

## PERCY GRAINGER AND THE SEA

THE PERCY GRAINGER MUSEUM 1998 SPECIAL EXHIBITION IN THE YEAR OF THE OCEAN



BY Elinor Wrobel

It may be argued by musicologists that perhaps Percy Grainger was not a great composer — but his music remains as a testimony to his paradoxical stature in the history of world music in the 20th century.

In 1998, his legendary virtuosity as a pianist remains unchallenged, supported by those still living who were taught by him or those who heard his concert performances, and substantiated by the early to mid-20th century extant records and duo-art piano rolls.

The musical curiosity that guided Grainger's collecting as a folklorist and ethnomusicologist was not restricted by racial or geographical boundaries; but spanned the British Isles, Europe, the South Pacific, Australia, Africa and America. His research and fastidious notations regarded not only the folk music, but the performers, their personalities, characteristics, vocal presentation and the provenance of the songs.

Grainger, the precursor of the 20th century new age man roamed free across the international stage as a performer, composer, educationalist, linguist, artist, writer, archivist, sado-masochist, clothes reformer and women's liberationist. Anti-Puritan, uneducated conventionally, a gregarious socialite, and without constraints; his ebullient charm, physical and mental

energy was a legendary paradox, which still endures till today.

Grainger personified today's "green age" man, he was a "global village" composer who saw no barriers for music, education or languages, a man both precursor and innovator.

What forces shaped the multi-faceted genius of Percy Aldridge Grainger?



As an embryo he rocked, awash and secure in an ambiotic sea in his mother's womb, whilst Rose Grainger contemplated the beauty of music and art and the birth of a beautiful gifted baby. Rose's influence on her son during her life and after her death has been vilified by many. Yet, it cannot be denied that those two influences, the primeval sea and his mother remained, forever, with Grainger and his music. Rose had succeeded, she had created a genius,<sup>1</sup> and Grainger would continue to respond to her, in life and after, in death, like the ebb and flow of the tides and the call of the sea.

Grainger was born in 1882, into a *fin de siècle* family who nurtured a beautiful, infant with a precocious talent for art and music. Formally educated at home from 1886 by his mother, from 1888 she gave him daily instructions in

the piano and French. From 1888 to 1894, his education continued at home with his governess Medidney, together with an Australian Aboriginal boy, Lani, the adopted son of a doctor and his wife, who were friends of the Graingers.<sup>2</sup> This was a unique experience for a child from this social background during the Victorian era. Did this provoke in Grainger and early awareness of "the noble savage"? Did this support the Jungian theory that colonising people "inherit" the racial memory of the indigenous natives they disperse and dispossess?<sup>3</sup>

Rose used her riding whip to control her drunken, philandering husband. But were other subliminal forces shaping the child's later development of sado-masochism? His mother's parents arrived as free settlers in the non-convict settlement of South Australia in 1847. His father arrived in 1877. The British penal colonisation of the east coast of Australia from 1788 was brutal and bloody for the convicts and the indigenous natives alike. Those who survived the long sea voyage faced survival in a hostile environment

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**Above:** The Finnish four-masted bark *L'Avenir*. Percy and Ella Grainger spent 110 days in 1933–1934 on a voyage to Australia aboard this ship. Photo: Grainger Museum.

controlled by army regiments with a régime of fear — fear of death, punishment and “the lash”. The colony was an island continent surrounded by the sea and its early existence dependent upon the Royal Navy sailing ships and the seamen who were disciplined by “the lash”. Did the brutality and discipline of “the lash” in this new land subliminally imprint on the psyche of the child?

“I live for my lusts and I do not care if they kill me or others. Now (as when I was 16) I live only for fury and wildness. I feel that a hot parched wind from the Australian desert has entered my soul and with a fury of heat I must go thru life, burning up my self and others. But what joy! You remember our talks at Bawdsey<sup>4</sup> when I said ‘I live only for flagellantism. I care for nothing else. Of course, I shall compose occasionally’, and how you laughed. That was prophetic. That is how I live; following my lusts, and composing now and then on the side.

My life (if you count the majority of its hours) is that of a slave, but no sadist can call life poor or disappointing who can realise his cruellest, wildest dreams. When we successfully follow and realise our lusts, we are lords indeed. I would not exchange with the angels”.<sup>5</sup>

Rose Grainger encouraged and inspired her child’s interest in music, art and literature, including the Nordic myths and sagas he later transposed into his youthful tone works.

He began his Kipling *Jungle Book* Cycle in 1898 and finished in 1947, as a protest against civilisation.

Several of his sea settings whilst inspired by Rudyard Kipling are dedicated to his beloved mother, like *The Rhyme of the Three Sealers* (1900–1901), an experiment for dealing with irregular rhythms notation, 1901, *Anchor Song* NR. 6, 1899 and 1905, *The Beaches of Lukannon* (Song of the Seal Rookeries, Aleutian Islands) 1898, and *The Men of the Sea* NR. 10, 1899:

At sixteen years of age, (Grainger) had, in fact, developed a style, and that style was the outcome of a discovery, and a literary discovery, not a musical one; for he had discovered

Rudyard Kipling, and from that written, he imbibed an essence and translated it into music...

...from that beginning up to the present time whenever Grainger elects to produce one of his Kipling settings, be it song or chorus, he becomes Kipling in a manner which nobody in the musical arena can approach.<sup>6</sup>

The relation between Kipling and Grainger provides a significant study of the psychological functioning of art and the interconnection between various levels of artistic expression. By studying the relationship between these two men, insight may be gained into the deepest well springs of creative art and the functioning of the creative mind. It is interesting to note in this context that Grainger himself wrote of his hope that one day an enlightened scientific knowledge would be able to at last adequately explain the forces which combine to produce creative art.

...in 1905 Grainger met Kipling... and played for him several of his Kipling settings. Kipling is reported to have said to him, ‘till now I’ve had to rely on black and white, but you do the thing for me in colour’.<sup>7</sup>

From July 1893 Grainger followed a meticulous practice of dating compositions and inscribing his manuscripts, giving details of arrangements, dating fair copies and supplying information for program notes and publication for works.<sup>8</sup>

Grainger composed and arranged his sea music over a period of 62 years, a final page of *The Bride’s Tragedy* is dated March 25, 1960, White Plains, New York, that is, one year before his death.<sup>9</sup>



From 1916 he designed the covers and lettering for his published compositions both in England and the United States. These were eclectic designs suitable for the music, frequently with an Australian nationalistic tendency, or a design transposed from a pair of North American Indian moccasins for his *Tribute to Foster*. In 1922 he designed the lettering for the Schott, London edition of the “Kipling Settings. Room music tit-bits”,

from the street name signage set into the corner walls in London. Grainger was a precursor of Art Deco when he designed the lettering for *Fadir Og Do’ttir* (*Father and Daughter*) from the inside cover of the published score in 1913,<sup>10</sup> whilst, his Art Deco lettering for *Shallow Brown*, published by G. Schirmer Inc., New York, first edition March 1927, is contemporaneous with the Art Deco period.

Grainger as a composer had a unique wholistic attitude to the creative process of his music; it extended from the age of 11 years to include decorating and binding unpublished scores, paste-ups, documentation, designs and instructions for engraving scores for publication.

Wilfrid Mellers examines Grainger’s relationship to the phenomenon practised by folklorists, as “guising” when he transformed concert music into “ritual re-enactments” and in pieces when he assumed the “mask” of another composer.

Mellers extends this hypothesis to explore Grainger’s fanatical anti-Puritanism in relation to modern industrial technology, for example his wearing of his self designed, multi-coloured towel clothes, like a Morris dancing “guiser” or perhaps a 20th century therapeutic fool.

If Percy played a child’s part in our battered technocracy, this called for energy as no real child could summon up or cope with.<sup>11</sup>

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 commodities,<sup>12</sup> but their genesis began during the 1908–1909 Ada Crossley Australasian concert tour, when Grainger was inspired by the beauty of Maori and South Sea island clothes and fabrics seen in New Zealand and Australian museums.

My mother mooted the idea of clothes made from Turkish towels — cool in summer, warm in winter, and

washable at all times. I leaped at the idea, seeing therein a chance to return to something comparable with the garish brilliance of the “sky blue and scarlet” garments of our Saxon and Scandinavian forefathers... between 1910 and 1914 I wore these clothes when giving many of my lessons in London.<sup>13</sup>

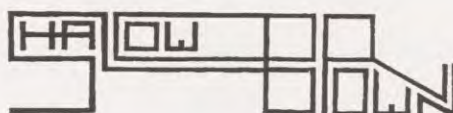
Artistic, hygienic and rational clothes reform was a recognised and established movement after the International Health Exhibition was held in London in 1884 at the Albert Hall. The first edition of *The Journal of Healthy and Artistic Dress Union* was published in July 1893. Dr Gustave Jaeger’s sanitary woollen machine knitted clothing and extreme design systems for men were adopted in the late 1880s by George Bernard Shaw,<sup>14</sup> the playwright, music critic, writer on social and political subjects and an associate of Grainger. Both Rose and Percy attended Shaw’s lectures, read his books and attended his plays after their arrival in London in 1901. In 1914 Shaw chose Grainger’s *Shepherd’s Hey and Mock Morris* as entr’acte music for the first London production of his play *Pygmalion*.<sup>15</sup> Percy and Rose responded to Shaw’s theories on socialism and reform, but Percy resisted the influence of Shaw and his friends Cyril Scott and Herman Sandby to deny himself the great pleasure of eating huge slices of roast beef and gravy. It was not until 1924 that he became a vegetarian.

But you may ask why I, who all my life have enjoyed warlike and violent — mood literature, should be so much against war. One answer to that is that since war has ceased to be hand-to-hand fighting, its appeal to the savage side of our nature doesn’t amount to much. It isn’t sporting.

Yours, for meat-shun-ment & world-peace,

Percy Grainger<sup>16</sup>

The sea chanty *Shallow Brown* evokes not only the wild ocean and the desperation of human loss, but also exposes Grainger himself poised between love, death and life, like the ebb and flow of



**Above:** Percy Grainger’s typeface design for the music score of *Shallow Brown* (MG 1/79-1-1a), 1927.

**Below:** *Shallow Brown* (MG 3/81-3-3) music score by Grainger, instrumental parts for Guitars I and II. (Both Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne Library.)

the old outgoing tide and the renewal of life with the incoming tide.

Wilfrid Mellers interprets an oblique involvement of Grainger’s sado-masochistic proclivities, and the impact on us by his setting of *Shallow Brown*, composed in 1910:

The grand tune rings out in Nordic raucousness, in Ionian B flat major, but with savagely dislocated accents and contrasted dynamics prompted by the desperation behind the words, “O Shaller Brown, you’re goin to leave me, Shaller Brown, don’t ne’er deceive me”. The notation of this vocal line, with its irregular triplets and microtonal slides, seems close to the notations taken down from John Perring’s singing, while the refrains

of the male chorus, snarling Shallow’s name, sound comparably authentic. Throughout, the piano’s furious “tremolando or wogglings”,<sup>17</sup> intended to “suggest wafting wind-born surging sounds heard at sea”, underline the fluctuating dynamics with powerful, sometimes fiercely dissonant harmonic shifts. The ambiguously resolutive end — with “woggling” modulations through E flat and C minor, and mysterious changes of gear between triads of D flat major and D minor — deeply disturbs, until the sea sounds fade on an unresolved flat seventh (or blue note) of B flat. Such effects are scary enough in the version for baritone and piano but become — especially in the climax with the screeching clarinet in the previous stanza — horrendous in the full room music version, wherein wind parts — plumb oceanic depths through a babel of guitars, mandolins, and ukuleles, thrumming madly in support of the inexorable piano. Grainger is said to have played this piano part, swaying in a semi-conscious state, indeed “carried away and drunkened”. There is no more alarming instance of this particular Percy-paradox, whereby music traditionally communal becomes a personal testament.<sup>18</sup>

Mellers continues his discussion with Grainger’s setting of *One more Day, My John*, a sea shanty originally arranged as *Death Song for Hjalmar Thuren* and later “dished up”<sup>19</sup> for piano in 1915:

Grainger’s note informs us that the song was traditionally sung at sea, the day before making the home port. Such a ditty is a late survival of “music of superstition”, i.e. music employed as a spell to propitiate the hostile, malign or insuperable forces of nature — “oceans, rivers, storms and the like”. Since the piece is not an action song like a sea shanty proper, but rather a magic spell securing return to the safety of home, it is not surprising that it charms us in more than one sense, and is set in Grainger’s magic-nostalgic key of F sharp major. Nothing could be more distant from the scarifying music of “oceans, rivers, storms and the like” which we encounter in Grainger’s most famous sea shanty setting, *Shallow Brown*.<sup>20</sup>



Art, writing and leisure become synonymous for Grainger during the 1933 to 1934 voyage to Australia with his wife Ella, a dream realised to escape and sail away on board the four masted Bark *L'Avenir*. During the sea voyage of 110 days, he painted the people aboard, the ship, shipboard life and the ships in the Australian ports of call. His unfinished literary creation of 130 pages, the autobiographical essay, the *Aldridge-Grainger-Ström Saga* was written whilst engaged in crew tasks on deck and below, aloft in the ship's riggings and the crow's nest. Grainger mastered the craft of sailor's knots with several practice pieces of sinnet knotting, short hauser pointing and plaited belts completed during the voyage. He made a Dada 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 Ronnings drawing ink bottle and box designed and made to prevent the ink from moving or spilling when the ship hove too.

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 poles, created machines to transmit those and other "sound scapes of his mind", with a holistic vision of his "New Age" *Free Music*, with its de-restriction of pitch, rhythm and harmony, directly into audible sound; pure sound, without the interference or interpretation of a performer; a machine workable by the composer, without a staff of engineers to translate the composer's music or maintain it. Grainger began his experiments obsessively in 1946, at the age of 64, assisted by a young scientist, Burnett Cross. Grainger's paradoxical quest for world music, *Free Music* and *Free Music* machines<sup>21</sup> led him to invent, documenting his progress and the machines he created. This terminated with his electric-eye tone-tool and his death in 1961.

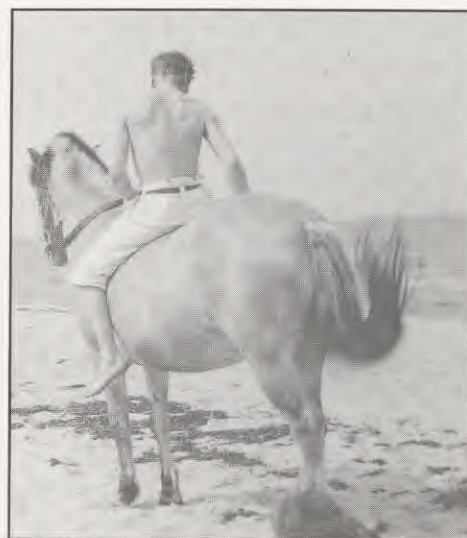


Percy Grainger's lifetime of sea voyages began on Saturday 26 May, 1895, at the age of 13 years, when he sailed from Australia with his mother Rose, to study piano and composition at the Hoch Conservatorium, Frankfurt am-main, Germany. He traversed millions of miles of sea lines, on the great and small ocean liners in pursuit of his performance career as a concert pianist and as a world traveller. His last sea voyage was in late May 1959, when he returned to the USA, after his deteriorating health and the progress of cancer prevented his planned visit to Sweden and the Adleburgh festival in London. His long, passionate association with the sea ended ironically, after his death, when this man, who had avoided air travel, was flown back to his homeland in a hermetically sealed crate and then transported by train to his burial place on 2 March 1961, in the West Terrace Cemetery, Adelaide, South Australia. A life ended that he would not have exchanged with the angels.

Shall Percy Aldridge Grainger remain forever a musical paradox — dedicated to ancient music combined with his innovative avant-garde experimental music?

Whilst Grainger can carry the public along with the sheer joie de vivre of many of his compositions originally conceived for whistlers, are they merely following a Peter Pan-like Percy playing the fool, the "Guiser" leading them back in time and place to those magical, pagan, secret rituals and mythical Elysian fields and unknown, uncharted seas?

As he whistles down the wind to immortality, he lifts his mask, to reveal the dark side of his moon, to reveal the entwinement of his art and psyche and we are inexorably assailed in his music by the deep, dark recesses and longings of his soul. ❖



Percy Grainger riding bareback, coast of Denmark, (late 1920s), Photo: Grainger Museum.)

## NOTES

1. Elinor Wrobel, *Rose Grainger: The Creator of a Genius*. Australian Bicentennial Exhibition Catalogue. Melbourne, Grainger Museum, 1988.
2. Elinor Wrobel, *The Formative Years: Percy Grainger the Baby and Child*. Special Exhibition catalogue. Melbourne, Grainger Museum, 1991.
3. Elinor Wrobel, *Percy Grainger: The Noble Savage*. Special Exhibition catalogue. Melbourne, Grainger Museum, 1992.
4. Letter, Percy Grainger to Karen Holten, 6 August 1909, concerning his holiday with Roger Quilter at Bawdsey Manor, Woodbridge (Grainger Museum).
5. Letter, Percy Grainger to Roger Quilter, 20 July 1930 (Grainger Museum).
6. Cyril Scott, "Percy Grainger The Music and the Man," in *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3, July 1916, pp. 426-427.
7. Theresa Balough, "The Essential Grainger: Percy Grainger's Kipling Settings 1898-1947". Dissertation, University of Western Australia, 1985.

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8. See Exhibition and Music Catalogue, "Percy Grainger and the Sea: from water, wind and the sea evolved the soundscapes of Percy Grainger's mind", Melbourne, Grainger Museum, 1998, p. 13ff.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 13ff.
10. Elinor Wrobel, *Percy Grainger: Artist and Art Collector*. Special Exhibition catalogue, Melbourne, Grainger Museum, 1997, p. 76.
11. Wilfrid Mellers, "Grainger as the Guiser: An Anthropological Note", Appendix I, In *Percy Grainger*. Oxford Studies of Composers, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 157.
12. See Elinor Wrobel, *Percy Grainger: Artist and Art Collector*, pp. 68–70.
13. Percy Grainger, *Towel Clothes Made by Rose Grainger, Percy Grainger and Ella Grainger*. Museum Legend, Grainger Museum, n.d.
14. Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art and Reason. Dress Reformers of the 19th Century*. London, John Murray, 1974.
15. John Bird, *Percy Grainger*. South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1977, p. 70.
16. Letter, Percy Grainger to the *American Vegetarian*, 13 October 1946 (Grainger Museum).
17. Percy Grainger's idiosyncrasies of spelling musical terminology.
18. Wilfrid Mellers, *Percy Grainger*, p. 86.
19. See footnote 17.
20. Wilfrid Mellers, *Percy Grainger*, pp. 79–80.
21. Elinor Wrobel, *Percy Grainger's Paradoxical Quest for "World Music": Free Music and Free Music machines*. Special Exhibition catalogue, Melbourne, Grainger Museum, 1994.

Elinor Wrobel curated the Grainger Museum special exhibition "Percy Grainger and the Sea: from water, wind and the sea evolved the soundscapes of Percy Grainger's mind". This introduction to the exhibition first appeared in the exhibition catalogue.

## FROM COMMERCIAL TO PRIVATE AN EXPERIENCE IN PUBLISHING

BY Robert Iling

This account was presented as a talk some years ago at a gathering in Adelaide of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand. Since his retirement Dr Iling has continued to devote himself to the bibliographical and musicological study of early music.

My introduction nearly 40 years ago to commercial publication was a gracious and generous gift by my teacher Edward Dent, Professor of Music at Cambridge University, a scholar of world stature whose devotion was to opera, and a display of trustfulness and helpfulness by Penguin Books. On Dent's suggestion I was invited to write the *Dictionary of Music* published by Penguin Books in 1950.<sup>1</sup> The task taught me a huge amount about my own ignorance of music; and it taught me to write English with a little more ease than I had as a student when I was more at home with notes and numbers, than with nouns and verbs. The published volume sold some 20,000 copies and it gave me confidence that I could become a musical scholar. Penguin's contract was simple and honest and their royalty payments were a handsome reward for my labours. During the next 20 years the sale of many small essays to highly reputable journals brought small, but fair rewards as I practised my analytical and critical

skills on a diversity of musical subjects, from church organs to youngsters who could not sing in tune.

Then the climate changed. I learned from two publishers (one in England and the other in Australia) the wide range of devices by which an author can be ill-served by his publisher. The Australian Society of Authors, of which I was for a while a member, did great battle on my behalf — and the result of its battle was that over a dozen copyrights were returned to me and I was given the remaining book stock. Commercial publication had earned me only a slight trickle of dollars — which mattered little as I was not dependent on publishing for my living — but it had failed to distribute my work, which mattered much. In one sense it was a mighty victory.

At about the same time I was becoming increasingly disgusted with the publications of the great publishing houses, music and books about music edited or written by those who held