Percy Grainger’s aleatoric adventures: 
The Rarotongan part-songs
Paul Jackson
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This article draws together a range of source material relating to the recording and notation of the Rarotongan part-songs encountered by Percy Grainger during his 1909 concert tour of Australasia, and presents his transcriptions and notes for the first time within a critical framework. The various extant recordings, initially made in 1907 during the New Zealand International Exhibition by Alfred J. Knocks and later copied by Grainger, together with Grainger’s attempts at transcription, are evaluated in both the context of his activities as a collector of folk music and within the framework of his developing ideas of the notion of democracy in music. Grainger cited the music of Rarotonga as ‘a treat no less than the best Wagner’¹ and he maintained its importance throughout his life. Whilst his transcriptions of the songs, and his planned settings of the music, were never completed, echoes of the Rarotongan music can be found in much of Grainger’s experimental output. In particular, he was to mine this material for the production of Random round, the genesis and development of which will be examined in part two of this article (to be published in number 3 of Grainger Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal).

The Rarotongan songs

In record sweet of ancient song,
That Rarotongan’s brought a long:—
Percy, my friend, thy voice I hear
With music, giving tuneful cheer.²

First encounters

Percy Grainger first encountered the native music of Rarotonga, the largest of the modern-day Cook Islands, during a concert tour of Australasia he had undertaken with the singer Ada Crossley in the early months of 1909.³ Here, Grainger made the acquaintance of Alfred J. Knocks (1851–1925), a licensed interpreter and native agent of Otaki, New Zealand,⁴ who ‘came into contact with the native race, their customs and usages, and always made it a point to learn anything that was of interest from them’.⁵ On 20 January 1909, in the Jubilee Hotel, Otaki, Knocks played Grainger examples of Rarotongan part-singing that he had recorded during the time of the New Zealand International Exhibition held in Christchurch between 1 November 1906 and
15 April 1907. The Rarotongans were part of a larger group of visiting Māori and South Sea Islanders, all of whom were installed in the Arai-te-uru Pa, a reconstruction of pre-Europeanised Māori village life. The pa was intended to promote a sense of kinship between the races represented therein, and to educate modern-day New Zealanders about Māori culture, a culture that, according to the official record of the exhibition, ‘had attained a high degree of skill in many handicrafts, and in decorative art certainly had evolved some of the most beautiful designs which even the cultured pakeha [White New Zealanders] cannot but regard with admiration’. The record confirms the enthusiastic reception the Rarotongan singers received, where, ‘chanting their ear-haunting tuneful himenes […] one never tired of listening to the delightful part-singing harmonies of these South Sea people, so different from the monotonous chant of the Maori’. The meeting between the New Zealand Māori and the South Sea Islanders was clearly very friendly and was accompanied by songs of welcome and songs of thanks, the Māori graciously attempting to imitate the Islanders’ more complex music.

Grainger had, in fact, made fairly extensive pre-tour plans to enable him to investigate examples of the indigenous music of Australia, New Zealand and the South Sea Islands; his encounter with Knocks, although fortuitous, was not entirely accidental. Indeed, his work as an ethnomusicologist and recorder of folk musics at this crucial time, when much indigenous art was thought to be on the verge of extinction, was in large part driven by his interest in the kind of frontier civilisation the Māori and Rarotongans represented for him. Grainger’s view of such societies, which he broadly incorporated within a ‘Mongolian-Nordic musical tradition’ (in contrast to the ‘Mohammedan musical tradition’ that was characteristic of much Mediterranean music), would enable him to include the music of the South Sea Islanders in his definition of Nordic music.

Grainger described his initial impression on hearing the music of the Rarotongan singers in a letter he sent to his mother dated 21 January 1909 following a visit to Knocks’ home. In typically urgent language he related that the Rarotongans:

go fast with swinging hammering pattering rhythms, & the whole effect of the group of singers is like a band of banjos, spluttering, wiring in, brazen tongues. […] The whole music is the outpouring of everglad ungloamable souls, merriness incarnate, & trickling good humor & devilish energy in overflow […] If such music isn’t the voicing of ‘the joy of life’, where else shall I look for it? If the best pulses of humanness do not flow in these cannibals we’d be better lacking them. […] I’ve taken the whole concern down near
enough to be able to perform it on chorus in London.\textsuperscript{11} Wait till you hear these fiercesouled phrases frolic into song.\textsuperscript{12}

Ten days later, he wrote a more detailed account of his meeting with Knocks to his friend, the composer Roger Quilter:

I met a dear old man […] born here, I should say, brought up in the country when Maoris swarmed & whites were scarce; \(\frac{1}{2}\) (at least) native in feeling, married to a Maori, very chummily pally with his handsome but erratic \(\frac{1}{2}\) breed sons, quite a card he is. Kind and easygoing to animals; they browse in his unkempt gardens, doesn’t kill flies if he can help it & takes phonograph records of every bit of native music that he can. Two years ago Rarotongan natives were brought over to Christchurch (NZ) Exhibition. They sang gloriously. This old man phonographed them. Nobody else did seemingly. His name is Knocks […] I came to hear his Maori records, but he made me hear the Rarotongan records & I straightaway noted them down in his cobwebby, dirty, manuscriptbelittered, brokenwindowed, queersmelling house from afternoon early to 5 the next morn. The old man stayed up to 2 o’clock with me, & he and \(\frac{1}{2}\) breeds & I had great fun manning the phonograph & chatting and getting on well together & feeding on tea & bread & butter. That old chap is a dear trustful tolerant (though a bit bitter against the whites) kindlisouled born artist nature; you don’t find that sort in Australia.

These Rarotongan things are the strongest impressions I’ve met since the Faerø dance tunes. These are dance music also. \textit{But polyphonic}. They have \textit{real harmony}, & of course tons of rhythmic delights. Sometimes their spirit is very sweet, rocking & kittenish, & at times fierce & rending like tiger claws, but always it is great larks […] Red flowers in shining blueblack hair, the easy graceful gait of Sea air bedewed coastdwellers, the bold free eyes of islanders, the dance instincts of folk shortly ago fighters & maneaters; there is lots of fun ahead. I am taking some phonograph records of Maori songs myself. \textit{Not} sung in harmony ever as far as I can make out; but queer interesting intervals they use, & they sing & recite like heroes; such wantonness, laziness, energy, unselfbeknownst attack, & strong coaxing throbbing voices.\textsuperscript{13}

On his return to New Zealand in 1924, when Grainger again met Knocks, he wrote of his hopes of encountering further examples of native music,
noting in his ‘round letter’ of May–June that ‘I was told that many of the people who were at the Christchurch Exhibition in New Zealand around 1906 (& were then phonographed by my old friend Knocks) are still alive, so I live in hopes of later trips to Rarotonga’. But this was not to be, and Grainger’s transcriptive work on Rarotongan music remained incomplete.

Figure 1: Group of the Rarotonga Natives, headed by Makea Daniela, from James Cowan, Official record of the New Zealand International Exhibition of Arts and Industries, held at Christchurch 1906–7. A descriptive and historical account, Wellington: Government Printer, 1910, p. 354

Makea Daniela (chief [far right?]); [from left?): Tapuoe and Tira (women), Arona te Ariki (Makea’s brother), Mama (a boy), and Manaia, Aiteina, Iotia, Puka and Tutakiau, Te Ariki, Tauei and Tairo (men)

Grainger, democracy and the importance of Rarotongan music
For Grainger, Rarotongan part-songs encapsulated many of his developing notions of music as an expression of democracy, ideas that were to be expressed with growing coherence through his articles ‘The impress of
personality in unwritten music’\(^\text{16}\) and ‘Democracy in music’.\(^\text{17}\) His ‘Description of Rarotongan part-singing’ from ‘The impress of personality in unwritten music’ provides a detailed account of the music (and also provides a blueprint for what was to become Random round), and is worth reproducing in full:

These choral songs, which were sung as thank-offerings by the Rarotongans in return for gifts they received from the Maoris of Otaki, are more full of the joy of life than any other music (art or native) it has yet been my good fortune to hear, though they also abound in touching and wistful elements. The polyphony displayed by the four to eight singers was prodigious, and as the whole thing went prestissimo (Polynesian languages lend themselves very readily to speed) it reminded me of nothing so much as of a seething, squirming musical ant-hill, bursting into furious song for sheer joy and high spirits. No doubt the habit of harmony here displayed had been caught long ago from missionary hymns (Rarotonga was ‘converted’ before many of the other islands of the South Seas), yet the use made by these brilliant musicians of their foreign accomplishment was completely native in its application and was throughout governed by the individualistic dictates of Unwritten Music. Their procedure followed habits rather than laws.

Each part-song consisted of a succession of small sections, each lasting some fifteen to twenty seconds, and separated one from the other by a brief moment of silence.

A short solo began each section, consisting of a curving, descending phrase, starting off on the fourth, fifth or sixth of the diatonic major scale and ending on the tonic below. As soon as the first singer reached the keynote the other voices would chime in, one after the other or in a bunch, according to the free choice of each individual concerned, while the first singer kept up a stirring hammering and highly rhythmic patter (which in the phonograph closely resembles the twang of banjos or rattle of small drums, though actually no instruments at all were used) on the tonic until the end of the section.

These other voices also sang curving, descending diatonic phrases (never twice quite alike, but always bearing a sort of family likeness to those of the first singer), which were repeated by each singer several times before the end of the section, which was heralded by a growing lassitude in all the voices—often fading away in an indolent sort of ‘dying duck’ wail—whereas each new section was attacked in the most vigorous manner.
The various melodic lines as well as the whole character of the performance showed great variety during the course of a longish chain of such sections, while the harmonic and polyphonic happenings were kaleidoscopic in their everchanging aspects.

It will be seen that a great range of personal choice was left to all the members of this Rarotongan choir, in each of whom a highly complex, delicate and critical sense for ensemble was imperative. Each of these natives had to be a kind of improvising communal composer, and to a far greater degree simultaneously creative and executive than is the case with peasant songsters in Great Britain or Scandinavia, though a somewhat similar gift for complex improvised part-singing is displayed in the wonderful Russian choral folk music so admirably collected and noted by Madame Lineff.\(^\text{18}\)

For Grainger, the ‘highly complex, delicate and critical sense for ensemble’ of the ‘peasant songsters’ might also equally stand as an analogy for his idealised view of a fully democratised society, one in which its members co-exist in a spirit of individualised fellowship: ‘a chance for all to shine in a starry whole’.\(^\text{19}\) Similarly, polyphonic music—with its free-flowing and subtly interdependent melodic lines—becomes, for Grainger, an embodiment in sound of the act of democratic pursuit. In polyphonic music, melody, rather than harmony, remains the principal musical concern, whilst the associated non-architectural formal imperative—form-finding rather than form-building—‘allows melody to retain its selfhood’.\(^\text{20}\)

Grainger initially afforded the Rarotongans a ‘well-developed harmonic consciousness’ in the performance of their polyphonic music, suggesting that they regulated the movement of the songs’ individual parts by ‘courting certain discordant effects which they probably like & avoiding others, (which they probably dislike)’.\(^\text{21}\) However, Grainger seems to have revised this view by the time of the publication of ‘The impress of personality in unwritten music’ in 1915, when he acknowledges that, whilst Rarotongan polyphony has ‘a seductive complex harmonic appeal’, the music arises from the Rarotongans’ ‘exceptionally developed individualistic polyphonic instincts [which] are still free from the kind of harmonic consciousness which art-musicians have gradually built up through the centuries’.\(^\text{22}\) Grainger would have also been attracted to the irregularity of metre exhibited in the Rarotongan part-songs, where the rhythm of the words, which were of uppermost importance, conditioned the structural fabric of the music. Such an approach was similar to Grainger’s compositional experiments in irregular rhythm—itself a manifestation of a type of temporal democracy—as exhibited in works such as *Love verses from the*
Song of Solomon (1899), the uncompleted Train music (1900) and Hill song no. 1 (1901–02).

Unfortunately, only one of Grainger’s Rarotongan transcriptions contains a text (SL1 MG13/6-4:2, known as ‘Fierce I’), which Alfred Knocks had attempted to transcribe and translate. At a surface level, the individualised phonemic components characteristic of Polynesian languages, together with the concomitant tendency towards non-melismatic vocalisation, bears a similarity to the treatment of words exhibited in English folk songs, which favour the use of one note to one word (or syllable).\(^2\) Indeed, in his analysis of North Lincolnshire folk songs, Grainger had noted the use of ‘nonsense syllables’ frequently inserted within and around words in order to avoid melismata.

**The phonograph recordings**

The accurate identification of the various recordings of the Rarotongan part-songs, and of the numerous copies produced shortly after, is achieved only with some difficulty. The 1984 catalogue of the Grainger Museum’s Rarotongan cylinders\(^2\) lists multiple versions of what appear to be the same original five recordings by Knocks, although there appear to be several discrepancies in the naming of the cylinders. Table 1 reproduces those entries from the catalogue that are relevant to this paper:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box</th>
<th>Cylinder</th>
<th>Description or title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>‘Rarotonga 1 1st copy’ ‘Gentle antiphonal (title may be “Hoani Hakaraia te Whena”)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>‘Rarot. 1 2nd Copy’ [Description as for P1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P3</td>
<td>‘Rarotonga 2 (2(\text{c})) 1st copy’. ‘Similar to No. 1 probable text, first phrase: Noho aho ite whai nu matine’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P4</td>
<td>‘Rarot 2 2nd copy’ [Description as for P3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P5</td>
<td>‘Rarot 2 3rd copy’ [Description as for P3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P6</td>
<td>‘Rarot 3 1st copy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P7</td>
<td>‘“Ari aria” Rarot. 3 2nd copy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P8</td>
<td>‘Rarot fierce 1 1st copy’ ‘First Fierce part-song. First phrase of text: Tu ma pa ne e tau mai nei ke raro nei’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P9</td>
<td>‘Fierce 1 2nd copy’ [Description as for P8]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P10</td>
<td>‘fierce 1 3rd copy (broken)’ [Description as for P8]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box</td>
<td>Cylinder</td>
<td>Description or title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P11</td>
<td>‘fierce 2 1st copy’ ‘Similar to No. 4’, [i.e. to “fierce 1”]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P12</td>
<td>‘fierce 2 2nd copy’ [As for P11]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P13</td>
<td>‘3rd copy  Fierce 2 (changes pitch) not good’ [As for P11]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>P14</td>
<td>‘Rarot. fierce 2 4th copy (bad)’ ‘P14 (fragm) fierce 2, not good 4th copy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Working 3’ [“Ari ari a’”]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Working 2’. [Noho aho ite whai nu matine]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Working 5’ [“Fierce 2?”]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Rarot. 1 1st working copy’ [Gentle, antiphonal: “Hoami Hakaraia te Whena’’]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Working 4’ [“Fierce 1?!”] [Tu ma pa ne e tau mai nei ke raronei].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘A.J. Knocks’ Rarotongan record No. 1 orig’ – P.G. ‘duplicate of this given to Percy Grainer 21st-1-1909 Rarot. 1’ – A.J.K. ‘Rarotonga Record ‘mina mina Tohu mai kei o taua tuio [or tino?] [then last word illegible]’ – A.J.K. [Discrepancy in title – see PG note on P1/Box19]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘original Rarot 2. Rarotongan Record No. 2’ ‘A.J. Knocks’ Rarotongan Record No. 2 orig’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>3 [4?]</td>
<td>‘orig fierce 1 No 3 A.J. Knocks’ Rarotongan record No 3’ – P.G. ‘Rarotonga’ A.J.K. (Discrepancy – see PG note on P8/Box 19 &amp; P7/Box 19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>4 [5?]</td>
<td>‘No 4 orig A.J. Knocks’ Rarotongan Records fierce 2 BROKEN’. [Discrepancy – see PG note P11/Box19]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 1 Dansk Phonograph magazin copy black’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 2 Dansk Phonograph magazin. Black copy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 3 Black copy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 4 Black copy’ [Rarotonga “fierce 1” or “fierce 2”?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 5 Dansk Fonograf magazin. Black copy’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The reproduction quality of many of the cylinders is so poor that the melodic lines are often indistinct. Furthermore, the songs seem to be, at least to western ears, variations on the same five- or six-note patterns, with frequent melodic and motivic similarity apparent, making accurate identification problematic.

Knocks’ recordings were presumably made using an Edison phonograph and all subsequent copies organised by Grainger were taken from Knocks’ original cylinders. The correct playback speed for these cylinders is, however, a matter of some uncertainty. Edison cylinders operated at speeds ranging from 100 r.p.m. for the earlier models, up to 160 r.p.m. for the Edison Gold Moulded Record cylinders, introduced in 1902, which subsequently became the standard speed. Grainger owned an Edison Standard Phonograph from 1908, which was intended to operate at a speed of 160 r.p.m., various recorded pitch-pipe calibrations confirming this to be the correct setting for his own cylinder recordings. However, the table of keys and metronome markings found at the beginning of Grainger’s transcription of Record 1 (SL MG13/6:5-2) implies uncertainty on his part about the correct speed setting for the Knocks recordings, which may have been made on an older machine reproducing at a slower rate. When Knocks’ cylinders are played back at 160 r.p.m. the pitch centres correspond to Grainger’s keys of ‘between E-flat and E-natural’ and the associated metronome mark of minim=126 (Figure 2). However, the songs appear to be unnaturally fast and high-pitched at this speed and a more appropriate playback speed of between 125 and 132 r.p.m. matches Grainger’s metronome indications of ♩=196 and ♩=208, giving B-flat or C as approximate key centres. Grainger’s notated key centre of G, which is adopted for all of the transcriptions apart from SL1 MG13/6-4:4 (B-flat) and SL1 MG13/6-5:3 (C) follows in the tradition set by the Finnish ethnologist, Ilmari Krohn, and later modified by Grainger’s contemporary, Béla Bartók, to standardise the tonal centres of transcriptions. Grainger’s own transcriptions of English folk songs, as published in the Journal of the Folk-Song Society in 1908, favour G as the notational ‘key’ centre (although these transcriptions, unlike the Rarotongan transcriptions, also contain confirmation of the original key centres as sung by the folk singers).
Figure 2: Grainger’s metronome marks for Record 1 (SL MG13/6:5-2, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne)

**Grainger’s Rarotongan transcriptions**

By the time Grainger encountered the recordings of Rarotongan music in 1909 he had developed a sophisticated approach to the task of transcribing folk music. He had an innate sensitivity towards, and appreciation of, the complexities of orally transmitted music, an art that he felt:

> the general educated public [...] shows little or no appreciation of [...] in its unembellished original state, when, indeed, it generally is far too complex (as regards rhythm, dynamics, and scales) to appeal to listeners whose ears have not been subjected to the ultra-refining influence of close association with the subtle developments of our latest Western art-music.²⁹

Grainger’s experiences between the years of 1905 and 1909 with the English folk singers of Lincolnshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Kent prompted his attempts to preserve the nuances of performance in notation, a notation that sought to recognise the concept of variation inherent in folk music practice. His account of the Lincolnshire singer who, when confronted with a recording of one of his songs performed by another folk singer, retorted ‘I don’t know about it’s being fine or not; I only know it’s wrong’,³⁰ succinctly encapsulates the notion of folk songs as multiple variations of a non-existent original.³¹

Grainger’s efforts at notating folk music were greatly helped by the ability of the phonograph to replay music at a speed slower than the original, thereby enabling fine details to be revealed that would otherwise elude even the most sensitive ear. But even with the aid of reduced-speed playback, Grainger’s notes to his transcription of Rarotonga I (SL1 MG13 6/4:5) attest to the complexity of the task, and he records that it is ‘well nigh impossible from
merely hearing the phonograph record only to determine which notes […] were allocated to which particular singer of the 4’, adding, perhaps a little modestly given the uncommon acuteness of his transcriptive ear, that ‘it is pretty easy to distinguish the lead singer (top singer) from the rest’. Of course, the transcriptions do not represent the music in a meaningful way and, for all of Grainger’s care in the matter, must be viewed in a similar light to his seminal transcriptions of English folk songs: as aids in the apprehension of otherwise lost examples of orally transmitted music. It must also be remembered that Grainger only ever heard the Rarotongan part-songs through Knocks’ recordings (although he did hear live examples of Māori music in 1909, which he subsequently recorded), and his transcriptions are therefore already at a further state of remove from the original performances. It is useful therefore to keep in mind the caveat that ‘even an exceptionally accurate score, such as Percy Grainger’s […] does not convey the reality of performance to someone who is not acquainted with the sounds of the music’. Grainger made several attempts to transcribe the Rarotongan recordings and Kay Dreyfus’ catalogue, excerpts from which are reproduced in Table 2, provides a summary of the available material held within the Grainger Museum:

**Table 2: The Rarotongan transcriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score cat. no.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-3:1</td>
<td>Double leaf of AL manuscript music No 18, 24-stave. Sides 1 &amp; 2 are blank. Sides 3 &amp; 4 contain a pencil sketch labelled “Rarotonga I/Otaki N.Z. whole nighthro 20-21.1.09”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-3:2</td>
<td>Pencil sketch, “Rarot. I”, sides of a single leaf (torn) dated 18.10.09. The first side has been crossed out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-4:2</td>
<td>Text for “Fierce 1”. One side of notepaper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-4:3</td>
<td>Notes. 1 side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-4:4</td>
<td>Double leaf of sketches for “Rarotonga 1” (Bb major - 2 sides) and 2 (2 sides).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Score cat. no. | Description
---|---
SL1 MG13/6-4:5 | Double leaf AL. Manuscript music No 18, *Rarotongan music* Collected by ---/noted by Percy Grainger, Otaki, N.Z. 20-21.1.09”. Sides 1 & 2 staves of side 2 are a noting of Rarotonga I, 75 bars marked “end”. Then follow 3 sides of notes with a loose ½ sheet insert, (6) also of notes. Notepaper has been pasted over music staves.
SL1 MG13/6-5:1 | “Fierce Rarotonga I (Tu ma pa ne e tau mai nei)”. Collected and phonographed 12.1.07 by A.J. Knocks in Otaki, N.Z.; noted by P.G. 20-21.2.09, Otaki, N.Z. Two double leaves of 12-stave ms. Paper stitched together by P.G. and containing 4½ sides of his transcription. Ink and pencil. For 4 men’s voices.
SL1 MG13/6-5:2 | “Rarotonga II”. Record I. Two double leaves of 10-stave ms. Paper, AL No. 4, stitched together by P.G. and containing 3 sides of his transcription of section 1.
SL1 MG13/6-5:4 | “Rarotonga 2”. Three sides of a double leaf of 12-stave ms paper. Ink, some pencil, no date.

The task of matching the recordings to Grainger’s transcriptions, all of which are incomplete to some degree, and all but one of which (SL1 MG13/6-5:1) lack a text, is made even more difficult by the rather interchangeable names appended to the scores. Thus, ‘A.J. Knocks’ Rarotongan record No. 1 orig’, identified as box 21, cylinder no. 1 in the Grainger Museum catalogue, seems to appear in Grainger’s hand as sketch SL MG13/6-5:2, headed ‘Rarotonga II/Record 1’. For the purposes of this article, a summary of the most completed transcriptions, matched against the box 22 copy recordings, is given in Table 3:

**Table 3: Correspondences between the recordings and the transcriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 22 description</th>
<th>Score heading(s)</th>
<th>Score cat. no.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 1</td>
<td>Rarotongan Music – Rarotonga II Record 1.</td>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-5:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 2</td>
<td>Rarotongan Music Rarotonga I.</td>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-4:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 3</td>
<td>Fierce Rarotonga I. Rarotn 3 – (Fierce I) – Piece III</td>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-5:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 22 description</td>
<td>Score heading(s)</td>
<td>Score cat. no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
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<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 4

[The ‘Working Copy 4’ identifies this as Fierce I. However, the version performed is not quite the same as Rarotonga 3]

Rarotonga (Knocks) No. 5

- ?

[The ‘Working Copy 4’ identifies this as Fierce I. However, the version performed is not quite the same as Rarotonga 3]

Fierce I.

SL1 MG13/6-4:2

Text only]

SL1 MG13/6-5:3

Rarotonga I (1947)

[This does not obviously match any of the recordings, and seems to be a simplified version of the basic outline of the songs. It is possible that these pages, together with the two double-sided, loose-leaf pages marked ‘Draft Orchestrations’ (SL1 MG13/6-5:5 and 6-5:6) represent Grainger’s sketches for an unrealised work for orchestra and voices based on the Rarotongan material]

Rarotonga 2.

SL1 MG13/6-5:4

[This appears to be a much sketchier version of SL1 MG13/6-5:2, possibly an earlier draft]

Draft Orchestrations

SL1 MG13/6-5:5

SL1 MG13/6-5:6

[These two double-sided manuscript sheets include material related to Rarotonga I (1947), together with unidentified short-score harmonium and orchestral sketches. Various sections of the ‘Rarotongan’ material are marked with letter names in red (also present in Rarotonga I (1947)). The relationship between the various sketches is not clear, however.]
Editorial notes

In editing the various extant transcriptions of the Rarotongan part-songs, I have sought to preserve Grainger’s original layout and notation. Whilst this approach does not necessarily provide for the simplest performing edition, it continues in the tradition, established by Grainger, of presenting the material in as accurate a form as possible, free from simplification and the tendency for editorial amendment. Because much of Grainger’s material is in draft form, and seems to incorporate multiple attempts at transcription, only the three most complete versions, identified as Rarotonga I, Rarotonga II and Fierce Rarotonga I, have been edited. These correspond to Knocks’ recordings 2, 1 and 3 as given in Table 4:

Table 4: Correspondences between transcription titles, Grainger Museum catalogue numbers and Knocks’ cylinder descriptions in edited transcriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcription title</th>
<th>Museum catalogue no.</th>
<th>Cylinder description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rarotongan Music / Rarotonga I</td>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-4:5</td>
<td>Rarotonga No. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarotongan Music – Rarotonga II / Record 1</td>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-5:2</td>
<td>Rarotonga No. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fierce Rarotonga I / Rarotn 3 – (Fierce I) – Piece III</td>
<td>SL1 MG13/6-5:1</td>
<td>Rarotonga No. 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grainger’s transcriptions were made on large-format printed manuscript paper in ink and are, for the most part, reasonably clear to read. The transcriptions of Rarotonga I and Fierce Rarotonga I both contain several pencil additions (some very faint and difficult to read), which Grainger has used to notate passages where he was less certain, whilst the transcription of Rarotonga II adopts the same practice, but includes both pencil and red ink additions. All of these additions are represented in small notes in the current edition. Throughout, Grainger’s inserted time signatures change where he chooses to use bars of different length, but he omits rests for whole bars and, on many occasions, for parts of bars. This practice has been retained in editing the transcriptions, the vertical alignment of the various parts making his intentions clear enough. Grainger made extensive accompanying notes to his transcription of Rarotonga I (SL1 MG13 6/4:5), and these are presented, as far as possible, in their original layout, with his characteristic idiosyncratic spelling. The numerous crossed-out passages are, however, omitted.
notes provide a fascinating insight into Grainger’s practices as a transcriber of folk music, which go beyond ‘mere’ notational conversion, but which also offer insightful speculation into the performance aesthetic of the singers.

**Transcription and translation of the text**

*Fierce Rarotonga I* (SL1 MG13/6-5:1) is the only transcription that contains a sustained attempt to include the words sung by the Rarotongans. Some of the words are included directly in Grainger’s transcription, in both ink and pencil, although the additions are rather fragmentary and do not occur in all parts. Additionally, there is a one-page transcription in ink on notepaper from the Jubilee Hotel, Otaki (SL1 MG13/6-4:2), presumably made at the time of Knocks’ first meeting with Grainger in January 1909. Finally, on 8 March 1909, Knocks sent Grainger a two-page letter containing his attempt at a translation (Figure 3) in which he pointed out the inherent difficulty of rendering the highly syllabic Polynesian language into English:

> I tell you what I find in connection with my attempt at translation of words of Rarotongan song into English, that to do anything like justice to the composition it takes a lot of consideration, and it is a matter that can not possibly be hurried, however to give you an idea, I am sending herewith a rough copy, which will show what the composer meant, but it is indeed rough as it now stands, the great difficulty is, one is tied to so many syllables—or notes—no more no less, and to make sense of it, or rather to translate without destroying the sense of it, is difficult, you might easily improve on what I have done, that is if you can find the time.36 All three sources contain minor orthographical variations, with some sections appearing in one source but not in another. As some of Grainger’s text in the transcription is difficult to decipher, a comparative reading across the versions confounds as much as it clarifies. Neither Grainger nor Knocks makes use of hyphens to indicate where phonemic components belong together as parts of a single word, although Grainger does use some hyphens (inconsistently) in the word underlay in the transcription. As the Rarotongan language comprises a wide variation of a small number of phonemic components, it is difficult to assess where words belong together or exist as separate units. Knocks’ rather poetic translation, whilst attempting to be true to the spirit of the verse, is of limited use in clarifying the detail of the sung text, which is, at least in the surviving recordings, extremely difficult to hear clearly.
Grainger Studies, number 2, 2012

1st Section
Solo Ta ma pa ma e tau mai nei ki ra ro nei.
Ye  friends and  pa - rents ga - ther’d near, that greet us here.

Chorus Au e ma te mai nei i
Love is great, your gifts we see

Solo Ta ma pa ma i ra ro ra i ra ro ra
Ye  friends and  pa - rents

Chorus Ra ngi Ra ngi ra, au e {But me, just me, fan cy me} repeat

Solo Au e te tu ta a te ta ne
Oh see the youth shy - ly ma - king love (2nd)

2nd Section
Solo Kia wha kaa ro ko te tu ku nga a ki ri
Re mem ber the gifts of dear-est friends, kith and kin

Chorus E pa ko te tu ku e pa ko te tu ku tu ku
Pa rent ma king the gift, pa rent ma king the gifts aye gifts

Solo Kia wha kaa ro ko te tu ku nga a ki ri
Re mem ber the gifts of dear-est friends, kith and kin

Chorus Te mu - tu - nga ko te mu tu nga o tai ra
Sweet est end - ing Oh hap - py end ing of this day.

3rd Section
Solo Kia nui te ma ra ma kia o ti nga ra
When all is made clear and our days then come to end

Chorus Kia mau mau Kia mau te ma ra ma
Ta - ken a-way when know ledge comes to stay

4th Section
Solo i ori o ori ta whi ri i te a wa a kau ta
Whi ri a lab y soothing with mu sic sing well come a gain and yet

Chorus Kia mau mau e Hei pe re ra ro
Ta - ken a - way as a sou ve nir (repeatedly)

5th Section
Solo O ra ro mai au e o ta ua pai
In our an cient home gra cious love from each

Chorus Hei pu ra pu ra ra pa pai
The best of seed free from all weed

P.S. Section 5 with chorus really means that the Rarotongans of Cook Islands and Maoris of Otaki New Zealand love each other as a kindred race etc

Figure 3: A.J. Knocks, Translation of the text for Fierce Rarotonga, from his letter to Percy Grainger, 8 March 1909, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne
Knocks had previously attempted his own transcription of part of one of the ‘fierce’ Rarotongan songs, with words and a translation, which he sent to Grainger on 23 January 1909 (Example 1). However, the melodic line is not obviously related to Grainger’s transcriptions (Knocks was clearly not as skilled as Grainger in this respect) and the words do not match those given in Knocks’ own versions of the text for Fierce Rarotonga.

Example 1: A.J. Knocks, Transcription of part of a Rarotongan song, from his letter to Percy Grainger, 23 January 1909, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne

Afterword
Whilst Grainger’s transcriptions of the Rarotongan part-songs remained unfinished, the impression these songs made on him was sufficiently strong to ensure that he regularly cited their influence on his compositional outlook throughout his life. As transcriptions made from second-hand recordings, they join the unfinished sketches of indigenous music from Australia, Somalia, Yemen and Africa that Grainger encountered at the height of his folk music collecting activities in the early years of the 20th century. Many of Grainger’s early experimental pieces exhibit characteristics similar to the many-voicedness and kaleidoscopic ‘harmonic and polyphonic happenings’ found in the Rarotongan music, whilst echoes of Polynesian languages can be found in, among others, Scotch strathspay and reel (1901–11) and The Lonely desert man sees the tents of the happy tribes (1911–49), the latter’s ‘Tam pam pa ra di da’ being an amalgamation of the more extreme phonetic modification heard in many English folk tunes and the language of the ‘fierce’ Rarotongan songs. Grainger more successfully mined ethnographic recordings in the 1930s when he encountered examples of music from India (Babariley V. Palaniyandi), Bali (Gamelan Anklung: Berong Pengetjèl), Java (Sekar Gadung), and Madagascar (Mampabory Ny Masoandro Seranin-Javona), from the gramophone record set,
Musik des Orients. Grainger finally returned to his Rarotongan sketches in 1947 (see Table 3), and the two-page transcription of Rarotonga I from that period (SL1 MG13/6-5:3), together with the orchestral drafts (SL1 MG13/6-5:5 & 6), suggest that he had planned further work.

However, it is to Random round, a piece the composer described as ‘[not] “significant,” but possibly amusing’, 39 that we must look to find the most complete and sustained influence of Grainger’s Rarotongan experience. One of his most far-sighted musical explorations, an experiment in ‘Concerted Partial Improvisation’, 40 Random round occupied Grainger at several points throughout his compositional life. The genesis of this fascinating piece and its relationship to the Rarotongan part-songs forms the next section of this article, ‘Percy Grainger’s aleatoric adventures: Towards Random round’, to be published in no. 3 of Grainger Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal.

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This article has been independently peer-reviewed. It was published on 10 August 2012.

NOTES

4 For further biographical information, see Historical Journal, vol. 5, Otaki Historical Society, 1982, pp. 30–32.
5 A.J. Knocks, Letter to Percy Grainger, 1 June 1909, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.
6 The precise circumstances of Knocks’ recordings are not known. However, one of the recordings (‘Rarot 2’) contains Knocks’ confirmation of the place and date of
recording (Otaki, 12 January 1907), which confirms that the singers travelled to Otaki during the period of the International Exhibition (see also note 37). After hearing Knocks’ recordings for the first time, Grainger sent a telegram to Rose Grainger during the afternoon of 20 January 1909 with the simple message: ‘NEVER HEARD THE LIKE TREAT EQUAL TO WAGNER I AM GODLY LUCKY LOVE PERCY’ (The farthest north of humanness, p. 263).


8 Cowan, Official record of the New Zealand International Exhibition, p. 353.


11 Knocks states that he ‘would be delighted to get a copy, or two, of the Rarotongan music that you & your friend are working at’ (A.J. Knocks, Letter to Percy Grainger, 8 February 1910, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne). However, it appears that no such work, or performance, materialised.


15 The names of the Rarotongan singers given in the official record do not obviously correspond with those annotated by Grainger in his transcription of Rarotonga II [SL1 MG13 6/5:2], which appear in faint pencil at the head of the manuscript paper. The names are not clearly audible on the extant recordings, so it is possible that the differences arise from Grainger’s attempts at a phonetic realisation, and the orthographic transliteration of the heard sounds used in the official record.

Percy Grainger, ‘Democracy in music’ (1931), in *Grainger on music*, pp. 217–22. He concludes this text by stating that ‘For me democratic music is only a halfway house on the road to “free music”’, defining the latter in 1952 as: ‘1) Melody freed from the tyranny of harmony; 2) Harmony freed from the narrow conceptions of concordance; 3) Intervallic freedom unrestrained by the hampering confines of scale & key; 4) Rhythm freed from the constant in-step-ness-with-Jim (coincidence between the rhythms of the various voices); 5) Musical form freed from unsuitable “architectural” conceptions’. (Percy Grainger, Unpublished address to American Guild of Organists, 29 December 1952, cited in *Grainger on music*, p. 376, note 10).

Grainger, ‘The impress of personality in unwritten music’.


The cataloguing of the Grainger cylinders was undertaken by Helen Reeves, and is reproduced in the *International Association of Sound Archives, Australian Branch Newsletter*, no. 17, July 1984.

The poor quality has doubtlessly been exacerbated by the deterioration of the original cylinders and Grainger’s early copies, now over 100 years old. Knocks thanks Grainger for arranging copies to be made, noting that ‘the records are really a splendid reproduction’ and telling Grainger ‘not [to] trouble about sending back the original Rarotongan records, as I have now got from you such superior duplicates’ (A.J. Knocks, Letter to Percy Grainger, 8 February 1910, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne).

Knocks mentions a mix-up in the transference of the recordings from Knocks to Grainger, and suggests there were six original Rarotongan records (A.J. Knocks, Letter to Percy Grainger, 23 January 1909, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne). Grainger later arranged for the cylinders to be copied to acetate discs by the Library of Congress.

See, for example, the transcriptions ‘Six dukes went a-fishin’’ (two versions), ‘Three dukes went a-fishin’’, ‘The “rainbow”’, ‘The north-country maid’ and ‘Rufford Park poachers’, *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, no. 12, vol. 3, no. 3, May 1908.


In the essay entitled ‘The impress of personality in traditional singing’ Grainger noted that ‘Behind all this variegated mass of personal characteristics the collector, and the student of accurately noted variants, may feel the throb of the communal pulse, [my italics] but each single manifestation of it is none the less highly individualistic and circumscribed by the temperamental limitations of each singer’. (*Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, no. 12, vol. 3, no. 3, May 1908, p. 163).

Percy Grainger, Transcription of Rarotonga I, SL1 MG13/6-4:5, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

Grainger eventually visited Rarotonga in 1924, hoping to hear live examples of the music he had encountered through Knocks’ recordings. He met Knocks again on the occasion but only experienced contemporary dance music: ‘In the evening an Australian man & I went to a dance in which the natives danced with themselves & with the sailors & stewards from our boat. No native music but quite jolly playing of accordians [sic], guitars & ukuleles by natives, very musical & rhythmic.’ (Percy Grainger, ‘Round letter’, May–June 1924, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne).

Blacking, *A commonsense view of all music*, p. xi.


Knocks writes: ‘herewith I send you three lines of an attempt to write the music, and translation of the words into English, of course it is a hurried translation, and with a little time the words could be put into much prettier shape, however they express the feeling in which the Rarotongan’s sang on the Eve of their departure from Otaki’. A.J. Knocks, Letter to Percy Grainger, 23 January 1909, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.


Percy Grainger, Letter to Karen Holten [original in Danish], 8 November 1912, in *Farthest north of humanness*, p. 473.

Percy Grainger, Transcription of [Rarotonga I] (SL1 MG13 6/4:5, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne)

Rarotongan music
Rarotonga I.

Certainties (more or less) are given in ink; uncertainties in pencil*

Actual notes; without determining which part was sung by which particular singer.

section 1

louden gradually in all voices

soften

section 2

very full & clingingly

section 2

4

section 1

paragraph

20

pause

4

25

mark

(f)

30

4

xx or:

* Here rendered as small notes and text.
Paul Jackson, ‘Percy Grainger’s aleatoric adventures’
Percy Grainger, Notes to [Rarotonga I] (SL1 MG13 6/4:5, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne)

These bars are very hard to make out in the record.

Bar 30 has very strong limping syncopations, most banjolike in effect on the phonograph.

One of the singers (top singer?) may have caused this effect by singing out of time some such phrase as the following:

So that it became:

Comparison with the corresponding passage in the 3rd section (bars 54, 55, 56, 57) suggests that such a passage is not unlikely, maybe somewhat like:

Or the passage may have been more on the following lines:

Section 1 is sung with much more tenderness than the 2 following sections, which are fierce, brisk, & sharply pattering, the earlier portions of them, at any rate.

It is well nigh impossible from merely hearing the phonograph record only to determine which notes of the foregoing were allotted to which particular singer of the 4. But it is pretty easy to distinguish the leading singer (top singer) from the rest. One voice seems to restrict itself to singing the keynote, (keynote singer) or arabesques around it throughout. But as all 4 parts often dwell upon the keynote it is at times hard to distinguish the work of the singer from that of the others, but as a rule his effects
are more vigorously rhythmic than those of the 3 other voices, & in fierce moment such as bars 28-31, 32-35, 57-61, the quickly sung syllables of his text hammer & rattle like drums. At times again, the singer seems to take rhythm into his own hands, ignoring that of the others (knowing that his keynote will always harmoniously fit in with whatever else is going on) with whose rhythmic pulse his beats no longer fall together. It is difficult for me to distinguish between intention & accident in such a case as this, having no experience of the customs of performance that are in this music.

The lowest voice (bottom singer) comes next to the top singer in prominence & distinguishableness, except the endnote of his phrases, which is almost invariably the keynote, when it becomes wellnigh impossible to tell him apart from the keynote singer. If it is his custom to end his phrase on reaching the keynote, (as then we find in this music, the topsinger & bottomsinger engaged in an endless dovetailing of short phrases, each beginning when, or nearly when[.] the other ends; as follows:

It maybe, however, that he joins in with the keynote singer on reaching the keynote, continuing upon that note until the start of the next phrase. This would change the 2 above examples to:

The indistinct f# in bar 73 seems to suggest a descent of the bottomsinger from the keynote to the d of his next phrase, unless it be that the keynote singer is responsible for the indistinct note, & the correct allotment of parts as follows:

The least distinguishable singer is the 4th (accompanying singer) whose work his on & around the 3rd of the key (b).[.] A sound of b is very continuous throughout the record but it is hard to me to tell whether is it a note sung by his accompanying singer, or merely strong overtones of the g of the keynote singer.

In some places this singer has pretty clearly distinguishable, (such as bars 15, 20, 58-60, etc) & I incline to believe that he sang almost as continuously as the keynote singer, only less loudly, in most places.

Is the in bar 56 sung by him, maybe? And ought this passage to read...
But this suggestion does violence to the otherwise neverbroken rule that the top voice ends each phrase on the keynote.

Maybe the keynote singer never leaves the keynote at all, & all the a, b, cs in the piece (except those of the topsinger) are taken by the accompanying singer, so that bars 61-62, for inst, should read:

The aforementioned dovetailing of top voice & bottom voice phrases is probably answerable for the strangeness that European ears will probably feel in bars 41-42, 46-47, & 61-62. But probably, to the Rarotongan ear, there is nothing “final” (calling for harmonic finality in other parts) in the gs that [???] [???] end the topsingers phrases. I suggest, in all tentativeness, after observing the upbuild of this piece, that the Rarotongans probably may feel finality (if they ever do so at all) when the bottom voice reaches the keynote. Against this view, however, the ending of section 1 maybe be quoted, where the bottomsinger ends his phrase without reaching the keynote. Note, however, that his d is not sustained like the g, b, d of the 3 upper voices, which thus bring the section to a close with the keynote for bass, after all.

Note that the range & phrases of the top voice, keynotesinger, & bottomvoice are arranged so that they have no opportunity for crossing each other. The phrase dovetailing habit further ensures freedom from the dischordant simultaneous sounds of e in the top voice & d in the bottomvoice, & vice versa, for the bottomsinger is either silent or sounding the keynote while the topsinger moves about on d & e, & the topsinger is concerned with c, b, a, g while the bottomsinger sounds d & e.

The simultaneous sounding of e & d in these voices in bar 50, may (but I do not at all wish to “explain away” discords) be due to a faulty (too early) entry of the bottomvoice, (proper entry in bar 52?) or to its taking to the e too early, instead of staying on keynote as it seemingly does in the corresponding passage in section 2 (bars 24-29.)

The same discord (d & e) in bar 63 may also be due to a too early entry of the accompanying singer. Maybe bars 62-63 would more properly represent the Rarotongan harmonic standards if they read:

Surely these customs show that the Rarotongans do not move the different parts of this polyphonic music about merely with a sense for “melodic line”, but point to their having well developed harmonic consciousness; that is to say that they are conscious of the harmonic results of moving parts, & regulate these movements accordingly, courting certain discordant effects which they probably like & avoiding others, (which they probably dislike)
Percy Grainger, Transcription of [Rarotonga II] (SL1 MG13 6/5:2, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne)

Rarotongan Music  Rarotonga II

Record 1.

Opens with list of names. Pau-ua, Tua-ua, Tipikirau, Naubahan, Tikaru, Uka, Ukawaru, Uaru, Waawau-u, Hakau-paro-ku-parau, Oapaku, Ngaka.

Comparative certainties in black ink. Faint & doubtful notes in red ink.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keys</th>
<th>M. M.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B⁰</td>
<td>= about 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C⁰</td>
<td>= about 208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D⁰</td>
<td>= about 112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between E⁰ &amp; F⁰</td>
<td>= about 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between E⁰ &amp; F⁰</td>
<td>= about 138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These and subsequent similar markings are not explained in Grainger's transcription. Presumably, these were to refer to a table of explanatory notes.
Section 1 noted
18.10 - 4.11.09.

(spoken:) Ka pa rau!
Library Digitised Collections

Author/s:
Jackson, Paul

Title:
Percy Grainger's aleatoric adventures: The Rarotongan part-songs

Date:
2012

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/118257