

Percy Grainger, the ‘World’s Ninth Best Composer’: His Life, Music, and Museum

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In 1945, the Australian pianist and composer Percy Grainger penned a document titled ‘A World-Wide Tone-Wright’s Guild’.¹ In it he suggested that composers should set up an official register to protect their craft from the ‘mind fog’ of non-experts (non-experts, being, of course, those who consider Mozart a good composer). Such an organisation, he hoped, would definitively show the mastery of the *real* leaders in the field, such as Wagner, Delius, and Cyril Scott.

The document concludes by suggesting a system through which ‘the tone-worth of tone-wrights’ (that is, the musical importance of composers) could be judged by scoring them in 11 different categories to produce a definitive ranking. The categories, Grainger suggested, should include things like ‘tied-upness with life’, ‘beauty’, ‘Change-shock-fulness’, ‘Well-sounding-ness’, ‘Tween-realm-some skill-hoard-fulness ((international tradition))’, and ‘puzzle-thoughtfulness ((complicatedness))’. The highest a composer could score in total was 75.

Here’s a selection of some of his rankings:

Tonewright-class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Total
Skryabin	5	3	2	3	1	10	10		3	3	7	47
Beethoven	2	4	3	3	5	10	8	2	2	4	3	45
Bach	5	3	5	4	5	5	8		5	10	10	61
Brahms	4	3	3	5	2	8	2	4	3	7	8	46
English Folksong	5	5	4	5	3	10	5	5	5	5	5	57
German Folksong	2	5	3	2	1	5	3	5	4	3	1	34
Javanese Tonery	5	5	2	5	1	6	8	5	5	5	6	53
Delius	5	2	2	1	5	2	10	3	5	5	5	45
Arthur Fickénscher	5	3	2	5	2	6	10		4	10	10	57
P. Grainger	4	5	3	4	3	8	10	4	5	7	8	58
Duke Ellington	3	5	1	4	2	6	6	5	5	4	3	44
Puccini	3	5	3	4	3	7	2	4	5	4	-	40
Verdi (not late works)	2	4	4	2	4	4	3	4	3	2	-	37

¹ Percy Grainger, ‘A World-Wide Tone-Wright (Composer) Guild’ (1945), reproduced in *Self Portrait of Percy Grainger*, edited by Malcolm Gillies, David Pear and Mark Carroll (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 201–8.

Gounod	3	3	3	5	3	7	-	4	5	5	-	38
César Franck	5	3	4	5	4	10	6	5	4	10	6	69
Sibelius	4	5	3	3	3	5	-	5	2	5	3	38
G. Fauré	4	4	4	5	2	7	3	2	5	8	5	49

This is only a small section of the composers Grainger scored, but it's clear that in his estimation Bach is much better than Beethoven, while English folksong is much higher ranked than German.

The top composer overall is (obviously), Wagner. More surprising, perhaps, is the second: a tie between the seventeenth century English composer William Lawes and Rarotongan part singing from the Cook Islands. Also highly ranked are César Franck, Evgenia Lineva's collection of Russian part-songs and Natalie Curtis's of African American songs. Grainger ranks himself ninth, two below Bach, and slightly above Grieg and Tchaikovsky.

This document, Grainger said, was written on the 'spur of the moment, without fore-thought', and therefore probably not intended as a serious manifesto. But it nonetheless offers an interesting insight into the person who created it. Firstly, it's written in a completely bizarre, invented language that Grainger called 'Blue-Eyed English', which was part of a life-long project through which he intended to 'purify' English of any Mediterranean (and particularly Latin) influences. Next, some of the values across the various categories don't add up (see 'Verdi (not late works)' or Franck, above, for example). This might tell us something about his education, as mistakes of basic arithmetic that might be expected from someone who had only three months of formal schooling as a child.

Conceptually, the document clearly shows an idiosyncratic way of looking at the musical world that collapses boundaries between what might have been called 'high' and 'low' art, or composition and ethnomusicological documentation. Though this world-view was certainly genuine, it might also have a whiff of what has been described as Grainger's 'antipodean contrariness'.²

And finally, there's the fact that he ranked himself 9th, only a little way below Bach. In all, this document seems to represent a fairly unusual person.

Percy Grainger was settler Australia's first internationally successful composer, and as a pianist, he was among the world's most famous through the 1910s and '20s. As an example of his pianism, try his performance of Chopin's B minor sonata. Grainger's biographer John Bird described hearing this recording as like being hit by 'a volcano of sound ... as if a rattling and defiant express train. Steam, of course, had just dashed through the room'.³

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qW371IdjiA>

² Peter Tregear, "'The Art of Agony': Aspects of Negativity in Grainger's Music", *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 16 (2019): 27–41.

³ John Bird, 'A Pilgrimage of Sorrows: The Life of Percy Aldridge Grainger' 1982 lecture.

Percy Grainger was born in Melbourne in 1882, and was raised and educated almost solely by his mother, Rose. He had a fairly unusual upbringing, even for the time. His mother had very high hopes for him, setting about from the very start to raise a genius who she intended to be ‘Australia’s First Great Composer’. Percy only went to school formally for a few months, but excelled at languages, art, and music, and so his mother withdrew him from the education system and sought out the best tutors she could find in Melbourne in these areas.

Rose herself was a very good pianist, but she married very young—she was 19 when she had Percy—and the majority of her life was dedicated her raising and managing the career of her son. Percy’s father, John Grainger, was a ‘flamboyant and talented, but irresponsible’⁴ architect and civil engineer, who was also a violent alcoholic who infected his wife with the syphilis that would eventually ruin her mental and physical health.

When Percy was 8 his parents separated, and his mother spent the next five years raising money to take her child prodigy son to Germany—like many other Australian musicians before him—to study in Frankfurt at the Hoch Conservatory.

In 1895, Grainger entered the Conservatory, studying piano and composition. Here he met his lifelong friends Cyril Scott, Balfour Gardiner, and Roger Quilter, who collectively became known as the ‘Frankfurt Group’. Although Grainger did have a ‘official’ composition teacher—Ivan Knorr—later in life he wrote that he learnt nothing from him, and his only ‘real’ composition teacher was an engraver, graphic designer, and amateur musician called Karl Klimsch who lived in Frankfurt.

Klimsh’s philosophy, Grainger reported, was ‘If you have no theme or melody in your head, don’t compose at all. If you have a theme or melody, start off with it rightaway, & the moment your melodic inspiration gives out, stop your piece. No prelude, no interlude, no postlude. Just the pith of music, all the time’.⁵

This sort of immediacy is one feature of Grainger’s writing, but at the same time, and almost paradoxically, his oeuvre is also full of repetition. Throughout his life, he would regularly return to and revise or rework material he had either written or encountered in the 1890s and early 1900s, and often he didn’t publish works until years after they were completed.

An example of this—an early work begun in the late 1890s but not actually published until 1930—is a short piece later titled ‘Youthful Rapture’. (When it was first written, the teenage Grainger had titled it ‘A Lot of Rot’). It is written for string orchestra and cello soloist, and dedicated to his duo partner, the Danish cellist Hermann Sandby.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/3IgXn7wkYElpEOLPvebKGe>

In 1901, Grainger moved to London, where he established himself as a salon pianist. As an attractive, young, energetic Australian, he was very well liked and quickly became enmeshed in the ‘high society’ of the day. He regularly performed for royalty, and moved in the same circles as musicians like Thomas Beecham, Ethel Smyth, Holst, and Vaughan Williams, and

⁴ Malcolm Gillies and David Pear, ‘John H. Grainger (1855–1917)’, *Portrait of Percy Grainger* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 3.

⁵ Percy Grainger, ‘Karl Klimsch (born 1840–died about 1925): Percy Grainger’s Only Composition Teacher’, Museum Display Legend, 1956. Grainger Museum accession no. 04.0331.

artists like John Singer Sargent. Through these networks, he befriended Edvard Grieg, who was completely baffled that an Australian should be such an insightful interpreter of his deeply Norwegian music. As Grieg was quoted in a 1907 interview after meeting Grainger, ‘What is nationality? I have written Norwegian Peasant Dances that none of my own Countrymen can play and here comes this young Australian and plays them as they ought to be played’.

While he was living in England, Grainger also began collecting and arranging folk songs. After hearing a lecture by Lucy Broadwood about collecting in the field, he started to travel around the countryside of Lincolnshire, Gloucestershire, and Warwickshire—and later in Denmark, too—meeting farmers and labourers to note down their songs. He was the first person to use a portable phonograph for this type of collecting.

Grainger’s approach to folk song collecting was radically different to the accepted process at the time. Most contemporary collectors had an antiquarian view of folksong performance as a manifestation of a song’s ancient ‘ur-tune’.⁶ They saw it as their job to edit and smooth out all the individual expressions and perceived ‘errors’ of the performer, to bring out that underlying tune. They were not at all interested in the singers, and often didn’t even record their names.

Grainger’s approach was the opposite: he saw each performance as a unique expression of the singer, and that singer as part of a living culture. From this, he attempted to transcribe every microtonal interval and rhythmic fluctuation of each performance, and recorded details of the singers’ lives. While he was heavily criticised by the Folk Song Society through their publications and meetings, he seems to have been entirely unbothered by this, and began incorporating the folk songs he’d collected into his compositions.

When Grainger moved to London, he had avoided playing his own compositions, thinking his unconventional style might put audiences off. Having grown up with precarious finances, he was determined to make money, and therefore only started promoting his own work once he felt fully established as a pianist.

When he finally did start presenting his compositions, he was an immediate success. The first concert featuring his works was put on by his friend from Frankfurt, Balfour Gardiner, in 1912, where, alongside several of his settings of poems by Rudyard Kipling and his arrangement of the ‘Irish Tune from County Derry’ (perhaps better known as ‘Danny Boy’), was his, frankly insane, arrangement of a Faeroe Island folk song, called *Father and Daughter*.

The work is scored for five solo voices, a double mixed chorus, and three orchestral groups of brass, strings, and mixed mandolins and guitars (the score says ‘as many as possible’, and he managed to get thirty for this concert). Its score provides an example of what Grainger called ‘elastic scoring’, offering a range of variations in instrumentation for those occasions where thirty mandolins were not readily available.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2cbsCNvj40IipqrWmgrx2>

⁶ Graham Freeman, “‘Into a Cocked-Hat’: The Folk Song Arrangements of Percy Grainger, Cecil Sharp and Benjamin Britten”, *Grainger Studies* 2 (2012): 41.

Grainger wrote many works like *Father and Daughter*, based on pre-existing folk songs, but at the same time he began composing a number of works on folk-song models that were entirely originally conceived. One example of this is *Mock Morris*—a ‘mock’ morris dance tune—scored for a variety of ensembles including string orchestra.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2Ht8LVE6pHfo5HbUMRsfPO>

While such works were immediately and enormously popular—and made him a lot of money through sheet music sales—they also contributed to Grainger’s growing reputation as an eccentric. One reason for this was his proto-experiments in ‘blue eyed’ English and refusal to use Italian terms in his scores, seeking increasingly bizarre English equivalents.

Thus, instead of violas, Grainger wrote for ‘middle fiddles’. It is never ‘molto crescendo poco a poco’, instead, ‘louden hugely bit by bit’. There are no tremolos in his pieces, only ‘waggles’, and he provides performers with instructions to play ‘clatteringly’ or ‘rollickingly’ or ‘clingingly’ and ‘dead rhythmic’.

Even before his compositional career took off, it seems Grainger was starting to think about his legacy. In 1908, he wrote to his Danish girlfriend, Karen Holten, asking for the return of his letters to her in the hope of collecting and preserving them, saying ‘My letters shall be admired by a yetunborn generation; can’t you see that I always write with an eye to a possible public?’⁷

At the outbreak of World War One, Grainger and his mother moved to New York. This was, ostensibly, for Rose’s health. It was not public knowledge that she had syphilis, but she was becoming increasingly unwell—both mentally and physically—and one of the treatments for syphilis at the time included mercury, which probably only compounded things.

But, at the same time, Grainger was also running away from Europe. As he had said privately, if he *was* to be Australia’s first great composer, he couldn’t go getting himself killed in the war, and this move lost him a lot of friends and goodwill in England.

Nonetheless, in America, his career reached its zenith. He became a huge celebrity, entering into lucrative publishing and recording contracts and touring widely. It was here that he completed his piano setting of the folk song *Country Gardens*, which became his best-selling work—reportedly keeping his publishers in business through the Depression.

<https://youtu.be/76uhcO9gABw?si=CGgV3xkms9PC3LuK>

While *Country Gardens* certainly made him a fortune, it also became the bane of his existence, and he grew increasingly frustrated at its popularity, drawing the public’s attention away from what he saw as his more serious work.

Despite his celebrity status, Grainger did eventually give in to pressure from his social circles, and he enlisted in the US army in 1917. In the army band he learnt to play the saxophone and he seems to have enjoyed the anonymity of this role for some time. Eventually, however, it was decided that his talents would be better spent in fundraising, and

⁷ Percy Grainger, letter to Karen Holten, 12 February 1908, reproduced in *The Farthest North of Humanness: Letters of Percy Grainger 1901–14*, edited by Kay Dreyfus (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1985), 187–8.

he was dragged back to the concert platform to perform in war benefits for the Red Cross and other charitable organisations.

When he enlisted, Grainger was still terrified that he would be killed and forgotten before he'd made a proper mark as a composer, so he began cataloguing his compositions and documenting his ideas for works he hadn't yet finished, to make sure there was concrete evidence of his musical greatness.

Ultimately, he never saw action, but his time in the army allowed him to discover and experiment with the wind band as a medium. This would become one of his most enduring legacies, particularly in the United States, where almost every wind musician has played works like *Lincolnshire Posy*.

When Grainger was discharged from the military in 1919—around the same time he became an American citizen—he again took up his hectic touring schedule and was in demand as a soloist with almost every major US orchestra. With this success he finally had the connections and resources to stage even his most unusual works, including his largest orchestral work, *The Warriors (Music for an Imaginary Ballet)*.

Grainger is generally thought of as a miniaturist, with most of compositions only a few minutes long, but *The Warriors* takes about twenty. It is a *vast* piece of music, requiring up to three conductors and an extended orchestra including offstage brass, at least fifteen percussionists, and three (or any multiple of three) pianos, sometimes played with mallets and by other extended techniques. All these sections work at different tempos and in clashing rhythms against the rest of the orchestra. The piece also contains aleatoric sections, including instructions—as in the xylophone and marimba parts in the finale—that say things like ‘any notes will do equally well ... keep on with the same sort of thing (any notes)’ or ‘the actual notes do not matter, anything of this sort will do equally’.

Grainger described *The Warriors* as offering ‘no definite program or plot ... though certain mind-pictures set it going’ describing ‘the ghosts of male and female warrior types of all times and places ... spirited together for an orgy of warlike dances’.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0jIM5e8O9Gc2NhFdgKIVDM>

When it was first publicly performed in 1919, *The Warriors* was described as both ‘monumental’ and as a ‘monumental failure’. There were reports of the audience laughing throughout—particularly when one of the pianists unexpectedly produced a large mallet—but others were simply delighted by the exuberance of the style.

Things had been going exceptionally well for Grainger until 1922 when his mother died by suicide. He was away on tour in California, and she jumped to her death from a New York City skyscraper.

Although she had not been well for a long time, this final act seems to have been catalysed by rumours that her and her son's relationship was incestuous. They were incredibly close, and deeply emotionally reliant on each other, and in all of Grainger's life had never been apart for more than a few weeks. But given how scared Rose was of passing her syphilis on to him—

she wouldn't even hold him as a baby—it seems unlikely that there was any truth to these rumours in a physical sense.

One of the things that solidified Rose and Percy's co-dependency was that they both had secrets: hers was syphilis, as we know. It was an incredibly socially isolating disease and the stigma around it—had anyone found out—would have seen them cast out of the social circles that they'd worked so hard to get into for the sake of Percy's career.

Grainger's secret, in contrast, was that he was a sexual sadomasochist, and from his teenage years through his entire life, enjoyed whipping and being whipped by women. While his girlfriends, obviously, found out about this pretty quickly—and he thoroughly documented his own 'self-beating' through writing and photography—this was, at the time, still considered a 'deviancy'. His mother considered it a sign of 'madness' and was so terrified that it would get out and ruin his career that she took an increasingly controlling role in every aspect of his life. Who he met with, who he dated, and the day-to-day management of his life was carefully controlled by Rose, hoping that she might also be able to control what information got out about him. Although Grainger was not at all embarrassed about his sexual preferences, and actually considered sex to be 'integral to his artistic enthusiasms', he also understood his mother's concerns, and happily acquiesced to her control.

With such a relationship, it is not surprising that Rose's death was utterly devastating to Percy. He was 40, his mother had managed everything in his life to that point, and her final letter to her him, written in the heat of those swirling rumours, had concluded with 'You have tried so hard to be all that is noble—but your mad side has ruined us'.⁸

In the aftermath, Grainger thought that he might also die, given his grief and the closeness of their bond. He frantically began cataloguing everything in his and his mother's possession—everything, not just musical works this time—and wrote nearly half a million words of autobiographical text that he never published. He also started to form the idea of a museum to document his and her life together.

After nearly a year off performing and composing, Grainger slowly returned to work. In this second half of his career, he generally took on less lucrative engagements, where he could have more control over the programming to promote his own compositions and those of his friends. Most of his work became focused on community groups and amateur orchestras, and he became increasingly involved in education, including chairing the New York University music department for one year from 1933.

While Grainger had always been a bit eccentric, from the mid-1920s this became an even stronger part of his public persona. For instance, he was already known for athletic feats—in London he was called 'the running pianist' for running between concerts, or even between towns when he was on tour—but through the 1930s, he is increasingly seen running about inside the concert hall. As a concerto soloist, his trademark became running to the back of the hall during a break and leaping onto the stage in time for his next cue. As a conductor, he often took the stage in a similar manner, leaping onto the platform.

See an example here: <https://youtu.be/7gmcERgEcmM?si=oYXK-3Hun7dj-8fV&t=1281>

⁸ John Bird, *Percy Grainger* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1998), 205.

Grainger was also involved in other ‘headline-grabbing’ stunts, including his own wedding. On a trip back to the US from Australia, he met a Swedish painter called Ella Ström, whom he fell in love with and married in 1928. Their wedding was held on the stage of the Hollywood Bowl during one of Grainger’s concerts in front of 15,000 people. Apparently Ella, who had never been to California, expected the Hollywood Bowl to be a lovely, quiet grotto, so was rather surprised by the whole thing.

Grainger’s statements to the press also, over time, grew progressively more outrageous. He would often say things simply because he knew he’d be quoted, such as describing Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’ as just a dressed-up version of ‘Yankee Doodle’, suggesting that Australia was ‘not isolated enough’ and that he himself was a ‘brainless composer’.⁹

He also circulated stories about himself to the press. For instance, he never wore a coat or a hat, even in winter, and when he got off a train dressed like this in 1939, in snowy Wisconsin, he was arrested when the local police took him for a vagrant. It was only after his manager showed up, and he’d changed into his concert tails in his jail cell, that the situation was resolved. This story was reported across the country, largely because Grainger had circulated it to the newspapers himself, even writing to the arresting officer for clarification of what had been said, because he wanted to quote him accurately.

But while Grainger’s public persona was coming more and more eccentric, his compositions took on a more serious and autobiographical flavour. In much of music of this time, he was thinking about Australia. Though he had left Melbourne at 12 and never lived there again, he retained a strong sense of Australian identity and constantly argued that his music was inherently Australian. In particular, he considered the Australian landscape to have impacted his aesthetic development.

His most explicit ‘Australian’ work is his *Colonial Song*, which he described as an attempt to create ‘a melody as typical of the Australian countryside as Stephen Foster’s exquisite songs are typical of rural America’. And yet, this was not at all well received: his friend Balfour Gardiner, said he simply ‘did not consider it a satisfactory work’, while Thomas Beecham was more scathing, describing it as, categorically, ‘the worst piece of modern times’. It is certainly soppy, in a kind of Edwardian Parlour song style, but later assessments have suggested this it actually an appropriate expression of longing for a past, or possibly never-existing, era.¹⁰

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4lCb7kRB81TjO7VvO6742z>

Grainger used and reused the ‘Colonial Song’ melody through many of his other works, where it becomes almost a leitmotif in explicit reference to Australia. An example of this is the second theme in his ‘Gumsuckers March’ from the *In a Nutshell* suite:

<https://open.spotify.com/track/02z11CwVgiNgC0FGaz2Irk>

⁹ ‘Percy Grainger Calls Himself Brainless Composer, Says Saxophone in Beautiful’, *The Herald* (Melbourne), 7 April 1934, 11.

¹⁰ Peter Tregear, ‘Nostalgic Memories of a Colonial Dream’, *Hoardings: Exceptional, Exotic and Commonplace*, edited by Brian Allison and Jennifer Hill (Parkville, Vic: Grainger Museum, 2013), 16.

These are clearly personal, and autobiographically inflected works, but even less-obvious pieces of this period can be read autobiographically. For example, *Tribute to Foster*:

https://youtu.be/qxRYgrk-hFY?si=JaF14m_k35QVAMAG&t=191 (particularly from 3:15)

This is a large-scale orchestral setting—including tuned drinking glasses in the extended percussion—of Stephen Foster’s ‘Campdown Races’, but it contains a surprisingly gentle lullaby right in the middle. While this might seem a slightly unhinged way to set the Foster tune, knowing that this score was worked on over the 1920s while Grainger was still deeply mourning his mother, and knowing that she used to sing him to sleep with ‘Campdown Races’ as a child, it begins to make more sense.

Grainger was an uncompromising advocate of there being NO separation between the art and the artist. To this end, he tried incredibly hard to leave a legacy that would allow future audiences to fully understand his life and works. So he set about creating an autobiographical museum.

This idea came to him after his mother’s death, when he started working systematically to record their lives together, but in the early 1930s, he took the proposal to the University of Melbourne, in his birth city, who—surprisingly, in retrospect—agreed. He sold them the idea by presenting the museum as an educational institution, suggesting that one half of the building would be a ‘Music Museum’ documenting music making in Australia broadly, while the other would be dedicated to him, to aid in the interpretation of his works.

The Grainger Museum was designed by University architect John Gawler, but Grainger was incredibly hands-on in its design and construction, even laying some of the bricks himself. Although its contents were pretty sparse at its public opening in 1938, Grainger spent the rest of his life sending materials over from New York—a project his wife continued for many years after his death—to the extent that the collection now holds over 100,000 objects. There is a lot of music: manuscripts and published scores, and about 50,000 letters and other bits of correspondence. There is furniture, clothing, shoes, hats, quite a lot of hair (including an envelope of his back hair for some reason), there are decorative art objects, cutlery, combs—almost everything imaginable.

Grainger really did intend the collection to be comprehensive because he strongly believed art was fundamentally linked to its creator’s life and experiences. For the same reason, he also carefully recorded and documented his sex life, leaving the Museum with thousands of photos of his flagellation practice, descriptive essays, commercial erotica, and a collection of about ninety whips (some homemade and incorporating objects like conductors’ batons). Initially he put this material into a bank vault in Melbourne, along with a letter marked ‘not to be opened until 10 years after my death’, hoping that by then, society would have progressed enough to accept this aspect of his life (and therefore, his music).

When this letter was opened in 1971—ten years after Grainger’s death—it caused significant issues for the University, which was still a relatively conservative institution, and it is only in the last few decades that this material has been publicly acknowledged and displayed.

But there are also other aspects of Grainger's legacy that remain difficult today, including—particularly in his later years—his obsession with race.

As might have been apparent in his concept of 'blue eyed English', Grainger was incredibly and categorically racist. He had been raised being told that people with blonde hair and blue eyes, like him, were of a superior race. In the 1920s, he discovered the writings of American Nordacists like Maddison Grant, and the British-German eugenicist Houston Stewart Chamberlain (who was, incidentally, Wagner's son in law), and from these discovered a framework of racial categorisation that apparently supported his theories of about 'Nordic superiority'.

From this pseudoscientific foundation, he began trying to apply these concepts to music and language, arguing that blue eyed composers were inherently better, and he even commissioned a series of close-up colour photos of composers' eyes in the 1950s, for a display in the Museum. These theories too, however, also became increasingly eccentric, as Grainger adapted them to suit whatever music he liked at a certain time. From this, for instance, when he discovered he liked jazz and the music of Duke Ellington, he decided that African Americans must actually be Nordic—so strong was his desire to preserve the theory, in face of any evidence to the contrary—leading to him to develop further bizarre compound racial categories like 'Mongolian-Japanese-Celtic-Nordic-Anglosaxon' to classify both music and people.

As Grainger became growingly racist in his private writings, these same writings also become progressively sadder, changing in tone from 'nostalgic to wistful to bitter', as he saw himself 'heading toward the abyss of "has been" mediocrity'.¹¹ He was still well known in the 1940s and 1950s, but it seems that audiences only really wanted to hear from him as a pianist, not for his compositions, with the exception of *Country Gardens*.

He was also deeply frustrated by the lack of interest in what he considered his most innovative work—his 'free music'—which occupied much of his last decades. The concept, he said, had been in his mind since childhood, where he sought to create a music unconstrained by traditional notions of pitch and rhythm, inspired by experiences of the Australian landscape, including rolling hills and waves on Melbourne's Albert Park Lake.

From this he imagined a music of unimpeded gliding tones, and from the 1940s, in collaboration with a physicist called Burnett Cross, he worked intensely on building huge, home-made machines to realise these sounds. Some machines were adapted from traditional instruments, while others were made using household objects, like old vacuum cleaners and sewing machines. Ultimately, he considered the sounds these machines made to be his 'only important contribution to music'.

Two examples can be found here:

<https://soundcloud.com/granger-museum/first-gliding-chords-on-the-reed-box-tone-tool>

<https://soundcloud.com/granger-museum/kangaroo-pouch-tone-tool-experiment>

¹¹ Malcolm Gillies, 'Introduction', *Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger*, xxiii.

Although Grainger believed this was his most important work, it seems the public was not moved, and most of the people who tried to engage with ‘free music’ at the time came away more confused than anything. Although it didn’t make an impact during his lifetime, Grainger’s recordings, completed machines, and the intricate schematic drawings that accompanied them have allowed later generations of Australian experimental composers to take up his ideas in their own work.

And yet, *Country Gardens* continued to haunt Grainger. As something of a final insult, in 1950, Leopold Stokowski asked him to produce a new arrangement of it for orchestra. Grainger agreed, but produced a version that not only demonstrates his antipathy for the work, but also—as one later reviewer noted—both denies us ‘any simple reverie’ and ‘shows the pain Grainger associated with this music’.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2LVII6QP8VjZhUNbyPbV4A>

It’s unfortunate that a chronological survey of Grainger’s life ends on quite a sad note, but thinking beyond his immediate life and to his legacy, it’s a slightly brighter picture. He was certainly a complex person and left a complex legacy, and the question remains as to whether he—after all that effort to be remembered—he was really Australia’s first great composer. In the European art music tradition, there is perhaps a case to be made that he was. He was certainly the most internationally successful, and remains the most well known, even today.

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