

Introducing Percy Grainger

Musician, designer, innovator

Monica Syrette

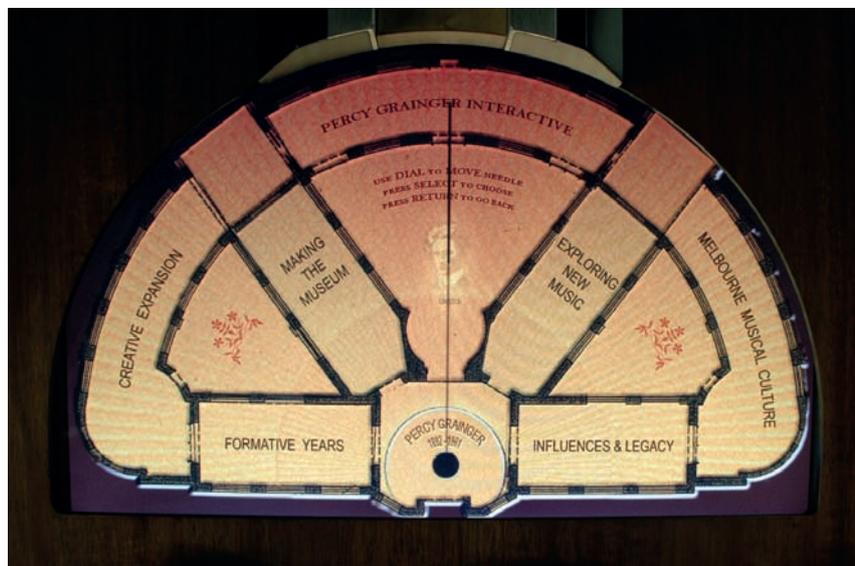
In June 2007 the Grainger Museum received generous funding from the Hugh Williamson Foundation to support the creation of a computer-based interactive research tool to promote Percy Grainger and his multi-faceted life. The interactive would serve two purposes: provide an 'add-on' multimedia experience for visitors and scholars at the museum, and in its DVD format, cater to those unable to visit in person, or preparing to visit the museum (especially secondary school students).

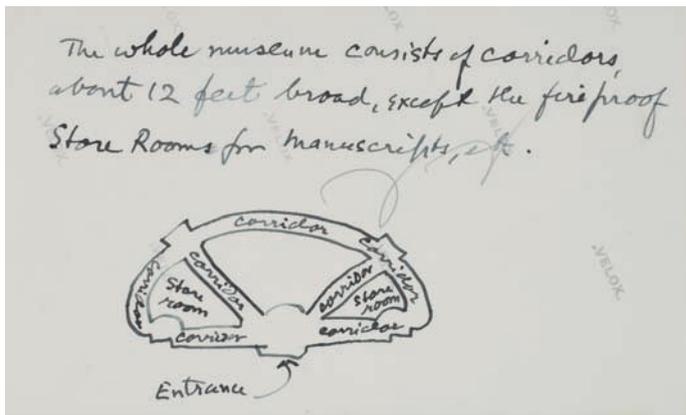
To get the project under way, an extensive briefing document was compiled. This was used in the tender process to assist in selecting a consultant for the technical development of the interactive. The award-winning multimedia company Megafun was selected to work with the University team on the project.

Grainger Museum curator Astrid Krautschneider and I, with input from curatorial assistant Jennifer Hill, met with Megafun general manager Ros Porter in 2008 to begin the complex process of shaping an interactive biography. Initial discussions centred on the public perception of Percy Grainger and how his wide-ranging interests and activities had been almost eclipsed by the popularity of his best-known arrangement, *Country gardens*, and

certain aspects of his unorthodox private life. The interactive would seek to redress this imbalance by weaving together the many strands of Grainger's life as composer, arranger, pianist, folk-music collector, artist, designer, teacher, inventor and social commentator. Rather than presenting Grainger's life along strict chronological lines, the themes, narrative and content of the interactive would reflect those aspects of his personality that defined him: his honesty and openness, a collecting and archiving nature, his curiosity and experimentalism, and his charisma and popularity.

Megafun proposed an interactive design that would echo the architectural footprint of the museum with six main screens corresponding to the galleries in the art deco building. The cabinet housing the interactive in the museum was designed by Deep in the Woods, a Melbourne furniture design and custom building company, to resemble a 1930s radiogram. It incorporates timbers appropriate to that era—Tasmanian blackwood and Queensland walnut—into the design. The radio theme is extended to the navigation style with the user 'tuning' into the screens by turning a radio dial.





Opposite: The first screen of the interactive *Introducing Percy Grainger: Musician, designer, innovator* allows the viewer to follow either a loose chronological narrative or select by thematic interest.

Left: Percy Grainger, Sketch of Grainger Museum, 1938, ink on photographic paper, 8.5 x 14.2 cm. Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne. The design of the interactive was based on the Museum's floor plan.

Below: Percy and Ella Grainger at the Grainger Museum, 1938, photographic print, 10.8 x 8.2 cm. Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne.

Selecting content was a protracted process as hundreds of images were needed. Museum staff combed through the archive and storage site for appropriate objects to accompany the milestones of Grainger's life and illustrate the chosen themes. This exhaustive process yielded both fresh perspectives into the collection and exciting discoveries of significant items that had not previously been on display.

There were also challenges in the selection process. For example, there was much discussion amongst the team about how best to present Grainger's theories, which were wide-ranging and often interconnected. Although he could contradict himself at times, Grainger displayed a lifelong commitment to his theories and fine-tuned them over many years in diaries, notebooks, correspondence, lectures and essays. Whilst there was a wealth of material to choose from, there were space limitations imposed by the interactive design. Thus in some instances a complex theory had to be represented by a single page. In these cases the text accompanying the image needed to be crafted with great care. Text revisions were a major aspect of the project for the entire Grainger Museum team and even in the final stages curator Brian Allison



and I found ourselves labouring over the editing, re-checking facts and tweaking sentences.

Another challenge we faced was how to capture the intangible element of Grainger's career—his performances? We wished to illustrate how devoted and enthusiastic Grainger's audience was, as this had such a strong impact on his life. He was highly ambivalent about his popularity, expressing bitterness about lost creative opportunities whilst pursuing commercial success on the touring circuit. The collection holds only one film of Grainger playing and it is

silent, so we looked instead to his diaries, reviews, scrapbooks, programs, publicity photos, correspondence, advertisements and audio recordings to tell the story.

Whilst the selection of objects was still in progress it was necessary to begin photographing them. Boxes containing everything from fragile folksong collecting maps to long plaits of hair regularly made their way to photographer Lee McRae's door. An array of objects was also chosen to be viewable on screen in three dimensions. To achieve this, Megafun director Keith Tucker organised for selected objects to be photographed on a turntable 36 times in ten-degree increments, a relatively simple approach, but one that produced remarkable results.

The digital image archive generated by the project has boosted the existing Grainger Museum digital image holdings significantly. This will assist staff in future when providing reference services both in Australia and overseas, and lessen the handling of fragile objects by staff and researchers, thus assisting in their preservation.

The audio used in the interactive contributes to an understanding of Grainger by building up a partial sound profile of his life, from music favoured by his parents to works that

Right: The interactive cabinet, designed to resemble a 1930s radiogram. It will be housed in the Grainger Museum, reopening in 2010.

Below: Trustees for the Hugh Williamson Foundation at the presentation of the completed interactive. From left to right: Denis Tricks, Martin Carlson, Harry Carrodus and David Ward. Photography by Fiona Willan.



influenced him, folksongs he collected and his own compositions and experiments. Many factors had to be taken into consideration when selecting the audio component, including the quality of the recordings, file size and copyright.

A project of this magnitude demands a comprehensive and efficient tracking system. Ros Porter devised a numbering system for the interactive layout that proved indispensable, whilst I created a colour-coded spreadsheet to list the objects; this ended up stretching to 63 pages. Project coordinator Georgina Binns (Music, Visual and Performing Arts Librarian) ensured the project ran smoothly and to schedule by liaising between Grainger Museum staff, Megafun and the Hugh Williamson Foundation.

Once the interactive was completed Brian Allison and I gave it a thorough road testing. We have endeavoured to achieve the highest possible level of accuracy and attention to detail. We went through each screen minutely, making note of all necessary changes, as Keith Tucker can wearily attest.

The project has been both challenging and rewarding in equal measure. Everyone on the team is delighted with the final product. For Grainger Museum staff the process of



creating the interactive has fed directly into exhibition planning for the newly refurbished building, due to re-open in 2010. The DVD-ROM will be available free of charge to music departments in schools throughout Victoria, and will also be available for purchase. The stand-alone interactive will be located in the Grainger Museum, with the capacity to act as a guide through both the exhibition space and Grainger's life. *Introducing Percy Grainger: Musician, designer, innovator* captures the intense curiosity and creative energy that Grainger brought to his life and

work and the depth and richness of his achievements.

For more information about *Introducing Percy Grainger: Musician, designer, innovator* please contact the Grainger Museum at grainger@unimelb.edu.au.

Monica Syrette is Assistant Curator at the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from Canberra Institute of the Arts and a Post Graduate Diploma in animation and interactive media from RMIT. Monica was Archivist at Arts Project Australia from 2004 to 2008 and is currently undertaking a PhD in the history and practices of art studios for people with intellectual disabilities.