Ultimately what Connor is referring to is the power of suggestion and the will to believe, without either of which Grierson and his historical counterparts would have made little to no impact.

The power of this assumptive or suggested disembodiment is a core component of esotericism and mystical philosophy. There must be a hidden element, a secret, an invisible realm, etc. But when it comes down to an individual or a group of people who control what is hidden, this secret gives rise to great power by the few and great submission, or persecution of the many. From Pythagoras' shrouded voice, which lead his cult of *akousmatikoi* ["hearers"] in ancient Greece, to the use of the microphone by Adolf Hitler, disembodied sound - however deceptive, inspiring, or entertaining - can have profound influences and serious consequences. The illusioned ear is impressionable and dangerous when not attended to.

In Europe the phantasmagoria used this power of esoteric illusion to instill fear and wonderment through a unique style of theatrical horror; while Mesmerism used the invisible fluid of animal magnetism towards political ends. In America, Spiritualism's use of this power ultimately evolved into a form of self-serving capitalism, its practice becoming associated with

hoaxes and swindles. Throughout these applications of disembodiment, sonic or otherwise, projected "vocalic" bodies or mysticized machines are imbued with a felt presence, a ghostly life, often posed as a dualism that was inherited from Enlightenment philosophy. In critiquing this mind/body dualism, at the core of René Descartes' philosophy, Gilbert Ryle slandered Descartes' premise, pronouncing it a philosophical myth and coining it "the dogma of the ghost in the machine" (Ryle, ix).

I do not recall this history to evaluate Descartes. But, in regards to Grierson and the other sources constellated here, I will say that, good or bad, the ghost always exists for us, whether it is real, imagined, or devised. And myth will always remain an extremely valuable teacher. Now, moving across and forward in time, comparing a few more perspectives, we can see with a little more nuance how disembodied sound and the myth of "the ghost in the machine" have continued to play an influential role in aspects of contemporary music.



Les Paul and Mary Ford, in the studio

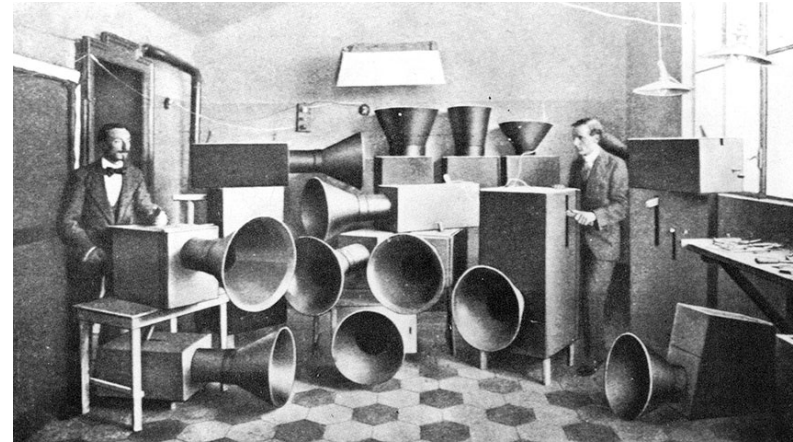
Les Paul was a pioneer of the solid-body electric guitar, as well as of various techniques used in analog recording and electronic effects, including overdubbing and the use of delay. While not the inventor of the electric guitar nor of the recording techniques mentioned, it was Les Paul's commercial application that brought these developments to broader attention and more wide spread use. These experimentations became such a staple of his work that even in live performance, often with his wife Mary Ford, he sought to create the illusion of such effects live. Paul's solution recalls us to the hidden rooms and voices in the Villa Montezuma. In replicating the echo effect used in the recording of the song "How High the Moon," Paul "came up with the bright idea of taking Mary [Ford]'s sister and hiding her offstage in a john or up in an attic - wherever - with a long microphone. Whatever Mary did onstage, she did offstage. If Mary sniffled, she sniffled. It just stopped everyone dead. People couldn't believe it or figure it out... One night I hear the mayor of Buffalo sitting in the front row tell his wife, 'Oh, it's simple. It's radar'... they began to think that they heard more than one guitar. They began to think they heard all kinds of things. They put in things that weren't there" (Doyle, 151).

In the 1880s the first guess at the source of such a strange sound as Mary's live echo would have been a spirit, but by the 1920s the mystery of spirit had been replaced by the mystery of technology: "Oh, it's simple. It's radar [...]" Interestingly enough, the first person to catch Paul's sonic hoax was a young child, whose innocence or naiveté was not distracted by spirits or gadgetry, and understood the simple truth of the illusion.

Then one night, a man came backstage with his little girl and says, "If I tell you how you're getting that sound, will you give me a yes or no?" I said, "Sure" and the little girl says, "Where's the other lady?" It took a little kid who didn't have a complicated mind. Everybody saw machines, turntables, radar – everything but the simplest thing. (Doyle, 151)

These same techniques, emphasizing sonic disembodiment, often under the more general genre of 'spatial music', have been used strategically according to various degrees of illusion, by composers over numerous centuries, from Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere* (1630s) to Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question* (1906). In no small part it was the ease of technologically manipulating and disembodimenting sound that would influence the metaphysical experimentations of the modern avant-garde. Around the same time that the "father of electronic music" Edgard Varèse was embracing noise and "liberating sound" from its constraining past, Italian

futurist Luigi Russolo was speaking a similar language. But Russolo's perspective was steeped more explicitly in the mystical thought of spiritualism and Theosophy.



Ugo Piatti with Russolo and his *intonorumi* in his Milan laboratory. January 1, 1913. Reproduced in *L'Arte dei rumori* (Milan: Edizione Futuriste di "Poesia," 1916)

Russolo's *intonorumi* were handmade mechanical sound generators producing noises imitative of the sounds of war and industry. Russolo was insistent that the artist has "the insatiable desire to raise matter up to its own level, to see it spiritualized in the work of art" (Luciano, 135). In two separate passages Russolo's spiritual consideration of sound are explicitly stated:

Make first the senses vibrate, and you will also make vibrate the brain! Make the senses vibrate with the unexpected, the mysterious, the unknown, and you will truly move the soul, intensely and profoundly! Here lies the fated and absolute necessity of drawing the timbres of sounds directly from the timbres of noises of life. Here - sole salvation in the deep misery of orchestral timbres - lays the unbounded richness of the timbres of noises. (Chessa, 140)

Music apparently has no need of a universal ideality, nor of any kind of spiritual ideality, because thanks to its' fundamentally abstract language, neither narrative nor speculative, it escapes the contingencies of the collective idealities of each work. But sound, let us not forget, is the matter of this abstract language, as the word is for poetry and color is for painting. Let us not confuse the abstraction of this matter with the

spirituality to which all matter from which the arts are molded must take us. Music must make the same effort as the plastic arts: music must spiritualize its matter, as the plastic arts must spiritualize theirs. And whereas the plastic arts, when they do not succeed in this, remain either solely descriptive or banally and impressionistically documentary and fragmentary, music, when it does not succeed in this, remains abstractly amorphous. Music must move away from an abstract indefinite, which is the characteristic of its language, and of the matter that it uses, to arrive at a spiritual infinite. (Chessa, 128)

Russolo's *intonorumi* were then a creative response to this metaphysical logic in pursuit of "spiritual infinitude." Through disembodied the raw timbres of everyday sound, loosened from their physical and cultural bonds, the listener is brought in touch with a transcendental audition, of infinite possibility and a sense of wonder. Russolo was not alone in his spiritual beliefs, the entire collective of Futurists expressed similar metaphysical perspectives concerning painting, photography, sculpture, and all media. The associations between a metaphysical perspective and artistic innovation, especially in the realm of music, can be met nearly every step of its history in Europe and America from the sixteenth century, if not from the very beginning, to the present. And with the advent of reproductive media since the late nineteenth century, even the abstracted and idealized forms of sonic matter, e.g., music in all its various styles and traditions, becomes itself reduced to raw sonic material, disembodied from its original contexts of physicality and function, and projected into unprecedented spaces and projected bodies. Perhaps nowhere has this illusioned audition been more widely experienced in the last decade than in Janet Cardiff's *Forty-Part Motet* (2001).

Recently I experienced Cardiff's work in two very different realizations in New York. *Forty-Part Motet* had been presented at the white-walled gallery space of PS1 and the historically and religiously laden open-aired stone Fuentidueña Chapel at The Cloisters. The former had the ear tuned more into intimate auditions of the individuals, and to the interstices between the music, to the coughs, mumblings, and sighs of the singers as they held "silent" between their parts; the latter, with subtle architectural verb and more ambient chatter, tuned my ears more into the music, which was originally composed for analogous, if larger, religious architectures, and the dynamic spatial movement of the voices across speakers.



Forty-Part Motet at The Cloisters (source, Metropolitan Museum of Art; photographer, Wilson Santiago)

Beyond acoustics, however, if one takes notice of the people listening, the full spectrum of the effects of the work becomes clear. Many are seated or squatting with their eyes closed - a serious expression, or non-expression, upon their faces - as they listen intently. Two teenagers walk by briskly smiling, talking, and rolling their eyes, as if it were over-sentimentalized background music. Several couples hold hands or sustain an embrace as they listen. Two children are cozied into their mother's arms, all seeming to be peacefully asleep. An old woman is recording the music, placing her iPhone directly up to one of the speakers, while another is crying quietly against the cold stone wall. Several people are rushing about the space, as if they know of or are trying to find the most ideal place in which to listen to the work [no such place objectively exists]. And I, drawn to the innocence of the sound, stand motionless near a speaker projecting the voice of a child an inch away from my ear.

With this work Janet Cardiff had taken a composition by Thomas Tallis, *Spem in Alium* (1570), a choral work for 40 voices, and disembodied it, recording each individual voice of the choir and projecting it into another

space with its own individuated speaker. Tallis' *Spem in Alium* ("Hope in any other"), was inspired by a text in the "Book of Judith," an apocryphal book from the *Old Testament*. With old-fashioned Christian self-deprecation and reverential gratitude, the lyrics read in English as:

I have never put my hope in any other
but in You, O God of Israel
who can show both anger and graciousness,
and who absolves all the sins
of suffering man
Lord God,
Creator of Heaven and Earth
be mindful of our lowliness.

Beyond the inherent spiritual origins of Tallis' religious composition and its' appropriation of Biblical text, Cardiff speaks about the piece in her own humanistic and spiritual terms:

The piece serves as a record of all the people who are in it. Just the other day George was looking at the list of singers, and he Googled his favorite bass singer, only to find that he died two years ago. The piece also includes many children. Now those children are all grown up. Some of the singers we recorded weren't professionals. Some of them go off a bit. It's a very difficult piece to sing. But it is the piece it is. I've heard it so many times and sometimes I hear flaws, and I think maybe we should re-record it. But it's about those people too. That's why the first part of the recording includes the singers talking to one another. It's about the personal, the individual, and how people come together for the singing, and then it becomes ethereal, spiritual. (Cardiff, AinA)

For me it was an interesting piece to do because I was very interested in having this up-to-date technology playing back a 16th century piece of music. You can follow the music as it goes from one choir to another and to another. You can hear it moving around in a sculptural way. I just love the feeling of sound coming from one side, and another, crosses over you to another, until all of those sound waves are hitting your body. It's quite an effect. (Cardiff, TT)

Cardiff's take on Tallis, was not merely about quotation or appropriation, as it might be for other composers' re-appropriation of musical material. For Cardiff there is a cultural communication occurring across time. It is this juxtaposition of disparate times and spaces, and above all a kind of captivating and suspended sense of wonderment that she sought, or discovered, in disembodiment these voices.

I think wonderment in our work is something that we really concentrate on, because we love to experience it. And we make work so that we can feel it, and so many of our pieces have this sense - whether it's through trickery of technology, or playfulness - it gives you a sense of 'Wow, how did they do that?' or all of a sudden you realize you're in one space in your mind, and in the physical reality you're all in different spaces and your mind kind of goes through this point where it can't concentrate and so it goes into a state of wonderment, I think. And that is very important to me because I'm almost political in my views that the art that I want to create should be transcendent. (Cardiff, TT)

By an unanticipated effect of intimacy and mortality caught in the human voice, Cardiff's piece, in the sense we give to it, returns our audition from the mystery of technology, which was becoming the poster-child of the inexorable and prophetic by the 1920s, back to the mystery of spirit, which had lost ground through the denunciation of Spiritualism and the spreading orthodoxy of institutional religion across America. By the acoustic intimacy of vocal isolation, *Forty Part Motet* humanizes the technology of the audio speaker (and the individual members of the choir) in such a way that there may be a greater connection between the listener and the recorded singer than one that is purely acoustic or conceptual. The intimacy of the recordings, personalized voices frozen in time, may open one's ears to a catacoustic audition, a listening by echo, and perhaps provide a sense of wonderment, that same wonderment which has accompanied every successful phantasmagoria, séance, or *intonorumori* performance across history.



Grierson

It is by this same catacoustic audition that I hear Grierson's silent contribution to American music. Unlike many séance directors or technology wizards, Grierson was not regularly using phenomenal illusions, like Miss Vinson who tied instruments to her ceiling, or like Les Paul's electronic manipulations and Mary Ford's staged echo. Often through the manner of simple suggestion, he claimed that the music he produced was inspired from beyond himself via invisible spirits. Posing himself as a vessel gifting the ghost, he and his music then point an attentional finger elsewhere, as far away or as ubiquitously near as one could imagine, and as mysterious as one allows it to be. Nowhere in the records now available had Grierson exposed any sense of doubt as to his spiritual beliefs nor to his spirit communications (only to those of others), nor any explicit references to devised manipulations or intentional duplicity on his part. Only his dealings with the High Brothers speak to any deceptive intentions. His aims were otherwise, as far as can be told, sincere and unpretentious, and he used all available tools - from sheer talent to persuasive suggestion - to guide the consciousness of his listeners towards a metaphysical audition. Grierson was never interested in proselytizing a traditional or occult God, nor of presenting himself as a guru, nor of swindling any false claims for personal profit. He had his profits with his practice - royal gifts and a short-lived mansion life - but these were never his motives, while he was ultimately consumed by poverty.

His self-professed aim was to provide "spiritualized pleasure." It was through his musical séances that he, apparently with a great deal of success, brought his audience, not towards a true or false belief in a given proclamation or verifiable spirit, but to the open engagement and actual possibility of "transcendental perception" (Simonson, 13), to a *sense* of wonder and mystery. And in that sense, the psycho-phone is not an imaginary technology that requires invention; rather, we are all psycho-phones. Wherever voices are disembodied, whenever sonic ambiguity and the panoply of noise meet our audition, we are all, if listening, subject to the pleasures and inspirations, as well as the confusions and duplicities of the illusioned ear. Grierson said it best:

All is mystery. Whatever we do we cannot escape that fact. This is the fundamental law which causes the illusion of progress and a constant desire to acquire more knowledge, to seek the unseen, the unheard, the unknown. Mystery engenders illusion - the most wonderful and subtle of all the primordial elements. Everything revolves or reposes on illusion; it is the action exercised on the mind by some person or some

thing, and we are always under its influence, whether it be good or bad or indifferent. Indefinable though they be, illusions are, nevertheless, realities. (Grierson, CT, 170)

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