The Grainger Museum as a Museum of its Time

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by

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Abstract

The Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne was conceived in the 1920s and built in the 1930s by the Australian pianist, composer, conductor, teacher and folklorist Percy Aldridge Grainger (1882-1961). It is unusual in being an autobiographical museum and archive, in which are deposited the records and artefacts of the considerable and varied life’s work of this versatile and energetic creative person.

Much has been written on the Grainger Museum and on Percy Grainger himself; his beliefs on a range of subjects and his considerable musical achievements. Most of the writings on the Museum examine it as a manifestation of Grainger’s creativity and eccentricity. While this is a valid approach, less consideration has been given to the museum in the context of museums generally during Grainger’s lifetime. Nor has Grainger’s strong urge to collect and preserve been examined in the light of the considerable recent literature on collecting and its motivations.

Much has also been written on the history of museums, particularly the great expansion in museums in Europe and its colonies and North America in the nineteenth century. Less attention has been paid to the development of museums in the first half of the twentieth century. In placing the Grainger museum in a contemporary museological context, therefore, my PhD thesis will examine developments in museums during the approximate period in which he worked on this project—particularly between the first and second world wars. In order to put Grainger’s museum in this broader context it is also necessary to put Grainger’s beliefs into their contemporary context. Many of his enthusiasms—racial purity, language reform, Australian boosterism—were more widespread than has been generally acknowledged in previous Grainger scholarship.
The precociously talented pianist, composer, conductor, teacher and folklorist George Percy Grainger was born in Melbourne in 1882 and made his first concert appearance there at age twelve. In 1895 he left with his mother to study in Frankfurt for five years, then moved to London to launch his career as a society pianist. He befriended leading English and Scandinavian composers of the day and became a respected collector of English (and later Scandinavian) folk song.

Until 1914, Grainger regularly toured throughout Europe, and twice through Australasia and once through South Africa. He was an acclaimed virtuoso and sought-after teacher, performed in major venues and society ‘at homes’ and mingled, with his mother, among the social stratum upon whom their livelihood depended. At the outbreak of World War I, Percy and Rose left England abruptly for the United States. Grainger’s career prospered despite feeling obliged in 1917 to enlist as an Army Bandsman. He became an American citizen and after the war enjoyed a decade of huge success as pianist and composer. In 1921 he and his mother bought a house in the New York suburb of White Plains in which he lived until his death; it is preserved today as a house museum and Grainger archive.

Her husband had infected Rose with syphilis shortly after Percy’s birth and she had long been a partial invalid. By 1922 her physical and mental health were deteriorating further and in April of that year she committed suicide. The loss of his life’s companion, mentor, business manager and promoter was a crushing blow to the nearly forty-year old Percy, leaving him racked with guilt and remorse. Rose’s tragic death was a major impetus to his deciding to establish a museum; more about this later.

Although a highly successful pianist, Grainger’s true interests lay elsewhere. From the 1920s his activities took on a more didactic cast, giving lecture recitals in which he expounded his own often idiosyncratic theories, particularly on the music of so-called ‘Nordic’ races. He encouraged his audiences to explore the folk and art musics of cultures beyond Europe. In 1934-35 Grainger toured Australia for the newly-formed Australian Broadcasting Commission, putting the fees towards building his museum at the University of Melbourne. This project occupied much of the energy and income of his later years. In the 1940s and 1950s Grainger lost some of his pre-eminence as a pianist. This he did not seem to mind, but he became increasingly bitter at his lack of acclaim as a composer. He spent his final years working on his museum and his ‘Free Music’ experiments. Prostate cancer eventually led to his death in 1961.

Grainger had been thinking since at least 1922 of setting up a museum on the subject of himself, his music and the music of the Scandinavian and English-speaking composers and other cultures. He had long been accumulating material suitable for such a museum but he did not settle on the location, his ‘birth-town’ Melbourne, until the early 1930s. The University of Melbourne agreed to provide a site and Grainger paid for the construction, which began in 1935 and was completed in 1938.

Grainger’s aims for his museum were (Grainger, 1955):

- To throw light upon the processes of musical composition (as distinct from performance) during the period in which ‘Australia has been prominent in music, from about 1880 onwards’;
• To illustrate the music of the English-speaking and Scandinavian countries;
• To trace the aesthetic indebtedness of composers to each other and the ‘culturizing influence’ of parents, relatives, wives, husbands and friends;
• To address the general lack of a cosmopolitan and universalist outlook on music, particularly by promoting the study of early English music and the neglected masterpieces of the 20th century ‘Nordic’ composers (which Grainger defines as British, Irish, American, Canadian, Australasian, Dutch and Scandinavian);
• To establish a centre for the study of musics of Australia and its geographic neighbours such as Indonesia and Pacific island nations.

Once his museum was established Grainger actively increased his collecting through solicitations to friends and colleagues for letters, manuscripts, published music, clothing, recordings and memorabilia, even photographs to record the colour of their eyes. His collection already included musical instruments and other artefacts from many cultures, folk song recordings and transcriptions, paintings, furniture, decorative arts, his and his mother’s clothing, diaries and other documents. In 1941 Grainger complained that: ‘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 & cultural records) is ALL-SIDEDNESS, side-lights, cross references.’ (Grainger, 7 June 1941).

During his final visit to Melbourne in 1956, Percy and his wife Ella worked tirelessly at the museum, creating the majority of the series of some 35 ‘Legends’: framed and glazed didactic panels in which he spelt out his theories on most of his pet musical and family subjects. Grainger wrote or selected the texts, chose photographs, small objects, scores, concert programs and other illustrative material and assembled the panels into wooden frames, in some cases painted in bright ‘Scandinavian’ colours. These highly significant artefacts were designed to hang on the walls of the museum and are the best evidence to us today of Grainger’s vision for his museum and the how Grainger wished to communicate music history and his own life and career.

As mentioned, a major impetus for the establishment of the museum had been the heartbreaking death of Percy’s mother Rose in 1922 at the age of 61, when he was nearly forty. Percy and his mother had had an unusually close relationship, with Rose directing every aspect of her son’s education, career, social life and romantic and sexual relationships from babyhood onwards. She was a demanding woman who concentrated her considerable energies into her ‘genius’ son. Grainger’s reaction to the devastating news of Rose’s suicide was overwhelming grief. He was in Los Angeles at the time and on the train back to New York he wrote a long letter to an old friend setting out in detail his plans for a museum, with instructions to carry them out in case he, Percy, died before he could get home: ‘My heart & head alarm me & I wonder if I can live thru it all. I want to come thru so badly, for I am all in life that remains of my beloved mother, & I wish to live so as to make her as sweetly remembered as possible ... / ... But to be able to do all that I must live many years longer and prove myself (as well as hint towards) the great artist & generous man she planned me, from the 1st, to be.’ He encloses a blank cheque to use for publishing his music, in order to position him as Australia’s first great composer, and make Australia’s and Rose’s ‘name shine bright’. His intimate letters were to be deposited
in an Australian Grainger Museum, preferably in his birth-town of Melbourne. He directed that another small fireproof Grainger Museum be built next to his White Plains home (Grainger, 3 May 1922).

Grainger mourned his mother for the rest of his life. He saw his museum partly as a duty, a place to house her relics (Grainger, 9 June 1927). But Grainger also felt that it was part of his culture to teach mankind by the means of museums and to anchor museums to the houses and relics of geniuses such as Goethe, Wagner, Beethoven, Dickens, Hans Christian Anderson and Grieg, concluding that if he too was a genius then he also had the right to a museum (Grainger, 15 July 1930). In 1927 he wrote: ‘I have made my will. All is for the Grainger Museum. I am hungry for fame after death.’

In order to understand Grainger’s aims in establishing his museum it is important to understand how he saw himself, because his museum is autobiography, self-portrait and soap-box. Grainger developed many of his ideas on a wide range of subjects early in life and he took pride in the fact that his underlying views did not change, despising those whose tastes vacillated with the vagaries of fashion. His museum became the principal showcase for his philosophies on matters musical and extra-musical, and is therefore a statement of ideas which in many cases had their germ in his early Melbourne years. The remarkably wide range of Grainger’s interests, together with his forceful mode of expression, cultivated eccentricity and unusual sex life, has led many scholars to treat Grainger as *sui generis*. While Grainger as an amalgam is unique, many of his ideas reflect contemporary thinking and therefore his museum is not just a window into the mind of one highly unusual Australian but reflects many aspects of the time and places in which he lived, including the museum culture of his day.

Race was Grainger’s primary framework for interpreting the world and art (Gillies and Pear, 1994). Race was to Grainger what religion was to other fools (Grainger, 2 February 1907). This racial preoccupation may be the reason why he chose the medium of the *museum* for his ultimate statement and legacy. Grainger was a keen visitor to museums, which had long been used to communicate theories and beliefs on matters both racial and national; to justify colonial expansion, conquering of other races, efforts to change or obliterate indigenous cultures and religions, and often to illustrate, whether tacitly or overtly, the supposed superiority of one race and its culture over others. Grainger’s museum is not only a monument to his own artistic achievements and musical ideals, but a statement on the supposed superiority, both culturally and physically, of an idealised ‘Nordic’ race of which he believed he was a member.

Grainger’s ‘Nordic’ racial identity originated early in his childhood with his mother’s family’s predilection for fair-haired, blue-eyed types. His blue-eyed mother believed that all her troubles had been caused by her ill-advised marriage to a dark-eyed man. This prejudice was reinforced by their literary tastes: a love for the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales, Icelandic sagas and early English history. Grainger felt the Battle of Hastings as an acute personal tragedy. He wished to turn back the tide of history by celebrating all pre-Norman, Anglo-Saxon characteristics and he invented a language, ‘Blue-Eyed English,’ which removed all words of non Anglo-Saxon origin, thus supposedly re-creating, through a type of linguistic cleansing, English as it was spoken before 1066. This linguistic obsession has often been portrayed as merely another manifestation of Grainger’s eccentricity and unusual creative personality.
While it is true that his remarkable facility in learning foreign languages and his wish to create a new mode of English expression do reveal a further aspect of Grainger’s polymath mind, his blue-eyed English coincided with the tail-end of more than a century of activity by European lexicographers, philologists, grammarians, folklorists, publicists and composers in developing vernacular print-languages, all connected with the nineteenth-century rise of nationalism (Anderson, 1983, p.72). Such work even manifested in Australia with the publication in 1898 of two dictionaries, E.E. Morris’s *Austral English* and Joshua Lake’s *Australasian supplement to Webster’s International Dictionary* (Serle, 1973, p.87).

The culture into which Grainger was born had a tradition of racial prejudice dressed up as scientific fact. Racial belief pervaded Western social thought from the mid nineteenth century, while social Darwinism linked biological science with popular ideas of survival of the fittest. Moving away from the long-standing belief that humanity was all one species descended from a single pair, ‘scientific racism’ saw humanity as comprising several separate ‘types’ or species, each with its own moral, intellectual and biological capacities. In Australia as elsewhere, racial arrogance combined with a fear of racial degeneration through interbreeding. Economic arguments were used to support the push for racial ‘purity’ or else Asian races through cheap labour or superior efficiency would lower Australian living standards. Even the Federation movement was racially justified; Australia’s national unity stemmed from its white, British racial origins (Alomes, 1988, p.40). A common belief was that mixing the races, particularly with Asians, would lead to mental, moral and physical decay, a tainting of the pure Caucasian blood (Alomes, 1988, pp.31-2). Grainger’s prejudices reflected these views. In 1903 Grainger, while on tour in Australia, wrote his opinion of Brisbane: ‘[….]Quite nice for a short stay, but it’s a blot on Australia. / Full of Chinese, Kanakas, & worse still ½ breeds, & chaps likening Colombo Eurasians. And the whites too, all bung-faced, sallow, puffy, sloppy-built, undersized; no look of pride, uprightness, or toughness. Aright-thro’ immoral hole too, by all accounts. Sure as I’ve been thus far of a doubtless noble to-come [future] for the rest of the places seen, like sure I am that here trouble will one day arise …’ (Grainger, 1 November 1903).

Grainger’s racial views were influenced by his enthusiastic reading of the American ‘Nordicists’ such as Madison Grant, during the inter-war period; (Gillies, 1998, pp.9-10); his hierarchy of racial superiority was that promulgated by the authors of the day: at the top were Scandinavians, then British, beneath them other Continental Europeans as a whole, ranging from the Dutch at the top down to Germans (North Germans superior to Southern Germans and Austrians, Northern French superior to Southern French and Italians).

These Nordicists whom Grainger adulated followed the pseudo-science of Eugenics, which also influenced museums. In 1932 the American Museum of Natural History was host to the third International Eugenics Conference, which was accompanied by dozens of displays on topics such as heredity theory, the incidence of insanity, photographs of ‘bastards’ (the offspring of mixed-race couples); inventiveness analysed by racial stock; the history of eugenic sterilisation; anti-miscegenation laws; the migration of Negroes between 1910 and 1920; the pure-sire method of race assimilation in North America; the racial descent of American statesmen; and detailed family trees of eminent Americans such as president Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Edison and George Washington (International Eugenics Conference, 1934). Like
Grainger’s museum narrative, these displays applied the principles of heredity and race even to the specific case of the individual achiever and his family.

In museums, Grainger would have been accustomed to seeing themes expounded in the form of chronological narratives, following an evolutionary schema, the final outcome being considered the ‘best’ or ‘highest’ of all. Grainger saw his own musical achievements as the innovations of a Nordic- Australian genius, who was putting his birthplace on the map by placing new musical ideas on the world stage. His identity was, however, rooted in the past: his family history, his Australian and English racial and cultural inheritances, and his many and varied musical, literary and other artistic influences. Grainger wished to make clear to the world the importance of these many strands in shaping him as an artist. To do this he felt it was essential to display the material evidence of all these threads: letters, diaries, photographs, paintings, drawings, manuscripts, speeches, journals, books, clothing, household items, and even seemingly trivial ephemera. His insight and skill as an amateur anthropologist, evidenced by his thoroughness as a folk-song collector, were turned upon himself as object of study. Again, in Grainger’s world, museums were the site of such anthropological collecting and display.

Nationally, Grainger identified strongly as an Australian and maintained links with the land of his birth. He had an abiding love for the Australian desert and bush landscape which is reflected in some of his compositions. His Free Music grew out sounds he had imagined in his Melbourne boyhood. In common with Australian egalitarian views of the late nineteenth century, Grainger lauded the common man over the aristocrat or ‘toff’, and the all-round man over the specialist. His ideal Australian man had many elements in common with the idealised Australian ‘digger’ and with the views promoted by the Bulletin magazine of the 1880s and 1890s, including its anti-Semitism (Alomes, 1988; Serle, 1973). He saw Australia as a new country where freedom and independence were virtues (Grainger, 21 October 1906) and found Australia’s sense of democracy one of its noblest aspects (Grainger, 16 January 1904). He reflected Australian political nationalism of the late nineteenth century, which envisioned Australia as leading the world in social and electoral reform, attempting to creating a New World paradise free from the class differences of the Old World (Serle, 1973; Alomes, 1988). Grainger felt it his duty as an Australian to promote musical democracy, which he defined as ‘a chance for all to shine in a starry whole’ (Grainger, 9 June 1952), particularly by encouraging musicians of all levels of proficiency to play his music, by publishing easy versions and facilitating flexible or ‘elastic’ scoring. In the program note to his Marching Song of Democracy, he wrote that this composition should: ‘reflect the easy-going, happy-go-lucky, yet robust hopefulness and the undisciplined individualistic energy of the athletic out-of-door Anglo-Saxon newer nations. […] to typify the buoyant on-march of optimistic humanitarian democracy in a musical composition … heroic but not martial, exultant but not provocative, passionate but not dramatic, energetic but not fierce, athletic but not competitive.’ (Grainger, 1923).

It is difficult to reconcile Grainger’s theories of Nordic racial supremacy with his pioneering promotion of the musics of the Pacific Islands, South-East Asia, China, Japan and African-Americans. Grainger’s racism and anti-Semitism are apparently contradicted by his genuinely enthusiastic interest in the music, languages, art and literature of these other cultures. Of the aims of his museum he wrote: ‘It would seem only natural for Australia to become a centre for the study of musics of the islands adjacent to Australia … Some of the world’s most exquisite music is found in this
area. ... It would be a wonderful thing if Australia should be the first country to live up to the axiom: ‘Music is a universal language.’ (Grainger, 1955). Grainger actively supported African-American musical activity in New York and proclaimed once that the three greatest composers of all time were J.S. Bach, Delius, and Duke Ellington. Elsewhere, however, Grainger characterised African-Americans as one of the ‘lower races’, ‘backward’ and ‘feeble’. In common with his times and particularly with museum displays, he placed people from non-European races outside linear history and the European concept of time: ‘Personally I do not feel like a modern person at all. I feel quite at home in South Sea Island music, in Maori legends, in the Icelandic sagas, in the Anglosaxon ‘Battle of Brunnburch’, feel very close to Negros in various countries, but hardly understand modern folk at all.’ (Grainger, 23 August 1916). Grainger here groups the cultures of South Pacific and ‘negro’ people today with European events of centuries or even millennia before. This non-historical way of perceiving so-called ‘primitive’ peoples was perpetuated by the typologies and exhibitions in most ethnographic museums. Grainger’s perspective reflects the distinction between anthropology, the study of timeless ‘primitive’ peoples; and history, which was continually being made by Europeans.

Historical perspective is a key aspect of Grainger’s identity, and is of particular relevance to his museum. From a relatively early age Grainger believed that he and his music had a place in the history of Australia and, by extension, the world. He believed that (white) Australia had a worthwhile history, and also a place in world history. Grainger’s historical vision looked both forward and backward. He saw Australians as an emerging race derived from British racial stock, with potential to develop desirable characteristics and make significant cultural achievements. Through his museum and his writings he attempted to demonstrate that Australia’s cultural history fitted into an international cultural history by tracing and dating musical influences between composers from different parts of the world and giving credit for primacy in innovation. Grainger believed that Australia could be a leader rather than just a follower, and that he too was a leader—an innovator and cultural ambassador for Australia—in that whole scheme, and that a museum was the place to demonstrate this.

Although Grainger’s thinking was consistent with the common nineteenth-century habit of compiling chronologies, making narratives, and constructing genealogies (Griffiths, 1996, p.11), he held this view at a time when many others still believed that Australia had no history worthy of preservation, display, or commemoration (Bennett, 1995, p.122). There were of course exceptions to this perception, but even by the 1930s when Grainger’s museum was under construction, some of the more conservative Australian intellectuals were still pessimistic about the prospects of ever developing forms of Australian cultural expression such as local literature, because Australia had too little history, and no past glories, upon which to draw (Serle, 1973, pp.130-4).

Grainger saw the colonial situation as one of opportunity, inspiration and unfettered artistic possibilities (Clunies-Ross, 1986, p.62). In 1944 he wrote: ‘In my early years (1889-1907) as a modernist I took it for granted that I, as an Australian, would be ahead of my European tone-fellows in original inventivity & experimentalism. [...] For if I took it for granted that an Englishman was a super-European, I equally took it for granted that an Australian was a super-Englishman.’ (Grainger, 1944, p.271).
Grainger claimed for himself a primary place in a linear Australian, and international, musical history. In 1914 he described his *Colonial Song* as ‘Australia’s first attempt to express itself nationally.’ (Covell, 1967, p.96). Grainger wanted his museum to facilitate ‘a study of the nature (personality, racial characteristics, working habits, etc.) 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 … to examine the indebtedness of composers one to the other and the extent to which composers give practical help to one another—how Schumann helped Brahms; how Brahms helped Dvorak; how Liszt helped Grieg; how Grieg helped Delius; how Delius helped me.’ (Grainger, 24 August). Grainger claimed to be the innovator of various aspects of musical modernism which other composers then copied from him. For example, on the innovation of concluding a composition on a discord, he suggests that it would be worth looking into whether he or Claude Debussy was the innovator: ‘The matter is worth looking into — by some patriotic Australian; for it would be a bright feather in Australia’s cap to have produced the first composer to use a discordant ending.’ (Grainger, 1944, p.275).

I believe that Grainger was ahead of his time in seeing a museum as a medium for preserving and celebrating recent and future Australian cultural history. Large museums in the nineteenth century were concerned principally with the natural sciences, applied science and technology, the fine and applied arts viewed in aesthetic rather than social or historical terms, and ethnography. The history of the Europeans, whether in Europe or its colonies, became a specific subject of academic and museum interest only later. In Australia, this began largely in the twentieth century (Webber, 1986, p.155). The turn of the century saw the establishment of the Royal Australian Historical Society (Webber, 1986, p.156), the first appointments of professional historians in Australian universities (McCubbin, 2001, p.39) and Federation celebrations which included a re-enactment of Captain Cook’s first landing on Australian shores (Anderson and Reeves, 1994, p.80). In 1902 there were calls to establish a national museum of Australia, but it did not eventuate for another century (Anderson and Reeves, 1994). In Melbourne in 1914 an embryonic historical collection was established, dealing with the European history of Victoria and featuring portraits of governors and early colonists, prints, manuscripts, documents and other objects (Rasmussen, 2001, p.164). Similar random assemblages of historic items accumulated as an adjunct to the principal collections at other institutions.

However, it was the experience of Australians in World War I that brought about Australia’s transformation from a nation with no interest in its own history to a nation where history and historical collections formed a central focus of national identity. ‘Once Australian soldiers had died in their thousands the nation had a history’ (Webber, 1986, p.162). Artefacts destined for the proposed Australian War Memorial were collected from the battlefields as battles were still raging, not for the factual information they could reveal about warfare, but as holy relics for veneration as symbols of national greatness (Webber, 1986; Anderson and Reeves, 1994). But even as late as 1933 only three of the 65 public museums in Australia were dedicated historical collections. Australia was still dominated by museums of zoology and mineralogy, although local museums had historical holdings relating to their own town (Markham and Richards, 1933, pp.37-44). Grainger’s early vision of Australia’s worthwhile history and bright cultural future and his subsequent choice of a museum as the appropriate medium to preserve and interpret his vision were in advance of general Australian attitudes.
References


