

WHY IS HARRY PARTCH IMPORTANT?

by

B. McLaren

Much of the material written about microtonality in the second half of the twentieth century refers to Harry Partch. Why? What did Partch do or think that makes his contribution so important?

[1] Partch was the first composer to construct an orchestra of microtonal just intonation instruments and to train performers to play music on them in concert.

Thus he is the first American microtonalist to force his way into the so-called "serious" concert halls on a regular basis.

Partch's debut at Carnegie Hall in the mid 1940s proved that he could make microtonal music acceptable to general audiences. Throughout his subsequent career, Partch refused to settle for anything less than rehearsed concerts in high-quality venues: university auditoria, respected halls like the Carnegie, etc. Not for Partch the informal "happening" in a small loft in Greenwich Village; Partch wasn't interested in presenting his work at an impromptu cocktail party at some tiny art gallery opening in Soho. He demanded and received carefully staged performances in large, appropriate concert halls.

Partch was important, therefore, because he was the first microtonalist in America who broke into the serious concert halls on a regular basis. While other composers (Ives, Copland, Bartok, etc.) produced one or two quartertone pieces for concert performances, Partch produced an entire body of work. Moreover, he took great pains to see that the performances came off as well as possible--no easy task, given that many of his performers were students whose rehearsal schedule proved erratic at best.

Harry Partch wasn't the first microtonalist to espouse just intonation in the 20th century. Many other influential composers and instrument-builders proposed the resurrection of just intonation: Shohei Tanaka, Kathleen Schlesinger, Wilfrid Perrett, Carl Eitz, Eivind Groven, Thaddeus Cahill. But all of these people were either pure theorists who composed little or no music (and none of it for concert performance), or they were instrument-builders. In any case, these musicians concerned themselves primarily with producing a single elaborate device for the performance of just intonation music. They did not tackle the problem of finding a way of bringing JI to the attention of a wider audience.

And so Partch was important because he not only theorized and built instruments, he was the first American composer to force microtonal music into the concert hall on a regular basis. After Partch opened the door, other microtonalists could not be denied. Once Partch had performed microtonal music at Carnegie Hall, no American could claim that "audiences in this country won't listen to that weird stuff."

All subsequent microtonal composers and performers owe Harry Partch a great debt for breaking through the invisible wall that kept non-12 music out of the concert hall.

[2] Partch was the first modern just intonation theorist to go beyond the Greeks without limiting himself to an equal tempered approximation of just intonation.

All of the other major theorists and instrument-builders based their just intonation systems on Greek practice.

Kathleen Schlesinger did so explicitly. Her 13-limit system of subharmonic scales, set out in her 1939 book "The Greek Aulos," imaginatively reconstrued Greek musical practice. Contemporary scholarship indicates that Schlesinger's ideas bear little relation to likely Greek musical theory...but even so, she offered a daring and interesting set of just intonation scales for would-be microtonal composers. (The Australian composer Elsie Hamilton appears to have taken Schlesinger's tuning system and run with it, composing a number of microtonal just intonation pieces for retuned piano and orchestra.)

However, Schlesinger based her theories entirely on classical Greek models. Her works flow from a study of Greek music texts, of paintings on Greek vases, and measurements of the tone-holes in surviving Greek wind instruments. She even hired craftsmen to build replicas of ancient Greek lyres and auloi. And so her theories proposed an intriguing direction for microtonalists in the 20th century--but not a new one. She remained bound by ancient Greek paradigms.

Hans Keyser's system of just intonation, while it anticipates Partch's diamond in some ways, is based on the Pythagorean *tetraktys*, and thus derives at a basic level from Greek theory.

Wilfrid Perrett also offered a number of interesting ideas.. Again, however, he started from Greek musical theory.

Like Schlesinger, Perrett built an instrument to realize just intonation music--in his case, a retuned pump organ. He proposed novel harmonizations of Greek scales. (Alas, all evidence runs against the idea that the classical Greek composers ever thought of harmonizing their music with vertical triads.) Perrett's system of just intonation did not venture as far into the upper reaches of the harmonic series as did Schlesinger's, since he stopped at the 7th harmonic while Schlesinger proceeded to the 13th. But--like her--Perrett based his system of just intonation entirely on conjectured Greek theory and practice...as implied in the title of his 1926 book "Some Questions of Musical Theory."

Carl Eitz, Shohei Tanaka, Thaddeus Cahill and Eivind Groven all built organs using the 53-tone equal tempered scale to approximate just intonation ratios. While this approach to just intonation broke with Greek musical theory, it also had drawbacks... It restricted the erstwhile microtonalist to inaccurate approximations of small integer ratios, defeating the main purpose of just intonation.

Western European composers and theorists weren't the only ones to advocate just intonation in the 1910s and 1920s. The Soviet composer Leonid Sabaneev built at least one just intonation instrument and he espoused his own just intonation system throughout the 1920s. But, like the other 20th century precursors to Partch, he was unable or unwilling to produce a coherent musical theory for using just intonation...other than the traditional harmonic series approach of the classical Greeks.

This is an important point. So it's worth taking a moment to discuss Greek methods of scale construction.

From Pythagoras onward, Greek music theorists started by dividing a string, then succes-

sively subdividing it until they reached some arbitrary number of divisions. These string divisions formed the basis of the just intonation scales used in Greek music, and of all subsequent just intonation theory--until Partch.

Thinking of just intonation in terms of subdividing a string produces problems for the JI music theory. One of the most basic dilemmas is that (prior to Partch) no theorist could justify using a particular just intonation. Many just intonation theorists offered many different systems, but each one was arbitrary. No just tuning system was both musically sufficient and theoretically necessary.

This arises from the nature of string subdivisions. Once one begins to section off a string, there is no necessary stopping point; one can continue to infinity. Moreover, once one fixes some member of the harmonic series as the highest prime used in a just ratio, one immediately faces the question: Why? If 7 is good, why isn't 11 better? If 13 is better still, why not 17? And so on, up to infinity

This led to endless debate between just intonation theorists. Which scale was best? Which limit was most musical? The acrimony and arguments tended to drown out the music, leaving the impression that just intonation theory prior to Partch was a "Serbonian bog into which whole armies of musical-minded mathematicians and mathematically-minded musicians have disappeared without a trace." [James Clerk Maxwell, Rede Lecture, 1867]

This traditional Greek approach to just intonation dominated microtonal JI theory from the time of Ptolemy in 100 A.D. It ruled Europe through Boethius circa 600 A.D. up to the time of Prosdocius to Vicentino and Mersenne, onward to Helmholtz, Ellis and Bosanquet in the 1800s...and the obsession with Greek theories of just intonation remained very much alive and well when Harry Partch wrote his breakthrough *Exposition of Monophony* in 1927-1933.

Partch's "Exposition" represents a breakthrough because, for the first time, Partch reached beyond the Greek method of just intonation scale construction by string subdivision.

Instead, Partch introduced a more sophisticated way of constructing just scales. He set out the first N members of the harmonic series and multiplied them by the first N members of the subharmonic series, generating a set of $N^2 - N$ pitches. (If $N = 6$, $N^2 - N = 29$) Partch called this a "tonality diamond" (because he turned the square on its side to form a diamond).

In one leap, Partch introduced an entirely new **functional** method of generating just intonation scales. Subsequent theorists were no longer limited to conceiving of just scales as string subdivision.; Instead, they could now view just intonation scales as cyclic groups generated by mathematical functions operating on sets of integers. (In the case of Partch's tonality diamond, the functions concerned are $y = x$ and $y = 1/x$ functions and the set is a sub-group of positive odd integers).

By introducing the concept of the tonality diamond, Partch immediately gave just intonation composers a rationale for their scales: Partch's diamond pitches are necessarily limited to a specific group of $N^2 - N$ pitches, where N is the number of integers in the generating set. For the first time, just intonation composers knew where to stop. For the first time, they had a theoretically necessary and musically coherent set of scale pitches which did not arise *ex nihilo*, from the theorist's whim.

Most subsequent just intonation theory flows from Partch's crucial insight. His breakthrough: the realization that just scales construction could be reformulated as mathe-

mathematical functions operating on subsets of the integers. Since 1933, it has become commonplace for just intonation music theorists to speak of "generating sets" and operations performed on them.

In the case of Erv Wilson's combination product sets, the generating set is a group of positive odd integers and the function performed is the combination of N out of M of these. In the case of John Chalmers, the sets are formed from the pitches of the Dominant, Tonic and Mediant chords in a given limit and the operation performed is the union of sets. The case of my just scales, the sets are various groups of juggler numbers or gapped primes or hailstone numbers and the operations performed are various linear recursions... But in every case the essential ideas remain elaborations of Partch's basic concept.

Thus Partch is the theoretical wellspring from which a enormous amount of exciting just intonation music theory has flowed.

[3] Partch was the first just intonation composer and theorist to recognize that modulation was musically superfluous.

Prior to Partch, most of the attacks on just intonation center around the difficulty of modulation.

This "problem" crops up again and again in the writings of those who sought to discredit just intonation; J. Murray Barbour, for example, ridicules erstwhile just intonation composers as "mathematicians who know no music, and musicians who know no mathematics." in his 1934 article "Just Intonation Confuted."

Again and again, critics cited the "impossibility" of modulating through just key cents. (This, since no power of a prime greater than 2 is ever equal to a power of 2.)

From the 17th century -- when Giuseppi Di Doni fought a losing and passionate battle to re-introduce just intonation in to western music -- to the 1930s, music theorists dismissed the idea of just intonation. They scoffed at the idea of composing or performing in just intonation as impractical...**always** because of the difficulties introduced for modulation.

Partch was the first music theorist to destroy that objection.

He recognized that the expanded musical resources of just intonation made modulation unnecessary. In the Vivian Perls interview in 1974, Tape 2, Side, Partch states: "I really didn't know at the time how tremendously variable [the musical resources within a single 1/1] were and what great potentialities there were *within* one tone... I just said, 'Look...I'm going to start with one tone, I'm going to see what happens.' And then I remember walking along the levee of the Mississippi in New Orleans and realizing some of the great potential of just that one tone."

Partch's crucial insight? The harmonic/melodic subtleties within a single microtonal just intonation key could produce the same musical effect as modulation through equal-tempered keys.

This solved one of the most perplexing problems to bedevil just intonation composers. From the time of Bach and Froberger, european composers had used movement through a succession of keys to add zest and spice to the music. Countless western composers had delighted audiences by introducing unexpected tones and effervescent modulations.

Partch recognized that even though a just intonation composer stayed in one key, movement

through different higher members of the harmonic series could provide the same function. Partch's insight offered just intonation composers a way to add the same kind of zest and spice to their music that Bach and Handel had added to theirs.

This was an enormously important idea. At one blow, Partch's epiphany shattered three hundred years of objections to just intonation. The purported difficulties of modulating through a succession of just key centers now became irrelevant, since a just intonation composer could achieve the same musical effects without modulation.

In practice, Partch's inspiration works extremely well. Many subsequent just intonation composers have produced exciting and dramatic music *without* modulating, simply by exploring the iridescent gamut of microchromatic pitches offered by the expanded resources of just intonation.

[4] Partch broke composers out of the straitjacket of thinking in terms of traditional european instruments.

The "impossibility" of just intonation in musical practice can be traced to the development of the modern orchestra and the piano.

By mass-producing musical instruments, 19th-century manufacturers not only put music within reach of the general public... They also unwittingly locked composers into twelve tone equal temperament. It is impractical to build one-of-a-kind pianos in a mass production factory. It is also impractical to tune a piano to more than 12 pitches out of a given just intonation scheme... And once one limits oneself to 12 pitches, why not stay with twelve **equal** pitches?

The problems grow progressively greater with woodwind and brass instruments. Since they must be "lipped" to play in tune with 12 tone equal temperament, a player needs must throw away many year of equal-tempered performance practice in order to sound just intonation pitches. And so an orchestra would have had to entirely re-learn their performance skills from zero.

String players faced the same daunting challenge (although they are used to sounding just fifths because of their Pythagorean tuning--but they are not used to sounding, for example, 17/16 intervals, or 31/17, etc.). And so it was impractical to ask performers to play just intonation composition using traditional european musical instruments.

Partch recognized this early on. He burned his 1928 just intonation string quartet in 1930. And, although an article by Bertha Knisely in 1933 in the magazine *Los Angeles Saturday Night* states that Partch went to New York in search of funding and craftsmen to "adapt" a trio of string instruments to his just intonation pitches, it's clear that by 1934 Partch had realized the impracticality of the idea. By the time he got his Carnegie grant in 1934 he had abandoned the idea of performing just intonation music with traditional european instruments.

Most of Partch's Carnegie grant in 1934 went into constructing his first entirely new instrument. (The adapted viola was a modification of an existing 19th century orchestral instrument.) To wit, a microtonal just intonation harmonium which he christened the Ptolemy (probably a bow to Wilfrid Perrett's just harmonium, named the Olympion).

From 1934 on, Partch diverged ever more steadily from the european tradition. Instead,

Partch built a succession of just intonation psaltery and wooden/bamboo/metal percussion instruments.

By abandoning western instruments and building his own orchestra, Partch started a revolution. The entire contemporary mass movement toward homebuilt instruments can be traced back to Partch's influence. As John Chalmers has pointed out, "Harry Partch [was] an American original who singlehandedly made extended just intonation and home-built instruments not only acceptable, but virtually mandatory for musical experimenters at some stage in their careers." [Chalmers, J., "Divisions of the Tetrachord," pp. 2-3, 1993]

Partch's crucial realization?

By the late 1940s, electric power tools made it possible for a modern composer to build his own orchestra--if traditional western paradigms were thrown out.

Many scholars have credited Partch with realizing that non-western instruments were an idea whose time had come. Yet too little credit has been given Partch for his really big idea... Namely, that technology had advanced to the point where it was practical, for the first time in history, for a single person to build and maintain his own **orchestra** of microtonal instruments.

It is an accident of history that Partch was the first microtonal composer to come along at a point where electric-powered consumer tools and "do-it-yourself" ethos allowed a microtonalist to "do it all" hi/rself.

While this confluence was an historical accident, chance (as Edison said) favors the prepared mind. Thus Partch's contribution as an instrument-builder is vital. The entire history of subsequent instrument-building by modern microtonal composers can be traced back to Partch's labors in the woodworking shops of the University of Wisconsin from 1948 onwards.

[5] Partch was the first microtonal composer to combine scholarship with instrument-building and composition and performance as weapons against the conventional musical orthodoxy.

Other xenharmonists proved adept as theorists, but lacked interest in composing music for their microtonal systems--for example, Mersenne, Huyghens, Helmholtz, Ellis, Bosanquet. Or they spent their entire lives building one single microtonal instrument, but never developed a convincing theoretical justification for the use of microtonal music--for example, David Ward Poole, Carl Eitz, Henry James White, Thaddeus Cahill.

Other microtonally-minded scholars excelled at interpreting and recognizing the truly alien nature of classical Greek music theory and practice--for example, Kathleen Schlesinger, Otto Gombosi, M. L. Hunt. But they did not take the next step and apply their understanding of these different musical paradigms to the problems faced by contemporary composers with the so-called "exhaustion of tonality" in the 1920s-1960s. (Like Mark Twain's death, reports of the demise of tonality in western europe during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s appear to have been exaggerated.)

Partch was the first composer to not only re-discover the radically different nature of Greek, Babylonian, Chinese and Sumerian musical theories, but also to champion them in practice as a solution to the problems facing the contemporary composer of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. (Earlier, in the 1870s, George Biddell Airy had also written about the importance of the harmonic series to the basis of western music in "On Sound," but his text compromises and

settles on equal temperament as the best musical solution. Hermann L. F. Helmholtz's "On the Sensations of Tone" takes the same ideas to a more radical conclusion--namely, that just intonation is theoretically superior to equal temperament. However, Helmholtz did not build large numbers of just instruments, nor did he compose or perform just intonation music. Henry Cowell also espoused non-western musical forms--but again, only in the context of the 12 tone equal tempered scale. By the time Partch finished writing "Genesis Of A Music," Colin McPhee had written extensively about Javanese musical paradigms. However, McPhee's post-1939 compositions used Balinese and Javanese musical forms forced into 12 tone equal temperament. Thus Partch remains the first modern theorist/composer to champion both non-western musical structures **and** non-western pitches.)

Within the western tradition, another group of microtonalists proceeded down the path of subdividing the whole-tone to obtain 24, 36, 48 and up to 96 equal tempered pitches per octave (Ivan Wychnegradsky, Julian Carrillo, Alois Haba, Areseny Avraamov). But the theoretical and musical justifications for these equal divisions of the octave proved less convincing. In truth, the main justification for quartertone music was that it wasn't serialism, *faux* Stravinsky, or warmed-over Wagner, and it would (theoretically) be performed by conventional orchestras using conventional instruments.

Throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, a small (yet vocal) contingent of theorists espoused 19 or 31 or 53 equal divisions. (Eivind Groven, William Piehl, Joseph Yasser, Adriaan Fokker, Thorwald Kornerup, and many others.) These tunings, however, proved extremely difficult to put into practice. Worse, once someone went to the immense time and trouble of constructing an instrument in 19 or 31 or 53, the composer usually had so much effort and time invested in that one tuning that there was no time or energy left to explore other microtonal tunings (as Ivor Darreg has pointed out).

By contrast, Partch used his scholarship to uncover a wealth of historical precedents for just intonation in musical theory and practice. Armed with the results of his research, he set forth an impressive argument for both the historical and practical superiority of just intonation.

Prior to Partch, exponents of just intonation relied mainly on vague numerology, abstruse mathematics, or smoke and mirrors. The work of Hans Keyser is lamentably typical in this regard, although the tradition goes back to Boethius.

Alas, numerological tirades have proven a remarkably poor justification for taking the time and trouble to build just intonation instruments and compose and perform just intonation music. So it was particularly important that Partch changed the nature of the debate.

For the first time, he linked the precedent of Greek musical theory with the dilemma introduced by the ever-increasing chromaticism of 12-tone equal tempered music by the end of the 19th century--and put his ideas into musical practice.

[6] Partch was the first composer to recognize that western note-names and conventional western notation could not adequately represent music in extended just intonation.

Although Hermann Helmholtz, Alexander James Ellis and Professor Theodor Wittstein of the University of Jena all proposed just intonation tunings between 1875 and 1888, these theorists consistently relied on conventional western notation. Daggers, slashes and apostrophes were used to denote a different "type" of a or b or c, but none of these theorists

took the crucial step of recognizing that just intonation (once extended) produces pitches which cannot be adequately described by the conventional diatonic western scale.

The pitch $11/8$ above $1/1$, for instance, is neither an F nor an F# above C; it is an entirely new interval which cannot be described in conventional western terms.

Although Wittstein, in the pamphlet "Grundzu"ge der mathematisch-physikalischen Theorie der Musik," set forth two different 5-limit just intonation tunings--one with 19 tones to the octave, the other with 30 tones to the octave--he failed to push his system to its logical limits.

Partch carried his system of first 29, then 55, then 37, then 41, then 43 just pitches to the end point demanded by his extension of just intonation--namely, a tuning system which contains pitches indescribable by standard western notation.

Partch's use of ratios rather than conventional musical notes is an important breakthrough. It encouraged future generations of microtonal composers to abandon the strictures of conventional western notation. Without realizing it, composers often limit themselves by using a method of notation which inherently limits the kind of music they are capable of imagining--Partch's notation brought through one of the most important of these limitations, and allowed composers to think directly in terms of members of the harmonic series, rather than note names like "a" or "c."

CONCLUSION

Partch's legacy comes down to us in the form of his music, his writings, his goals and his ideas.

Ironically, his musical instruments probably offer the least promising avenue for contemporary composers. Like it or not, the brutal reality remains that--ever since the start of the industrial revolution--products which require human labor have risen steadily in price.

Alas, live acoustic concerts are products which demand enormous amount of skilled labor. Thus they are slowly but surely going the way of the dodo and the carrier pigeon.

With the introduction of analog electronics in the 1950s and digital technology in the 1980s, subsequent generations of microtonal composers have progressively departed from the methods and techniques of Harry Partch. As the rain forests vanish, wood grows ever more scarce. As oil prices rise, metal becomes ever more costly to smelt and refine. Synthetic composites lie at the heart of modern materials science, and they increasingly replace traditional materials. Thus it seems likely that future performances of Partch's music, generations hence, will **not** take place on his instruments. Once the wood rots and the metal corrodes, performers in the latter half of the next century will likely produce Partch's timbres on synthetic digital controllers crafted to look like Partch's instruments. Physical modelling synthesis will allow uncannily exact duplication of Partch's timbres, but without the expense of instrument repair or the inherent inaccuracy in tuning due to changes in humidity, etc.

Too, economic constraints make it unlikely that any future microtonal composer will build and train performers to use a large orchestra of wooden microtonal instruments. (Glenn Branca has already given up. "*It was beyond my means. I had to build my own instruments, for god's sake. Or pay to have them built! With the orchestra, you hand them the paper and you go home. It's not just a matter of being easier, it's a bit more realistic.*" [Towmey, Crhis. "Glenn Branca's Sound-Field of Dreams," *MusicWorks* 66, Fall 1996, pp. 18-22])

The tab for the 1979 concert of Partch's music in Europe came to \$100,000.00 U.S. This is serious sugar. As the industrialized world's population ages, there will be less and less money for the arts, education, and anything but medical care for geezers. As a result, Partch's own music will seldom be heard live by a mass audience in the second millenium. Instead, Partch's compositions will probably reach future audiences in the form of digital recordings and computer-based interactive multimedia events--as, for example, in the web page of the British Harry Partch Society or the upcoming CRI CD set.

Some of Partch's ideas about just intonation are also now known to be incorrect.

Modern research into psychoacoustics from the 1950s onward (with the aid of digital computers to generate and analyze sound) has systematically disproven some of Partch's claims in *Genesis of A Music* about the human ear's purported "preference" for just intonation.

"In 1987, IPO issued a wonderful disc by Houtsma, Rossing, and Wagenaars entitled *Auditory Demonstration*. Tracks 58 through 61 illustrated the effects of a moderate stretching (octave 2.1 rather than 2.0) of scale frequencies and/or partial spacings. Part of a Bach chorale is played with synthesized tones. When neither scale nor partial frequencies are stretched, we hear the intended harmonic effects. When the scale is unstretched but the partial frequencies are stretched, the music sounds awful. Clearly, melodic intervals in the ratios of small whole numbers are in themselves insufficient to give Western harmonic effects." [Pierce, J. R., "The Science of Musical Sound," 1992, 2nd. ed., pg. 92]

The upshot of these developments?

As a microtonal composer in contact with many others of my ilk, it's clear to me that modern post-Partch microtonalists have typically **not** followed Partch's lead in carpentering orchestras of wood instruments. Instead, just intonation composers post-1983 (the dawn of MIDI) typically use computers and digital synthesizers, rather than lathes and jigsaws and routers.

These are details.

The essential influence of Partch's work and ideas remains profound.

While most contemporary microtonalists have not followed Partch's lead in the small things, this does not in any way diminish Harry's influence.

True, the means he used to realize his particular type of just intonation music have to a large extent been superseded by newer technologies. For example, the reed organs Partch picked up second-hand for a pittance are now fabulously expensive antiques. Another example: the plexiglas vats from which Partch constructed his cloud chamber bells are now no longer used in cloud chambers--in fact cloud chambers aren't used much in physics labs nowadays. Modern high energy physics experiments tend to take place inside large accelerators lined with digital detectors hooked up to huge computers, not in cloud chambers.

And even ardent Partch purists like Dean Drummond now use multi-track digital tape recording to generate an artificial "orchestra" of Partch instruments from a smaller group of actual instruments. So the advance of technology continues, rendering Partch's methods ever more obsolete. Nonetheless, Harry's ideals and basic inspirations still light the way for subsequent generations of microtonalists.

And so Partch's basic goals continue to energize most modern just intonation theory and practice. Not only just intonation composers, but all modern microtonalists, owe a vast debt to Partch's dedication, insights, and musical genius.

perhaps two ensembles could be involved--Newband plus an ensemble-in-training.

On another point, there *is* anecdotal evidence about how Harry wrote his melodies. Ben Johnston told me (and the scores attest) that Harry's vocal lines for Barstow, US Highball and earlier pieces were not precisely microtonal, but *freely ad libbed*. Later, he found it easier just to transcribe his performances while retaining the natural style in order to guide the performers who sang when HP didn't do the deed himself.

As to corporealism, Li Po *is not a corporeal piece* since his theories of corporealism were not yet in place. Staging it would be extra, and in my opinion, distracting from the simple elegance of the songs. The Greek Studies are also noncorporeal, as well as probably are most of the smaller songs such as many of the Intrusions, The Letter, etc. Bitter Music is noncorporeal, yet multi-media.

I grant that it would be silly to produce a "concertante" version of The Bewitched. How effective would it be to stage Bless This Home? I'll go further and argue that a staging of Barstow would be nothing better than a pantomime, since the piece is inherently the text plus accompaniment, and lacks a coherent dramatic concept, such as that found in Water! Water!.

Adam

Date: Thu, 25 Jul 1996 07:50:57 -0700
From: tuning@eartha.mills.edu
To: non12@deltanet.com
Subject: TUNING digest 790

TUNING Digest 790

Topic No. 3

Date: Wed, 24 Jul 1996 21:24:37 -0600
From: bq912@freenet.uchsc.edu (Neil G. Haverstick)
To: tuning
Subject: Denver loves 19
Message-ID: 7250324.VAA19016@freenet.uchsc.EDU

Haverstick aboard...today I got wonderful news...I won a \$1000.00 award from a local arts organization for my 19 tone piece "Jimmy and Joe"...this says several things to me; first, I totally feel that I'm on the right track with alternate tunings; 2nd, that people are pretty openminded here in Denver towards new music; and 3rd, persistence pays off. This is the 3rd year I entered this contest; of course, the piece I sent is a fast country breakdown, and rather accessible, even though it's in another tuning. Then again, who knows what judges think anyway? I am very grateful I won, and this gives me more optimism for the future.

On another note, let me say I am astonished by the discussion concerning whether or not Partch's music should only be performed on his own instruments...what a total non-issue. Who cares about such details? The music

is the issue, not the vehicle...in fact, I think it is very interesting to hear music for one instrument performed on another...perhaps a new reading of a piece can bring out things in the music that were not there before, or lend a totally new perspective to the end result. In fact, JS Bach did not specify an instrument for his Art of Fugue; so, what instrument should it be played on? Also, I say the more the merrier... once a piece is created, and is in the physical world, I feel it is fair game for any and all interpretations. I myself often have several versions of my pieces, and it's a hoot to see how they change from one situation to another. One of my guitar studies wound up as a clarinet solo, and I dug it...again, who cares?

Also, was I correct in reading a recent post which said only members of Newband could play Partch's instruments? If this is true, what a total crock of shit. Can someone explain to me what's going on here, if indeed this is true? Arrgh...Hstick

Topic No. 4

Date: Thu, 25 Jul 1996 01:19:55 -0700
From: "Jonathan M. Szanto" zanto@adnc.com
To: Tuning List g
Subject: The Reply, Part Last: Whither Harry...
Message-ID: F72E2B.23@adnc.com

To our gracious listeners,

Time to wrap up. Oh, sit down, you in the back. I realize that this is an informal forum for public opinion, but I look back over the last couple of days' postings and wish that I had prepared the material in a more rigorous way (a paper or presentation or some such); I respect the writings I have seen in the list before my joining the fray. Oh well, it be writ. I am richer for having heard other opinions (which I don't have to agree with g) and am glad to have stirred the waters. Hit it...

What I would ask, of *all* who find value in the creative output of Mr. Harry Partch, is to view his works in a different manner than most any other composer, for Partch is certainly a unique case. To constrain him, and a constraint it is, to the concert hall in a concert setting is an undeniable disservice to a larger view of "ritual-experience", a "basic mutilation". If Harry, save for "a few studies", viewed his music as embodying "dramatic ideas", why would anyone choose to lessen it's impact by presenting it in "the obsessive formality of the concert stage" or, worse yet (by leaps and bounds), an adaptation for non-Partch instruments? These actions would, as Harry said, "deny fulfillment". To agree to such a request for integrity in belief and action would beget a monumental undertaking, pointing towards a performance style that we in the West Coast group were only part way down the road to.

The question has been raised as to the substantial, yet (at face value) non-corporeal works such as the "Li Po" songs, the "Intrusions", and

similar. As Partch's aesthetic of integrated disciplines evolved over his lifetime, the later pieces he created came to embrace more of the all-involving corporealism he had sought for many years, even as the earlier, smaller pieces did not. I have often thought that his ideal of a corporeal performance could be 'backwards compatible'; a sensitive staging of even the vocal and small ensemble works, with appropriate settings, could serve to *enhance* their content, not detract from it. A difficult task, to be sure (without it seeming to be the tail wagging the dog), but how wonderful it would be to see the "Li Po" done with the instrumentalist intoning the texts himself. "Barstow", while not directly bearing a traditional story line, adapts itself well to having players in the group be 'in character' and having different players assume the singing/speaking roles. With appropriate stage design, costuming, etc., it lifts the piece to another place, someplace Partch wanted to be.

I recall a performance of "U.S. Highball" done on one of our tours that was staged in a similar manner, with an intermingling of singer-actors-players. After the performance, an audience member commented that, having been a hobo himself, the evening reminded him of not only the "sights and sounds of the road, but the smells, too!". A good justification for getting away from the "insane specialization" Partch abhorred, and a way to avoid standard concert-hall presentations. Somehow, this just doesn't jive with four people in a string quartet backing up a 'singer', even if the notes, the text -- the music -- was correctly rendered. After all, the guy who wrote it told us: "I must therefore decline to limit the dimensions of my rather intense beliefs by the modernly specialized word 'music'".

In this light, it seems doubly injurious to the experience to promote his 'music' on non-Partch instruments. They were so integral to the development of the works themselves; even as the instrumental palette expanded Partch reworked some of the older pieces (thanks to Dr. Philip Blackburn we can hear some of those, and trace a trajectory). It is inconceivable to replace the "sculptural beauty" inherent to those instruments. If they were not such a critical component, could Harry have stated:

"And as for imaginative and sculptural forms of instruments, I have easily given as much time to this endeavor as to intonation".

Brian McLaren, who got me rolling on this, had his own 'revelation':

"As a chronically unrepentant electronics gonzo, permit me a small confession: Yes, I finally built myself a duplicate of Harry Partch's Harmonic Canon I (minus Harry's bad design features). And it sounds INCREDIBLE. Johnny Reinhard has roundly chided me for slighting acoustic music. Of course, he's right. In the end, there's no substitute for live acoustic music played by good performers on real acoustic instruments. The richness and subtlety of the sound is nonpareil. [...] A universe of subtle & gorgeous xenharmonies lie within its bridges and pinblocks."

Not to mention the raw physicality that is transmitted (ideally) to the audience, the musician-dancer-actor breaking the normal bindings of a

specialist-performer. Quite a goal to shoot for: "magical-sounds, visual form and beauty, experience-ritual".

I am well aware that none of Partch's instruments emerged from the womb of creativity fully realized; some were created using the only materials he could get his hands on, using his own carpentry and other 'skills'; all of this is pretty well documented elsewhere. They were not meant for the long haul; a good portion of my time was spent in repair and replacement, and the ordeal of tuning them all was a constant ritual. Could 'better' copies be made? I'm certain of it. Should copies be made? Sure, why not? (Not counting the cost, time, effort...hah!). Would I have chucked all that work and replaced them with MalletKATS, just-tuned samples and whatever other electronic devices seemed a panacea? Not bloody likely. To do so, folks, is to truly, truly miss the point. And with only one set of instruments, it does indeed set up a horrendously frustrating set of circumstances, for all of us.

I don't harbor any illusions about what will happen from here on out. I am, in spite of the depth of my respect for Partch and my years spent with his works and creations, as powerless as any one of you in the future uses (and abuses) of Partch's body of literature. I can (and will) speak out against those performances that, by their very nature, diminish the very experiences that Partch hoped to propagate. I can (and will) speak out in favor of those people who do their utmost to ensure that integrity and respect, with regard to Harry's own guidelines and visions for his work, are the reason for laying mallet to bar, pick to string. Precious good it will do me, I imagine. It has been a few years now since I last played any of the pieces; I wish Harry had left us in a different state than we are in. That, however, is the real world, and we have to deal with Harry in his own way, problematic, cantankerous, and a pain-in-the-ass to the end. Somehow, a way will be found, and to all that care for more than frequencies in the air, Harry said: "This thing began with the truth, and truth does exist."

As an addendum, I offer these bits o' info. For those of you that have not visited the British Harry Partch Society Web site, it is a lot of fun and a bit of information. I urge you to join, if only because these guys are doing a great job of spreading the word, and are being pretty non-judgemental about it (not like me, huh?). I especially draw your attention to the July 1996 newsletter (which is not on the Web site yet), because it contains writing far more eloquent and coherent than mine regarding the Kronos "Barstow"; a must read. I will be continuing my activity in the tuning list (with a day or so off), email me if you have questions outside of the issues raised in the forum, and I will try to respond to all flames and bravos in a somewhat timely manner. Last but not least, I plan on having a very small Web site of my own up in a few days, as kind of a clearinghouse for Partch-related info. I'll post something when it's running (anybody taking bets on if I get content on the pages before Allen Strange? What a world we live in...

Yours in search of all things corporeal,
Sincerely,
Jon

--

Jonathan M. Szanto | Once upon a time |
Backbeats & Interrupts | There was a little boy |
jszanto@adnc.com | And he went outside. |

Date: Fri, 26 Jul 1996 07:50:05 -0700
From: tuning@eartha.mills.edu
To: non12@deltanet.com
Subject: TUNING digest 791

TUNING Digest 792

Topic No. 2

Date: Fri, 26 Jul 1996 16:06:46 -0700
From: "Jonathan M. Szanto" zanto@adnc.com
To: Tuning List g
Subject: Carping about Partch.
Message-ID: F94F86.A85@adnc.com

Hi, kids.

Matters to attend to. In Digest 790, Neil G. Haverstick wrote some things about the Partch debate. A couple of excerpts:

- > On another note, let me say I am astonished by the discussion
- > concerning whether or not Partch's music should only be performed on
- > his own instruments...what a total non-issue. Who cares about such
- > details? The music is the issue, not the vehicle...

Neil, I am glad to see that you are having success with your own musical adventures; the best of all possible worlds. You know, though, not everyone views music the same way. In fact, **I** care about such details, and if you would read the entire postings (droppings?) I have left, you will see that Harry felt diametrically opposed to your last statement. So, you want to play Partch's works, but you don't want to show him any respect as someone who put a lifetime into their creation. Interesting.

- > Also, was I correct in reading a recent post which said only members
- > of Newband could play Partch's instruments? If this is true, what a
- > total crock of shit. Can someone explain to me what's going on here,
- > if indeed this is true? Arrgh...Hstick

I can't explain it, and I don't like it very much myself. As I have tried to be fair about everyone's ideas, and especially as **we** tried to allow other people to be a part of Partch performances when I played in the group, I am going to try and find out more about this. This does **not**, however, negate my points regarding appropriate stewardship of an endangered species, namely the instruments themselves.

And then, in Digest 791, PAULE (sorry, I don't know a proper name here...) joined in:

- > Neil, I think you got it right. Here's a group of people who are
- > jealously guarding Partch's instruments, so that no one else may play
- > them, but if anyone tries to play Partch's music anyway, they get
- > branded as criminals by this same group. Something's disastrously
- > wrong here.

See above. Criminals -- who said that, Paul? Certainly an integrity issue, and a disservice to the guy who created the whole shebang, but I do not advocate a prison sentence. I *have* considered a 'three-strikes' law, whereby anyone who uses a Yamaha home organ in more than two performances in public would be sent to a labor camp, to divide rocks into 43 pieces. It's a joke.

- > Bach did not approve of the pianos that existed in his time, but think
- > how valuable his music has been for centuries of piano-based composers!
- > It is a remarkable disservice to the future of xenharmonic music to
- > keep Partch's work so narrowly confined.

This part is not a joke. Please read my thoughts on how Harry Partch (well Harry's thoughts, too) is a *different* case from other composers [remember: not better, different]. And then justify transcriptions again. Finally, Paul, if you could be so kind as to point out **anywhere** that Harry Partch directly stated, or even *implied*, that his creative fervor was for the betterment of the United Xenharmonic Brotherhood, International. No, Harry had his own agenda, his own life to live.

Like it or not.

All the best to you. I am wanting to find ways to hear the music that *you* two are doing -- let me know.

Cheers,

Jon

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|-----|
| Jonathan M. Szanto | Once upon a time |
| Backbeats & Interrupts | There was a little boy |
| jszanto@adnc.com | And he went outside. |
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Topic No. 9

Date: Sat, 27 Jul 1996 00:31:06 -0600
From: bq912@freenet.uchsc.edu (Neil G. Haverstick)
To: tuning
Subject: more Partch comments
Message-ID: 7270631.AAA04816@freenet.uchsc.EDU

Haverstick here...just a brief addition to the Partch comments which have been on the forum lately...I don't have a clue why Partch should be treated any differently than any other composer...am I missing something here? Also, I just want to say that elitism in the arts is really stinky, and has no place in the true artists life...music comes from sound, and many of the great spiritual traditions state that sound is a foundation of the very Universe...therefore, music belongs to everyone, and indeed is part of everyone at the deepest level. I feel musical talent is a wonderful gift, and is meant to be shared with as

many people as possible...many great artists have stated, at times, that they feel as if their music is coming from somewhere else, that they are not really DOING it, but they are only the vehicle for some higher power...of course, I feel that is absolutely true, and I myself have had the experience of seeing an idea come to me from beyond my teensy "self"; how, then, can it be "mine"? If it was given freely, then I feel it should be shared freely as well...again, any whiff of elitism is wrong, and has my utmost contempt...Hstick

End of TUNING Digest 792

Date: Sun, 28 Jul 1996 07:54:28 -0700
From: tuning@eartha.mills.edu
To: non12@delta1.deltanet.com
Subject: TUNING digest 793

TUNING Digest 793

Topic No. 1

Date: Sat, 27 Jul 1996 10:10:42 -0600
From: bq912@freenet.uchsc.edu (Neil G. Haverstick)
To: tuning
Subject: more Partch comments
Message-ID: 7271610.KAA04737@freenet.uchsc.EDU

Haverstick again...once again, pardon me if I'm wrong, but did not Partch himself, in several places in his book, get rather indignant at those folks who had possession of microtonal keyboards (such as Universities), but kept them under glass, so to speak, and would not allow access to them by interested parties? And rightfully so... Jon Szanto's comment to me in the last digest about respecting a person's wishes as to how they want their music performed, referring to Partch, was OK by me...but, again, I must state that music, once brought into the physical world, belongs to no one (except in a legal sense, to prevent them from getting ripped off)...since I did not know Partch, I am at somewhat of a disadvantage here...but, I see no sensible reason why his music should not be performed by whoever wants to, on whatever instruments they want to use. Of course, one should respect another's wishes...however, I think being selfish with one's art is unacceptable on a deep level...sorry...Hstick

Topic No. 5

Date: 28 Jul 96 02:03:21 EDT
From: Gary Morrison .2576@CompuServe.COM
To: Tuning List g
Subject: Darwinistic Tuning?
Message-ID: H8060320_71670.2576_HHB57-4@CompuServe.COM

Neil H's comments about that Partch should receive no special treatment as a composer, and that his instruments shouldn't be kept under glass, got me thinking.

To that first thought, that Partch's music should receive no special treatment, I think it's appropriate to add that it doesn't NEED special treatment. It has no problem standing on its own merits; it's downright excellent music (on the whole), by Jove!

In a similar vein, every once in a while I stop myself mid-sentence on messages to this forum and notice that I use terms like "new tunings" or "unusual tunings" instead of the term coined by my mentor (Ivor Darreg), "xenharmonics". I then think, "gee, am I subtly letting Ivor's legacy slip away"?

Then I look at myself again and realize that I'm behind schedule with the next XH Alliance Directory because I've been working with my own xenharmonic music. Is that another example of me letting Ivor's legacy slip away?

But then I read reports of Neil's and Johnny R's successful concerts, and listen to new CDs, many by new faces on the block. These are promising signs I realize.

I invariably then a very simple conclusion from all this: As long as I'm cooperating with other explorers of these new-tuning resources, and otherwise taking what seems to be the best course of action in exploring them, then what more can I ask of myself? Each of our efforts will stand for what they're worth. My music will be out there with Partch's, and Neil's, and Ivor's. A lot of people will like Partch's, others will gravitate toward Ivor's or Johnny Reinhard's, and some will dislike all of it.

Is there really any need to promote the past greats religiously? We need to make sure that their music, and their personalities, stays available and known of course. No doubt about that. But beyond negligently letting them be forgotten, isn't it best just to let composers and their music, past and present, stand for nothing more, nor nothing less, than what they are?

End of TUNING Digest 793

Date: Mon, 29 Jul 1996 07:58:04 -0700
From: tuning@eartha.mills.edu
To: non12@delta1.deltanet.com
Subject: TUNING digest 794

TUNING Digest 794

Topic No. 3

Date: Sun, 28 Jul 96 14:18:34 PDT
From: Brian Belet @SJSUVM1.sjsu.edu
To: tuning
Subject: Partch, Johnston, Kronos
Message-ID: 7282135.OAA08516@eartha.mills.edu

I saw Ben's performance of 'Barstow' with Kronos a year ago at Santa Cruz, California. While driving Ben from the San Francisco airport to the concert I asked him about the whole project (and I continued the conversation in depth while visiting Ben at his home last September). So: here's HIS take on this.

Ben has long championed the integrity of Partch, including Partch's initial statements regarding the use of his instruments, etc., etc. Ben has been using the string quartet as a modern microtonal ensemble for a long time (he has just finished his 10th quartet); in many ways this ensemble has been Ben's personal 'invention' in much the same way that Partch's instruments are.

Ben worked with Partch on the original 'Barstow', including performing in the ensemble. Ben reports that Partch was NOT always in tune (singing), and certainly his instruments are not 100% in tune with his theory. OK: so much for the sacredness of Partch's original instrumentation, etc.

Partch was a complex individual with more than a few moments of radical statements. His insistence on using only his own instruments may be one of these (my own thoughts....not necessarily Ben's). At any rate, Partch stated this long before Ben established the SQ as his own proportionally tuned ensemble.

Ben's transcriptions of 'Barstow' for SQ & voice is excellent. He consulted all of Partch's versions (sketches, etc., etc.), and called upon his experience working directly with Partch on this project. Ben's voice is just right for the performance now (he even looks the part!). The result is both true to Partch and to Ben. It is simultaneously a compliment to a former teacher/mentor and a strong statement from one of our most important living composers.

It 'works' theoretically (I've studied Ben's score in comparison to Partch's) and aurally. The current transcription IS NOT offered as a replacement for Partch's original work; rather it is a unique offering from his one student who qualified (technically and aesthetically and personally) to handle such a project. (Sure, I could do it on paper, but it would not be 'right' for me to do it. I see it as clearly another matter for Ben to do it.)

-- Brian Belet

Date: Wed, 31 Jul 1996 07:57:52 -0700
From: tuning@eartha.mills.edu
To: non12@delta1.deltanet.com
Subject: TUNING digest 796

TUNING Digest 796

Topic No. 1

Date: Tue, 30 Jul 96 10:40 EST
From: PAULE ACADIAN/ACADIAN/PAULE%Acadian@mcimail.com
To: tuning_g
Subject: RE: Carping about Partch.
Message-ID: 730154029/0005695065PK4EM@MCIMAIL.COM

J. Szanto wrote:

Finally,

Paul, if you could be so kind as to point out ****anywhere**** that Harry Partch directly stated, or even ***implied***, that his creative fervor was for the betterment of the United Xenharmonic Brotherhood, International. No, Harry had his own agenda, his own life to live.

Like it or not.

Well, I think the boys at UXB are going to be disappointed to hear that. You know, I feel such a bond with Brother McLaren and Brother Moreno after those long marches in uniform and burnings of the sacred texts of 12-tone hegemony.

Of course, a careful reading of Partch's showed that his creative fervor was solely for the betterment of Danlee Mitchell and Newband. Thanks for setting us straight.