

Remembrances of Harry Partch

By Harold Driscoll

It worried me a little even to know Harry Partch. He was so much freer than I, and although beleaguered by forces of law, order and convention, he appeared to defy them unhampered. He went on living his life in his way. It was always like that.

Harry's parents had been teachers and missionaries to China in some Christian/American denomination for the final decade of the last century (1890s). His early home environment was genteel, but poor, so Harry became more or less indifferent to creature comforts, but was given a solid base of good English usage and a strong tilt towards the "higher" things in life.

In Los Angeles, as a youngster he was studying piano and headed towards prodigy status under an excellent teacher (I believe it was Olgo Stieb). Harry happened to appreciate rather suddenly the tonal anomalies of the tempered scale, reflected so rigidly in the fixed tuning of the piano (as opposed to a free non-fretted instrument, such as the violin or viola). He quickly lost his enthusiasm for the piano much to the chagrin of his teacher. (A teacher rarely gets a pupil of Harry's musicality.) After this, I know only that Harry took to studying theories of tunings of various scales.

To support himself, he found work as a typesetter, then as a proofreader. In order to be near a good research library, he found a job as a proofreader in the California State printing Office in Sacramento, where he would be near the State Library. There he found Helmholtz's treatise on theories of scales. This opened the way to the study of early Greek systems, including that of the Golden Segment, and Just Intonation. Because of the one-tone origin of this idea, Harry dubbed his version of it Monophony. When I heard him speak of this for the first time, I misunderstood and thought he had said "Monotony". In later years, the work monophony seemed to fade from Harry's musical vocabulary, probably for the same reason that led to my misunderstanding of it.

I first met Harry because he was trying, at the time (about 1933), to get a hearing for his Just Intonation compositions. Bertha McCord Knisley, then music critic for *Saturday Night*, a weekly "high society" Los Angeles magazine, gave Harry a chance to perform at her house one evening before a small, informal gathering of her musical friends. Although an *unmusical* friend, I was an appreciator. I believe, however, that Rodzenski, the conductor, and Artie Mason Carter, founding mother of the Hollywood Bowl (How she would have laughed at that description!) were present, along with Ruth Wilson, a young violin prodigy, Dr. Verne Mason and other knowledgeable music lovers.

In those days, gourmet cooking was practiced quite unwittingly by those who loved good food and knew what cooking was about. Bertha Knisley (who later became and remained my wife for forty-seven years, until her death in 1982) was a naturally good cook who had spent a good part of her European school years (as a piano pupil of Martin Krause) dining well at pensions (boarding houses) and as an occasional or holiday guest at the baronial mansions of fellow students' parents. Harry Partch was very fond of well-prepared food, so the Knisley table became accustomed to his frequent visits. His hostess heard his

life story, reported his occasional informal performances and explained his theory of Monophony to all who would listen. Bertha Knisely happened to be easy to listen to. Besides, she had the ear of every important conductor and composer in the United States. She was a member of the first Artist Selection Committee for the Hollywood Bowl, was often called upon to judge musical competitions and, as a journalist-critic, had a reading public consisting of not only the well-healed and influential Angelenos, but also of the musical cognoscenti of at least the West Coast.

Bertha Knisely became one of Harry Partch's most enthusiastic supporters. Without personal wealth (her weekly pay then as a music critic was her sole income – and that was \$25), Mrs. Knisely went to her friends in the music world and in other professions and asked them to contribute to a fund to send Harry Partch to Yaddo, the American Festival of International Contemporary Music held in upper New York State. She felt that Harry was ready to meet his composer-contemporaries and make a stand for his ideas in his own field. Famous musicians and conductors had already listened, first to Bertha Knisely's exhortations on Harry's behalf, then to Harry himself and to his compositions. Individually and collectively, they expressed their admiration for him and his work, and then said, "But what does all this have to do with me? I am trained otherwise. I have these instruments, the piano, etc. the notation, the orchestra – what to do? I am so sorry, but it appears that your Harry Partch is not for us. He asks us to change our ways and our music too much. He comes perhaps, too soon for us?"

So Bertha Knisely took Harry Partch to Yaddo. She got pledges of \$5 a month apiece from nineteen of her Los Angeles friends, then added \$5 from her own pay to make up a \$100 grub-stake to keep Harry in New York long enough to apply for a Guggenheim Fellowship to go to Europe.

Editor's note: This "Remembrance" of Harry Partch was found among the stacks of papers and magazines left for me by the estate of Harold Driscoll and Bertha Knisely Driscoll. Referred by Partch, the Driscolls were among the first friends of my parents when they arrived in San Diego in the late 1940s. My parents, John and Alletah Glasier met Partch when he was in the Madison Wisconsin home of my grandparents as the guest of my uncle, artist Marshall Glasier. Partch finished his book, Genesis of a Music there in 1947. Our family had a lifelong friendship with Partch starting from that time. I feel that any new information about Harry Partch is valuable, so I was pleased to find this recently and present it to the public.

Jonathan Glasier, June 10, 2018