



The San Diego Union/Don Bartlett

Danlee Mitchell plays Partch 'cloud chamber bowls' at an SDSU performance.

A Talent On A Grand Scale

He looked like a figure from the Old Testament with his flowing hair, gray beard and piercing eyes.

But Harry Partch's religion was music and his legacy was a collection of beautifully crafted instruments, exotic compositions and a unique microtonal scale that divides the octave into 43 parts.

Like the biblical prophet, Partch was not without honor save in his own country.

His reputation as a composer and musical innovator was established in Europe long before he achieved recognition in the United States.

Partch died alone, impoverished and embittered, in a tiny North Park apartment on Sept. 3, 1974.

He left no survivors, a handful of friends and one loyal disciple — Danlee Mitchell, a music professor at San Diego State University, who has custody of his instruments.

But Partch's fierce, uncompromising musical genius lives on in records, films and occasional live performances of his work. A West Coast tour of Partch performances got under way Monday night at San Diego State and will continue in Oakland, Portland and Seattle.

Partch's life was an example of the rewards and frustrations of an American artist who dared to be different.

In truth, Partch had very little chance to lead a conventional life.

"My parents received the 'call' (as those with missionary zeal referred to the experience) some time in the 1880s," Partch recalled in his memoirs, "and were sent to China.

"Before 1900 both began to have doubts, this very soon

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ended in resignations. The crisis came in the Boxer Rebellion and I was born in (Oakland) California in the middle of 1901 after they returned."

The Partches moved to Arizona and Harry recalled his father's apostasy "took the direction of agnosticism, secularism and atheism. But my mother could not go that route and took up, at various times, Unity, Mary Baker Eddy, New Thought, until her death in 1920."

Young Partch said such reading matter "simply did not stack up in excitement beside the wild immoralities of Greek mythology."

Partch recounted his musical influences as Christian hymns, Chinese lullabies, Yaqui Indian rituals, Hebrew chants, Congo puberty rites, Cantonese music hall and Okies in California vineyards.

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Paul Marshall photo/1969

Harry Partch: 'I am a physical composer, more so than any composer I can think of.'

Partch: Talent On A Grand Scale

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His compositions reflect these early influences. There is a strong suggestion of Oriental music, a hint of Africa and perhaps a little Latin flavor. But there is little direct link to European music — the wellspring of most American composers.

"I attended the first concert of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra about 1920," Partch recounted, "I recall the audience, largely a sea of blue-haired ladies. And I attended another concert in the same city in 1965 — 45 years later. Behold, the sea of blue!

"We could look upon blue-haired ladies and symphonies as the salt of the earth. But they are foisted upon us from on high, as fashion culture, with moneyed deference."

Partch began playing reed organ, mandolin, violin, trumpet and harmonica at 5 or 6. Before he was 20, he had rejected the intonational system of modern Europeans well as its concert system. In 1919, he gave up on music schools and private teachers and began "to ransack public libraries and writing music free from the infantilisms and inanities of professors."

He made his living in a variety of odd jobs — newspaper proofreader, playing piano in a silent-movie theater, hopping bells.

By the time he was 28 he had written a string quartet, a symphonic poem, a piano concerto and some 50 songs. That was in 1930, Partch was in New Orleans and he crammed all of this into a big potbellied stove and burned it. He recalled later:

"I wanted to be free and in the secret, tiny vortex of my being I found it. I can still relive the great surge of exhilaration that uplifted me on that occasion. But it is a curious fact that I destroyed nothing truly valuable to me. As late as 1960, I was still pulling out bits of ideas from that potbellied stove, stored away in memory, that mysterious structure of mind and spirit."

During the Great Depression, Partch hit the road, living in hobo jungles, hopping freight trains and hitchhiking around the country.

His "U.S. Highball," written in 1943 on a Guggenheim Fellowship, is a musical work based on railroad station names, bits of boxcar conversations, and hobo inscriptions. Later works, such as "Oedipus" and "Daphne of the Dunes," reflected his enthusiasm for the Greek myths he had enjoyed as a boy. In these performances, dancers move in and out and among the instrumentalists who always are on stage. Sometimes the musicians double as dancers.

Gradually, Partch's life became more conventional. He was awarded a smattering of other fellowships.

In the 1940s, he was invited to the campus of the University of Wisconsin, but as one colleague recalled, "The conventional musicians never accepted his instruments or his microtonal music.

"Instead he was embraced by the faculty of the engineering school who appreciated the quality of his workmanship and the

structure of his music."

Partch's music is based on a new scale with 43 tones to the octave instead of the conventional 12. To play it, he designed and built a wondrous galaxy of new instruments.

These include a 72-string kithara, constellations of giant bamboo reeds called boos, sawed-off glass vats that he called "cloud chamber bowls" and a whole family of marimbas including one so large it has to be played with sledge hammer-size mallets.

"I am a physical composer, more so than any other composer I can think of," he once said. "I build instruments for every new work, tune them constantly and rehearse strenuously. I cannot accept the ordinary journeyman musician for my work without dedicated retraining."

He came to the University of California at San Diego in 1967 and in 1969, after five decades of laboring in virtual obscurity, Partch was "discovered" by the American musical establishment.

The International Music Congress, meeting in New York, asked him to exhibit his instruments and present a concert at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

There were articles in Newsweek, The New York Times and Los Angeles Times. Partch films were shown on public television. And a new work was premiered in Los Angeles.

But by then it was too late. The creative fires had burned out.

Replying to the offer of a grant by the Koussewitzky Music Foundation for a new composition, Partch wrote:

"I am approaching the age of 73. A series of small strokes has left me weak; my health is chancy and I am in no position to begin a new dramatic work."

Less than a year later Partch was dead. Two months after his death "Harry Partch Week" was proclaimed at San Diego State and live performances, films and tapes of his music were played.

The National Endowment for the Arts tried unsuccessfully for a Partch program at Kennedy Center during the Bicentennial. In the ensuing years, his instruments were displayed at various showings and a touring group played Partch's music before six straight nights of sell-out audiences at the Berlin Music Festival.

The recognition that eluded Harry Partch for most of his life came to him after his death. And there are those who believe Partch's lasting influence may be ideological as much as artistic.

Says composer and performer Ken Gaburo, who has Partch's archives at his home in Ramona:

"He was an evangelist for artistic freedom. He felt artists should not be treated as second-class citizens, as he was. Literally and symbolically he brought musicians up out of the pit and put them on stage.

"That was revolutionary when he did it, but it is commonplace today."