

Percy Grainger: 2019 Cataloging Project

Cal. State Northridge Professor Visits White Plains to Organize and Catalogue Music



"I first heard the name 'Percy Grainger' in high school band. As I became more familiar with his work, I learned we had strong interests in common," notes Dr. John Roscigno, pianist, percussionist, composer and conductor. "He was a fascinating character, a unique genius, really," notes Roscigno. I felt a strong connection to him based on the similarities of our musical backgrounds.

Percy Grainger (1892-1961) is perhaps the most well-known Australian classical composer. He was one of the most widely respected concert pianists of the early 20th century, plus a folk song collector, musical innovator, and instrument inventor. Grainger spent the final forty year of his life living in (and touring internationally from) White Plains, New York. To this day, his home and workspace in White Plains is a historic landmark and still contains a large amount of Grainger's music, memorabilia, and manuscripts.

Dr. Roscigno's early interest blossomed into a 1999 doctoral dissertation centered on Grainger's writing for percussion in the 1913 composition "The Warriors—an imaginary ballet." "The Warriors" is an 18-minute suite that mixes elements of notable Grainger works with references to musicians Arnold Bax, Arnold Schönberg and Richard Strauss. Performance requires a huge orchestral ensemble, large tuneful percussion section including four octaves of chromatic suspended handbells and at least three pianos. In one performance, Grainger used nineteen pianos with thirty pianists, and

Grainger insisted that the musicians be "exceptionally strong vigorous players" reflecting his own interest in physical strength and fitness. Roscigno's dissertation focused on that fact that Grainger was far ahead of his time in writing for melodic percussion and was keenly aware of the colors one could achieve on these instruments through various mallet selections.

Roscigno is Professor of Music and Director of Orchestral Studies at California State University, Northridge, as well as Music Director of the Thousand Oaks Philharmonic and the CSUN Youth Orchestras. He will spend Fall, 2019 in residence at the Grainger House completing a music cataloguing project giving him access to the entire contents of the home.

"My current plan is to take two or three round trips to New York in the fall and spend 2-3 weeks there each time," explains Dr. Roscigno, "I will likely take a trip there this coming spring to meet with the Grainger Society at their annual meeting in White Plains in May. The goal will be to carefully organize Grainger's music and the music of Grainger's composer friends and to help create a study library in the house for future scholars and musicians to view the vast collection.

Roscigno muses that his first visit to the Grainger House consisted of walking around and simply looking at the outside of the house. Since that time he contacted and then kept in touch with the International Percy Grainger Society. He was able to arrange a December 2017 visit where he was able to catch a glimpse at the house contents. He was thrilled and surprised at the vast amount of music Grainger kept stored in the basement of the home.



John Roscigno, pianist and percussionist, here seen performing on vibraphone.

The *International Percy Grainger Society*, and its charitable affiliate *Percy Grainger America*, are engaged in an ongoing re-creation of the life and times of Australian composer Percy Grainger during his forty years in America (1921 to 1961). They rededicated Grainger’s historic landmark home at 7 Cromwell Place in White Plains, New York as a living time capsule that exhibits how an internationally famous, radically inventive creative artist (and his wife, Ella Viola Strom, also an artist) lived and worked as "different drummers" in twentieth century America. The Grainger home, long a destination for a worldwide stream of visiting musicians, is a fascinating storybook world for a larger cultural public.



Conductor John Roscigno will be visiting White Plains to catalogue Percy Grainger’s music.

The benefits of this project to the musical community will be enormous. Future generations will have more accurate information as to Grainger’s entire output and any new findings may be brought to light. “This is a truly unique opportunity for any conductor or musicologist,” Roscigno noted, “I’m thrilled to have this opportunity to help preserve Grainger’s work.”