

# Songs of the Open Road

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, JANUARY 23, 2001 AT 4 A.M.

I attended "Musical Intersections: Toronto 2000," the millennial mega-musicology conference in that city a few weeks ago. Less exciting than skinny-dipping, I'll readily admit, but a big high point came when I glanced at a publisher's display copies and saw the title *Barstow*. As many of you know, *Barstow* is arguably Harry Partch's most perfect small-scale work, a delightful setting of eight hitchhiker transcriptions that Partch found on a highway railing while thumbing through Barstow, California. The inner workings of Partch's music remain obscure even to aficionados because his notation, a homemade tablature for instruments he invented himself, is idiosyncratic and sometimes indecipherable unless you've played the instruments. But here on the shelf was *Barstow* in a readable transcription, the first published transcription of a Partch work—lovingly, exhaustively, and insightfully annotated by Partch scholar Richard Kassel.

That doesn't mean that the average piano jockey could pick up *Barstow*—available in the Music of the U.S.A. series from A-R Editions—and sight-read it. Partch used 43 pitches to the octave, of course, and Kassel transcribed the work into an efficient notation that Partch never used himself, but that was invented by Partch's protégé Ben Johnston. That notation uses little "7"s to lower pitches 49 cents (almost a quarter-tone) for the 7th harmonic in the overtone series, up and down arrows to adjust for the 11th harmonic, and so on. Even without knowing that, though, you can get a much better approximate idea of the pitches than from Partch's manuscript, a copy of which is, however, included for comparison. (Peter Garland had published the ms. in his *Soundings* journal in 1972.)

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As musicological events go, this one is potentially earthshaking for Partch scholarship and for the study of alternative tunings in general. Since Partch's death in 1974, his music has become something of a cottage industry, closely guarded by the performers who worked with him.

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Kassel's achievement allows any interested musician to bypass the cult's priests and go straight to Partch's musical thinking, to get a better grasp than we've had of what his compositional concerns were. While we also desperately need Partch's magnum opus, *Delusion of the Fury*, in some commercially available edition, *Barstow* is a good starting point, with its found vernacular texts ranging from "Jesus is god in the flesh" ("Hey, hey, hey!" Partch editorializes) to "Go to 530 East Lemon Avenue in Monrovia, California, for an easy handout." *Barstow* occupied Partch for 28 years: He revised it six times after its original version of 1941, and it is the last, 1968 version—easily the liveliest and most developed—that Kassel transcribes.

So now we can see on the page that what sound like muddy blurs on the recording are actually 16th-note runs up and down the 43-tone scale on the Chromolodeon (Partch's retuned reed organ). Most helpful is the transcription of the part for Surrogate Kithara, a struck-string, harplike instrument whose tuning is difficult to decipher from the instructions in Partch's book *Genesis of a Music*. And Kassel is scrupulous on details: commenting in a footnote, for instance, that in the classic 1968 Columbia recording (still not out on CD, and we need it) Partch substituted *You asshole* for the word *Etcetera*.

In fact, Kassel's 79-page annotation, offering a thorough tour of Partch's compositional thinking, is worth the price by itself. He charts an overall harmonic analysis, showing how Partch unified the piece by framing inner sections in the keys of E and G with passages in "A-flat minus" (a Johnston term); he draws attention to Partch's occasional and evocative instances of pure-tuned dissonance; and he pinpoints examples of "Tonality Flux" (Partch's term), a technique whereby Partch would slide quietly between close-pitched but harmonically unrelated chords. Pointing out how much Partch would have hated to see his work carried on by "a coterie of squabbling disciples," Kassel pleads for a Partchian pragmatism and tolerance in the dissemination of Partch's music, though with a politeness, I think, that shouldn't provoke the Partch purists.

In short, Kassel stays so close to both the spirit and letter of Partch's music that he produces something of an editorial miracle: a scholarly edition that even the irascibly anti-academic Partch would have a hard time objecting to.

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