A Significant Influence on Percy Grainger’s Style of Composition
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Glen Gillis, University of Saskatchewan

Sound Concept of Percy Grainger (1882-1961): “Free Music”
- Idea conceived at age 11
- His description—an art not tied to the “slavery” of scales, intervals, rhythms, and harmony

Non-Western Cultures that Influenced Him
- Maoris of New Zealand, Rarotongas of South Seas, Aborigines of Australia

Musical Experimentation Between 1898 and 1900
- “Beatless” music: melody free and independent of harmony without standard durations of beats and rhythms (bar lines only to facilitate reading)
- Mixed and asymmetric meters
- Non-sequential rhythmic patterns and irregular rhythms
- Non-repetition of themes
- Non-architectural forms
- Polytonality
- “Democratic” polyphony
- Modal and mixed modal
- Pedal tones (bagpipe effect)
- Chords in conjunct motion (chromatic sliding or chordal slippage)
- Parallel 4th and 5th
- Wide-toned scales

First Major Works (Grainger considered his best compositions)
- *Hill Song No. 1* (1901-2) and *Hill Song No. 2* (1907); both arranged-scored several times later with aforementioned musical characteristics maintained

Grainger’s View of Future Western Music (as of mid 1930’s)
- Freer rhythms
- Micro and gliding intervals
- “Free” tonality
- Greater dissonance
- Striking dynamic contrasts

Wax Cylinder Recordings (original recordings of early 1900’s)
- Wax cylinder recordings masterpiece: *Lincolnshire Posy* (1937), a portrait of singers, based on some of the collected folksongs which captured the musical personality of rural people from North Lincolnshire County, England
- Composition techniques in *Lincolnshire Posy*: polytonality and “democratic” polyphony, modal and mixed modal, pedal tones, chromatic sliding, parallel 4th and 5th, mixed and asymmetric meters, free meter, as well as music markings stated in the vernacular (similar to his other band scores)
Free Music Machines
- 1944 began working with scientist/engineer Burnett Cross
- After WWII until his death, focused on free music concept with machines
- Develop a machine to spontaneously create music like sounds found in nature
- Several names: Grainger’s Free Music Machine, Grainger’s Kangaroo Pouch
  Free Music Machine, Cross-Grainger Instrument or Machine, Composer’s
  Performing Machine, Composing Instrument, Performer’s Machine

Note: Not pursued by other composers or inventors after his death

Grainger’s Musical Accomplishments
- Performer, teacher/lecturer, conductor
- Innovative composer/arranger of many artful folksongs

Note: Later in his life he became bitter and disheartened as being remembered more for
the aforementioned accomplishments than his direct work/experiments with free music

Arrangers and Editors of Grainger’s Band Music
- Bainum, Clark, Daehn, Erickson, Faber, Fennell, Goldman, Kent, Kreines,
  Osmon, Ragsdale, Rogers

Compositional Techniques Often Found in Other Grainger Band Music
- Chromatic sliding in Children’s March, Shepherd’s Hey, Handel in the
  Strand, The Immovable Do, The Power of Rome and the Christian Heart, The
  Gum-Suckers March
- Rapid descending chromatic lines for upper woodwinds which create a
  glissando effect in Molly on the Shore; fast sixteenth notes that produce a wall
  of sound which create a quasi-glissando effect by woodwinds in The Lads of
  Wampstow, Children’s March
- Mixed modal and polytonality prevalent in Colonial Song, Molly on the
  Shore, The Power of Rome and the Christian Heart, The Duke of
  Marlborough Fanfare
- Mixed and asymmetric meters in The Duke of Marlborough Fanfare, Handel
  in the Strand, Faeroe Island Dance, Marching Song of Democracy
- Displacement of ascending-descending arpeggiated lines for harp and piano in
  Spoon River, creating a sense of changed meter
- English horn, tenor saxophone, trumpet, and optional organ or harmonium
  performer(s) are instructed to ‘ad lib.’ their written parts in Ye Banks and
  Braes O’ Bonnie Doon, providing the performer(s) with “democratic” freedom
- Quasi-aleatory effect produced by glissandos and mallet percussion in
  Shepherd’s Hey and The Gum-Suckers March; piano/harp parts in Colonial
  Song; the last measure of Ye Banks and Braes O’ Bonnie Doon for winds;
  random note-playing by mallets in Shepherd’s Hey (his composer notes on
  this piece: roll on hammers about on any notes and gliss on any notes)

Grainger’s Contemporaries
- Boulez, Cage, Cowell, Ives, Messiaen, Nancarrow, Partch, Stockhausen,
  Stravinsky, Varèse
Book, Journal, and Pictorial References and Resources


Music Score References and Resources


The Immovable Do. New York: G. Schirmer, 1941.

