



HARRY PARTCH

AN "UNHEARD OF" MUSIC

"None of his harmonies had any relation to any music I had heard before. . . . Sounds which filled me with an indefinable dread . . . unimagined space alive with motion and music, and having no semblance of anything on earth. . . . I shouted in his ear that we must both flee from the unknown things of the night. But he neither answered me nor abated the frenzy of his unutterable music."

— H.P. Lovecraft
"The Music of Erich Zann"

See them dance, watch them move: a full moon rising suddenly over the north woods, or the snow falling *with a bang* — it is the apocalyptic joker, Harry Partch, the Human Fly of musical consciousness, climbing the highest structures and beyond!

Hegel said that nothing great was ever accomplished without passion. It is passion, above all, that is exemplified in Harry Partch's music. He was a vertiginous one-eyed jack, an inspired rebel — no, a *revolutionary*: Having overthrown all conventions, he revealed endless sunrises and sunsets of tonal quality and modular vibrations, mysteriously soft at times, then cut in half like a wave by a maniacal speedboat, and invariably more delicious than a psychopathic diamond sleepwalking through a shattered mirror.

Exemplary partisan of an extreme Romanticism, Partch was forced to pursue his auditory dreams in that peculiar domain of solitude set aside for "artists," courtesy of man's

inhumanity to man. He was an "outsider," a solitary seeker, but never a snob. If an insane/insipid/inhuman social setup made his preoccupations seem remote from the day-to-day concerns of the great majority of humankind, keeping all but a small minority from knowing his music, he nonetheless consistently affirmed and helped fulfill the best aspirations of his species-being — for liberty, equality and fraternity, beyond all preposterous dualisms and other pitiable constraints. And notwithstanding the fact that he is still regarded by the lame police dogs of "musical appreciation" as impossibly *far out*, he always drew — deeply and powerfully — on authentically popular sources. He was warmly responsive to the music of tribal societies and to medieval choral chants, and no less attentive to sounds very much "in the air" of our own time. His long-standing obsession with hoboos, whose presence looms so large in some of his works, unmistakably indicates his social *direction*, passionately on the side of those who have nothing to lose.

Partch's specific lifelong aim was the *expansion of music*, which naturally entails the expansion of consciousness and therefore the expansion of the possibilities of life. Recognizing that the potentialities of music immeasurably exceeded the capacities of existing musical instruments, he calmly set about inventing his own. Utilizing *dozens* of these weird and captivating instruments, he devoted himself untiringly, year after year, to unleashing furious,

restless, defiant, untamable collages of sound against a world that uses its portable radios primarily to prevent people from hearing the voices of their own dreams. His vibrant, Beowulf-like sounds bring forth emotions long considered extinct, and simultaneously inspire the apparition of other emotions that are wholly new and unheard of. His music is *initiatory*, appealing to all the senses, wondrous and wet, a passion-fruit lamp that reveals the light of the unknown.

While so many other "modern composers" have only kidded themselves into a dull, empty corner by following "avant-garde" recipes — often little more than forlorn rainchecks on *satori* experiences read about in books written by misinformed tourists — Partch quietly (musically) followed his own ferociously anti-academic path, refusing the star-studded plaudits of mere virtuosity and perfection for the thankless but irresistible pleasures of reckless temptation and carefree discovery.

Envy of the criminal, which borders on a secret American nostalgia, lies — very logically — in the fact that crime is one area where individuality is taken for granted.

Others will come to write his biography, to compile memoranda and anecdotes, to analyze, annotate, criticize, discourse, dissect, discourage and disgust. It is hardly good news that his instruments are to wind up on display in the Smithsonian Institution, under the uncomprehending eye of the capitalist State. Is Partch to become another King Tut — his works enshrined by card-carrying members of that class of fools who, after extracting every trace of a person's living magic, can only bury his instruments behind theft-proof security glass?

I care even more for the divination of an ancient spirit of which I know nothing. To encom-

pass — at least intuitively — thousands of years of man's sensitivity to his world is to rise above the merely encyclopedic.

Let us listen to Harry Partch before the critics and scholars submerge him irretrievably under the "merely encyclopedic." His annihilation of musical dogma, and all repressive frameworks, is the proof that his was first and last a *quest for freedom*. Screaming for life, his music helps realize the future.

Let us add that his music is vastly more than what we have been accustomed to regard as music. It could more accurately be called *ritual drama*. His players are also actors and dancers — intermingling, trading places, undulating through a shifting hysteria of musical/magical progression. Human ritual generally has been accompanied by an activity called music: Christian choirs, Buddhist bells, Hindu and Moslem chants, African and Native American drums, Australian Aboriginal bones — All are born of the primordial mud of the rhythmic swellings and pulsations of the earth, and wakened by the very cry of life. Equally at home amidst the most ancient hieroglyphs and tomorrow's news, Harry Partch helped restore to music something of the incendiary promise that once permitted it to shake walls, disturb gods, and make the universe jump for joy.

Originality cannot be a goal. It is simply inevitable.

Walk through the darkened room, feeling your way with your hands, and turn on the Harry Partch switch. It will help you see where you have been, where you are, and where you are going.

Norman KAESEBERG

DISCOGRAPHY

The World of Harry Partch (Columbia Masterworks Ms 7207)

And on the Seventh Day Petals Fell in Petaluma (Composers Recordings, 170 W. 74th St., New York, N.Y. 10023)

Delusions of the Fury: A Ritual of Dream and Delusion (Columbia Records M2 30576)

The Bewitched — A Dance Satire (Composers Recordings)

Ulysses Departs from the Edge of the World (Orion)

Several other works (including *Six Poems by Li Po*, *U.S. Highball* and *The Wayward* are available on Gate 5 Recordings.

See also Harry Partch's important book, *Genesis of a Music* (New York, DaCapo, 1974), from which the above quotations have been taken.



Pierre SANDERS: Comic Strip from LE BLEU CIEL, Belgian surrealist newspaper (1945)