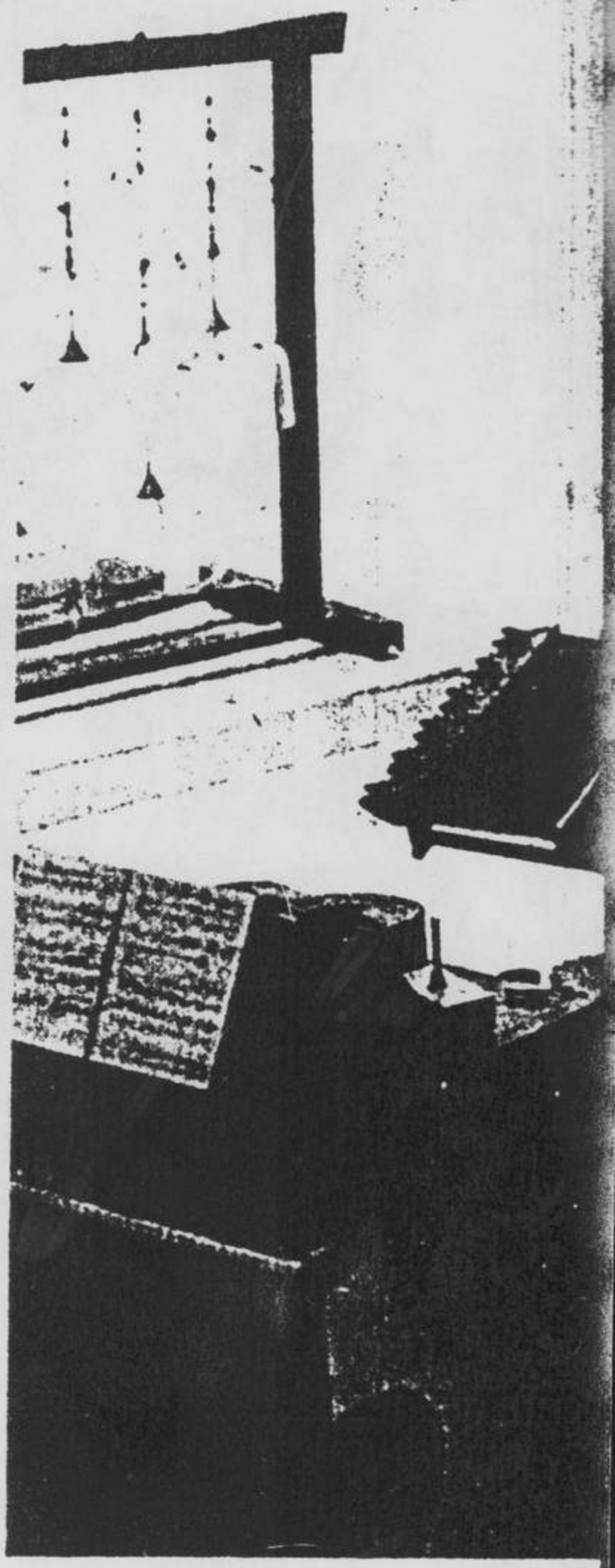
HARRY PARTCH

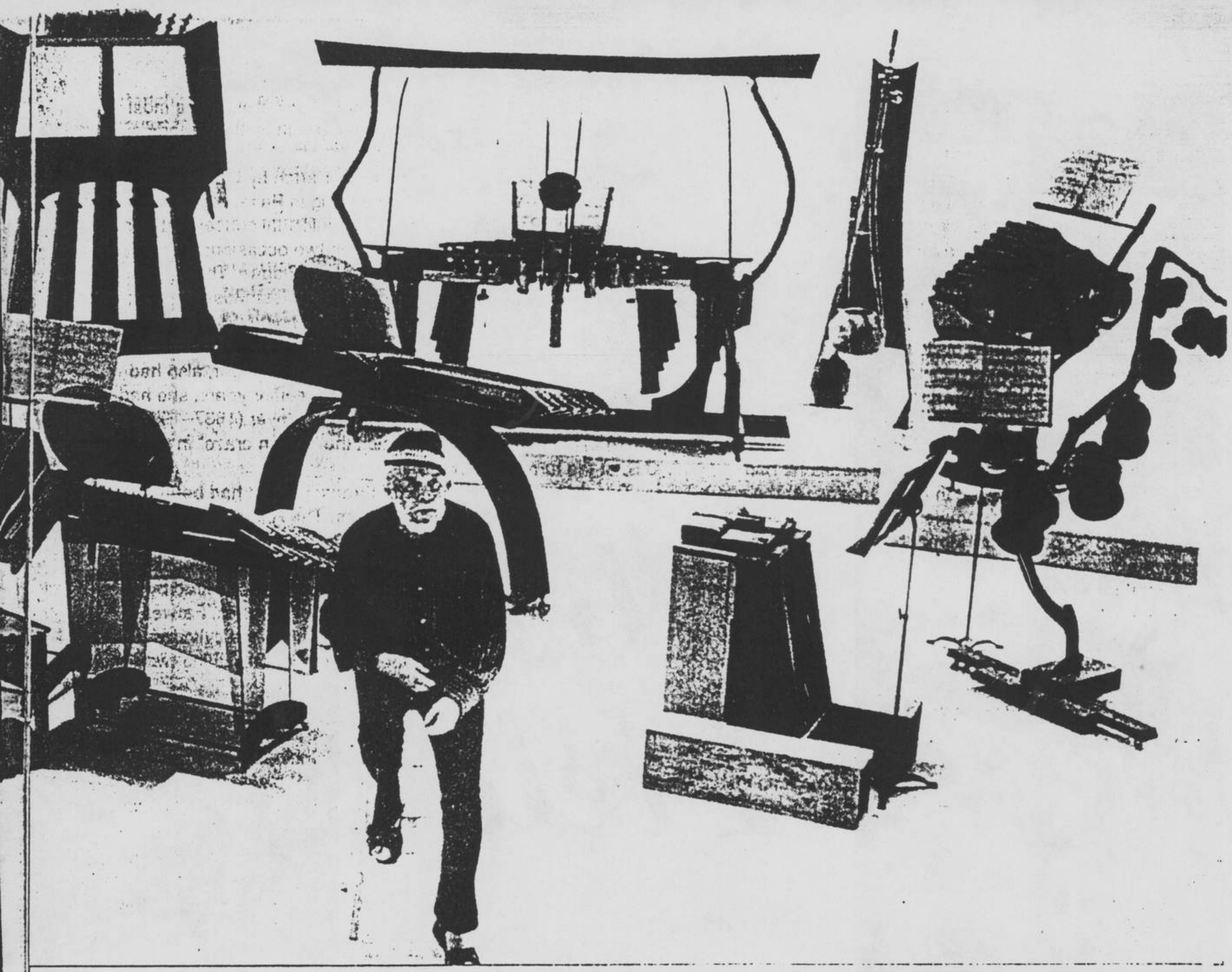
In the Field



by Richard Kassel

Early in his career, the American composer Harry Partch (1901–1974) adopted a radical view of musical pitch, along with an eclectic stylistic approach which permitted him to borrow from musical sources irrespective of their national or social origins. In the "author's preface" to the first edition of his treatise *Genesis of a Music*, Partch explains the philosophy behind his approach:

> Musical creators have been, and are, the exponents and the victims of system, philosophy, and attitude, determined for them by textbooks and classroom, and by the atmosphere in which they grow; in short, by their milieu. Consequently the later history of Western music is of *one* system, *one* philosophy, *one* attitude, and it is characterized by successive bodies of practitioners made up of multitudes of innocent believers and sprinklings of individualists who are frequently unequal to the struggle—the struggle of fundamental dissent with the musical practicalities . . . Investigators and experimenters are at least as reverent toward our European heritage as the average music lover—probably more so, because they are acolytes of the creative spirit that has produced such phenomena as the past three hundred years of Western music. But it is a dynamic reverence. In a healthy culture differing musical philosophies would be coexistent, not mutually exclusive; and they would build from Archean granite, and not, as our one musical system of today builds, from the frame of an inherited keyboard, and from the inherited forms and instruments of Europe's eighteenth century. (Partch [1949] 1974, xvii; emphases are Partch's)



Harry Partch In 1972 on film set at San Diego State College. photo: Betty Freeman

In the "preface to the second edition" of *Genesis of a Music,* Partch lists some of the early influences on his style: "Christian hymns, Chinese lullabyes, Yaqui Indian ritual, Congo puberty ritual, Cantonese music hall, and Okies in California . . ." (Partch 1974, viii) The first three influences were by-products of the composer's youth.[1] His parents, American Presbyterian missionaries in China during the 1890s, lost their zeal and returned to the U.S. around the time of the Boxer Uprising in 1900. Harry Partch was born the following year in Oakland, California; a few years later, the family moved to the southwestern region of the U.S., residing first in Arizona and later in New Mexico. It should be noted that these two frontier territories achieved statehood only in 1912, and at the time consisted of Indian reservations, small towns, and desert.

In addition to hearing hymns and lullabyes sung by his parents, Partch mentions that

> Yaqui Indians, very timid and aloof, were all about us in the declining years of the Old West. (I recall watching through a telescope "bad men" holed up in some nearby rocks, and I fear that my five-year-old sympathies were all for the hunted.) Later, when I heard the Yaqui Spring Ritual on a record, the sounds seemed amazingly familiar to me. (Partch 1974, ix)

Other influences on Partch included Japanese theatre, Indonesian gamelan, African drumming and story-telling, and European reform opera. Partch, who never travelled outside of North America and Europe, studied most of these cultures out of their original contexts. This was not a problem for him, however; he was, after all, neither musicologist nor anthropologist, but a creative artist with an aesthetically unbridled approach to stylistic synthesis.

On occasion, Partch did resort to American vernacular styles, usually for satirical purposes. Examples include parodies of Christian hymns in *Barstow* (1941) and marching

bands and cowboy songs in the theatrical work *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* (1950–60). However, his early exposure to Native Americans evolved into a deep sympathy and respect for them. Partch would have easily identified with a people who, like himself, had survived and continued to express themselves in the face of great opposition from the European-North American cultural mainstream.

Partch returned to California in 1919; the next fourteen years of his life were spent primarily in that state, with the exception of sojourns in Hawaii and Louisiana. Partch spent most of this period developing his ideas about tuning, based on his discovery of Hermann Helmholtz's *On the Sensations of Tone* in 1923 (Helmholtz 1954); Partch was especially taken by Helmholtz's preference for just intonation. After some years of experimentation, Partch abandoned equal temperament entirely, destroying several pieces he had written for it in 1930 while living in New Orleans. At the same time, he had a violin maker complete a so-called "adapted viola" designed for playing in "Monophony", his particular system of just intonation.

Over the next three years, Partch composed around twenty short works for adapted viola and "intoning voice", mostly settings of lyrics by the eighth-century Chinese poet, Li Po. "Intoning" a vocal part meant performing without vibrato in a speech-like manner, similar to Schoenberg's *Sprechstimme.* Pitches for both viola and voice were notated by Partch in ratios, rather than on a staff. These early "Monophonic" pieces are full of unison, drone, and heterophonic passages rarely found in mainstream European-North American art music of the period. With these modest pieces, Partch had begun his unprecedented musical explorations.

Partch's most significant contact with Native American music came in 1933, when he was hired by the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, California to do transcriptions of recordings kept there. As a notice in the Museum's bulletin, *The Masterkey,* states:

> For some time during the spring and early summer of 1933, Miss Eleanor Hague and Mr. Harry Partch worked on the Museum's collection of Spanish California and Indian song records. These were made some thirty or forty years ago by Dr. Charles F. Lummis, from the singing of local people of Spanish inheritance and from Indians of neighboring tribes. (*The Masterkey* 1934, 15)

Charles Fletcher Lummis (1859–1928), one of the first important North American ethnologists, founded the Southwest Museum in 1907. Between 1904 and 1908, he recorded around five hundred Mexican-Californian and Indian songs on wax cylinders, either at his Los Angeles home ("El Alisal") or on field trips to various local communities. These recordings now constitute a part of the Museum's Lummis Collection (Koegel 1990).

Eleanor Hague (1875–1954) was a folklorist and performer who specialized in Latin American music; among her achievements was the 1946 translation of *Canciones de mi padre* by Luisa Espinel (later revived by Espinel's niece, Linda Ronstadt). Hague was also a patron of the American ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore (1867–1957), the most prolific collector and writer then working with Native American music and musicians.

Hague was probably introduced to Partch by Calista Rogers, a New-York-born soprano living in Pasadena, near Los Angeles. Rogers, who presented informal concerts at her home, performed there with Partch on two occasions (February and April 1933) as well as with Hague. This connection probably led to Partch's Southwest Museum stint; his work there was not funded by Hague, however, but by Zahrah Ethel Preble Hodge, the wife of the Museum's director, Frederick W. Hodge. Mrs. Hodge, a singer, also had an interest in Native American music; in earlier years, she had performed with pianist/composer Carlos Troyer (1837–1920), one of the first musicians to exploit the "Indian craze" in the U.S. at the turn of the century.

This was not the first time that transcriptions had been attempted from the Lummis cylinders. The American composer Arthur Farwell (1872–1952), who founded the Wa-Wan Press in 1901 to further the cause of American music, was becoming known as an "Indianist" composer. Hired by Lummis in 1904–05 to come to southern California, Farwell transcribed around three hundred songs from the cylinders. He later arranged several of them for piano, publishing two sets of pieces drawn from his work.[2]

However, there is no evidence that Partch knew of Farwell's efforts, nor does Farwell seem to have provided Partch with much precedent. Farwell concentrated almost exclusively on Mexican-Californian songs; only a few transcriptions by him of Native American melodies are known. In his own "Indianist" compositions, he usually drew upon already published sources, especially the pioneering work on the Great Plains nations by Alice Cunningham Fletcher (1838–1923) and Francis La Flesche (1857–1932), in Omaha.

While some of Eleanor Hague's transcriptions of Spanish songs in the Lummis collection were published in *The Masterkey,* Partch's transcriptions were not. Shortly after completing his work at the Museum, he left for the East Coast; from New York, he mailed a copy of the transcriptions to Frederick Hodge. The transcriptions surfaced in 1949, as examples in an undergraduate term paper by Charles Rozairt, but were otherwise forgotten. In 1953, Hodge, newly retired as the Museum's director, found the transcriptions at his home and donated them to the Museum. They apparently lay undisturbed until 1990, when John Koegel of the Claremont (California) Graduate School and Richard Buchen of the Museum's Braun Research Library rediscovered them in a box of unsorted material.[3]

Returning to the notice in The Masterkey:

> Mr. Partch is peculiarly well qualified for such a task [i.e., transcription], on account of the research which he has carried on in musical intervals of smaller scope than the ordinary diatonic intervals. Indian tunes are replete with such intervals, and with his knowledge Mr. Partch could analyze the melodies according to the number of vibrations per second on any pitch.
>
> (*The Masterkey* 1934, 15)

Partch's twelve-page manuscript includes transcriptions of the music for twenty-four songs and dances found on the Lummis cylinders. Figure 1 lists the Californian and southwest Native American nations represented:

FIGURE 1
Native American Groups Represented in Partch's 1933 Transcriptions (one song per group unless indicated):

Cahuilla (four)
Hoopa [Hupa] (three)
Isleta
Luiseno (four)
Mono
Mono/North Fork (two)
Napa
Navajo
Ojibway
Pima/Cocpa/Papago
Pomo (two)
Serrano (two)

(one unidentified)

In some cases, the singer's name is indicated; Partch provides no texts.

Like most transcribers of Native American music, Partch carefully notates the pitches and rhythms, including the changing meters found in several songs. Five of the songs are set apart, however, in that they are given by Partch in both equal temperament and just intonation. In the commentary that accompanies these transcriptions, Partch discusses his use of just intonation:

> In the notation of Monophony each note is the symbol for a vibrational ratio. The tone that a ratio produces may be found on any string by finding the difference between that ratio and the figure 1 [that is, 1/1] . . .
>
> (Partch 1933, 1)

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Harry Partch in 1972 on film set at San Diego State College. photo: Betty Freeman

Figures 2a and 2b present the Hoopa [Hupa] *Brush Dance Song* [1904 recording on the MW 51 cassette] in both standard notation and in one of the experimental systems for just intonation that Partch was working with in the 1930s. (Partch 1933, 3, 7)

FIGURE 2a: **Hoopa [Hupa] *Brush Dance Song*,** transcriptions by Partch.

In equal temperament

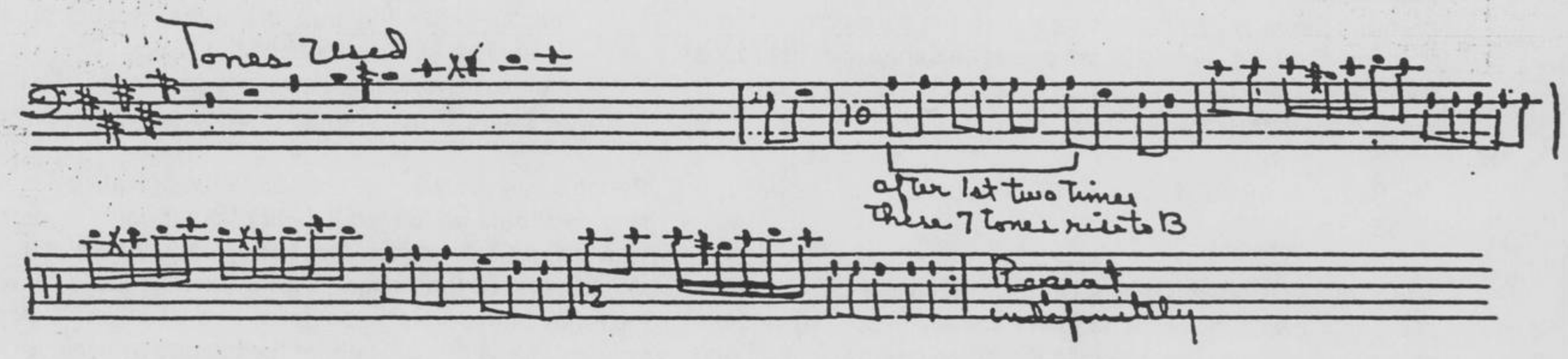
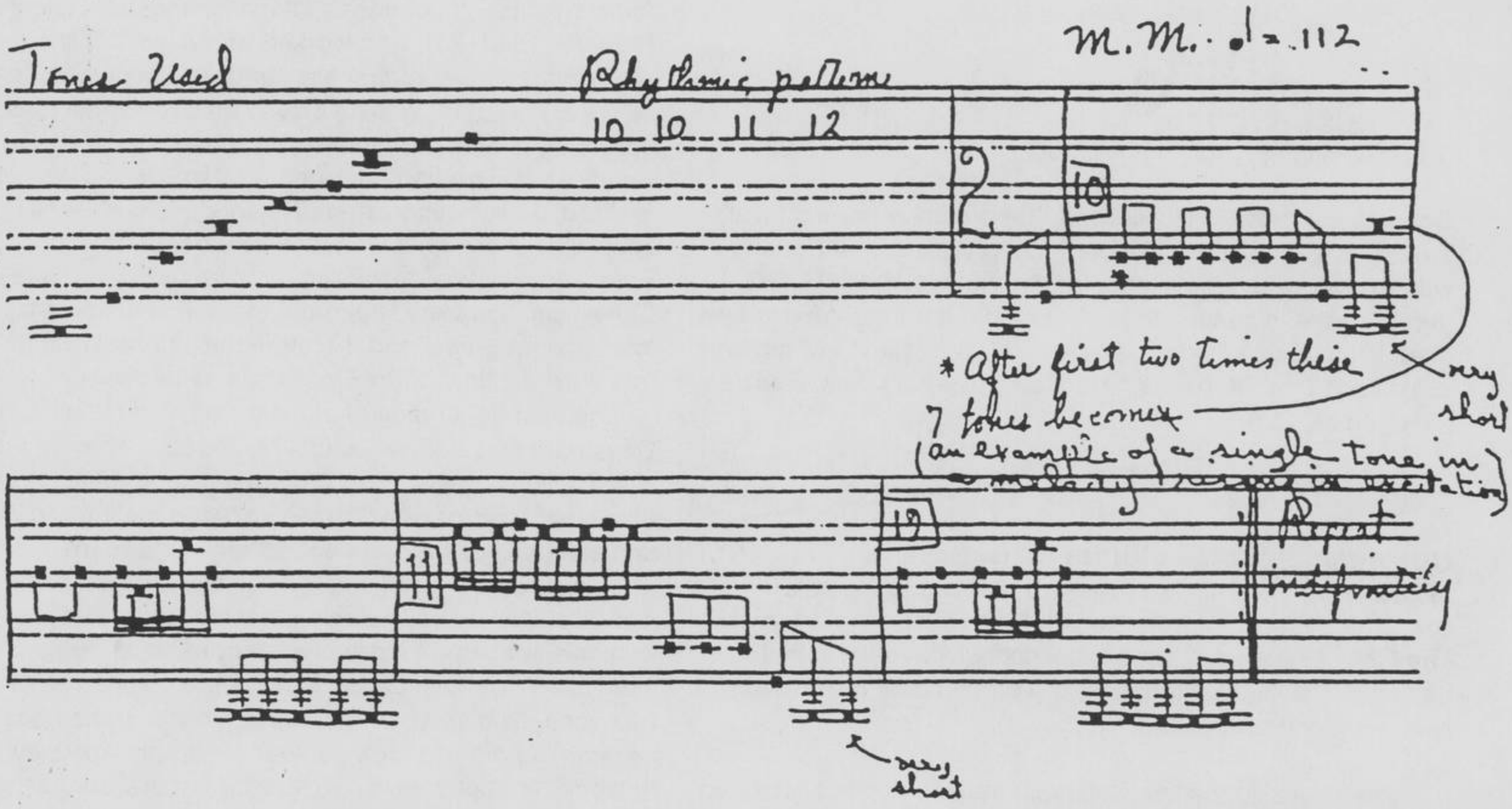


FIGURE 2b:

In just intonation



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The pitches used are indicated at the beginning of both versions; the noteheads in the justly-tuned version represent the following ratios (from lowest to highest):

15/8 22/21 7/6 9/7 11/8 10/7 14/9 8/5 18/11

In Partch's system of just intonation (Monophony), ratios are to be understood in relation to 1/1, the primary and generative ratio of the pitches in his music. He chose G (98Hz) as the equally-tempered equivalent of 1/1. The Monophonic "scale" or, more properly, "gamut", is based on the division of string lengths, and thus related to the overtone series. So, the ratios given above are the equivalent of the following "diatonic scale" based on 1/1:

1/1 352/315 56/45 48/35 22/15 32/21 224/135 128/75 96/55

The pitches represented by this set of ratios are close to but not identical with those found in the equally-tempered version of the *Brush Dance Song*. While the piece seems centred on F# (15/8), the correct justly-tuned equivalent to Partch's equally-tempered version should be:

15/8 135/128 75/64 5/4 75/56* 45/32 3/2 25/16 5/3

* or 21/16, if "tritone" ratio is 7/5

where the diatonic scale is

1/1 9/8 5/4 4/3 10/7 3/2 8/5 5/3 16/9.

Some of the ratios in the second, "theoretically correct" scale are not available in the 39-note Monophonic gamut Partch was working with at this time; but the ratios 5/4, 21/16, 3/2 and 5/3 were. It seems, then, that he did not hear the pitches used in the *Brush Dance Song* as part of a "standard" diatonic scale based on F#, but as part of a somewhat unusual scale centered on 15/8.

However, despite claims to the contrary in *The Masterkey*, Partch did not believe that this and the other songs he transcribed were "replete" with microtonal intervals. The first four pages of his manuscript, which feature the five transcriptions in just intonation, are prefaced by the following commentary (Partch 1933, 1):

> In analyzing the five California Indian melodies attached I have the feeling that there is a constant striving for very simple intervals. By very simple I mean those possible in our major and minor diatonic scales. Those places where the voice wavers, slides up or down to a tone, or rises under excitation do not alter that feeling since at no time, I believe, is there a deliberate use and repetition of a more complex interval. There is an exception in the ornamentation in the [Hoopa] Brush Dance Song which involves intervals smaller than a half tone. Notating the melodies for the tempered scale also is perhaps justifiable since its falsity is no doubt less than the element of human fallibility mentioned.

Concerning the rhythm:

> Except in two places there is a definite and invariable pulse in each of the five melodies. Therefore a measure is allotted a certain number of impulses. If that number is not changed at the beginning of a measure its rhythm continues. [One of two exceptions is] the very short impulse in the first measure of the [Hoopa] Brush Dance Song. The M.M. mark fixes the tempo. There is of course a strong impulse at the beginning of each measure. Other strong impulses are marked.

Partch's interpretation of the intonation of Native American singing should be judged in light of other contemporaneous views about the subject. Most early transcribers of Indian music believed that these singers were instinctively aiming for the notes of the diatonic scale, even if so-called "lack of training" made this difficult for the singers to achieve consistently. Among the first to analyze this music were Theodore Baker (1851–1934), whose 1880 doctoral thesis was the pioneering study; Benjamin Ives Gilman (1852–1933), whose studies of Hopi music featured precise, "phonographic" transcriptions and acknowledgment of "adiatonic" (i.e., microtonal) intervals; and John Comfort Fillmore (1843–98), who worked with Alice C. Fletcher.

Fillmore theorized that Native Americans had a "latent sense of harmony" waiting only to be developed; thus, according to him, the monophonic music of the Native American had an implicit harmonization waiting only to be realized. Consciously or not, Fillmore's attitude was in keeping with the predominantly nineteenth-century Eurocentric view of North American aboriginals. Related to Darwinism, this view supported the notion of so-called "civilizing progress" and therefore the self-proclaimed "manifest destiny" of the Caucasian settler/invader.

The next generation of ethnologists, including Farwell, Densmore and Natalie Curtis (1875–1921, editor of the 1907 classic, *The Indians' Book)*, followed Baker, Fletcher, and Fillmore's practice of writing down these melodies diatonically and in modes or keys. Helen Heffron Roberts (born 1888), who worked on the music of Native Californians in the 1920s and '30s, was virtually alone in her insistence, following Gilman's lead, upon more precise notation of microtonal intervals. While Fillmore's theory of "natural harmonic instinct" was soon dismissed, his harmonizations for voice and piano became the models for a number of serious works by "Indianist" composers, as well as for popular songs that embodied a turn-of-the-century shift in attitude on the part of the majority of North Americans: from fear and condemnation of the "savages" to the idealization and romanticization of the destruction and plight of a "noble people".

Essentially, Partch's approach was similar to that of his predecessors. Indeed, comparison of transcriptions made by Farwell and him of the same songs reveal no significant differences in the notation of pitch and rhythm. The one difference between Partch and others is his belief in just