

The Pierless Partch

By Kyle Gann

Harry Partch

Here's a story that illustrates the life of the composer-as-artist in America.

In 1934 the Carnegie Corporation gave Harry Partch a \$1500 grant (more than \$13,000 in today's dollars) to research the history of intonation at the British Museum, to set *King Oedipus* to music, and to build the prototype for his chromatic organ, capable of a 43-pitch-to-the-octave scale. The Carnegie president said to Partch, "Young man, you will do well to find a place for yourself in this country's economic system. You owe it to yourself to find it, because you can't go on year after year winning awards of this sort."

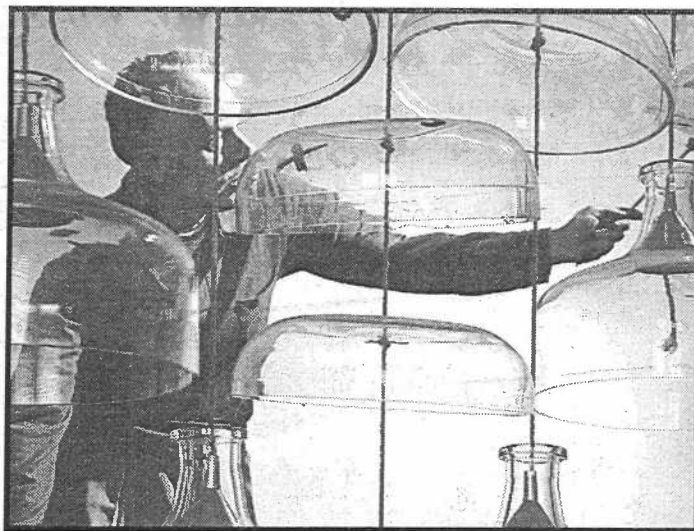
Partch: "Dr. President, I have never had a grant before in my entire life, and I have been working 11 years for this one."

President: "Hm. Well, this is just a warning. We don't want to do to you what we did to Roger Sessions. He kept winning award after award, scholarship after scholarship, until we finally had to throw him off the pier."

Partch: "Dr. President, I have been off the pier my entire life. If you throw me off it won't be new."

Partch may have been off the pier, but his gravity has pulled the continent snugly around him. The above gem is typical of *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (University of Illinois Press, \$44.95), a new collection of Partch's writings edited by Thomas McGeary. The title selection is a diary of one of Partch's hobo years, 1935, the year after the grant. As a road memoir, it's drier, more piercing, and less romanticized than Kerouac, but no less poetic. Partch jotted down his musico-social insights in between hitchhiking, freight riding, potato weeding, and sewer cleaning. Taking leave of a free meal, he concocts alternate begging strategies for artists: "I am doing invaluable work in the arts. It is not as yet widely recognized. . . . I am sure that as far as value delivered to the world is concerned that I have paid for the food and blankets of these little emergencies." Most originally, interspersed in the text are passages of music to accompany the inflections of his vagrant companions, and in an introduction Partch notes that the book is to be read, if possible, at the piano.

Prophet and saint, Partch offers no more solace to Downtown trendiness than he does to Uptown Europretensions. His scorn for professors is as unlimited as



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EMI ARCHIVES

his respect for libraries. Beethoven-music, he harangues, "has only the feeblest roots in our culture, and those mostly among a class of people that thinks of concerts as social occasions. . . . In the early days of presenting my music, the mere mention of the words Bach or Beethoven, twin gods of classical musicians, turned on a faucet of revolt in me." Then, in a 1959 essay, "The Ancient Magic," he takes a swipe at the avant-garde: "nothing could be more futile (or downright idiotic) than to express this age. The prime obligation of the artist is to transcend his age, therefore to show it in terms of the eternal mysteries." And a year later he adds, "Let not one year pass. . . when I do not step one significant century backward."

"Rhythmic Motivations" from 1952 details distinctions between classical and popular music with an acuity that needs no updating. When asked whether he writes

classical or popular music, Partch replies, "Neither, I write my own music." In secret, though, he counts himself among the "classicals," because of their "serious probing into the history and aesthetics of music" and their "musical insight of a profound and subtle nature." But he castigates them for their tendency to become rarefied and abstract, to lose "contact with this time and this place." Pop music of all kinds earns his contempt for its limited harmonies and repetitive subject matter, and his envy for its rhythmic potential, its ability to feel a world of accents outside the beat. And he explains how both traditions flow into *Castor and Pollux*, one of his most rhythmically engaging works.

The opening half of Partch's first book, *Genesis of a Music* (which Da Capo has consigned into "back-order" limbo, essentially out of print), drew a detailed history of tuning, which created

the misperception that pure intervals were his major concern. In *Bitter Music*, Partch calls tuning only one facet of his work, and complains that it's "described, by people who ought to know better, as the only thing I stand for, aside from musical revolution, that is." Antipurist from head to toe, Partch is currently out of favor with the just-intonationists because—surprise!—he didn't care about sitting around listening to well-tuned drones. What he wanted was independence, which meant not participating in the collective, institutional lie of tempered tuning. The irony's delicious: he was a prophet too radical for his own disciples. In a 1967 article he growls at would-be followers, "if anyone calls himself a pupil of mine, I will happily strangle him."

Alongside this book and a couple of CD rereleases on CRI, Partch's opera *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* has recently emerged, in its sweaty, howling production by the American Music Theater Festival, on a handsomely produced two-disc set on Tomato. With its brass band and pop-song parodies, it's the least characteristic recorded example of Partch's music theater in terms of his tuning and instruments, but the most enlightening in terms of his antipurist nonspecialization, his total, eclectic, corporeal, vernacular theater. Along with *Bitter Music*, *Revelation* should help rescue Partch's reputation from the pure-tuning brigade. Once the epitome of the lunatic fringe, he's come to seem like the most American composer of all, the center and progenitor of our indigenous music culture rather than its outcast. ■

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