

Partch Devises 43-Tone Scale and Unique Instruments to Match



The concert group shown above is the only one of its kind in the world, and in all history, for it plays music written to a new 43-note octave of Harry Partch, connected with the University of Wisconsin, on instruments which he has devised and the only ones of their kind in the world.

The picture, taken in the living room of

the home of Marshall Glasier, Madison artist, because Partch has no offices on the crowded campus, shows Partch with an adapted guitar at the left; Hulda Gieschen, at the harmonic canon in the background; Lee Hoiby, at the tall kithara at the right, and William Wendlandt at the diamond marimba in the right foreground.

—State Journal Staff Photo

Harry Partch is engaged in a one-man rebellion against much that he doesn't like in music.

Music — and particularly classical music — is in a rut, he says, with musicians' copycatting the works of people dead and gone from two to 20 generations on instruments kept from wholesome change by the iron chains of tradition.

And, he says, tradition and formality are stifling much that is creative and vigorous and alive in music — and again with particular reference to classical music.

43-Tone Scale

Partch criticizes, but he does more than criticize.

He has developed a new tonal scale, with 43 tones to the octave instead of the conventional 12 of the piano "which everyone accepts as though Moses had tapped it out of Mt. Sinai."

He has written new and exciting music to the new scale, with its greater flexibility.

And he has had to devise new instruments capable of playing the new music.



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"Music can't stand still," he says. "It isn't standing still. Yet we, with our instruments and our techniques and our capabilities hamstrung by what is handed down to us by the founding fathers of music . . . we're standing still."

A project associate under the graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, Partch continues:

'Creative Art'

"I'm trying to show that music can be a creative art . . . not merely an alibi for frustration."

What does young Johnny do when his mother decides that he is to be taught music? queries Partch.

"He picks out an instrument that other centuries has designed and other generations have made. He practices exercises that someone else has prescribed, learns rules that someone else has devised, and plays — generally with reluctance — little pieces which someone else has written."

And that description applied, at least in part, to Partch' own experiences.

He was studying music at the University of southern California in the 1920's and, after spending "three long months on the resolutions of the dominant seventh chord" could see no reason to continue.

He Quit School

He quit school, taking all sorts of jobs while he studied fundamentals of music, delving into history and theory and trying to discover where music had gone, as he believed, astray.

He searched into the theory of sound and, aided by a knowledge of science far advanced from the day when earlier concepts of music had been laid down, has beliefs began to jell.

First of all there was the matter of the 12-tone scale, which had standardized on the principle of the piano, and . . . he wondered if it had been standardized at the right place. Physics told him that in a middle octave, the ear can distinguish as many as 200 tones and "it seemed odd to waste the tones between the keys of a piano if they could be used."

Scale Explained

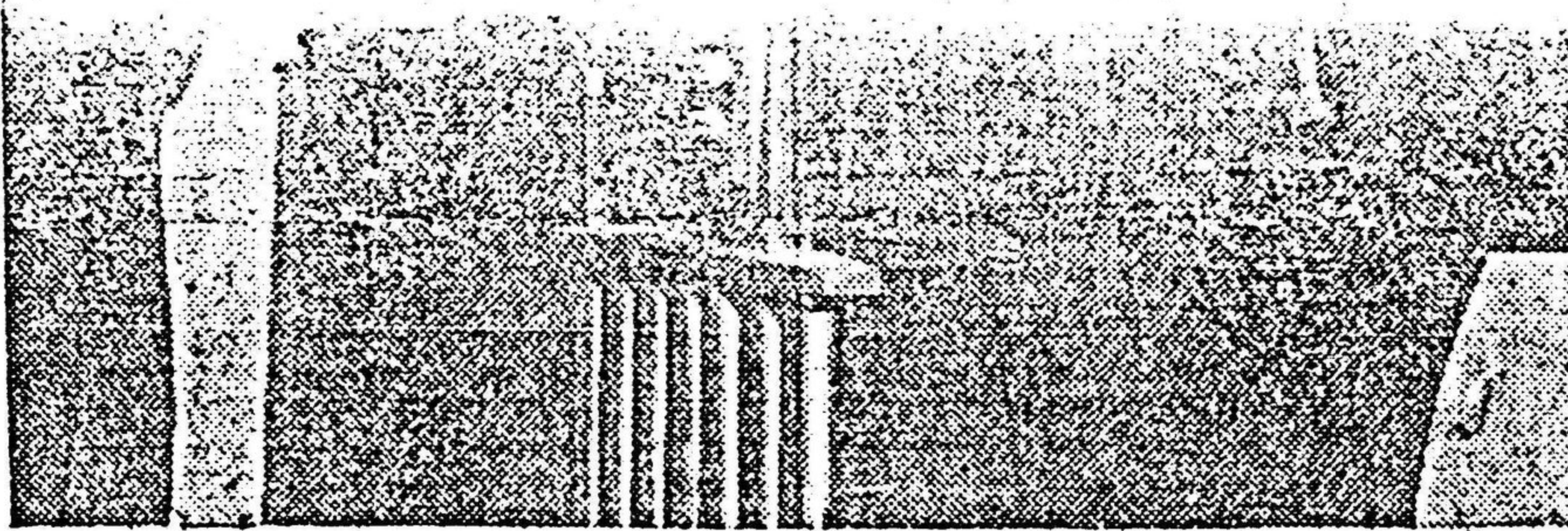
And further studies showed him that a 43-tone scale would give a true, rather than a tempered (piano) intonation . . . that it would use much more of the chromatic scale perceptible to the ear . . . and it would increase the present triad basis of tonality to a hexad basis.

(If all of that isn't clear, don't worry. A writer for a national magazine spent a week with Partch, left a great admirer of his music, but thoroughly confused as to the science that lay behind it, and proceeded to write a story which confused himself, the public, and Partch.)

But, to get back to California . . . A group of Los Angeles persons, impressed with his ability, incorporated and sent Partch to New York. There he got a Carnegie grant and, when it ended, went back to add jobs again.

For eight years, he drifted about the country, learning the jargon and lore of the hobo as he wandered the country over, from the harvest fields to the lumber camps, out to sea and to the vineyards, washing dishes and traveling on "the drags."

It was in 1943, in New York,



—State Journal Staff Photo
Lee Hoiby is shown at the Kithara, which, with its 12 groups of six strings each, is the equivalent of 12 open stringed guitars. Music for the instrument and the instrument itself was devised by Harry Partch, whose book, "Genesis of a Music," is to be published by the University of Wisconsin press.

that he won a Guggenheim fellowship, renewed the next year. And it was that year that Gunnar Johansen, University of Wisconsin professor of music and noted pianist, met him. The result was that Partch came to the Madison campus.

With him he brought the instruments which he has molded into a concert group. They are odd looking, and it is a toss-up whether they have caused more comment than his 43-tone scale.

The kithara, for instance, is patterned on old Greek lines, something like a giant lyre with hollow arms and base and 12 groups of six strings in different keys. Tremendously flexible, it is the equivalent of 12 guitars with open strings. It is electrically amplified.

Also electrically amplified is the harmonic canon. This instrument has 44 strings, all tuned to a single tone . . . G, in this case. Movable bridges can slide along the strings, so that the instrument can be tuned to almost any scale theorizable.

Five-Plane Keyboard

Another is the chromelodeon, a harmonium fitted to the 43-note scale which necessitates, to accommodate the added tones, a five-plane keyboard. And there is the diamond marimba, in a new tuning and with a "diamond" arrangement by which a sweep of the hammer diagonally one way will bring major chords and the other way the minors.

It is, says Partch, the first chordal marimba.

And there are others, the adapted viola and guitars and a double canon built for dance classes.

"They look strange to the eye accustomed to conventional instruments, but . . .

The best criteria is to listen to the music.

To begin with, it's different, and it's disturbing. Partch works with the inflections of spoken words, harmonizing them in his music, building the music around the voice as another instrument . . . not as an accompaniment but as a part of a whole, using the subtleties of the 43-note scale to follow the subtleties of the human voice.

And that brings up another of Partch's theories.

The vitality of European traditions of music is on the ebb, he says, while the "popular" music shows "the only evidence of real musical ability in the country."

Plus Third Ingredient

What music needs, he contends, is to combine the idealizing qualities of the "classical" music with the vitality, the verve, and the freedom of popular music plus . . . a third ingredient.

That ingredient is something

that is to come from experiment with sound and new instruments, from a probing into "the adventure of sound association with common experience, such as the sounds of speech."

"The connection between emotions and sound has hardly been touched," he says.

But, to get back to his music . . . it's different and it's disturbing, to repeat. Partch has put out one album, called U. S. Highball, based on hobo experiences, and people either like it immensely or not at all.

It's strange violence and turbulence, in places, bemuses some. There was the man who tried to walk through a closed door while under its influence. And others reject it violently as being too radically different from what they have been accustomed to hear.

Partch doesn't defend his music, but he defends his principles. He wants more experiment, and breaking away from tradition, whether his particular music or instruments are accepted.

And, in the meantime, he is spending his life trying to bring that change in music which he believes is necessary.

LOG CABIN MARKER

HUNTINGTON, Ind. — (U.P.) — The Huntington County Medical society is erecting a marker at the site of a log cabin where former Gov. Chase S. Osborn, Michigan, was born more than 87 years ago. Both Osborn's parents were pioneer physicians in Huntington county during Civil war days.

HAWAII FATTENS 'EM

SAN FRANCISCO — (U.P.) — Pan-American Airway reports that male passengers weigh from two to five pounds more when they return from Hawaii than they did when they left the United States. Discreetly, the air line's survey makes no mention of women passengers.

Kwara Sarkin Jebba has just died in Kontagora, Nigeria, at the age of 110.

A Sign of Satisfaction



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