

Nice one 'arry!

Harry Partch



Nowadays, when microtonality seems to be the 'in' musical buzz word among contemporary music seekers, it is easy to forget that it has been around for centuries in various shapes and forms.

The 12 tone equal tempered tuning system has been around for about 300 years in the Western world but is scientifically an impure system of pitch relationships, in other words, notes have been 'adjusted' or put out of tune from the pure intervals of the harmonic series. This is borne out by the fact of much non western music having different pitch relationships to the 12 tone system and of course much so called ethnic music has been around since the dawn of time. One only need listen to Indonesian gamelan to here these microtonal nuances which existed in 1580 and experienced by Sir Francis Drake who logged in his diary that the music of this land 'was of a very strange kind, yet the sound was pleasant and delightful'.

Harry Partch (born Oakland California, 1901 died San Diego 1976) described as: composer, microtonal theorist, instrument-builder, writer, visual artist, satirist, philosopher, flunky, musicologist, copy editor, hobo, man of letters, publisher, iconoclast, record producer, eccentric, teacher.... is best known for his innovative so-called 43-tone-to-the-octave scale structure. Partch realised that Western music since Gregorian chant was completely out of tune and set about devising a scale system based on the overtones of a vibrating string or column of air. He calls this system, Monophony as all the musical principles relate to ONE tone (i.e. the first eleven partials of the harmonic series). Partch spent 12 years researching the science and musical theories which led him to this system beginning with Pythagoras (6th century B.C.) through Ptolemy (2nd Century B.C.), Rameau (17th cent.) up to Riemann (19th/20th cent.) and concludes that Monophony reveals the falsification of the present 12-tone tempered scale and is not necessarily requisite to a practical music system, and that the basis of all musical materials lies in the understanding of the intervals that have true relationships i.e. those whose vibrations are expressed by small numbers. As a believer in plurism, Partch does point out that he doesn't expect everyone to 'follow his lead' but this is just the path that he is exploring.

Detailed explanations and explorations into this system can be found in Partch's own *Genesis of Music* first published in 1949, reissued in 1973 then out of print until this year where soft cover copies can be obtained from the British Harry Partch Society. To quote Partch on the need for this system...'I came to the realization (around 1930) that the spoken word was the distinctive expression my constitutional makeup was best fitted for, and that I needed other scales and other instruments....Having decided to follow my own intuitive path I began to write music on the basis of harmonized spoken words, for new instruments and in new scales.' (could this, I wonder, have sown the seed for Steve Reich's later idea of speech recordings to generate musical material in pieces like *Different Trains* etc.!?)

Partch wrote many works in the 20s including a string quartet, a piano concerto and many songs, although many were 'torched' by him having regarded them as immature. One piece did survive in the form of a pop song, *My Heart Keeps Beating*

Time which he wrote under the pseudonym of Paul Pirate. He spent many years 'on the road' travelling across America where he mowed lawns, did dishes, proof read, picked fruit etc. but continued writing music and instrument building. He has said that he was seduced into musical carpentry.



The Kithara I & II are modelled on the Greek Kithara or Lyre. Kithara I has 72 strings which are guitar, tenor guitar and banjo, with pitch set by guitar tuning heads. Tones are arranged in terms of twelve heads, each containing four to six identities of a tonality. Pyrex rods stop the two outside hexads for higher chords and gliding tones of chords. Other string instruments include Adapted Guitar, The Harmonic Canon I & II and Surrogate Kithara which are koto-like instruments played with a plectrum, fingers or small mallets.

The music of Harry Partch is firmly rooted in that of ancient ritual and is an expression of an ancient tradition where sight and sound unite giving dramatic purpose. It is not concert music but music that embraces all artistic elements of performance: dance, art, speech, lighting etc. Not to be confused with opera (Partch abhorred the idea of musicians in a pit) but the whole event must be corporeal and alive, with musicians and instruments in the performing arena. Few if any composers have approached this corporeality in performance, with the possible exception of latter day Stockhausen who comes near to this in parts of 'Licht' where musicians are in costume and free to move about and are integral to the overall scenario. However, Stockhausen, like Partch, has received his fair share of critical knocks.

Must our musical establishment always pigeon hole? Must it be either concert music, opera, musical or ballet?.. Partch has said that he wants his musicians who play his instruments to be part of that instrument, to move with the grace of 'Mohammed Ali'

and also to look good in costume and even head dress and. 'not to look like some amateur Californian prune picker!'



(Mazda Marimba)

For me, one of the most important elements in his music is fun. Humour and satire and the endless knocks at the establishment is what is sadly missing in much of the heady intellectual European avant-garde, although, through this, Partch has said, lies a serious expression of a philosophy unfamiliar to most lovers of classical music.

After receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship award he was able to develop his instruments and while living and working in an abandoned World War II shipyard in Sausalito he formed the Gate 5 Ensemble, a group of dedicated musicians who Partch taught how to play his instruments, and from there produced his own recordings on the Gate 5 record label. (Gate 5 was the name over the shipyard entrance, but also stands for the fifth gate to spiritual consciousness in Eastern philosophy.) Although many of his works are written exclusively for his instruments, there are some works which incorporate standard 12 tone instruments playing along side the Partch instruments. These include oboe in Bless This Home and Y.D. Fantasy, flutes in Two Settings from Joyce's Finnegans Wake, and marching band in Revelation in the Courthouse Park.

Obviously, due to the nature of his instruments, Partchs' music is rarely performed or indeed heard on recordings. Hopefully this may change due to the efforts of groups like

Newband, Kronos and musicians like John Schneider and Just Strings. But we have to look to organisations like the Harry Partch Society (U.S. and Britain) and the Harry Partch Foundation whose president is Danlee Mitchell, a long time associate and key member of the Partch ensembles over the years, for appearances of the original instruments. Wouldn't it be nice if some Arts Council or National Lottery money found its way to support a tour of Partch music and instruments to this country? Perhaps our musical hierarchy is a little apprehensive to address the question of what music should really sound like!

Harry Partch belongs to that group of so called eccentric West Coast composers (Henry Cowell, John Cage, Lou Harrison etc.) who rejected their Western musical background and looked to the East for new ideas and discovered that we may now be living in a truly global village. The spellbinding quality of Partch's music exudes a magic and feel which must have existed in ancient Greek tragedy and much Oriental music, and indeed his music does sound like nothing on this earth.

Sadly many early Gate 5 recordings are all but impossible to get hold of now.

However, you may be lucky enough to pick up 'The Music of Harry Partch' played by the Gate5 Ensemble on Composers Recordings Inc. CRI 193 and 'The World of Harry Partch' on CBS Masterworks MS7207 from some larger second-hand record shops.

Other recordings to check out are:

Just West Coast microtonal music for guitar and harp with John Schneider on Bridge label, Newband microtonal works on Mode label, Newband Dance of the Seven Veils and Revelation in the Courthouse Park on Tomato label all on CD and available. For the real enthusiast, one should obtain Enclosure 1, a video containing the 4

Partch/Tourtelot films (Rotate the Body in All its Planes - Music Studio - U.S. Highball - Windsong) and Enclosure 2, a 4 CD set of Partch works with many rare and previously unreleased material. Both these items are available through ReR Megacorp Thornton Heath, Surrey.

List of key works. (This is by no means a comprehensive or definitive list of works but a selection of key works which have been recorded.)

Bitter Music (1935/36) a collection of logged memories of life 'on the road'. Text interspersed with piano accompaniment.

The Letter (1943)

By the Rivers of Babylon (1943)

Barstow (1943)

Castor and Pollux (from Plectra and Percussion Dances) (1952)

Cloud Chamber Music (1950)

The Bewitched (1955)

Music for Film Soundtrack dir. Madeline Toutelot:

Rotate the Body in All its Planes (1961)

Music Studio (1958)

U.S. Highball (1958)

Windsong (later Daphne of the Dunes)(1958)

Two Settings from Joyce Finnigans Wake (1944)

Dark Brother. 2 paragraphs from Thomas Wolfes God's Lonely Man (1942/43)

O Frabjous Day from 2 settings from Lewis Carroll The Jabberwocky

Ring Around the Moon (1953)

Studies on Ancient Greek Scales (1942/50)

Oedipus (1951)

Revelation in the Courthouse Park (1960)

Delusion of the Fury (1966)The Dreamer That Remains

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