

And All Round Me Spirits : Invoking Harry Partch

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“It is one of the purposes of scholarship to discover ethical values and disciplines out of the past, verbally and visually stated, and to preserve them. I care a great deal about contemplating an age or ages that have been discovered through digging and presuming and learning. But I care even more for the divination of an ancient spirit of which I know nothing.” —Harry Partch¹

In June 2022 I was working on the text of an interdisciplinary performance currently in progress. The performance is about my experience as a teenager of being locked up and clinically “brainwashed,” and the multitude of voices from that period that still inhabit my psyche. The work has an audience participation component where people are invited to write or draw from a tableau vivant as I perform the text. The happening is meant to honor life outside of the screen by constructing a space for primitive mediation —one where eyes, ears, hands, and the private interior space behind the eyes have free rein. Primarily the work aims at unraveling internalized discipline while elevating the multitude of voices in each person.

I had been intuitively striving for something like corporeal music when by chance I heard Harry Partch’s composition *Ring Around the Moon Phase 1* from *Plectra and Percussion Dances Pt. 2*. I was mesmerized. I heard a correlating temperament in the intonation —in the “sonorous tremor distinct from the motion of individual particles.”² Also, the recording has a rhythmic patten and emotional tactility generally attributed to spoken word performance. There is a dramatic play with dissonance and humor that I have been working towards with voice, often by portraying different characters. Through combining selections of Partch's work with my own, I found a new way of thinking about and expressing words, including a more nuanced inflection which resists

¹ Partch, Harry, and Thomas McGeary, *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1991), 187. (This is an excerpt from Partch’s Introduction to *Bewitched*).

² Helmholtz, Hermann. *On the Sensations of Tone: As a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music*, (New York: Dover), 1954. Appendix xviii, 422.

language's normalizing power. The writing I did for the piece also transformed through an internal call and response. The process of sculpting words around microtones, reverberations, and echoes induced a spell –its own kind of trance– one where my body instinctively knew when the sounds aligned, and when they departed. Thus, instead of setting poetry to music, I let Partch's music guide my language into poetry.

Harry Partch was a twentieth century composer, independent scholar, music theorist, transient/hobo (for a time) and embodied a restless genius born of the American West. He made work that he called corporeal, meaning “central to here and now, a time and a place”.³ This idea evokes ancient Greek conceptions of poesis, the coming into being of what wasn't there before, and in his case being implies a body, a voice, movement, and objects in a space. He opposed the idea of the corporeal to what he called abstraction, that was, in his view, the dominant conceptual apparatus that he had been trained to see as aligned with historical progress. As he put it, “It involved no small inner struggle to emerge from that spell, to discover that present “progress” clothed a skeleton of bondage to a specific and limited past, and to emerge from mental turmoil to a realization that what was called progress was not necessarily progress to me, however sincerely it might be accepted as such by many, perhaps even a great majority.”⁴

His most ambitious productions involved dance, text, musical sculpture, and theatrical staging. This way of approaching music, or what he refers to as “the genesis of One,”⁵ may bring to mind the Gesamtkunstwerk or Total Artwork that was 19th century composer Richard Wagner's ideal, but Partch emphatically set himself apart from and even against the Western Canon of musical theory. While many in the Western tradition, including Wagner, had tried to draw something from the lost musical arts of the ancient Greeks, Partch had a much broader scope. His influences included Cantonese opera, Mandarin folk songs, Javanese gamelan, Hebrew and Gregorian

³ Partch, Harry, *Genesis of a Music: An Account of a Creative Work, Its Roots and Its Fulfillments* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), 8.

⁴ Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, 6.

⁵ Partch, Harry, and Thomas McGeary. “A Quarter-Saw Section of Motivations and Intonations,” in *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1991), 197.

chants, Japanese Noh and Kabuki theater, African rhythmic traditions, Yaqui Indian music, and Appalachian cultural roots in his search for something that would be outside knowledge. He looked within history but in order to go beyond it, or before it. In 1967 he wrote, “Meaningfulness must have roots. It is not enough to feel that one’s roots extend back only a decade or a century. It is my strong belief that the human race has known and abandoned magical sounds, visual beauty, and experience ritual more meaningful than those now current.”⁶

A trance may be a way to exit time. A trance may be a way of getting out of familiar cognitive patterns, granting the body attunement with unconscious shades and tones. A trance may also be a way inside –to proprioception and imagination– to an evolutionary primitive inscription on a living bone. This anonymous sgraffito may be a prayer, or a spell, it may be one that sends a signal from a primitive visceral reflex to a conscious self.

Harry Partch describes his work as “experiential-ritualistic-dramatic” and rooted in the human voice. He strove to narrow the gap between speech and song by handcrafting his own instruments and inventing a complicated set of tablature symbols in order to perform the microtonal shadings prevalent in speech. “I work with words, because they are the commonest medium of creative expression. And words *are* music.”⁷

The central question for Partch was whether it was truly logical to limit an octave to twelve equally tempered tones. After he had quit formal music training and was experimenting with microtones,⁸ he began doing independent research on just intonation composition.⁹ Partch soon relinquished and replaced conventional Western nomenclature for pitch with “the language of ratios.” “The ‘language of ratios’ is the language in which all of Partch’s own theoretical concepts are described, and his

⁶ Partch, Harry, and Thomas McGeary. “A Quarter- Saw Section of Motivations and Intonations,” in *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1991), 196.

⁷ Partch and McGeary. *Bitter Music*, 12.

⁸ Microtones are the sounds that would exist between the black and white keys of a normally tuned piano keyboard.

⁹ Just intonation is the tuning of musical intervals as whole number ratios (such as 3:2 or 4:3) of frequencies. (Wikipedia)

introduction of this terminology into twentieth century composition has been one of his most enduring legacies.”¹⁰ As Partch often insistently puts it, he was led to his research by intuition initially, and the theorizing followed.

Partch acknowledged that 19th century physicist and philosopher Hermann Helmholtz’s book *On the Sensations of Tone* had a profound influence on his understanding of the human voice and on his just intonation compositions. Specifically, consonance and dissonance as defined by Helmholtz broadened Partch’s musical palette.¹¹ In chapter xi, *Dissonance for Different Qualities of Tone*, Helmholtz wrote that the human voice has the particular distinction of a polyphonic range which cannot be executed by an organ or any other instrument of the time, that is, within the limitation of twelve notes to an octave of equally tempered tuning in the Western European tradition. Helmholtz claims that when words are sung they connect to notes that can guide the listener to the entire body of polyphonic sound. Furthermore, the same stanza sung with the same notes will constantly and independently vary, without exception. Helmholtz goes on to describe the effect of adding piano accompaniment to the same choir who had performed a cappella at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1867, hearing that once the piano accompaniment was added, “it had the effect of perverting their intonation and the whole charm of the singing was at once destroyed.”¹²

Harry Partch created a scale of 43 tones per octave of intonation ratios in order to explore “the natural acoustic musical intervals generated by sounding bodies,” and rediscover what was lost in the dominant system of twelve-tone equal temperament.¹³ The just intonation instruments he designed and constructed included the Chromelodeon 1 and 2, the new Kithera 1 and Kithera 2, Bloboy, Surrogate Kithara,

¹⁰ Bob Gilmore, *Harry Partch: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 50.

¹¹ Gilmore, *Harry Partch: A Biography*, 62.

¹² Helmholtz, Hermann. “Chapter xi Dissonance for Different Qualities of Tone,” in *On the Sensations of Tone: As a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (New York: Dover, 1954), 207.

¹³ Partch, Harry, and Thomas McGeary, “Introduction,” *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1991), xvi; Gilmore, Bob, *Harry Partch: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 50.

New Harmonic Canon 1, Harmonic Canon 2 Castor and Pollux, Harmonic Canon 3 Blue Rainbow, Koto, Crychord, Diamond Marimba, Quadrangularus Reversum, Bass Marimba, Marimba Eroica, Boo 1, Boo 2, Cloud Chamber Bowls, Spoils of War, Mazda Marimba, Zymo-Xyl, Gourd Tree and Cone Gongs, and Eucal Blossom. The instruments themselves are a fine example of poesis and corporeality as he conceived of it. They are marvelously named and meticulously handcrafted, with a strange, sardonic quality. They appear in photos like nearly living creatures with bodies full of sonic possibility. I imagine Partch sleeping nearby as they hum, rattle, and chirp each time a wind blows through Gate 5, the part of the abandoned shipyard along the Pacific coast where Partch and his ensemble stayed for a brief time.¹⁴

In the beginning of his career Partch found some institutional financial support. In 1934 he was given money to travel to Europe where he met the Irish poet W.B. Yeats. To exhibit his technique, he intoned the 137th Psalm, "By the Rivers of Babylon" along with his first bespoke instrument the Adapted Viola, demonstrating his intention of composing a tonal version of Yeat's play *King Oedipus*. In Partch's essay from 1941 about the meeting with Yeats, he writes that his artistic drive towards narrowing the gap between speech and music had been intuitive. He explains that only later did he understand that his tonal compositions for his ensemble of instruments were aligned with the "Greek and Chinese conceptions - as old as history - that music is poetry." In the same essay Partch writes that he had been unaware of the Irish poet's prose articulating this same belief regarding the adaptation of tonal exploration and the speech-like patterns he employed. In *Literature and The Living Voice* Yeats wrote that "we require a method of setting music that will make it possible to sing or to speak ...in such a fashion that word shall have an intonation or accentuation it could not have in passionate speech....It will be necessary to divine the lineaments of a still

¹⁴ Bob Gilmore, *Harry Partch: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 216-217; An early prototype of the Surrogate Kithara was found "hiding in crawl space under the concert hall at Mills college in the 80's. It'd been left over from a stage production of King Oedipus in 1952," master avant-garde percussionist William Winant said in a phone interview on September 4th, 2022.

older art, and recreate the regulated declamations that dies out when music fell into its earliest elaborations.”¹⁵

In Lewis Hyde’s book *The Gift* he claims that W. B. Yeats cultivated “spooks” working in a trance.¹⁶ “Spooks” are a gift, an innate sensation that mediates communication with spirit. Kenosis with a kase (a break in a sacred drum pattern which induces spirit possession), a trance invites spirits to communicate with living flesh about invisible, infinite worlds. It is the interior response of a trance which can spark a fury of immediate apprehension, of intuition, of poetry.

Partch’s theoretical writing on music as well as his compositions and recordings, his work on visionary sound, sculptural form, and rapturous experience continue to expand and influence interdisciplinary performance.

In my own work I had been slowly moving away from performances built around American historical sound recordings (circa 1898-1917) of popular songs. These adaptations of contemporary stories result in a cappella performances built around text, voice, and social gathering. It was very exciting to find a composer who was working so closely with the voice. It was also a way back into music but with the voice as the predominant feature, and the music as what would emerge from the use of the voice. No more singing songs full of melodies that I already knew. I was looking for effects in the voice, and in the words I spoke, that would augment the power of meaning through the power of sound and rhythm. I use staging, costumes, movement, and like Partch, I am always looking for an experience that has the power of ritual, something that will go beyond our recollection and beyond our written history.

When I began to read Harry Partch’s writing, I was struck by his earlier work in the bardic tradition, particularly the words written in his memoir of the years he spent as a transient. “I heard music in the voices all about me, and tried to notate it, and I tried to enhance the mood and drama of such little things as a quarrel in a potato patch. The nuance of inflection and thought of the lowest of our social order was a new

¹⁵ Partch, Harry, and Thomas McGeary, “W.B. Yeats”, *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1991), 165 - 168.

¹⁶ Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. (United States: Vintage Books (NY), 2008), 290.

experience in tone, and I found myself at its fountainhead—a fountainhead of pure musical Americana.”¹⁷

The piece I have been working on is about my own time as a juvenile delinquent, in particular the time I spent in institutions, first an institution for “troubled teenagers,”¹⁸ and then one for the mentally ill. In large part my writing is an activity, or maybe a passivity, that takes place somewhere between listening and memory. On the one hand I let myself remember, on the other I have to allow voices to come back. The voices of the other kids in the institutions, the choirs of voices tromboning slogans, the singsong voices of know-it-alls. There are voices of pleading authority figures and voices of delinquent boys mumbling for fear of sounding like a dying goose. There’s the television’s uncanny voice calling, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and so on. It doesn’t come in an orderly fashion but I would say that those long gone voices from Cincinnati do come as “a fountainhead of pure musical Americana.”

I’m drawn to Harry Partch not only for his body of work but for his story and his character. He was born in California, lived in Arizona, and he has a rough, courageous, and sometimes lost, quality of a highly sensitive American artist evolving out of the US in the early twentieth century. His parents were missionaries who left China when the calling left them. His mother sang to him in Mandarin and one can imagine how the story of a woman singing Chinese lullabies to her son, in a remote town in the Arizona desert, could be the basis for a lifelong search for a voice outside of all systems of measure.

“Music is not a desire – it is an omnipresent condition. Tones, like the color of the sky, mountains, trees, and the body are inescapable, and not all music is man-made. Some respond –some don’t.

¹⁷ Partch, Harry, and Thomas McGeary, preface to *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1991), 5.

¹⁸ Szalavitz, Maia. *Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids*. New York, NY: Riverhead, 2006.

Much of that which *is* man-made we ignore, such as the music of speech. Well, I'm not ignoring it.

*Hallelujah, I'm a bum—*¹⁹

¹⁹ Partch, Harry, and Thomas McGeary, preface of *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos* (Urbana: University Of Illinois Press, 1991), 5; According to the Fresno State Ballad Index the author of the song, *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum* is unknown. The first publication is from 1909 in the IWW *Little Red Songbook*. Harry "Mac" McClintock claimed to have written *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum* around the end of the 19th century; he first popularized the song with his 1928 rendition for a Victor 78rpm recording. The lyric has a long, detailed history in American popular culture.