

A Musical Pioneer: From Sketch to Sound

A composer, inventor, and tireless experimental pioneer, Percy Grainger broke through the limitations of traditional Western musical notation. Dissatisfied with fixed pitches and rigid rhythms, he envisioned sound as a continuous, flowing movement: melodies freed from the constraints of notes, meandering and undulating within the tonal space. He called this concept *Free Music*.

Our exhibition traces the evolution from conception to instrumentation. The framed musical score, *First Actual Free Music*, showcases Grainger's rejection of traditional musical notation. Our projection animation, on both walls of the gallery, creatively explores this idea: the flowing lines of musical score are conceived from the undulations of mountains and lapping waves, and existing instruments are no longer able to play them, requiring experiments to invent new instruments. This is a process of repeated testing, modification, and adjustment. The framed drawing *Discs With Flanged Towers for Controlling Pitch and Tone-Strength*, shifts the question from how to create sound to how to control it. It vividly depicts some of the found materials utilised by Grainger, showcasing Grainger's reflections on pitch and timbre intensity in experimental instruments.

These works collectively tell a story about innovation as a process: incremental, concrete, and never fully completed.

Curated by Xiangyi Chen, Zhiyang Zhao, Junzhe Yang, Yutong Li, Huixuan Lyu

Percy Grainger

Untitled (Discs with flanged towers for controlling pitch and tone-strength)

April 1952

watercolour and ink on paper

04.0188

This drawing studies disc components from Grainger's experimental instruments for controlling pitch and tone-strength. Rather than showing a complete machine, it presents individual parts in different colours and from different viewpoints. Grainger's accompanying notes identify the blue-and-white discs as tone-strength controls and distinguish them from pitch-control discs shown in varied colour combinations. The sheet records his effort to work out sound control through separate mechanical elements rather than through notation alone. It shows Grainger developing Free Music through practical design as much as through composition.

Percy Grainger

Score, First Actual Free Music

1935

graphite on paper

SL1 MG16

This manuscript records an early stage in Grainger's Free Music experiments. Although the music is still written in a traditional staff format, we can see how Grainger has modified the pitch, rhythm and melody repeatedly. These changes show Grainger testing how far musical movement could depart from fixed intervals and regular patterns while still remaining within conventional notation. Multiple layers of annotation and correction remain visible across the page, making the process of revision part of the score itself. Rather than presenting a stable version for performance, the manuscript records a process of adjustment and rethinking. Free Music had not yet left the five-line staff, but it was already beginning to push against its limits.

Xiangyi Chen, Zhiyang Zhao, Junzhe Yang, Yutong Li and Huixuan Lyu

China, Australia

The Birth of “Free Music” video (2026)

2026

digital projection, created utilising the AI tool Dreaming AI

Our video presents a creative illustration of the key concept of Percy Grainger’s Free Music, that was born from observing the curves of the undulating mountains through the train window during his travels. Grainger emphasized that the pitch and tone of music should be continuously changing and the rhythm should be flowing, but the existing Western music’s diatonic scale lacks this characteristic. With the aim of breaking the current situation where traditional Western music is bound by fixed scales and authoritarian rhythms, he uses curves to symbolize pitch and tone to create musical scores, allowing the notes to break free from the constraints of the staff and be released from the framework. Our animation integrates one of Grainger’s Free Music scores, *Kangaroo Pouch Machine Score Part 2* (SL1MG16/1:6), and two photographs, *Percy Grainger and Ella Grainger Working on a Free Music Tone-Tool Experiment, 1951* (99.5700.5), and *Percy Grainger Kneeling on his Kitchen Floor Working on a Free Music Tone-Tool Experiment, 1951* (99.5700.6).