Percy Grainger was known to shock his musical peers with his dismissal of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven as writers of ‘jazz classics’. He himself, he claimed, wished to promote quite different values, believing that the value of art music depended on the extent to which it was ‘intrinsically many-voiced or democratic’.

Identifying a fundamental divide in musical history with Joseph Haydn, Grainger claimed that the so-called Classical and Romantic eras of music were creative dark ages and the natural enemy of democratic musical values. Furthermore, that instrument which accrued such influence during Mozart’s and Haydn’s lifetimes, the piano, was a subsidiary devil because of its harmonic and homophonic bias and rapid decay in tone.

This article considers how Grainger believed music could be more democratic, and in particular, how early music, revealed to him through Arnold Dolmetsch and his Haslemere Festivals, could encapsulate so many of the freedoms he found lacking in the more formalised music of later eras.

Percy Grainger often said that he disliked Beethoven’s music. Martin Bernstein, one of his colleagues at New York University during the early 1930s, commented that this view was ‘unkind to Beethoven’; he wondered if Grainger really believed what he said.¹ But Grainger did mean what he said, and reiterated his dislike of Beethoven’s music from youth to old age. As early as 1901, in sketching an article entitled ‘Theme as related to form in music’, he branded the style of the First Viennese School superficial, inconsistent and insincere in its approach to form and to thematic development.² As Grainger grew older he accused Beethoven of having sacrificed true melody to the strait-jacket of harmony and the lock-step of rhythm. But Beethoven was not the only one to have so erred. He was, in Grainger’s opinion, just representative of his era in purveying banal music, characterised by top-heavy, non-polyphonic, unbalanced textures with unmelodious lower lines. Indeed, Grainger himself occasionally sneered at Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven as writers of ‘jazz classics’ because of their frequent allegiance to repetitive dance rhythms and their harmonic predictability.³ Grainger saw himself as promoting quite different values:
I, personally, would go so far as to assert that the value of all existing art music depends on the extent to which it is intrinsically many-voiced or democratic—that is to say, the extent to which the harmonic texture is created out of freely-moving voices, each of them full of character, or vigor, or melodic loveliness.\textsuperscript{4}

For Grainger, writing these lines in 1931, music had been needlessly sidetracked through much of the later 18th and the 19th centuries by the despotic ideal of popular simplicity. What was the cause? In 1933, he suggested that it was the Industrial Revolution, with its less certain role for musicians, that brought out the ‘montebanks [\textit{sic}], temperamentalists and wizards’ who emphasised the superficially creative rather than the doggedly crafted side of music. And so, there arose the skill-mongers, such as Paganini, and the romantic gods, such as Beethoven.\textsuperscript{5} Grainger, accordingly, identified a fundamental divide in musical history at the point of entry of Joseph Haydn, and saw the so-called Classical and Romantic eras of music as creative dark ages. Rather than ‘pre-Bach’, a senseless division which he believed had only arisen because of modern audiences’ lack of repertory knowledge, Grainger talked about music ‘pre-Haydn’, or sometimes music which was not ‘post-Bach’. He saw the classicising tendency through the 18th and 19th centuries as being the natural enemy of his democratic musical values. Furthermore, that instrument which accrued such influence during Mozart’s and Haydn’s lifetimes, the piano, was a subsidiary devil because of its harmonic and homophonic bias and rapid decay in tone (which created momentarily fluctuating tonal balances between parts).

Grainger’s musical narrative is, however, somewhat more complex than his strictly musical writings suggest. His relatively predictable and crisply chronological ideas about musical style and texture were intimately bound up with his larger world view—with his equally strong, but less well grounded, views about race, art and civilisation. A rough summary of the broader context of Grainger’s views on the stylistic history of music, drawn from the essays of his mature years,\textsuperscript{6} goes something like this. Civilisation exists in opposition to art. While civilisation pursues creative simplicity, in the face of social complexity, true art seeks complexity and, through that, loftiness. Hence, Grainger’s views on the stylistic history of music, drawn from the essays of his mature years,\textsuperscript{6} goes something like this. Civilisation exists in opposition to art. While civilisation pursues creative simplicity, in the face of social complexity, true art seeks complexity and, through that, loftiness. Hence, Grainger’s views of art—at least, his art—as being a ‘Grumble-shout (protest) against Town-skill-th (civilisation)’.\textsuperscript{7} Next, enter Grainger’s racial typologies, originally based upon the three European categories of Nordics, Mediterraneans and Alpinics, but frequently simplified into the dialectic of North (sometimes called Mongolian-Nordics) and the South (sometimes—even more provocatively—referred to as Mohammedan). Hence, Grainger’s personal aspiration also to a condition of the ‘farthest north of humanness’\textsuperscript{8}.
In Grainger’s interpretation, the Nordics were originally individualistic rural folk, inclined to musical and social freedoms, and hence to strongly individual and wide-ranging melodic utterance. Those from the South, often urban folk, were prone to be collectivists, more fettered by social and religious restrictions, and inclined to grouped music-making which naturally curbed the freedom of melody. As time went by and populations grew, those from the North overlaid their individualistic melodies to create complex polyphonies—that is, they sought art—while those from the South sought to curb complexities either through greater coordination of the notes of different lines into a few predictable harmonic progressions or through the distractions of soloistic display. That is, they sought civilisation. In Grainger’s geographical frame, Scandinavia, Britain and the Netherlands were in the North; Italy, France and Spain were in the South. The Germanic musical world lay awkwardly in the middle, with conflicting tendencies. Wagner and Bach (sometimes Brahmns), for instance, inclined to the North, while the Austrian-based Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven looked to the South.

Now, to democracy, which Grainger saw as a mediating force between radical individualism and the elements of collectivism necessary in any modern society. Musical democracy demanded that the opportunity to participate in performance be available to all citizens. This led Grainger to develop ‘elastic scorings’ for many of the works he wrote in the 1920s and later. These flexible scorings allowed musicians to play together, virtually whatever the available instrumental resources. In elastically scored music the connection of a particular part with a particular instrument was sacrificed to a more general concept of tonal balance, provided players were assigned their parts through careful attention to the blending characteristics of their instruments. Democracy also demanded that the musicians make something of an equal contribution to their music-making: ‘The budding musician needs the inspiration of hearing a grand cooperation of myriad sounds surging around him, to which he joins his own individualistic voice.’ Pianists could learn to play Bach’s masterful fugues in no better way than through each taking one of the strands of polyphony and appreciating it as line, rather than, as pianists so often do, as some form of digitally reconciled harmony. Purcell’s string fantasias offered, in Grainger’s estimate, a correspondingly excellent experience for string players, being the ‘most sublimely beautiful many-voiced, democratic music known to me’.

This democratic music was, nonetheless, not an endpoint in itself but only a midpoint on the road to an ultimately free music, characterised by freedom in the relations of pitch, rhythm, dynamics and form. ‘Then only will the full soul of man find a universal, untrammelled musical speech’, Grainger prophesied in 1931. In saying this, he had the hope that the music of the
future would find its way back to the values, if not the reality, of that unfettered ‘pure melody’ which he attributed to the original Nordic peoples. He would first put these free music goals to the test with his two *Free music* compositions of the mid-1930s. Especially in their revised scorings for four and six thereminis, they demonstrated his desire to do away with the regularised shapes of pitches and rhythms found in most western music. It was, of course, with the ‘free music’ machines, which he developed after World War II with the physicist Burnett Cross, that Grainger approached most nearly to his goals of artistic freedom.

Pre-Haydn music, then, approached more closely to Grainger’s intermediate goal of democratic music, and sometimes even to his ultimate goal of ‘free music’, than did music of Haydn and after. This music from the distant past, as with folk music, provided instructive models for Grainger and his followers:

I believe that the music of the future will be more soul-satisfying—more melodious, more many-voiced, more complex, more rapturous, more angelic in mood—than any music of the past. But I feel that the best training for future musical perfection lies in at least some working knowledge of those past periods of musical culture that possessed some real perfection.

Where then, in this pre-Haydn past, did these, normally Nordic, models of perfection lie?

Until Grainger was nearly 50, Bach was his pre-eminent and predominating example of music pre-Haydn. He regularly referred to Bach’s monumental works in his writings, performances and teaching syllabuses. The consistency of Bach’s polyphonic texture enticed him in 1904 to draw the unlikely analogy of the Nullabor desert, which he saw as being to the Australian landscape what Bach was to music. He lauded the ‘weekday-like, enduring, untiring graft & grind of a Bach fugue; grim glamorless greatness which lifts largest in the end.’ So, too, when Grainger gained his first exposure to Rarotongan music he was bewildered by the natural lack of harmonic consciousness with which these Pacific islanders produced their free polyphony, and commented on its ‘Bach-like gems of everchanging, euphoniously discordant, polyphonic harmony’. Through his pre-World War I years Grainger’s many performances of Bach and Bach transcriptions were among the best received on his programs. At a London recital, shortly before leaving for America in 1914, it was one of Bach’s *Well-tempered clavier* which most caught the attention of G.W.L. Marshall-Hall, who wrote of Grainger’s exceptionally fluid conception in the *British-Australasian*: 
He rolled out the great theme of the Bach in A minor, as a huge ship is rolled along the huger billows of ocean—with a mighty, inexorable, irresistible swing. There were moments when the bar-accents swished round with a plunge and an upheave which held one fascinated. In the … quietest places the rhythm never for an instant lost its buoyancy, but slid along as water hissing past the side of a vessel. Grainger has seized the idea of the grandly modulated line of Bach. He invests it with nervous, elastic vitality, and pours it forth like the interminable ocean its billows, and we never tire of gazing. It is a gorgeous conception …\(^{17}\)

Yet, in 1920, Grainger did recognise that the harmonic element, necessarily present to some degree in Bach’s music, did cause the quality of his melodies, \textit{qua} melody, to be less than those found in the best of Scandinavian, British, Irish or American folk songs.\(^ {18}\) Through the 1920s, as the so-called Neo-Classical movement as well as the fledgling movement for authentic performance practice brought more and more works from the Baroque and earlier eras to the attention of music-lovers, Grainger was to remain relatively uninvolved. His writings and concerts were much more concerned with promoting those, mainly contemporary, Nordic composers who measured up to his very particular polyphonic-melodic requirements, although he did continue regularly to perform and to praise Bach’s music.

It was with Grainger’s visit in 1931 to the Haslemere Festival in England, organised by the French-born musician and instrument-maker Arnold Dolmetsch, that his education in western art music before Bach truly began. Having previously taken a cavalier attitude towards anything smacking of the preciousness of performing authentically—even advocating playing Bach on the ukulele\(^ {19}\)—he is soon wanting to buy a consort of viols to explore the tonal potentialities of ‘these incomparable instruments’\(^ {20}\) and keenly investigating instrument numbers in original performances of works by Bach or Handel.\(^ {21}\) He was, however, most interested in transcribing or arranging for present-day musical resources the repertory which was presented to him by his new ‘early music’ friends, who included Anselm Hughes, Robert Donington, Gustave Reese\(^ {22}\) and Charles W. Hughes,\(^ {23}\) as well as Dolmetsch.

From Dolmetsch Grainger quickly absorbed a wide repertory, based upon works presented at Haslemere Festivals since their inception in 1925. In his article about Dolmetsch, published in \textit{The Musical Quarterly} of 1933, Grainger detailed nine categories of ‘ancient music and dances’ from these festivals: English songs and dances; English intimate music; Early Spanish music; Early French music; Early Italian music; Early German music; Bach programs; Haydn and Mozart programs; and a variety of Dance musics.\(^ {24}\) Predictably, it
was the Nordic-area works which most drew Grainger’s attention, although he did later work on some of Dolmetsch’s repertory from 13th-century to 16th-century Spain (Francisco de Peñalosa, Antonio de Cabezón, Diego Ortiz, Diego Pisador). It was, however, the category of ‘English intimate music’ which most fascinated Grainger, and particularly the works, often fantasies, for four to six viols by a long string of English composers including William Byrd, John Cooper, Richard Dering, John Dowland, Michael Easte, John Jenkins, William Lawes, Matthew Locke, Thomas Morley, Martin Pierson, Thomas Tomkins and Thomas Weelkes. These vastly supplemented his more limited, pre-existing knowledge of Purcell’s works in the genre.

As the 1930s progressed Grainger would make and promote his own arrangements of most of these works originally written for consorts of viols. The fantasies demonstrated for Dolmetsch, as then by adoption, Grainger, ‘the highest summit of pure music’. They lacked the contaminating pianistic or orchestral conceptions which lay beneath so much string chamber music of later ages. ‘Above all’, Grainger claimed, ‘they unfold the angelic mood, the sustained rapture, the complexity of musical thought, the glowing sonority, the breadth of form-flow so native to the strings.’ They were truly, at once, examples of music’s glorious past and models for its future. Although later more open-minded, in this 1933 article Grainger advocated that these masterpieces only be played on the viols for which they were written. ‘The less noisy, yet more ‘edgy’, tone quality of the thinner-strung viols enables the intricate voice-leading of these often highly polyphonic compositions to ‘tell’ with an obviously superior ease.’ Within these English gems of perfection Grainger noted one in particular: William Lawes’ six-viol Fantasy and air in G minor. It was notable for its diverse qualities, which he identified as ‘broad flow of form, complexity of polyphonic and harmonic texture, emotional poignancy, harsh discordance, surging sonority and strong personal originality’.

Elsewhere in this extended homage to Dolmetsch, Grainger provided a short list of the greatest art music of western peoples, namely that by ‘Guillaume de Machaut, Palestrina, Byrd, Purcell, Bach, Wagner, Delius, etc.’, while on his way towards a conclusion that balance of tone is an essential ingredient of perfect music-making, and that the art-music attitudes of the 16th and early 17th centuries were certainly favourable to that balance both in composition and in practice of performance. He went on to argue that this performing perfection results from the careful gradation, both in terms of range and tone, of instrumental groups such as consorts of viols. Ensembles of the Classical era and since, in stark contrast, suffer from ‘limping disproportions’ in numbers and types of instruments, and gaps in range, such as in the modern string quartet between the viola and the cello.
Grainger’s views on perfections of texture were further elaborated in an essay of the following year, 1934, entitled ‘Sublime and frivolous elements in music’. There he outlined the first essential of sublime music, that it avoid ‘showy, noisy, flighty’ musical elements, and demonstrate ‘a continuity of mood that eschews all ‘comic relief’, dramatic contrasts, bravura display passage-work, and other irrelevant distractions’. In short, it had to be texturally monotonous and featureless. Early laudable examples identified by Grainger included, in addition to the English and Spanish works already mentioned, a three-voice canonic Ballade by Machaut and Beata viscera, a three-voice late 13th-century English conductus. Beethoven, by contrast, came in for stinging criticism through an analysis of his 32 piano sonatas which identified just one ‘perfect slow movement’: the first movement of Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ sonata. The other sonatas either lacked a slow movement at all (11), degenerated into frivolous, display music (13), or were marred by ‘violent, noisy, dramatic outbursts’.

Beata viscera was among the Medieval works which the English monk Dom Anselm Hughes had found before World War I at Worcester Cathedral, and brought to publication in the Worcester Mediaeval harmony of 1928. Hughes had spread the news of this collection and some recorded examples of the works during a trip to North America in 1933. Through Gustave Reese Grainger came to know of Hughes’ collection and, when in England later in 1933, visited Hughes at Nashdom Abbey. Hughes later recalled: ‘before long he suggested to me the idea of a joint publication, for the use of choral societies, schools and concert groups … His suggestion for a title—English Gothic music—was agreed, and we settled down into a very cordial partnership.’ Hughes’ task was to provide accurate reproductions or transcriptions of the original music of some 16 items which they had selected, and also to help prepare acceptable versions of the verbal texts. Grainger, for his part, undertook all musical editorial work concerning arrangement and presentation. Many of these English Gothic pieces were included in Grainger’s gregarious concert programs from the mid-1930s onwards. Eventually, in 1943, G. Schirmer started to publish the English Gothic music series, commencing with Foweles in the frith (arranged for baritone and viola, or oboe), Alleluia psallat (six-part chorus and strings), and Beata viscera (three-part mixed chorus and harp). Other editions followed.

While the 1930s were the highpoint of Grainger’s interest in, and work with, pre-Haydn music, he continued to promote its virtues into the 1940s and 1950s. His long Musical Quarterly article of 1942, ‘The culturizing possibilities of the instrumentally supplemented a cappella choir’, provided comprehensive lists of music suitable for such mixed ensembles, of which ‘Early European chamber music’ from the 13th to 17th centuries was the
largest list. Examples from Grainger’s self-designated Nordic lands do predominate, although one example each of French (Machaut’s *Ma fin est mon commencement* rondeau), Spanish (Pisador’s *Paséabase el Rey Moro*) and Italian (Francesco Corteccia’s *O glorious golden era*) are included.\(^{40}\) Another list of ‘choice but neglected masterpieces’ for the instrumentally backgrounded *a cappella* choir consists of three neat categories:\(^{41}\) music of the 17th century and before; 20th-century music by Grainger’s own stable of preferred composers;\(^{42}\) and arrangements for American (Degan) percussion instruments of Javanese, Balinese and Siamese music.\(^{43}\) In the first category, in addition to examples already mentioned, he included the English 13th-century *Puellare gremium* (arranged for six-part mixed voices, trumpet, trombone), Dunstable’s *Veni sancte spiritus* (for mixed voices and between four and 12 strings), the 15th-century German song *Aus fahr’ ich bin* (for baritone and viola), and Claude le Jeune’s *Le printemps*. Grainger’s other theme in this *Musical Quarterly* article explores new angles on his old arguments about balance of tone and respect for complexity. The article’s first sentence picks on the vogue of the American symphony orchestra, specifically the Boston Symphony Orchestra,\(^{44}\) and its unsubstantiated claims to be the major musical ‘culture-bearer’ of the age.\(^{45}\) He attacks the bowdlerising tendency, whereby highlighted movements only are presented (as with the slow movement of Dvořák’s ‘New World’ symphony) or unbalanced, absurdly top-heavy re-orchestrations and arrangements of great pre-Haydn works are mounted, or—worst of all—the music itself was tampered with. He commented:

> I am not querying anyone’s right to re-orchestrate or re-arrange any piece of music—by whichever genius. (Bach himself was too inveterate an arranger of other men’s music for us to protest any arranging of Bach’s—even the wildest.) I am merely amazed that nobody thinks it a liberty to present arrangements and re-scorings of Bach’s masterworks, while nobody (in the symphony orchestra field) would adopt a like attitude to orchestral scores by Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner, and Brahms.\(^{46}\)

For Grainger it was a calamity that Bach, as so many earlier composers, was virtually never heard in his original scoring, and so with the original tonal proportions. These unsatisfactory, latter-day orchestral practices were, for the 60-year-old Grainger, merely symptomatic of modern life’s attempts to simplify everything. Genius, he hypothesised, ‘acting as a corrective to this lop-sided tendency, tries to hold up the mirror of truth to life’s many-sidedness—presenting both simplicity and complexity.’\(^{47}\)
Into old age Grainger continued to play with his idiosyncratic models of melody, polyphony, democracy and race. In his 1949 account of ‘Music heard in England’, he attempted a new articulation of the concept of ‘true melody’: ‘a tonal line that is complete in itself, full of its own volition and unenslaved by outside domination (for instance, domination by harmony or rhythm)’, and railed at the ‘tune-on-top’ obsession of the 19th century.\(^{48}\) To a Norwegian questionnaire circulated in the early 1950s which asked him about his musical creed he replied in two totally focussed paragraphs.\(^{49}\) In the first he stated unequivocally that, although he often did not live up to it, his musical creed was ‘musical democracy’, of an equality between the parts, of ‘a chance for all to shine in a starry whole’. So far, Grainger’s reply was unexceptional to his Norwegian readers. Musical democracy had been a fairly common theme among his inter-war generation of composers. But, for Grainger, that democracy was only worthwhile if it was in the service of a higher ideal: freedom. His second paragraph began by asserting that the only music of his to which he attached any importance was his ‘free music’, which sought ‘to tally the irregularity, the formlessness & the unforeknowableness of nature’. And what drove this freedom-loving inspiration?

Racialism and nationalism: I would not write any music at all if it were not to express the unity of the Nordic (blue-eyed) race, wherever found, to express the tragic position of the Nordic race (out-numbered in a hostile world), & in the hopes of bringing honor and fame to my native land: Australia.

Grainger’s forays into early, or as he preferred to say, pre-Haydn, music were in the service of higher ideals. In contrast with his enthusiasm for folk music, nurtured in the earliest years of the century, his fascination with pre-Haydn music only came to the fore in the 1930s, despite his lifelong respect for Bach. These revelations of 13th-century to 17th-century repertory sharpened his sense of democracy in music, both in terms of musical construction and in terms of the possibilities of musical participation within the community. It is not by chance that Grainger’s article on ‘Democracy in music’ was written in the same year as he attended Dolmetsch’s Haslemere Festival, 1931. Nor was it by chance that his first consolidated attempts at ‘free music’ occurred in 1934–1935, during that same extended tour of Australasia in which he put so many efforts into promoting Medieval and Renaissance music. This illuminating early repertory, which Grainger believed came overwhelmingly from the European North, provided further ammunition for his racial-artistic views, as expressed in the chauvinistic essay of 1934–1935, ‘The superiority of Nordic music’.\(^{50}\) Early music was just one
weapon in Grainger’s arsenal against modern-day ‘civilisation’, with its South-derived simplifying and bowdlerising tendencies. As with folk music, it was, for him, something truly artistic: pure, natural and uncorrupted; too complex for untrained or racially unsympathetic ears; at its best, aspiring to the condition of ‘free music’.

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**NOTES**


8 For a contextual study of Grainger’s racial thinking and its connection with characteristics in art, see David Pear, ‘Grainger on race and nation’, *Australasian Music Research*, no. 5, Percy Grainger issue, 2000, pp. 25–47.


10 Grainger, ‘Democracy in music’, p. 222. Grainger specifically recommended the Curwen edition of Purcell’s Fantasias for three to five parts, edited by Peter Warlock and André Mangeot.

Early electronic instruments with variable volume and timbre which emitted a single frequency determined by the distance of the performer’s hand from an antenna.


Reese was teaching classes in Medieval and Renaissance music at New York University in 1932–1933, when Grainger was Head of Department there, and has recalled Grainger’s occasional visits to his classes. See Gustave Reese, ‘Percy Grainger and early music’, *Studies in Music*, vol. 10, 1976, pp. 13–14.

Hughes, a New York academic living near the Graingers in White Plains, attended the 1935 Haslemere Festival with Grainger. See his taped interview with Burnett Cross, 14 March 1982, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.


Grainger, for instance, arranged Pisador’s *Paséabase el Rey Moro* for voice and small orchestra in late 1934.


Grainger, ‘Sublime and frivolous elements in music’, p. 278.

No. 17 in Friedrich Ludwig’s edition with Breitkopf und Härtel. Grainger scored this work for strings in 1934.

Grainger’s score of this work ‘for practical music-making’ was published in 1943. Another example highlighted by Grainger in his essays of the early mid-1930s was ‘La bel’ arond’ (Pretty swallow) by the 16th-century Belgian, Claude Le Jeune.

Op. 27, no. 2.


That is, Grainger’s own arrangements taken from the gramophone album *Musik des Orients*, Berlin: Decca, c.1931.


Grainger, ‘The culturizing possibilities’, p. 301. Grainger’s attack upon the narrow-mindedness of contemporary music professionals continued in his essay of 1943, ‘The specialist and the all-round man’, *Grainger on music*, pp. 312–317. He questioned why, on his 1934–1935 Australasian tour, professional ensembles in Adelaide and Sydney had come to grief with Medieval and Renaissance chamber works that he was promoting, while amateur groups in smaller cities, even Mount Gambier, had
presented them ‘without tonal shipwreck’ (p. 313). ‘Specialization makes the specialist so feeble that even skill forsakes him’, Grainger concluded.

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