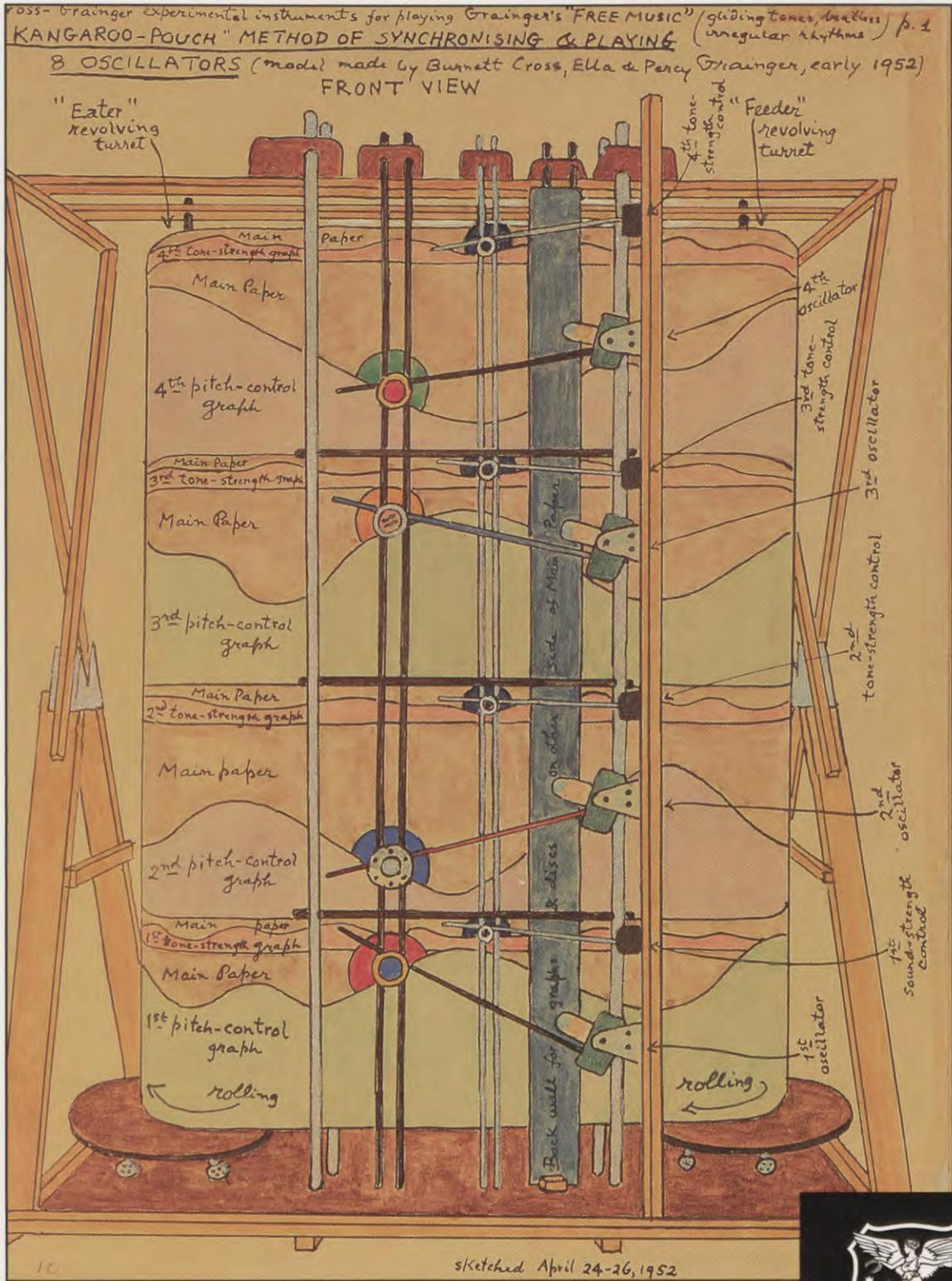
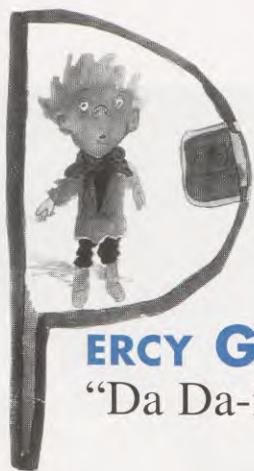


Library Journal





PERCY GRAINGER'S ART: “Da Da-ist” or Aussie “Make-do-ist”

In the post-modernist international art world of critics and curators, how do we package Percy Grainger for art consumption?

Difficult indeed, whilst alive he never exhibited or sold, and possibly his entire out-put is held in the Grainger Museum. Yet, the parochial *Encyclopedia of Australian Art* states:

“MUSICIAN, but also a painter. To most people, the exhibition ‘Objects, documents and pictures to reflect upon’¹ (selected from the Grainger Museum and the Archives Collections of the University of Melbourne), the university of Melbourne Gallery, 1978, came as a revelation.”

Grainger was born in 1882, into a fin de siècle family who nurtured a beautiful, infant, genius with a precocious talent for art and music. Formally educated at home from 1886 by his mother, by 1888 she gave him daily instructions in the piano and French. From 1888 to 1894, he was educated at home by a governess ‘Medidney,’ together with an Australian Aboriginal boy, Lani, the adopted son of a Mrs Blair, a doctor’s widow and friend of the Graingers. By 1891 he studied acting and painting with Thomas A. Sisley and drawing with Frederick McCubbin. In 1892 piano lessons with Louis Pabst.

Above:
Self portrait by Percy Grainger, aged 7 years, 1889. (Collection, Grainger Museum, the University of Melbourne).

by **Elinor Wrobel**

So, by the formative age of 10 years, the precocious talent and the duality of art and music were evident, as eventual career paths. Grainger followed music for fame and fortune, but art remained as an abiding form of solitary enjoyment and fulfilment.

Grainger’s first sculpture, “Beginning of an attempt to make a model yacht (aged 12 or 13)”, is held in the Grainger Museum collection, the precursor to his future free music machines. Percy Grainger’s childhood drawings and sketch books from 1886 to 1895 reveal a precocious, lively and amusing talent. Many of the drawings were gifts for relatives and friends or his governess “Medidney,” and reflect the child’s interpretation of the recipient’s personality and the child’s gift to amuse and please them.

One may speculate when studying the vast holding of childhood works in the Grainger Museum; that Grainger would have found ‘fame and fortune’ if he had followed art and not the muse music.

In 1895, aged 13 years, Grainger left Australia with his mother, to study piano and composition at the Hoch Conservatorium, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. His career in music became

his chosen destiny. The watercolours and drawings of this period are competent and mainly topographical and record his pleasure in roaming the countryside and his leisurely escape from the beginnings of the relentless pursuit of a musical career.

Similarly this is evident in the later period of watercolours of Barstow, California, painted in 1920 when Percy and Rose had a brief holiday between his demanding concert engagements.

During his 1909 concert tour,

Rose Grainger and Percy Grainger went (separately) to the Christchurch museum and both (separately) fell wildly in love with the African and other beadwork displayed there. Percy Grainger made drawings while in the museum and soon started copying native beadwork himself ... The American Indian beadwork was bought by Rose and Percy Grainger while living at 680 Madison Avenue (The Southern) New York City, around 1915–1917. Some American Indian beadwork may be added later. A few other gifts added by friends. Ella Grainger brought some nice shell money things to America when marrying Percy Grainger (1928), when she also brought the big Solomon Island mask.²

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The influence of Rose from his childhood where she nurtured him in music, literature and the arts continued during her life-time with their shared passion for collecting textiles, ethnographic objects and making towel clothes for Grainger.

Art and leisure became synonymous during the 1933–34 voyage to Australia with Ella, a dream realised to escape and sail away on board the four-masted brig *L'Avenir*. During the sea voyage he painted the ship, people aboard, ship-board life and ships in Australian ports of call. Grainger mastered the craft of sailors' knots with several practice pieces of sinnet knotting, short hauser pointing and belts completed during the voyage. He also made a Da-Da sculptured ink stand constructed from found materials like cardboard, pieces of commercial ships rope, newspaper and sections of leather braces, all lashed together with string to accommodate a Ronning's drawing ink bottle and box. Make-do — "Aussie-make-do", one may argue, designed to prevent the bottle of ink from moving or spilling—more than that, more than function-bizarre, da-da! In 1893, Grainger made a cover for his first composition, *Klavierstück*. This is the earliest extant decoration for music and is inscribed, "Birthday gift and Klavierstück. Birthday gift for mother, July, 1893". The score is stitched into a cardboard cover which is decorated with the title and the dedication verso. It is wrapped in a fabric bag sewn by Grainger.

From 1916 he designed the covers and lettering for his published compositions both in England and the United States. They include eclectic designs suitable for the music, frequently with an Australian nationalistic tendency, and a design transposed from a pair of North American Indian Moccasins (Grainger Museum) for his *Tribute to Foster*.

In 1922 he designed the lettering for the Schott, London edition of *Kipling Settings, Room Music Tit-Bits, British Folk-music* settings from the street name



Ella Grainger and Percy Grainger in hand-made towel clothes outside their house, White Plains, USA, 1936.

signage set into the street corner walls in London. Grainger was a precursor of the New Zealand-born, Australian painter and sculptor Rosalie Gascoigne, born in 1917, who came to the attention of curators and critics in Sydney in the early 1970s with her pictorial arrangements of discarded painted signs and objects.

There is no doubt having 1/2 a painter's nature makes me wish to see naked bodies maybe in a slightly different way to folk who have no painting inclination. It works on my pictorial senses like having the tuning up of a big orchestra does on my composition senses.³

Percy Grainger, 1908

Art, love and leisure relate to the drawings of torsos and nudes from the London period c. 1909. Art, photography and sex span the period from circa 1909 to the 1940s; often with scientific candour. Grainger photographed and documented self flagellation sessions. Other photographs capture his wife Ella with hands bound and naked, except for the bedroom slippers on her feet — as if saying, you can do anything Percy but do not let me get cold feet!

A musically innovative and controversial genius, Grainger's mature pictorial art was conservative until the late 1940s watercolour depictions, with annotations, of his *Free Music* machines. He did not aim for radical expressionism in his art as he did in his musical compositions.

In this music [free music], melody is as free to roam thru tonal space as a painter is free to draw and paint free lines, free curves, create free shapes. (Current music is like trying to do a picture of a landscape, a portrait of a person, in small squares-like a mosaic-or in pre-ordained shapes: straight lines or steps.) in *free-music* the various tone strands (melodic lines) may each have their own rhythmic pulse (or not), if they like; but one tone-stran is not enslaved to the other (as in current music) by rhythmic same-beatness. In free music there are no scales-the melodic lines may slide and glide from and to any depths and heights (practical) tonal space, just as they may hover around any "note" without ever alighting upon it. In other words, they have freedom of melodic movement, as a bird has (compared with an airship, which does 'trips' between 'destinations' — just as, in current music melodic lines make trips between destinations). In *free music* harmony will consist of free combinations (when desired) of all free intervals — not merely concordant or discordant combinations of set intervals (as in current music), but free combinations of all the intervals (but with a gliding state, not need fully in an anchored state) between the present intervals... for me of course, my free music seems entirely inspired (heard in the inner ear) and that is why I feel so much duty

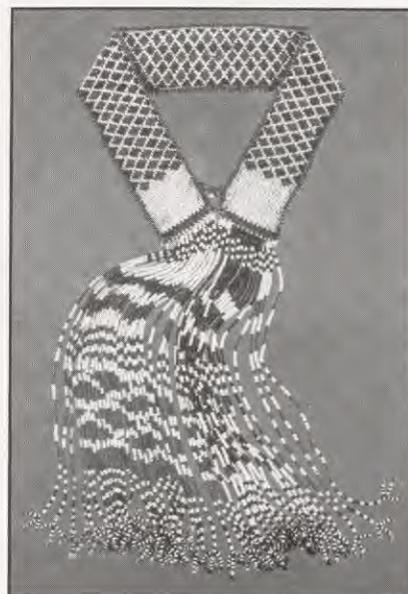
towards it. It seems to me the only type of music that tallies our modern scientific conception of life (our longing to know life *as it is*, not merely symbolic interpretations), and clearly the kind of music to which all musical progress of many centuries has been working up. The irregular rhythms of Cyril Scott (adapted by him from 1898 experiments and copied from Scott and almost everybody else) are a half-way house towards *free music... free music*, alone, uses all the resources as it stands...⁴

Percy Grainger, 1942.

How did Grainger the composer, inspired from childhood by the sounds of nature like water lapping on the sides of a boat, and wind whistling through telegraph lines, create machines to transmit those sounds and other "sounds of his mind", directly into audible sound — with a holistic version of his "new age" free music, with its de-restriction of pitch, rhythm and harmony? Pure sound, without the interference or interpretation of a performer. These were machines workable by the composer, without a staff of engineers to translate the composer's music or to maintain it. Grainger began his experiments obsessively in 1946, at the age of 64; they were terminated only by his death in 1961.

Grainger's paradoxical quest for world music,⁵ *Free Music* and Free Music machines led him to invent musical machines and document his progress, assisted by a young scientist Burnett Cross. Grainger the internationally renowned concert pianist, composer, universalist, linguist, historian, folklorist, also, had a playing and intimate knowledge of musical instruments of many cultures. He was conversant with the advances of musical composition and contemporary music technology like theremins, solovoxes, oscillators, photo cells. Experimentally he adapted pianos, pianolas, reed organs, vacuum cleaners and sewing machines.

He combed the streets for discarded "rubbish" like cardboard carpet cylinders, children's gramophone records and



Grainger's beadwork necklace (1909).

combined them with purchased knitting needles, ping pong balls, cotton reels, buttons, empty tins, skate wheels, lumber, masonite, linoleum, brown paper and string. Nothing was too mundane to be used as components.

He fashioned and shaped them into a spatial mass like a sonorous, soaring Da Da sculpture — the "Kangaroo Pouch" tone tool standing in the alcove of the South Gallery of the Grainger Museum.

How can we deny Grainger was not a Da Da-ist artist sculptor, costume designer and composer. Da Da was a convulsive movement germinating in Zurich, Switzerland, which then spread across Europe and later to the United States, in revulsion against the mass mutilation and killing, and the moral and monetary bankruptcy that resulted from the 1914–18 World War. The name, whilst obscure in origin, was used as a symbol to attack the establishment, logic and reason which led to the disaster of the world war. The movement attracted painters, poets, photographers, composers and philosophers.

Da Da was not only a moral protest but also a response to the technological

industrial design resurgence of the early 20th century; with an urgency by some artists to find new materials, new subjects and new expressions, amid the ordinary, everyday life and objects, and in doing so, to de-rarefy the old tradition of art, as pictures to be hung on walls.

Grainger's personal library holds no reference books, or correspondence relating to Da Da, but he was a cosmopolitan man aware of the contemporary trends of art and music. Grainger was greatly affected by the prelude and aftermath of the 1914–1918 war. He decided with Rose to leave London for the United States on 2nd September, 1914, to escape the possibility of being Australia's first composer of worth killed in battle. Some commentators claim audible evidence of Grainger's horror and hatred of war and killing in his works like *The Power of Rome and the Christian Heart* and *The Warriors*, whilst the eminent Professor Wilfred Mellers, dismisses *The Warriors* as having "never made anyone shiver, being rippingly boyish, like Percy himself."⁶

In 1932 or 1933 my wife and I took up this idea of clothing made of towelling and when in Australia in 1934 and 1935 we were amazed by the beauty of bath towels on sale in Australia— some imported from England, Chekoslovakia [sic] and America, but most of them (and among the most beautiful ones) manufactured in Australia. Here was a chance to show what could be done with the beauty born of machinery — a beauty as rich and subtle, in its own way, as anything made by hand or loom. The problem was to use the towels with as little as cutting and sewing as possible, and in this my wife shone.⁷

Grainger's brilliantly coloured, innovatively designed and constructed bath towel costumes of the 1930s and 1940s were made in response to the technology of 20th century manufactured utilitarian commodities. In comparison with today's ubiquitous, unisex tracksuit worn world wide for comfort, Grainger's towel clothes would, if worn today, be regarded as sartorially bizarre, thus observing the Da Da creed.

In 1909 Grainger wrote that

...fear of death and loss, destruction and forgottenness spur me to compose, collect, preserve and embalm. May I live long and not accomplish all too little! Not for my own silly sake, but because there is so much awaiting doing, & my heart really feels lovingly and feelingly and there ought to be some record of it.⁸

Grainger's inherent obsession to collect was stimulated as an infant, in his home, by the family boarder, artist A. E. Aldis, who fired Grainger's imagination with drawings of men, beasts and birds and marrow-curdling sounds of Maori chants. His parents' circle of artist friends included the artists Charles Conder, Arthur Streeton and Frederick McCubbin. The latter was his first drawing teacher, who no doubt instilled in Grainger his love of *plein air* painting, evident in the body of water colours held in the Grainger Museum collection from the early period, c.1895.

Throughout the years spent in Europe, England, the United States and Australia, Grainger continued to form friendships with artists and to be the subject of portraits by John Singer Sargent, Rupert Bunny, Jacques-Emile Blanche, Knud Larsen, B.E. Minns and many others.

Grainger was an obsessive collector, not driven by avarice or self-aggrandisement and he was a generous benefactor to Australia, the nation of his birth. The Grainger Museum holds a massive and diverse collections of thousands of objects. This exhibition⁹ (like those that have preceded it since 1982) is a selection of objects from this vast repository exhibited in an endeavour to interpret the man, his life and his museum, and to respond to Grainger's 1938 future plans for his museum:

*To correlate the various exhibits in the Grainger Museum so that a musically untrained layman passing through the museum, may feel the natural connection between life and music in our era, may realise the true importance of English-speaking music past and present, and sense the vast vista of music in the Australian-Pacific Area.*¹⁰ ●

Footnotes

1. Kay Dreyfus, *Objects, Documents and Pictures to Reflect Upon, selected from the Grainger Museum and the Archives Collections of the University of Melbourne*. Catalogue 1978. Exhibition, University of Melbourne Gallery (Melbourne, 1978).
2. Percy Grainger, *Legend*. "Beadwork and other curios". Grainger Museum. n.d.
3. Letter, Percy Grainger to Karen Holten, 20 August 1908, Grainger Museum. Trans. Phillip Grigg.
4. Letter, Percy Grainger to music critic Olin Downer, 10 September 1942.
5. See Elinor Wrobel, *Percy Grainger's Paradoxical Quest for 'World Music: Free Music and Free Music Machines*. Grainger Museum Exhibition Catalogue, 1994.
6. Wilfrid Mellers, *Percy Grainger*. Oxford Studies of Composers. (Oxford. 1992)
7. Percy Grainger. *Legend*. "Towel Clothes made by Rose Grainger, Percy Grainger and Ella Grainger." Grainger Museum, n.d.
8. Percy Grainger, letter to Karen, 2 May, 1909. Trans. Phillip Grigg. Grainger Museum.
9. Entitled "Percy Grainger (1882-1961): Artist and Art Collector".
10. Percy Grainger, letter to Sir James Barrett, 24 August 1938, Grainger Museum.

Elinor Wrobel is the curator of the exhibition "Percy Grainger (1882–1961): Artist and Collector" Grainger Museum, 1997.