



HARRY PARTCH

By Gregory Tozian

The Dreamer Whose Instruments Still Remain



DON HUNSTEIN/COLUMBIA RECORDS/CBS, INC.

IN A QUIET MUSIC ROOM OF SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY, there wait two dozen of the most strangely beautiful musical instruments ever devised by the mind of man.

But they are not, as they might well be, the handiwork of Japanese-Swiss woodworkers who were nuts about Jules Verne.

They are, instead, meant to produce in the hearts of men an awe for their creator's personal trinity: "sound-magic," "visual beauty" and "experience-ritual."

These are the primary-percussion wonders:

The Cloud-Chamber Bowls, 14 huge crystal mushroom caps hanging by tendrils from an Oriental arch. (The "bowls" are really the tops and bottoms of great, deep-ringing Pyrex bottles spirited from subatomic-particle laboratories).

The nearby Quadrangularis Reversum, a diamond-shaped cluster of 36 wooden blocks, bars and bamboo resonators, huddles beneath its own sensuous framework of dark wood.

There's the tongue-twisting Zymo-Xyl, an amorphous heap of discarded liquor bottles, psychedelic-painted hubcaps and wooden "keys"—collectively suggesting a Native American xylophone. Suspended artillery shell casings, meant to be beaten with mallets, are appropriately dubbed "The Spoils of War."

In other areas of the room are an expanded, color-coded reed organ; a Harmonic Canon (whose father was a draftsman's table and mother an 88-stringed harp), and an "adapted" Japanese koto imitating a midget outrigger canoe.

En masse, this whimsical sonic sculpture garden defines the physical boundaries of the universe of the late Harry Partch.

Harry Partch: underground cult figure, visionary hobo-composer and inventor of his own unique scale of music, notation and instruments.

But the survival of the instruments, in absence of the man who built them by hand over a period of 40 years, begs the question of whether these American cultural treasures will one day constitute an orchestral boneyard or live on into the distant future as a (vocal) monument to the man called "the Don Quixote" of American composers.

"I don't know what will happen to the instruments if anything happens to me," admits Danlee Mitchell, the keeper of Partch's flickering flame. "I'm the only person in the world who knows how to play all (26) of them. It would be nice if they could be put in a music research center of American contemporary music."

Mitchell, now in his early fifties, can probably lay claim to having been the best friend (musical or otherwise) that Harry Partch ever had. At any rate, the SDSU (percussion) music teacher is certainly the world's authority on the dynamics of Partch's music and the man to whom the composer bequeathed his singular scores and instruments.

Partch, perhaps the furthest out of all the way-out Daddies of contemporary composition, was the creator of a unique system of "Just Intonation" he called "Monophony." The system shoehorned between the octaves nearly four times as many tones as the 12-tones-between-octaves most Western ears are happy with. Instead of the tired old do-re-me-fa-sol-la-ti routine and their attendant "half tones," Partch laid down something like, do-yo-jo-blo-go-slo-ko-ko-mo-re-sey-hey-ok-oui-si-si-hee-hee-fa-nah-yah-so-wo-mo-no-oh-la-pah-rah-rah-ti-ni-wi-ni-bi-ki-ni, with about a dozen half tones squeezed in for spice. And THAT was in the 1930s.

Other composers—including Tcherepnin, Haba, Carrillo and Ives—wrote pieces that explored "smaller intervals" between octaves.

But no one ever had the Apollonian tenacity to take the notion as far as Partch, who died in 1974, at age 73, in San Diego. His tapestry of sound, looming from the self-made instruments, yields an aural landscape that is all-encompassing: simultaneously primitive and futuristic, alternately bell-like, cascading, droning, hypnotic, and often buoyed by human voices.

Raised by missionary parents on the southern Arizona border at the turn-of-the-century, Partch tamed several mail-order string and wind instruments by the age of six. He started composing music at 14, picking up pocket money as a piano player in silent movie houses. By 28, Partch was able to burn up, in an iconoclastic huff, a healthy body of traditionally-inspired originals in a pot-bellied stove in New Orleans. After that, the loner genius lit out on a never-before-traveled road, composing only in his custom-made 43-tone scale. He was hellbent on denouncing the tyranny of the piano and the sorry handful of notes it offered to convey the soul's longing through music. To share his system with the world, he inked a deliriously detailed how-to manual, *Genesis of a Music* (first published in 1949, updated, republished and still in print from De Capo Press, New York). During the Depression, Partch worked as a fruit-picker and newspaper proofreader.

In 1934, a Carnegie grant financed a work-study sojourn in Europe, where he met and impressed W. B. Yeats, whose *Oedipus Rex* translation Partch was hot to set to song. Upon returning stateside, Partch hoboed the West for eight years, riding rails and getting the inspiration for (among other things) his poetic-song series, "Barstow," which sets eight scraps of hitchhiker graffiti (copied from a highway railing on the outskirts of Barstow, California) to Partch's one-of-a-kind music.

Partch's travels in a roughneck world, and his uncanny ear for natural sounds and native dialects, bolstered his dream of creating a music based on "the musicality of American speech" (to use Mitchell's phrase).

A second grant, this one a Guggenheim, found Partch lumberjacking in 1945, and freed him to begin his instrument-building in earnest. From that point on, Partch dragged his instruments from one city to the next, taking months to train musicians to play them for concerts. Along the way, he found a tiny clique of private benefactors, friends, admirers and universities, to encourage his sonic investigations.

Many of Partch's best-known works were written during the conservative Eisenhower era, including the instrumental "Castor and Pollux" (1952), "Daphne of the Dunes" (originally written as "Windsong," for the experimental 1958 film of the same name) and the major "Bewitched—A Dance Satire" (1955) (the latter of which has typically titled Partch "scenes" such as "A Lost Political Soul Finds Himself Among the Voteless Women of Paradise" and "Visions Fill the Eyes of a Defeated Basketball Team in the Shower Room").

Danlee Mitchell entered the picture as a wide-eyed (and open-eared) percussion student, in 1956, at the University of Illinois, where Partch was visiting artist. It was a musical marriage made in heaven. The composer had a talented musician interested enough in his unusual works to want to perform and conduct them. Mitchell found his mentor.

In Mitchell's estimation, the opening of American minds to myriad cultural influences in the Sixties came just in time for a maverick of such a bold stripe.

For instance, even though Partch had played some of his "microtonal" music as early as the Forties in New York, the Big Apple wasn't hip enough to welcome him back until 1968. That year, the Whitney Museum of Art exhibited Partch's exotic jungle of instruments and hosted the composer, Mitchell and a dozen disciples in a performance that drew boffo national press.

"We played pieces such as 'Castor and Pollux,' 'Daphne,' 'Barstow' and an excerpt from [Partch's, long, African/Oriental inspired opera] 'Delusion of the Fury,'" Mitchell remembers of New York. "(Harry) was delighted."

The event helped inspire recordings, such as the excellent (out-of-print) duo of Columbia Masterworks albums "The World of Harry Partch" (MS7207) and "Delusion of the Fury" (M2 30576). (See box for music still available).

"It's my intuition that if Partch came along today, he would not appeal to young musicians, or audiences, the way he did then," Mitchell says. "When we put the Harry Partch Ensemble together in the early '70s, these people were at just the right place, mentally and philosophically, to want to study and play Partch's music."

Now, as ensemble members fall by the wayside, Mitchell doesn't know how he'll replace them. Concerts are few and far between as it is.

But then, "concert" is not a fitting label for a performance of Partch's work.

Partch pieces are spectacle, demanding those huge instruments doubling as scenic sculpture around which the costumed musician/performers are expected to dance, mime and (occasionally) sing and act. (For instance, the composer advises anyone attempting to play the floor-rumbling Marimba Eroica, "The instrument requires a player with robust shoulders, back and arms ... a hero of the Trojan War. In exciting and furious passages he must convey the vision of Ben Hur in his chariot, charging around the last curve of the final lap.") Partch aspired to and wrote for grand-scale ritual theatre experience. For inspiration, he dove deep into the wellsprings of Japanese Kabuki and Noh theatres, ancient Greek drama and American Indian rites.

Equally daunting, anyone in the world who wants to host a Partch airing must summon forth only those hand-crafted instruments (and musicians trained to play them).

In 1980, a German organization paid the considerable dues to transport Mitchell, two dozen players and all the instruments to concerts in Cologne and Berlin. A couple of years ago, the

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University of the Performing Arts in Philadelphia brought in Mitchell and instruments only, and had the conductor train local musicians (over three months) for four performances.

The rare West Coast performances in the past decade have drawn Partch cultists and eager first-timers like Druids to Stonehenge; but Mitchell is never sure when another public outing will occur.

Meanwhile, those stately Partch instruments hulk in their music room—like the magical singing furniture of some estranged Merlin. As they gather dust and gradually go out of tune, where is the latter-day visionary to conjure up the unheard voices humming in the metal, glass and wood? No other composer has ever written for the instruments (though a group of independent San Diego composers continue to write Partch-influenced Just Intonation pieces). Says Mitchell, flatly, "I'm not a composer."

Mitchell waits, too, for the benefactor or organization to step forward and assure the musical gifts of Harry Partch the permanent home and listening place they deserve.

As for Partch, he must have gone out with a smile on his lips. He satisfied, as he always knew he would, his life's mission: "to find freedom in the tiny vortex of my being."

In the gemlike preface to the second edition of his remarkable book, he defined a code for artists, which he himself lived and died by:

"Originality cannot be a goal. It is simply inevitable: The adventurer will undoubtedly experience ridicule, but he is inured to danger; he was not born in the woods to get scared by an owl ... let us give to music—magic, to man—magic."

HARRY PARTCH ARTICLE in Organica

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COMMENTS BY IVOR DARREG:

In my *Xenharmonic Bulletin* # 11 which appeared in Spring of 1989, I endeavor to ferret out Partch's choice of G = 392 Hz as his starting-note for tuning his instruments. The article is called PARTCH'S PITCHES. I also give frequency and cent tables for tuning his 43 chosen intervals.

As Mr. Tozian's article points out, the Partch instruments and ways of getting people to perform his music are in grave danger of being lost. One way of saving them for posterity would be to provide information on how to tune his scale on computers and on electronic instruments. I know--this angers the Purists and the people who try to make a religious cult out of Partch's legacy, but the alternative is most distressing!

For some time now, Jonathan Glasier, director of the Interval Foundation of San Diego which publishes Interval Magazine, and of the Sonic Arts Gallery, has proposed the creation of a MUSEUM OF SOUND AND LIGHT, which would have space dedicated to preserving the Partch Instruments.

Back issues of *Interval Magazine* which discuss many aspects of Partch's music and instruments are still available from Interval Foundation, P.O. Box 8027, San Diego California 92102. Tel. (619) 295-9023.

The task of keeping Partch's music alive is rendered much more difficult by the fact that it is intensely individualistic and incompatible with Establishment conventional practice.

Besides that, misinformation on Just Intonation, upon which Partch's tuning is based, is widespread; and standard books on music also censor out much important information on non-12-tone tunings or reject them entirely. That has been going on for over a century!

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Partch on Record, Film & Page

From Composers Recordings Inc. (CRI), 170 West 74th St., New York, NY 10023: The album, "Bewitched—A Dance Sature" (SD 304), the complete recording of the opera. A Harry Partch "anthology" cassette (ACS 6001), including the finale and epilogue of "Bewitched," "Castor & Pollux," "Cloud Chamber Music," "The Letter," and "And on the Seventh Day, Petals Fell in Petaluma." Also the first-ever Partch compact disc available, after March, offering the anthology as listed above, with "Windsong" added.

From New World Records, 701 7th Ave., New York, NY 10036: The album "Harry Partch/John Cage," including Partch's "The Rose," "The Wind," "Waterfall," "The Intruder," "I Am a Peach," "A Midnight Farewell," "Before the Cask of Wine," "The Street" and "The Dreamer That Remains."

From Da Capo Press, Inc., 233 Spring Street, New York, New York 10013-1578: Partch's book *Gemesis of a Music*, (\$12.95, paper); also obtainable from booksellers.

Finally, it seems that the short experimental films Partch scored for experimental filmmaker Madeline Tourtelot (*Music School* and *Windsong*, both 1958) and the Betty Freeman 1972 documentary, *The Dreamer That Remains: A Portrait of Harry Partch*, are not easily available on film, much less video. Good hunting.