BEYOND HARRY PARTCH

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Most of American culture sees art as a variety of entertainment, and "serious" art as a not very successful variety of high-class amusement. Note the adjective: an interest in serious art is seen as a credential for identification with a higher social class. The government, and the majority of the people, thinks that art should support itself like any other commercial enterprise, and that if a minority wants to indulge in aristocratic pretensions it should pay for these without subsidy.

A minority, mostly wealthy, has never given up an aristocratic stratification of society, and supports an art which imitates European culture in competition with it. With the decline in Europe of political institutions directly based on aristocratic models, the artist, freed somewhat from servility to patrons, tended to become a kind of culture hero. It is as though aristocratic behavior retreated into the arts. The moneyed minority in America which supports, for example, symphony orchestras and opera companies, keeps this view alive in the face of its rejection by most of the society.

But for generating a sense of belonging to a comfortable elite, or for purposes of upward mobility (which at a certain altitude becomes social climbing), Beethoven or Debussy or Tchaikovsky or anyone else whose music has undergone the metamorphosis into museum pieces will serve much better than a living composer. And Europeans are vastly better than Americans, even if they are still alive, because it is understandable if they are aristocratic. As a result most composers in the U.S.A. are supported by the only widely-acceptable form of subsidy: posts as teachers in college and university music schools.

While the general musical life of the country mirrors the state of the world by reminding us constantly that there are many musics, most music schools still operate as if European music (and mostly that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) were the only music of significance. This hegemony is challenged by jazz programs that transcend the "fun and games" state, and in a few places by performing groups growing out of ethno-musicological programs. Its most serious challenge has come from active groups of composers, who may be bent upon perpetuating the traditions of concert-making and attendant musical activities, but who are committed to overcoming the resistance to new repertory and to changing musical performing practices. But this activity only affects the professional world indirectly except in rare instances. Even the efforts of composers' societies seem to have relatively weak effects.

Sufficiently resourceful people can always create enclaves and cliques, but how much wider than that will the interested listening public ever grow to be? Just how long does the cultural lag have to get before we ask ourselves seriously if the gap will ever close? These questions were raised by Gunther Schuller in an address to the American Society of University Composers in the spring of 1980. But where I part company with Schuller is that I heard no hint of a way out of this cul-de-sac in his address and I have heard none in his music, unless what he proposes to do is to abandon concert music in the European tradition for jazz or ragtime or some other more popular music.

These seem to me weighty questions, and the finger pointed at us composers by Schuller to accuse us of having helped to bring about this situation seems not altogether unjust. Much so-called new music does not really deserve the wider audience it complains about being denied. If the only alternative to this is the endless replay of "the classics" or an attempt to rewrite them or to quote them or even to parallel them, we have already abandoned the serious effort to keep concert music alive.

I would be unhappy to see this happen. I would like the tradition of Western concert music to continue to develop among the world's musics in a future in which its dominance will have ended. But can we possibly regard the present state of concert music in this country as a state of health?

Questions of this kind assailed me right from the outset of my composing career, not least because of my contact with Harry Partch. I remember writing to him soon after I read his book, *Genesis of a Music,* that I had long felt that the very scale we were using had condemned contemporary composers to an ever-narrowing effort to exhaust the remaining possibilities in a closed system. Partch's determination to throw out almost the whole of Western traditions of composing, performing, theorizing, and bringing music to an audience impressed but also alarmed me. I could see even then how unlikely it would be that his work would even reach a wide public, let alone precipitate changes of so sweeping a nature.

I have never felt that the tradition of European concert music was either worthless or hopeless, though I have come more and more to see that we have allowed it to become an albatross around our necks. How and why it became so began to interest me extremely.

Among the early strong impressions pushing me toward becoming a musician was a lecture I heard at the age of twelve at Wesleyan Conservatory of Music in Macon, Georgia. It

concerned the importance of the acoustical findings of Helmholtz in the development of Debussy's music. The lecturer used a monochord to demonstrate the basic premises of just-tuned intervals and the phenomenon of overtones. I never lost the feeling of mystery and unfolding new possibilities that world of simple mathematical ratios opened to me. Debussy instantly became a figure of importance to me, though I had previously paid his music little attention.

Later, when I studied music theory, it was a disappointment and finally a disillusionment how cavalierly it sidestepped the principles of acoustics. By that time I was determined to master it and to acquire the tradition of European concert music, so I did not reject it, as Partch had done earlier. What happened to me was a gradually strengthening conviction that the tradition had gone awry a long time ago and was in need of rechanneling. This initially gained impetus from the impact of *Genesis of a Music* and subsequently six months' apprenticeship in Partch's studio at Gualala, California, in 1950.

It took me about ten years to digest that experience. When I finally decided to act upon these stimuli I set out to learn electronic studio techniques at Columbia-Princeton Studio while on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1959-60. I quickly discovered that this medium was not ready for the use I wished to make of it, and that my aptitude for that kind of composing was not high. It gradually became clear that neither that route nor Partch's was the best path for me, but rather the forbidding one of getting traditionally trained performers using conventional instruments to alter their performance practices sufficiently to play just-tuned music elaborated to the point of microtonality. As soon as I returned to Illinois after my sabbatical, in 1960, I set about trying to compose such music.

I was convinced that this freeing of music from the artificial shackles of twelve-tone equal temperament would prove to be a key to why most twentieth-century concert music has seemed

intelligible to so limited an audience. I am today more than ever convinced of this. It is a very important change I think composers could make in the unhealthy situation of music today.

Partch's aversion to European musical values originated in a rejection of American education as well as of traditions of "classical music". Since he spent his childhood and early youth in a part of Arizona very near to the Mexican border at a time when the region was only just emerging from the condition of frontier life, the urban culture of America was as exotic to him as a foreign country. When he encountered it he did not identify with it, but rejected it passionately, stubbornly maintaining against it an art and a life-style drawn directly from his early influences. The fact that his parents were apostate Protestant missionaries to China, and maintained something of what they had absorbed of Chinese culture, and the circumstance of living in American Indian country figured importantly in his formation.

Even after he plunged into twentieth-century America in Los Angeles he continued to draw almost all his artistic and cultural sustenance from non-European sources rich in the California environment. He was associated with the earliest artistic community at Big Sur. During this period one of his closest friends was Jaime de Angulo, a radically unconventional anthropologist who was studying California Indian cultures largely by assimilating into them. Thus Partch's sympathies were always with what much later would be called counter-cultures. When you add to this the fact that he chose to live all his life on the economic margin of American culture, surviving mostly on odd jobs, hand-outs and private grants, you can begin to see how his extraordinary independence came to be, and why he seemed to much of the drop-out counter-culture of the sixties a prophetic older brother.

But the culture as a whole has not gone in those directions, and he runs the posthumous risk of becoming a kind of anti-religious patron saint of drop-outs except in the Southwest,

where cultural currents of the same kind as those which produced him still generate artists of a unique breed. Without in any way wishing to diminish his large importance in these contexts, I think his significance and potential value are much larger than this.

In several crucial respects Harry Partch offers directions out of the trap our musical culture has gotten itself into. He refused resolutely to be drawn into the concert music world, not even that of "modern music" or its offspring "contemporary music" and "new music". He knew he was not part of it and would never willingly consent to further its aims by affiliating with it. His association with B.M.I. was the creation of Oliver Daniels and Carl Haverlin and amounted to a continuing subsidy of his work almost without strings attached. Partch was grateful and occasionally cooperative, but remained aloof and aggressively independent.

He refused with equal vehemence to have anything more than peripherally to do with the world of commercial music, which has swallowed up almost all the music this continent has spawned. Most of his recordings were produced and distributed privately, and his few commercial record contracts were negotiated with much effort and persuasion from colleagues who saw the importance of getting his work out to a wider public as outweighing even Partch's rejection of the values imposed by commercial and corporate interests. When his work began to attract rock musicians (for instance Frank Zappa) there was always one inevitable barrier between them: the dependence of rock music upon a world of commercial values.

Even Partch's affiliations with universities and colleges were as tenuous and temporary as he could make them, and suspicion on the part of musical conservatives and reactionaries that the institution was harboring a cultural subversive was only marginally over-balanced by the recognition from a determined minority that this was an artist of major importance.

Even more basically, Partch saw the identification of European artistic traditions with wealth, power, and social position in American society, and fought it at every opportunity. He looked to other cultures in the world for sources and influences in his own work, and he looked behind modern European culture to its sources to discover where it went wrong. In his work he set out to correct these errors in cultural, philosophical and artistic values. In his life he stayed as independent of the economic and institutional forces that mold cultural attitudes as he could while still forced to derive his sustenance indirectly from them. It was for that reason that he was willing to accept support from individuals who had demonstrated a belief in his work, but only rarely and with misgivings from corporate entities and institutions.

It must have looked to Partch as if the European heritage in American culture was impervious to change and insensitive to influence, and indeed this is in many respects very nearly true. But there is vastly more in our culture than that one component, and world trends are clearly running counter to a continued dominance of that particular strain. It is in fact a long time since the art music of Europe and its onetime colonies such as the U.S.A. was of anything like the strength or importance either here or in most of the rest of the world as the various popular musics so effectively disseminated by the mass media. It is above all in this respect that the United States holds a position of artistic leadership whether we are leading in a desirable direction or not.

We already face a situation in this culture where the values of "serious music" are threatened economically as well as culturally. If we elect to preserve only the museum aspects of this tradition because of the anachronistic social and economic organization of the main channels of its dissemination, we will ensure its atrophy.

In the face of this prospect, two main problems demand solutions: how can the tradition continue to grow without losing

its public, and how can it become a healthy, fruitful and even powerful stimulus to the world's other musics rather than an adulterative and disintegrative influence? If these problems are not addressed successfully the traditions of European concert music will not only wither in this country and elsewhere, but will be displaced successfully by rival traditions of music which reject above all its aristocratic anachronisms.

It begins to look as if serious music needs Harry Partch more than he ever needed it. He addressed problems it is ignoring with far more than tentative success, and he diagnosed many of its most serious ills with uncanny accuracy. The time is long overdue when diagnosis should be followed by prescription and treatment.

In 1946 *Circle* magazine published an article by Harry Partch entitled "Show Horses in the Concert Ring." It has been republished more recently by *Soundings* magazine. In it Partch launches an attack on American concert music and proposes his alternatives. Here are some excerpts:

> It need hardly be labored that music is a physical art, and that a periodic groping into the physical, a reaching for an understanding of the physical, is the only basic procedure, the only way a musical era will attain any enduring significance.....
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> The age of specialization has given us an art of sound that denies sound, and a science of sound that denies art...a music-drama that denies drama, and a drama that—contrary to the practices of all other people of the world—denies music.
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> One does not fertilize the creative instinct by twenty year plans of practice...to play music written by others, mostly long dead....And we permit an industrialization of music on the basis of such parlous degeneracy: issuance of interpretation upon interpretation of the

> accepted limited repertory by the record companies; facture on an assembly line of the accepted instruments and in whatever asinine notation and implied nomenclature they require—by still other companies, and soon, perennially sporting a bloom of pride over the magnificent spread of our culture. The 'so on' stands for literally thousands of scholarly magazine articles,... ubiquitous classes in music appreciation, multiplex radio programs, all deliberately calculated to weight us permanently with the incubi and the succubi of an interpretive age: That is, with a factitious, non-creative art. The only real vitality in this entire picture is exuded by the men who are out to make money in the deal.... Value of intrinsic content—value of human beings, of human works and attitudes—never enters the picture....
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> Some very drastic remedies are called for in order to bring vitality to a body of theory that rejects investigation and a physical poetry that excludes all but purely metaphysical poets. A period of comparative anarchy, with each composer employing his own instrument or instruments, his own scale, his own forms is very necessary for a way out of this malaise.

As a first step, Partch's work can be and must be brought before a wider public and his significance correctly assessed, not diminished to the level of a cultural oddity. As an even more important second step, those of us who can must carry on aspects of his work in directions of which, perhaps, he never dreamed or felt himself ill-equipped to deal with.

During his life I helped Partch to get his work before the public for as long as he permitted. I was responsible for getting him to the University of Illinois, where he produced *The Bewitched, Revelation in the Courthouse Park,* and *Water, Water,* and where he met Danlee Mitchell, his heir. When we came to odds as a result of his delegation to me of choice of choreographer for *The Bewitched* and my subsequent holding together of the

production, it was necessary for me to leave to others the active job of carrying out his work. I never ceased to be a supporter.

Since his death I have again tried to help, though I have no direct affiliation with the Harry Partch Foundation or with the ensemble which continues to produce his works.

With the aid of several other people, most particularly Thomas McGeary, a young musicologist from San Diego, I have begun to gather together oral history and other data on his life from people who knew and worked with him. I do not have the intention of producing a biography of Partch, but such materials will be important to anyone who does. More recently, with the aid of a team of young researchers, Glenn Hackbarth, Larry Polansky, Janet Cameron, Mark Culbertson, Mark Behm, and Christopher Granner, I have initiated the preparation of three works of Partch for publication in a notation designed to be as little different from ordinary traditional notation as possible. The works are *Seventeen Lyrics by Li Po, Eleven Intrusions,* and *Daphne of the Dunes.* Our aim is to make Partch's scores as accessible as possible to the ordinary musician.

The most significant aspect of my own work as composer is a very extensive development of microtonal just intonation. I have developed a theory in support of this which greatly extends Partch's. Since I am dealing with traditions of performing and with instruments and players which are in the European tradition, I have steeped myself in that music and have studied the techniques and aesthetic attitudes of all its phases of development up through the present. But my purpose has not been to Europeanize Partch's ideas. Rather it has been to alter that tradition so as to render it pervious to his way of thinking.

Lastly, I will not identify myself with Harry Partch. Early on in our association he paid me a compliment I did not recognize as such. He said I would never be a follower of his. Stung a little by what I took to be a rejection, I asked him why not. He said I was too much like him and I would have to find my own way.