



FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS OF THIS CENTURY

# HARRY PARTCH

*Orvis Auditorium*

*July 9, 1971*

*8 p.m.*

## LECTURE-DEMONSTRATION

The learned have depicted Harry Partch as a petrel soaring stormily against the winds of his own cosmography. He has been termed the iconoclast of scales—the stubborn and enforced artificer of instruments as strange as the music he composes for them.

—Carl Haverlin

From remarks at the American Symphony  
Orchestra League Convention, San Francisco,  
June 19, 1963.

Anyone who has sat in a room, surrounded by Partch's many instruments, and listened to his music—this complete and, to many, alien world of sound and drama—knows what an intimidating experience this can be. The very thought of adopting a philosophical position diametrically opposed to a well-entrenched existing tradition, building a theory of tonal relationships and the instruments to realize this theory, composing the music, staging the drama, rehearsing and bringing it all of performance, recording the result—all in the face of an uncomprehending public—and then having the perseverance (perhaps obstinacy would be a better word) to continue all this for the better part of a life-time, is a staggering thing to contemplate . . .

—Arthur Woodbury  
Associate Editor SOURCE  
Vol. 1, No. 2, July 1967.

Born in Oakland, California, on June 24, 1901, Harry Partch began writing dramatic music as a boy of fourteen and formulated his theory and philosophy of music while still in his twenties. In 1930 he wrote the first compositions in his new method, for voice accompanied by a viola adapted to play the 43-tone scale. Because he has put much time into experimentation and the building of instruments, the total of his compositions has remained small. He has received grants from the Carnegie, Guggenheim, and Fromm Foundations, and support by various means from the University of Wisconsin, Mills College, the University of Illinois, from personal gifts and contributions and from the sale of his records. Between whiles he has also hoboed.

No other composer, by the very nature of his artistic method, has placed so many impediments in the way of bringing his music to performance. The instruments he has designed and built are as easily transportable as a traveling exhibition of totem poles. Partch estimates the cost of duplicate set of instruments at about a quarter of a million dollars. He is, by necessity, his own repairman.

To perform his music, musicians must learn to read the notation and play the instruments; singers and speakers must be trained to distinguish and produce musical intervals to which they are entirely unaccustomed. During this period, usually requiring about six months for any major performance, the composer must function as teacher, tuner, instrumental repairman, technical adviser, and vocal and dramatic coach. If the reward were not greater than the labor, I doubt that so many of Partch's compositions could have survived the ordeal of preparing them for presentation.

No other composer, not Arnold Schoenberg, or John Cage, has threatened the institutional routine of music so fundamentally as Partch. He strikes musical convention at its taproot, the scale. He offers a new musical system so valid and, in its application to a musical theatre, so practical that the enthusiasts who oppose him must believe they are defending "the art of music as we know it." As Partch writes in the preface to GENESIS OF A MUSIC, "the door to further musical investigation and insight has been slammed shut by the inelastic and doctrinaire quality of our one system and its inelastic forms." Though he has worked within several universities, he has never been invited to join a music faculty as a teacher or as a theorist.

Partch's career poses before the American public the anomalous situation of the dedicated American composer, who between grants of patronage, is expected to fend for himself. It is not merely a contemporary problem, and we should remember that, in another century, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart also failed to solve it.

—Peter Yates

Reprinted from HIGH FIDELITY, July 1963.