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Lou Harrison Rings True; Sottsass and Klimt Shine: West Coast

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May 24 (Bloomberg) -- Lou Harrison's designation as a "California composer" has done him no favors. Instead, the epithet seems to have limited his appeal for East Coasters and Europeans. Yet Harrison, who died in 2003 at age 85, was a major artist whose reputation is poised for serious reappraisal.

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The most important reason for such optimism is the music itself: virtual ear candy that typically combines Western instruments (sometimes tweaked), Eastern ones like the Indonesian gamelan (an ensemble of gongs, bells and chimes) and "found" objects such as brake drums and spent oxygen containers.

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Influenced by such hard-bitten iconoclasts as Henry Cowell (his primary mentor) and Charles Ives, Harrison is frequently mentioned in the same breath as his friend and near-contemporary John Cage, though the two couldn't be more different in many respects.

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One of three Southern California programs dedicated to Harrison and his milieu in the past week showed where the two composers converged. The May 21 concert featured "Double Music," a seven-minute work for four percussionists jointly composed by Cage and Harrison.

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The three programs, the last of which is presented tonight and tomorrow night, form a mini-festival called "Uncharted Beauty: The Music of Lou Harrison." Author and music historian Joseph Horowitz organized the series for Orange County's Pacific Symphony, arguably the most important orchestra in California after the Los Angeles Philharmonic and San Francisco Symphony.

Violin, Cello, Gamelan

The first concert, at the Barclay Theatre in Irvine on May 19, was an all-Harrison affair in which two facets of the composer emerged. The first transported us to the jasmine-scented world of the Double Concerto for Violin, Cello and Javanese Gamelan, led by Bill Alves, director of the Harvey Mudd College American Gamelan, and "Solstice," conducted by the Pacific Symphony's longtime music director, Carl St.Clair.

The second came from an earlier period, in which Harrison composed a suite of music for a Dada ballet by Jean Cocteau titled "Marriage at the Eiffel Tower." Though St.Clair conducted with apt Gallic flair, and his merry band played the Poulenc-like score deftly, it was the taped narration featuring a drolli Virgil Thomson and a warm Harrison that proved priceless. It sounded remarkably fresh.

In addition to the Cage-Harrison composition, the May 21 concert at Founder's Hall of the Orange County Performing Arts Center offered several short piano works by Cowell, all dispatched with impressive commitment to detail by Ursula Oppens. Tonight and tomorrow she will perform the festival's final work and piece de resistance, Harrison's Piano Concerto With Selected Orchestra.

"Uncharted Beauty: The Music of Lou Harrison" is at Segerstrom Hall, Orange County Performing Arts Center, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa. Information: (1)(714) 755-5799 or <http://www.pacificsymphony.org>.

Sottsass Design

A different sort of maverick -- the Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass -- is being celebrated with a show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Sottsass, now in his late 80s and still active, is probably best known for an assortment of household objects that bear his inimitable stamp. These include brightly colored, portable Olivetti typewriters; an assortment of elegant barware and cutlery for Alessi; and a group of outre furnishings for the Memphis group (mostly ungainly and garishly colored cabinets and shelving).

Sottsass is also an artist in the purer sense, and the show, curated by Ronald T. Labaco, displays ceramics and glassware that exist without obvious function. Alas, these multicolored works, bulbous and undulating, exhibit