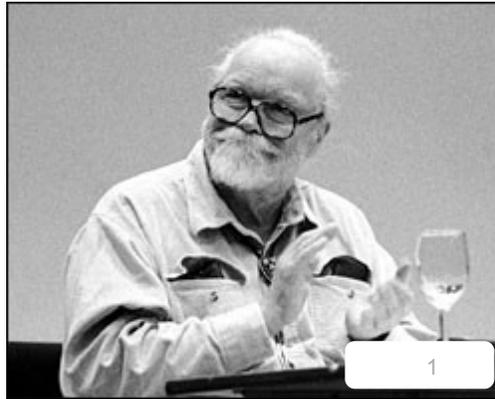


It's the Tune, Stupid

BY KYLE GANN

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He wrote whatever he enjoyed and never gave a thought to his place in history.

photo: Jack Vartoogian

He was the Santa Claus of new music, an oversized elf whom you could only picture with a broad grin on his face and a belly shaking with laughter. He was the supreme hedonist of us all. "Accompanied by courtesy, lust and greed are the two great virtues"—that was his word. Yet he could be serious when serious was called for, and his worldwide concerns dwarfed our parochial perspectives as his frame and stature dwarfed those around him. An Esperanto scholar, he gave his works titles like "Koncherto por la Violono kun Perkuta Orkestra" and set the Buddhist Heart Sutra in that language for his *La Koro Sutro*. He insisted that European music was ethnic music, and referred to Europe as "Northwest Asia." He was at home in American and European musics, also Indonesian and Korean. Lou Harrison was larger than life and a sunnier presence than new music can boast now that he's gone.

He died as he mostly lived, with hardly a moment's distress. On his way to Ohio State for a festival of his music, and averse to flying, he took a train to Chicago. Two students picked Harrison and a companion up and drove them, stopping at a Denny's in Lafayette for dinner. According to Ohio State composer Donald Harris, Harrison stumbled getting out of the car, and apparently had a heart attack, dying a few hours later without regaining consciousness. He was 85, and had been near death before, but hardly slowed his pace and never diminished his infectious zest for life. Lingering in a hospital would have been so unlike him. A mutual friend

tells me that Harrison took on a new lover several months ago, but said he wasn't ready for an exclusive relationship, and might want to see other people. How many 85-year-old men get to use *that* line?

When I think back over his life's music, such a heterogeneous jumble comes to mind: piano pieces of Ivesian density and dissonance, spiritual gamelan music, sunny little harp tunes, symphonies that stride through the cultures of the world, theater pieces evocative of the medieval era. He was indisputably a great composer. When I try to picture his music, though, I don't think of a total output, but of well-loved individual pieces that could practically have been written by different people. There's the austere yet catchy Violin Concerto mentioned above, which (you'd never guess from listening) only uses three intervals in its endless melody line. There's the august Symphony on G, so Schoenberg (or rather Wallingford Riegger)-like, a slice of conventionally dissonant 12-tone Americana except for the lush interludes with harp and tack piano, surely the places in which he most reveals himself.

There's a luxuriant Harp Suite with finger cymbal and hand drum, a Western image of an erotic East. There's the heterogeneous *Pacifika Rondo*, running through all the idioms of the Pacific Rim and—in his own way—mastering every one. There's the infectiously exciting *Varied Trio* for violin, piano, and percussion, with irresistible examples of his medieval dance mode. There's a big, growling Piano Concerto, Harrison with his stern Brahms mask on, yet expansive and good-humored underneath, treating us to 18th-century Kirnberger tuning and a delicate ear for timbre. There's the big, sturdy, dancelike melodies of his Double Concerto for violin, cello, and Javanese gamelan, such East-West combinations being the area in which he was the leading pioneer.

What ties all this together? Possibly only the hint that he gave William Duckworth in an interview: "Your take-home pay from a piece of music is a melody, a tune—and that's it. How do we recollect almost anything we know? It's the tune. So I write them." He called himself a melode and, as hedonistic in his music as in his life, wrote whatever he enjoyed and never gave a thought to his place in history. The "greatest living composer" label some pasted on him in recent years was an uneasy fit. He was too one-of-a-kind personally, too multifaceted musically. His works contain passages of aimless wandering that are hard to defend to skeptics, yet emblematic of what we love about him: that he relished life and didn't believe in hurrying. I last saw Harrison two years ago at a microtonal conference at Pomona College. He seated, I standing, we chatted awhile, then he looked up at me, said, "You're so handsome," and rested his head on my stomach. Coming from such a great soul, who could mind?

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