



McShane, I. (2011). Museum review: the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

Originally published in *Australian Historical Studies*, 42(3), 422–424.

Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2011.595898>

Copyright © 2011. Published by Taylor & Francis.

This is the author's version of the work, posted here with the permission of the publisher for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted. You may also be able to access the published version from your library. The definitive version is available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/>.

Review of the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

Australian Historical Studies 42(3), 2011, pp. 422-424.

The Grainger Museum, Australia's only autobiographical museum and one of its most fascinating, has re-opened after seven years. Coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the museum's original financier and principal subject, Percy Aldridge Grainger, the refit gives visitors rich insights to Grainger's life, ideas and creative output.

Concert pianist, composer and musicologist, and self-described all round man, Grainger (1871-1961) left Australia at fourteen and never resettled here. The museum's location at the University of Melbourne is in part a tribute to the support given to Grainger by head of the Conservatorium of Music Professor Marshall Hall, and in part Grainger's own attempt to be recognised as Australia's greatest composer. Appreciating Percy's precocious talent, and his mother Rose's determination for her son and only child to succeed, Marshall Hall organized fund-raising to send the pair to Frankfurt, where Grainger continued piano studies. Moving to London, the Graingers relied on the support of the Anglo-Australian community, until Percy's reputation and prosperity become established through his virtuosity as a performer and the patronage of Greig and Delius. The Graingers left for the USA in 1914, to be hounded by calls that Percy was escaping military service. As ever, Percy's *amour-propre* was impregnable; he saw the move as a tactic to ensure there would be no risk to his artistic legacy. Taking US citizenship, he lived in the USA for the rest of his life. Following his death, his house in White Plains, suburban New York was converted to a museum by his widow and Grainger devotees.

The source of the Melbourne Grainger Museum springs from Percy's devotion to Rose. Rose had contracted syphilis from Percy's father, John, the designer of Melbourne's Princes' Bridge and Perth's Parliament House, but long estranged from the family. As her mental health deteriorated with the disease's progress, she began to obsess over gossip regarding her relationship with Percy. In 1922 she jumped to her death from the 18<sup>th</sup> floor office of Percy's New York agent. Her suicide note - torn up and then painstakingly pieced together by Percy - along with a thick plait of her ginger hair and some personal effects, constitute the museum's most affective display vignette. Percy's remorse over Rose's death, and its intimation of his own mortality, triggered a project of self-documentation that was realized with the museum's opening in 1938.

The Grainger Museum is much more than a document of Percy's engagement with music performance and musicology, race and eugenics, language and clothing reform, typography and graphic design, ethnography, vegetarianism, sado-masochism and more. It is a fascinating story of museum-making. Grainger stated that "[t]he contents of this Museum are... the product of one man's taste and criticism - my own - and are limited accordingly", but the narrative developed in the 54 "legends" or interpretive panels that he prepared for display during his second

visit to the museum in the 1950s is uncompromising. Underpinning the story is Grainger's fusion of music, broader culture and racial thought. "While studying music... I was struck by the fact that the most gifted composition students were all from the English-speaking and Scandinavian countries. I foresaw that a period of English-speaking and Scandinavian leadership in musical originality and experimentation lay just ahead...". Grainger's preoccupation with Nordic cultures and 'race boostment' informed much of his work. The museum displays include a Grainger photo-essay documenting the colour of composers' eyes.

The most interesting and satisfying part of the museum, for me at least, is the section on Grainger's musical experimentation. Grainger was an autodidact who scorned specialism and experimented freely with ideas and media. On display is wax cylinder sound recording equipment, used in his pioneer fieldwork on English folk-songs, the source of some of his best known compositions. A stint in a US military band in 1917 was a further musical source, sparking interest in the use of percussion and, later, everyday objects and environmental sounds, in his compositions. Although Grainger has largely failed in his ambition to be regarded as a major composer, he deserves recognition as a progenitor of music freed from Western concepts of rhythm, metre and tonality. The museum's feature artefact is the Kangaroo Pouch tone tool, a large and highly sculptural structure with a series of revolving cylinders winding contoured paper that traced rising and falling pitch.

Grainger had a firm, if idiosyncratic vision of the building's design and display principles as well as the storyline. Convinced that electricity was a fire risk, he specified that the building open during daylight hours only. Ambient light from high-set gallery windows enabled visitors to view text-heavy displays mounted on A-frame structures that Grainger designed and built. Glass cases contained clothing and personal items belonging to Grainger and some of his musical contemporaries, following his dictum that "the history of [an artists] friends and friendships is the history of his art. Grainger's (unfulfilled) plans for display of his skeleton, together with the museum's radial floorplan enabling surveillance of galleries from a central foyer, have strong Benthamite echoes.

Some of the museum's original structures and mounts, along with text from several Grainger legends, feature in the elegant re-design by Sydney-based exhibition designer Lucy Bannyan. Ironically, Grainger's fear of electrical hazards exposed the displays to real damage from sunlight penetration. Bannyan and the project architect, heritage specialists Lovell Chen, resolved this problem with window baffles and interior ambient and display lighting. The elimination of the building's chronic damp problems was more challenging. Grainger's original plan for the museum to have separate biographical and musical sections was never fully realized. A second story of the structure remained unbuilt and the flat roof of the first level leaked persistently. The refurbishment preserved the building's efficient floorplan, with the galleries effectively catering for exhibition and visitor circulation.

In her 2006 PhD thesis on the Grainger Museum, Belinda Nemeč argues persuasively that Percy Grainger pursued an object-based epistemology that reflected the

museology and material culture of Victorian and Edwardian periods. By the 1930s, social and anthropological research had largely lost interest in museum taxonomy in favour of laboratory and real-world research. However, she argues, in emphasising social and cultural context, Grainger reflected Scandinavian folk museum developments and anticipated museum-based social history elsewhere. The resources and energy that Grainger brought to the project have yielded an archive of some 50,000 pieces of correspondence, 15,000 images and a substantial collection of material culture. Stored with other musicology collections, this group comprises one of Australia's most important musicological archives. The museum's website shows the prolific use that researchers have made of the Grainger material. The University of Melbourne and private benefactors deserve congratulations for re-investing in the physical museum.

Ian McShane  
Swinburne University of Technology