

# A JEWEL IN THE MUSICAL CROWN

## THE PERCY GRAINGER MUSEUM AND THE MELBOURNE FESTIVAL

BY Naomi Cass

How might a small museum — of international significance yet a little down at heel — gather the public attention and support required to fulfil its potential and the wishes of its original donor? This question is currently being addressed for the Grainger Museum which sits silently on Royal Parade next to Melba Hall (Nellie and Percy were friends).

The first attempt to redress this situation occurred during the 1997 Melbourne Festival when the Museum presented the mini-festival, *The Many Faces of Percy Grainger*.

From visitor attendance and critical response, it seems this unusual project for a museum succeeded in once again placing Grainger within the public imagination. Events ranged from concerts to demonstrations, seminar, installation and live ISDN link with Germany through ABC Radio's Classic FM.

Focused on the Grainger Museum, the events drew upon the resources, facilities and expertise of the Faculty of Music, the University Library, Australian Centre, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) as well as the Grainger Museum.

While organising such events may not be usual museum practice, not only do all museums need to be creative in the services and experiences offered to a variety of communities, the Grainger

extraordinary young pianist who has consistently championed contemporary Australian composition in his repertoire, commenced his performance with a rarely performed experimental work for

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"The Melbourne Festival was the Jewel in the musical crown for 1997. Of the events attended, three of them stood out ..(including) the Percy Grainger mini-festival. ...the Percy Grainger concerts were a celebration of the vision and the creativity of this extraordinary Australian." Joel Crotty *The Age* 30th December 1997.

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archive is ideally suited to such active and diverse interpretation.

While each event offered some reference to either Grainger's music or archive, this was not necessary. The aim of this festival was to use Grainger as an icon for the understanding and development of Australian music and music technology.

Using Grainger as an icon from which to gain courage to embrace the new, is exemplified by Michael Kieran Harvey's performance. This

piano by Grainger. To the delight of the audience, the *Pastoral* required the pianist to reach into the piano at the conclusion of the work and strike two of the lowest piano strings with a marimba mallet. Kieran Harvey used a mallet made by Grainger and held in the Museum's collection.

While enthusiasm, expertise and some financial support was forthcoming from a number of University sections, these events could not have been achieved without the generous financial assistance of The Australia Foundation,

Goethe Institut, Peter and Neroli Hansen, Hansen Yuncken Pty Ltd, Cicely & Colin Rigg Bequest and Hugh D.T. Williamson Foundation. Equally significant was in-kind support from The ABC, Friends of Percy Grainger, The Purple Group and Yamaha Music Australia.

One of the strengths of *The Many Faces of Percy Grainger* was the diversity of the program which presented music in conventional concert format, ranging from Grainger repertoire for piano, symphonic wind band and choral music through to contemporary Australian repertoire and less conventional presentations such as a demonstration of Grainger's piano rolls of his own and other's compositions.

Particularly germane to Grainger's aesthetic and practice, yet on the cutting edge of music and art installations and performance, was Dr Ros Bandt's *A Garden For Percy's Delight*. Drawing from Grainger's sonic palette, Dr Bandt created an extraordinary installation in the newly renovated courtyard of the Museum. With speakers suspended above, below and around, Bandt wove a most complex and engaging tapestry of sound and music drawing upon recordings made from instruments within the collection, to recordings of Grainger's free music experiments and ambient sounds intricately linked with his life.

In the final event of the mini-festival, Ros Bandt presented a live performance in the museum with a live ISDN link to composer Johannes Siermians in the Frankfurt Hochschule (where the young Grainger studied). This sonic bridge to Germany would have delighted Grainger who was most interested in the electronic generation of sound and technology.

For the first time in decades, the museum emanated music and sound, conversation and argument on the life and work of Grainger and on the future of Music in this country. With the generous guidance of Clifford Hocking, eminent entrepreneur and Director of the 1997 Melbourne Festival, there was a



**Top:** The Grainger Museum, seen from Royal Parade. The photograph is undated, but the fence indicates a pre-World War Two date. The fence, which surrounded the University, was removed during the War for its metal. (Photograph: University of Melbourne Archives)

**Below:** In 1997 the entrance and pathway was refurbished. The bronze lettering above the door was installed as per the architect's original drawings.

constant stream of important international visitors here to perform at the Arts Centre who took the No 19 tram along Royal Parade to be astonished by the collection.

The fact that Grainger is an under-recognised Australian of renown, engendered a feeling of confidence and interest among Museum visitors, audiences and the media. Having a Museum to

back up the concerts and concerts to back up the Museum was a further strength of the events. As a figure, even an icon of unconventional and robust nature, Grainger has great potential to support, develop and enhance the creative arts within Australia. ❖

Naomi Cass is the University's Cultural Development Officer.