

Percy Grainger's Past-Hoard-House

An autobiographical museum

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Percy Grainger built new sounds by modifying old instruments, he built electronic instruments from recycled materials, he built new words, new types of garments and previously unforged links between folk and classical music.

He also built the Past-Hoard-House, his word for museum, in which he stored his past and much more.

I speak of the Museum, not as a Grainger scholar, nor as a musicologist, but rather, as an enthusiast who is dedicated to developing the Grainger Museum so that it might better serve the intentions of its creator and shoulder a greater burden in society for the public engagement with music, music history and technology.

The life which inspired a museum Grainger hovered between a demanding schedule of experimentation and his day job, a grueling program of global tours playing the instrument for which he was famous and for which he had mixed feelings.

This life of economic bondage to the piano was overshadowed by his voracious experiments in many walks of life, to the point where, for Grainger, life and art were indistinguishable.

The profound contradictions within his music, on one hand his folksong fripperies to the robust so called Free-Music experiments, is reflected in many aspects of his life and lies at the heart of his most original and least understood enterprise—an autobiographical museum.

Grainger formed the idea of a museum over a number of years, arising from his desire to present the artist as a whole being, through not only music and lifestyle but that of milieu. He believed the Museum could reveal to audiences the creative process which he felt was present in all cultures and which is the highest aim of society.

Grainger was a musical prodigy. Born in Brighton in Melbourne in 1882, his first piano lessons were with his mother and first public appearance was in 1894, at the age of twelve. Grainger and his mother, to whom he was profoundly bonded, then left for Frankfurt am Main where he studied piano and composition. In 1901 they moved to London where Grainger began his public career as a virtuoso pianist, composer and leading collector and interpreter of the disappearing folk music of Britain and Scandinavia. From London he undertook concert tours, including tours of Australasia 1903-4 and 1908-9. He became a close associate of leading composers and performers including Grieg, Delius and Vaughan Williams.

As a contentious objector, Grainger fled, with his mother, to the States in 1914 and became naturalised in 1918. Composer and architectural historian, George Tibbits, writes 'his American career had unusual twists and flamboyant turns, such as his celebrated public marriage to Ella Viola Strom (1889-1979) in the Hollywood Bowl in 1928.' Having lived with his mother in the New York hotels after their move to America, Grainger bought a house at White Plains in 1921 which remained his home and music laboratory until his death in 1961.

Shortly after purchasing the house, Grainger suffered the catastrophic blow of the death of his mother, by suicide in April 1922.

Many scholars, including Tibbits speculate that, it was Rose's death which sparked the idea of a Museum. 'Within days of Rose's death' Tibbits notes, 'Grainger wrote to the English composer, Balfor Gardiner about a museum. Consumed by the tragedy and fearful for his own future, Grainger gave instructions should he also die. Intimate letters and notes were to be placed in 'an Australian Grainger Museum, preferably in my birth -town Melbourne, while other effects might be placed in a small fireproof Grainger Museum which might be built next to my home in White Plains'. These effects were: Grieg's watch, Grieg memento's, mother's collection of Scand[inavian] and Tartar Embroideries, scarves, some of her most characteristic clothes, my collection of beadwork and native art, my toweldress and army uniforms.' (3 May 1933)

The Museum

Built by Grainger in two stages, in 1935 and '38, with assistance from the University's architect John Gawler and the builders Hansen and Yunken, it was a work in progress, and remained unfinished at his death in 1961.

His original concept of a box of narrow corridor-

like, light filled galleries expanding outward in layers (as funds permitted) was largely unresolved and modified by Gawler. A talented draftsman, Grainger's drawing looks more like an ancient mystic site than a workable concept, he struggled to realise his ideas architecturally.

Built in patterned red brick with glass brick sections to illuminate the interior, this was the second building to use glass bricks in Victoria. While Grainger experimented extensively with the electronic reproduction of sound he was morbidly fearful of fires caused by electrical failure. The Museum is therefore not wired for light, heating or power and in many ways represents the cusp between the late *Arts and Crafts* movement and *Modernism*.

It's floor plan defies rational interpretation and provokes endless speculation. There are echoes of classical vocabulary and resonances of Swedish architecture.

For many, the Past-Hoard-House recalls a mausoleum, a lavatory bloc, a modern, pagan temple, dedicated to unmediated sound, folkculture and boundless experimentation. Here is an early modern laboratory or a *safehouse* for ideas, a time capsule for his work better preserved for the more permissive era which, he was sure was to come.

To be truthful, I can't describe it's shape very well but I can describe the disorienting feeling of entering this inward looking building, no windows to outside, with intimate spaces, lowish ceilings and minimal decoration.

While his home base remained in the States, Grainger was deeply involved with the condition, conservation, organisation and displays of the Melbourne Museum.

Since its inauspicious opening, closure and reopening in 1938, the Museum has travelled a

difficult path. The Museum was added to the Registrar of Historic Buildings in 1991.

Through years of neglect, the Museum is greatly underachieving on Grainger's own vision. It is a little down at heel, needy of late Twentieth century comforts of air conditioning, conservation, interpretation, education programmes, new technologies and adequate staffing. In some ways the Museum has remained safe but static since Grainger visited for the last time in 1956.

Grainger's vision

To what end did Grainger build, collect and preserve the minute of his and other major 20th C composers lives, as well as the aural and material-culture of the British Isles and South Pacific? Grainger was driven by mortality, the intertwining of life and art and the desire to promote understanding of musical composition as a universal language.

From the onset Grainger was interested in the existence or ontology of composition and to place composition within an interdisciplinary context. The collection consists in archival documents and correspondence (incoming and copies of outgoing), instruments, ethnographic material culture, furniture, garments, library, photographs, shopping lists, menus, whips and other personal items.

While his racial views are now controversial, his love of other cultures is borne out not only through his own composition, but through the collection, which gives primacy to the music, material culture and language of other cultures, particularly Nordic and South Pacific communities.

In 1927 Grainger wrote to his fiancée, Ella, reminding her of the 'word wrestling between us on the subject of Museums.' For instance in 1934 he wrote to her of the need to preserve physical expressions of the past, 'otherwise the past will die upon us.'

His view was essentially conservative, yet hugely understandable 'The whole value of the museum is its promise of something lasting, un-changing, reliable, something that has the permanence of art — something which lacks the drifting uncertainty of modishness.' (1933)

Parallel with this desire to conserve is a more modernist, positivist belief in enquiry, 'I have a bottomless hunger for truth. Life is innocent, yet full of meaning. Destroy nothing, forget nothing, remember all, say all. Trust life, trust mankind. As long as the picture of truth is placed in the right frame (art, science, history) it will offend none.' (1941)

The museum was part of his conception of himself as an artist and as a measure of his artistic stature alongside other artists. Artistic leaders which Grainger called *lifemasters*, such as 'Goethe, Wagner, Beethoven, Dickens, Carlisle, Hans Christian Anderson, Grieg and others survived as teachers of mankind through museums created from the houses and leavings of *lifemasters*.'

Grainger's vision statements for the Museum were ahead of his time and worth consideration. In 1938 he wrote that the Museum should:

- Stress the creative side of music, as distinct from the merely executive side.
- Preserve the MSS of Australian composers.
- Create a centre for the preservation and study of the early music of Europe and of the 20th century music.
- Create a centre for the preservation and study of folk song by means of gramophone records of the singing of genuine folksingers.
- Create a centre for the preservation and study of native music in, or adjacent to, Australia, such as aboriginal Australian music, the art-musics of Java, Siam, Bali and the hybrid music of the South Seas. The very least that can be said is that the Australian-Pacific portion of the globe is richer in manifold types of lovely music

than in Europe today. It would seem to me a proud Australian task to adequately study these exquisite native musics adjacent to Australia and present them to the world.

- Facilitate a study of composers and of the family traits and environmental influences that appear to make for greatness in composers; to examine the indebtedness of composers to early influences coming from music-loving parents, guardians, teachers, friends; to examine the indebtedness of composers one to the other and the extent to which composers give practical help to one.
- Collect evidence bearing upon the question: are composers specialists or 'all-round-men'?

In this letter to the Chancellor of the University (1938) Grainger wrote of his *future plans*, '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 and sense the vast vistas of music in the Australian-Pacific area.'

The Future

For the Grainger Museum to flourish in Grainger's terms, and as a unique and contemporary cultural entity, the Museum must become more relevant to contemporary audiences. I invite members of the Victorian Schools' Music Association to approach me with their ideas of how the Museum can become more relevant to your task of music education.

In 1941 Percy Grainger wrote, 'Most Museums, most cultural endeavours, suffer from being subjected to too much taste, too much elimination, too much selection, too much specialisation! What we want (in museums and cultural records) is all-sidedness, side lights, cross-references.' Whatever your suggestions, I'm sure Grainger would at least be pleased that we are discussing how the museum might better relate to young and old.