

## Humour and Music: Mary Cameron and Percy Grainger

While it is the correspondence exchanged between Grainger and his well-known friends and contemporaries that attracts the most enquiries from the Museum's researchers, my interest was caught recently by letters sent to Grainger from the now little-known Chicago pianist, Mary Cameron, during the years of the US's direct involvement in World War I. These letters are notable for insights they afford into a young middle-class woman's 'war effort', but they are also sometimes richly and anarchically funny: this was surely a genuine friendship and Cameron is revealed as animated and energetic, possibly impulsive and, to me, hugely likeable.

We have a draft of only one letter from Grainger, dated October 1923, where he tells Cameron that, upon reflection since his mother Rose's suicide, he wishes never to hear from her again; Alfhild Sandby received a letter of similar content. This is no simple 'Dear John' letter: a still deeply grieving Grainger writes to Cameron that 'there were things ... that made me think that you did not understand my mother, & I felt she had pain from these things at the time' and as a consequence 'there would be no happiness' in any future meeting or correspondence. Whether or not Cameron caused Rose distress, the meticulously cut-and-pasted mock-review reproduced in part here, 'Grainger breaks four pianos in recital', unattributed though unquestionably Cameron's work, was among a collection of items Rose herself preserved from this period. It is silly, certainly, but conveys much through its humour, including the sheer energy of Grainger's performances and the adoration he inspired.

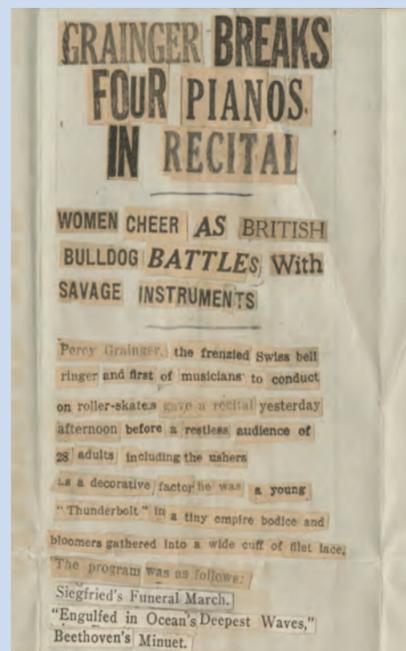
Grainger and Cameron were in regular contact from 1916 when she travelled east to take piano lessons with him in New York from May to August that year. When their correspondence opens in 1917 (there are letters to Rose too), Grainger is by now a bandsman in the army and Cameron sends knitting:

socks, jumpers, mittens and 'helmets'. She becomes 'desperate' for more lessons ('I've got a number of [concert] dates and am all adrift about programs') and seeks detailed advice on tempi for particular Grainger works. Cameron's sobriquets for Grainger are numerous and inventive—the 'honourable blondness' is one—and her letters are peppered with descriptions that are fresh and sometimes a little cruel; she does not take at all to poet Edgar Lee Masters, for example.

Cameron did much more than knit. She took part in in-camp entertainments for troops, including at Grainger's own Fort Hamilton, for which she wrote sketches, acted, played and conducted. And she was 'Corresponding Secretary' of the Illinois branch of the American Friends of Musicians in France. With what it seems was Grainger's written support, she was chosen for the YMCA-administered 'Over There League' in 1918, and spent time in a party of just five, entertaining the troops in France. The Museum holds a picture postcard from Bayonne (9 Nov. 1918) where she tells him that she has 'given 31 shows in 24 days & show[s] no signs of weakening'.

Also evident from the correspondence is Cameron's untiring and no doubt invaluable support of Grainger's solo piano music. We tend to think that Grainger needed no assistance in promoting music he wrote for his 'own' instrument, but Cameron programmed Grainger's music in her own recitals, adding his new works to her repertoire as they were written, and later furthered his interests through her own students. Replying with stiff formality to Grainger's letter ending their friendship a full year later, she described herself still as his 'pupil and representative' (14 Oct. 1924).

After the War, Cameron's comic gifts continued to find expression beside her more conventional work as recital pianist, occasional soloist and accompanist. She became a



Mary Cameron, 'Grainger breaks four pianos in recital', detail from mock review, n.d. (c. 1916-1920), newsprint pasted onto paper. Grainger Museum collection.

composer of 'light hearted' piano pieces and operetta-style works including the satirical 'Music Critic's Hymn of Hate' (1920; rev. 1938) and 'Hi Eda' (1936). In May 1934 she toured a lecture-recital, 'Humor in Music'.

What Grainger himself thought of Cameron may never be known, but we do have the reflections of *Chicago Daily Tribune* music critic, 'F.D.' (15 Sept. 1918):

She has been a pungent and stimulating item in the city's musical life, gifted for finding the fun which is in it, and bright and eager in making clear that the purpose of music is not punitory. Also, she is a good pianist.

Dr Jennifer Hill  
Research Officer

## News from the Manager's Desk from front page

Membership of Cultural Tourism Victoria and an association with Tourism Melbourne, as well as participation in Melbourne Open House and the Cultural Treasures Festival on 28 and 29 July actively promote the Museum to the wider community. New external signage is underway so that the function of the red brick building behind the cafe is clear both to the cafe patrons and the passers-by on Royal Parade. Landscaping of the Royal Parade nature strip is occurring with the mass planting of violets and spring and autumn bulbs.

Acquisition of a specific database system is being finalised to strengthen and support collection management and to enable public access to the catalogue, incrementally adding images and where possible, sound.

I look forward to seeing you in the Grainger — whether enjoying the exhibitions, participating in public programs or relaxing in the courtyard on the smart, comfortable wicker furniture underneath the kurrajong tree.

Suzanne Bravery  
Manager



Singer Belinda Dalton (left) and visitors at Grainger Day, 19 October 2011. Photograph by Fotoholics, Melbourne University Photography Club.

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# Hoard House

NEWS FROM THE GRAINGER MUSEUM

## News from the Manager's Desk

Welcome to *Hoard House*, the biannual newsletter which provides information about the Grainger Museum's collection and activities.

It is timely to look at what's happened in the 20 months since the Grainger Museum reopened. Eight thousand visitors have entered through the double doors from Royal Parade and over 800 general enquiries and 430 research enquiries have been answered. Facilitating access to the more than 100,000 objects in the collection whether on display or in storage is central to the role of the Museum.

In December last year the Grainger Museum team met and, with a facilitator, determined a Strategic Plan for 2012-15. This was an important opportunity for reflection, review and planning for the next few years within the context of the University's vision. Our vision is for the Grainger Museum's rich, diverse and unique cultural and scholarly resources to be more widely accessible: to the public, to students and to researchers. It is one that supports museum best practice in all areas. It was agreed that the primary purpose of the Grainger Museum is to make the collection available for research and teaching.

We had moved ahead in placing Melbourne as the centre for Grainger studies in Australia and internationally, hosting symposia, launching *Grainger Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, participating in Grainger events in England and Japan and welcoming thousands into the Museum.

Utilising collective experiences and observations and after intense discussion, a set



Penelope Thwaites with piano duo Ayumi Iga and Masatoshi Yamaguchi at the Grainger festival in Tokyo, 27 November 2011. Photograph courtesy of the festival committee.

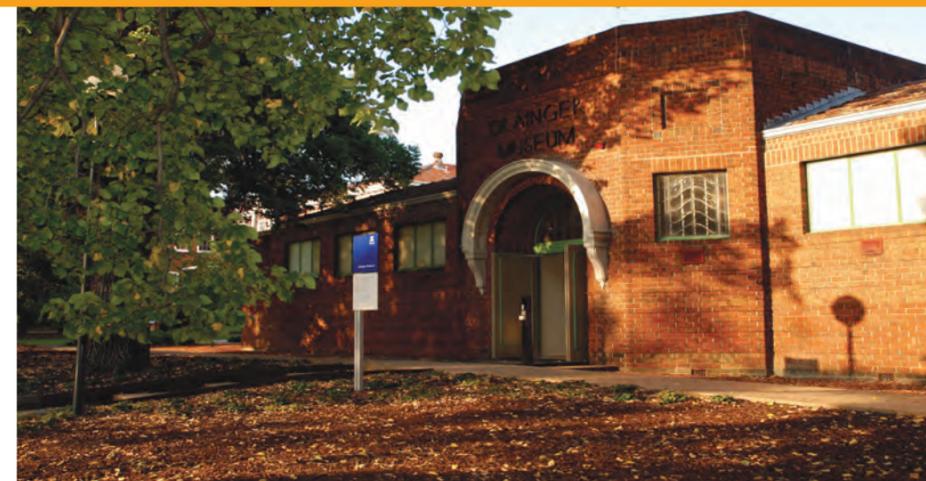
of strategies and actions was determined. These focused on strengthening engagement with the University of Melbourne community (and others); growing the quantity and quality of programs and initiatives including engagement with contemporary arts; expanding education programs; developing the public face of the Museum; effectively marketing the Museum; increasing external revenue; and systematically building management and maintenance of all Museum spaces on and off campus. Access to the collection online and the improvement of the catalogue records are also priorities.

Some of this work had started but the plan provided the context, direction and the basis for decision-making that was the necessary next step for prioritisation and allocation of resources. The outcome of a review of opening hours, from detailed visitor statistics kept in 2010/11, is a trial in a change of opening hours for 2012. The opening of the Museum from Tuesday to Friday and Sunday from 1 to 4.30 pm has been retained. In addition the Museum is open on Mondays during semester from 12 to 3.30 pm when there is a performance in Melba Hall. The idea is to give audience members who attend the performance an opportunity to visit the Museum.

Working with the Cultural Collections Projects Coordinator, six projects have been identified for student internships over the year with one currently underway. This engagement with students on campus offers a keenly sought after opportunity for students to acquire experience within an operational Museum, as does the opportunity for students to work as gallery attendants.

Given that the collection reflects Grainger's vision of music as a universal language and the idea that a museum is a place for conversations, plans for a series of public programs are in development with a talk by Dr Daniel Grimley on Grainger and the Danish landscape, performance by sound installation artists Ros Bandt and Johannes Siermanns and the opening of this year's temporary exhibition on the overshadowed father of Percy, John Harry Grainger. These plans include performances by contemporary musicians and artists, by musicians using experimental instruments and more traditional ones and the use of voice and piano — all related to Grainger's concepts or collections.

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## The Elusive Leonora Speyer

Edvard and Nina Grieg met Percy Grainger at 46 Grosvenor Street, London, the house of Sir Edgar and Lady Speyer. The Grainger Museum collection has an informally scrawled note asking Grainger: 'Will you dine with me on Tuesday (15<sup>th</sup>), [May, 1906] 2.30 & meet the Griegs and play the piano ...', signed by Leonora Speyer. This was one of a number of social occasions where Grainger developed a fondness for the diminutive Norwegian composer.

The story of Grainger meeting Grieg is far from new, but what is of interest in this defining moment in his life is the role of Lady Leonora Speyer (1872–1956). For many years she had been one of Grainger's less well-recognised supporters who, through the fruits of her social standing, contributed to his rapid ascendancy in the musical world of Edwardian London.

The scrawled note suggests that Grainger was already acquainted with Leonora Speyer, and that this was a relatively informal occasion. The Museum also has an elegantly engraved invitation to Grainger to attend an 'at Home' at 46 Grosvenor Street 'To meet Dr & Madame Edvard Grieg', on 21 May.

Though a woman of quite extraordinary achievements, frustratingly, Leonora really only appears in the various narratives of her second husband, Baron Edgar Speyer. In 1902 Leonora von Stosch married Sir Edgar Speyer (1862–1932), financier, railway magnate, Privy Councillor and philanthropist. She was born in Washington DC and was the daughter of Ferdinand, Count von Stosch, of Mantze, Silesia in Prussia.<sup>1</sup> Leonora was a violinist who had studied in Brussels and Paris, debuting with the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra in 1890.<sup>2</sup> She appeared as a soloist with the New York Philharmonic and was performing at Proms Concerts at Queen's Hall when Sir Edgar met her.<sup>3</sup> Sir Edgar is reported to have injected approximately £4000 annually into the Proms concert series at the time.<sup>4</sup>



Leonora Speyer painted by John Singer Sargent, 1907, also a friend and supporter of Percy Grainger. Private collection.

On 21 May the reception for the Griegs was a grand affair with almost 200 guests. The musical programme commenced at 11 pm and included performances by both Edvard and Nina Grieg, Leonora Speyer and Percy Grainger. In his diary Grieg stopped short of praising the performance of his hostess, describing her as having 'plenty of talent and spirit, but, too superficial'.<sup>5</sup> She played Grieg's Sonata in G major with Grieg accompanying her.<sup>6</sup> Grainger fared better with Grieg declaring that he played two of the Slåtter (Norwegian peasant dances) in brilliant style.

Grieg and Grainger's relationship grew. They planned to tour Grieg's Piano Concerto with the composer conducting and Grainger at the piano. This plan never came to fruition as Grieg's chronic ill-health led to his premature death the following year. Grainger did play Grieg's concerto throughout the rest of his performing career.

But what do we know of Grainger and Speyer's continued relationship? Very little,

but what does exist is firm evidence of their ongoing association. Fifteen years later Leonora sent Grainger a book of her poetry titled *A Canopic Jar*. It was inscribed on the fly leaf to Grainger '... in friendship'. She also sent a copy to Grainger's friend, the English composer Cyril Scott, with an equally warm inscription.<sup>7</sup> She had, like Grainger, relocated to New York to escape World War I, though under very different circumstances. Edgar Speyer was effectively thrown out of Britain following accusations of spying for Germany. He was struck off the Privy Council and had his baronetcy rescinded.

In New York it appears Leonora's energies and possible patronage supported a different art form from her London days. In 1923 she edited *American Poets: An anthology of modern verse*, which included works by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Grainger's friend, Edgar Lee Masters, among others.

Leonora Speyer's career as a violinist did not progress as her literary career most certainly did. In 1927, she won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for a book of poems ironically titled *Fiddler's Farewell*.

Brian Allison  
Curator, Exhibitions and Public Programs

- 1 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, www.oxforddnb.com/.
- 2 <http://eleventhstack.wordpress.com/>, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh blog.
- 3 Leanne Langley, *Banker, Baronet, Saviour, 'Spy': Sir Edgar Speyer and the Queens Hall Proms*. A presentation given at the 'Proms and British Musical Life' conference held at the British Library, 2007, www.leannelangley.co.uk/documents/BankerBaronetSaviourSpy.pdf, p. 3.
- 4 Ibid, p. 4.
- 5 Lionel Carley, *Edvard Grieg in England*, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2006, p. 378.
- 6 Printed programme for the performances held at '46 Grosvenor Street, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1906', Grainger Museum collection.
- 7 Leonora Speyer, *A Canopic Jar*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1921. Both copies are held in the Grainger Museum collection.

## Casting a Light on John H. Grainger

It is tantalising to think that if the few brief years Percy Grainger spent with his father had been extended, his future in the arts may have been forged in a very different direction. He may have become one of Australia's leading visual artists with a latent talent as a musician. John Grainger wrote to his father on 14 January 1890, the year he was to leave his wife and son permanently:

At present he draws well. Immensely well in fact, and it is a frightful thing to keep him from being always at it, and his mother is most anxious he should be an artist. I am afraid if he becomes one that he will be dangerous, and his mother's ambition is to take him to

London or Paris where some Duchess [sic], old or young, may 'take him up'; that is, to introduce him to a lot of people who buy pictures.<sup>1</sup>

The Museum collection has hundreds of drawings and watercolours from this obviously gifted child. Whilst still in Melbourne, he filled drawing books with sketches of the world around him and also some very amusing caricatures. His visual literacy developed to the stage that whilst studying music in Frankfurt, he was executing watercolours that demonstrate a quite mature understanding of the medium. But of course music became the centre of his being. His mother must have had a change of heart or perhaps had hidden secret

ambitions for him, because with John Grainger gone, Percy was subjected to a tight and rigorous regime of piano practice. Yet his visual acuity never left him. He was to use drawing and painting as a means of communication regularly throughout his life, designing clothes, decorative bead jewellery, the covers of his musical editions and executing many watercolours of Free Music machines.

Percy's father was an architect and civil engineer who excelled at interpreting his vision of the three-dimensional world on to a two-dimensional surface. Like all architects of his era he was skilled with pencil, ink, watercolour and a brush.

*Life under a shadow: John Harry Grainger architect and civil engineer* is the title of the new temporary exhibition in the Grainger Museum. John Grainger's life and achievements were largely overshadowed by that of his son Percy.

The Grainger Museum has a CD by the quintet 'I Salonisti' called *And the Band Played On ...*, which claims to contain 'music played on the *Titanic*' and includes 'Molly on the Shore' by Percy Grainger. The centenary of the sinking of the *Titanic* in April this year pricked my curiosity about the possibility of a Grainger connection with the world's most (in)famous ship. If Grainger was played on the *Titanic*, why don't we know about it?

There were possibly more than 350 songs in the repertoire of the *Titanic*'s eight official musicians, comprising a piano quintet and string trio who played for the first and second-class passengers. The contents of the *White Star Line Songbook* were especially compiled and arranged for use aboard the *Titanic* and her sister ships. Passengers were issued with a pocket-sized booklet listing the works from which they could make requests by number. The musicians astonishingly seem to have memorised the numbers and notes of every song.

The music selected for the songbook offers a revealing insight into Edwardian taste, from Romantic favourites such as Tchaikovsky, Puccini, Rossini and Bizet, to Sullivan, Sousa and Elgar, to Scott Joplin and Irving Berlin. There were also hymns and the anthems of all nations, along with an up-to-date selection of works by contemporary composers who are largely forgotten today. Edvard Grieg's 'Peer Gynt' suite of 1907 was included, but Mozart and Beethoven were not.

What about Grainger? My brief inquiries have failed to prove or disprove 'I Salonisti's' claim, however there is every reason to believe that Grainger's 'Molly on the Shore' could have made it into the *White Star Line Songbook*. Composed in 1907, not long after he began collecting folk songs, the rousing piece captures Grainger's enthusiastic and unorthodox approach to folk song, weaving together two Cork reel tunes, 'Temple Hill' and 'Molly on the Shore'. The first version, for 'string four-some' (quartet) was dedicated to Grieg and published in 1911. It was subsequently re-issued numerous times and in myriad rearrangements in England, Europe and America throughout Grainger's life, and has remained one of Grainger's best-loved pieces ever since.

On 13 March 1912, less than a month before the *Titanic* set sail upon her maiden voyage, 'Molly' was played, together with Grainger's 'Mock Morris' in a quartet recital in Amsterdam. The composer was in attendance and deemed the piece a 'groat success'. By October of the same year, Rose was writing to Percy of the 'tremendous applause'

## Molly on the High Seas



Steamship, painted by Percy Grainger, 1895. Grainger Museum collection.

'Molly' had received in a London concert: 'How wonderful to have written a piece that appeals so to an audience', she went on (27 October 1912).

For all its popularity, it is difficult to know where Molly might have been put in the *White Star Line Songbook*, with its divisions of: Opera; Suites, Fantasies, etc.; Waltzes; Sacred Music; Entr'acts, Intermezzos, etc.; and Marches, Cakewalks, etc. Grainger's reinvented folk

songs may not have easily fitted the

categories of the songbook, but it is likely that folk songs would have mingled with vaudeville and light opera in the halls of the *Titanic*'s third class, where the passengers provided their own music.

While 'Molly' was pleasing crowds at least on the shore, if not the high seas, Percy was enjoying a very successful European tour, writing to his mother from Zurich on 12 March 1912: 'I don't think I've ever had a more stupendous success than here.' Amid his busy schedule, it seems that the *Titanic*, from the hype to the horror, might have passed Grainger by altogether.

This is a little bit surprising given that we know Grainger had more than a passing fondness for ships, not to mention a talent — inherited from his father — for painting them, as this delightful watercolour attests. Unlike restrictive train travel, sea voyages allowed Grainger to maintain something like his normal routine. He could run laps of the decks to expend his excess energy, and practise on the ship's piano between tour destinations. It was while practising on board a return journey from Australia in 1926 that Grainger met his future wife Ella Strom.

So we know Grainger practised at sea, but did he ever perform? His music might have been heard, but we are lucky that Grainger himself did not play aboard the *Titanic*. Yet only two years later, he took the crossing that had taken the *Titanic*, sailing from England to America. The journey had a sense of finality, if not fatality, about it for Grainger too, marking the end of his youthful years in London and the beginning of stardom and the rest of his life in New York.

For all these tantalising parallels and possibilities the only certifiable link I have so far been able to establish is between Grainger and not a ship but a record label called Titanic. 'Molly on the Shore' is among the numerous Grainger pieces released by this label.

I remain all at sea. Throw me a line if you can!

Stella Gray  
Gallery Attendant

Yet in this exhibition we are investigating a man who at the age of 25 designed one of Melbourne's built icons — Princes Bridge. This was an enormous achievement, a task that would have challenged a seasoned practitioner twice his age.

Born in England, John Grainger studied engineering with William Wilson (1822–1898) of Westminster, who specialised in railway engineering. Grainger also claimed he studied architecture with I.J. Eden & W.K. Green. No traces have ever been found of this company, but Grainger was certainly well grounded in the principles of architectural design and construction, fluently working across the various styles current at the end of the Victorian period, with a particular penchant for French Renaissance Revival architecture.

Grainger's relatively short career took him to every state in Australia as well as Colombo

in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, and Auckland in New Zealand. He was also employed as senior architect in the Western Australian Public Works Department, during which time he signed off on the designs of numerous public buildings, conceived a very elegant ballroom at Government House in Perth, and designed the displays for the Western Australian Pavilion at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle — to much acclaim.

Grainger had been surviving on £30 a month wired to him from New York by his son Percy, when he died a cripple in 1917. He is buried in an unmarked grave in a suburban Melbourne cemetery.

Brian Allison  
Curator, Exhibitions and Public Programs

1 Grainger Museum collection.



Townsend Duryea Junior (1854–1925), Adelaide, John Grainger, 1896, silver gelatin print. Grainger Museum collection.