

Performing Arts

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On Thursday, cellist **Yo-Yo Ma**, left, joins Jeffrey Kahane and the L.A. Chamber Orchestra in UCLA's Royce Hall for Tchaikovsky's "Rococo" Variations and, with pianist Kahane and violinist Margaret Batcher, Beethoven's Triple Concerto.

In Honor of a Masterful Maverick

Microtonal composer Harry Partch fought to get his work taken seriously. Now his centennial is the occasion of a celebration.

By JOSEF WOODARD

Artists are often more complex and influential than early appearances and reputation would suggest. That's particularly true for Harry Partch, microtonal guru, composer and incurable freethinker. Since his death in 1974, his status has shifted from controversial and marginalized to controversial and *less* marginalized—a maverick whose name is sometimes even placed in the same pantheon as Charles Ives and John Cage.

One of his most famous quotes hints at the unusual nature of his creativity: "I am not an instrument-builder, but a philosophic music man seduced into carpentry."

He was indeed an instrument-builder, because he needed tools adaptable to his personal tuning system (43 tones to the octave versus the standard Western 12-note unit). But even these widely known, significant aspects of his art were just parts in a grander whole, an utterly new vision of music in which the "corporeal"—theatricality, movement and the performer's body itself—ruled over academic notions of concert life.

Born in Oakland in 1901 to Christian missionaries on the verge of losing their religion, Partch's personal history is the stuff of legend, including his Depression-era life as a hobo, recounted in his surreal songs. Later, after winning grants and academic appointments, he enjoyed a more public life as a rebel with his own cause.

Not incidentally, the Partch saga also includes extensive, significant contact with Los Angeles, which makes the Partch Centennial Celebration at UCLA on Saturday a well-placed event.

There will be presentations by Partch fans and scholars, including Philip Blackburn, creator of the biographical "Enclosures" project; Bob Gilmore, author of a more conventional biography; filmmaker Steven Pouliot, presenting his 1972 film on Partch, "The Dreamer That Remains"; and panel discussions with a



File photo
Harry Partch plays on an instrument made partly out of wine bottles and hubcaps.

longtime assistant and friend of Partch, Danlee Mitchell, and another Partch ally, Erv Wilson. In the evening, a microtonal ensemble, Just Strings, will perform music from Partch's early years.

It will be, in a sense, a homecoming. It was at UCLA that Partch staged one of his most important and critically acclaimed music theater works, "Delusion of the Fury," in 1969. Based on Noh theater and a West African folk tale, it involved danc-

ers, mimes, Partch's instruments and traditional instruments in a mix designed to open up the usual buttoned-down concert setting. A recording of that work, by CBS, became one of the few major-label records of Partch's music, which otherwise was distributed on his own Gate 5 label.

As Blackburn explains, "One irony of this upcoming event is how rejected he was by UCLA up until that point. There was a lot of back-room politicking going

on, particularly by Betty Freeman, who made that all happen, much against their better judgment." Freeman, the noted local patron of contemporary music, became a vital friend, supporter and also photographer of Partch in his last years.

The kind of thing his champions were up against is clear from some of the reviews. In a record review of Partch's "Oedipus" in 1954, Los Angeles Times music critic Albert Goldberg opined: "After the first novelty wears off one is inclined to doubt that there is much real creative force or originality to Partch's innovations."

Partch, known for his ferocious responses to critics, sent a letter to Goldberg: "Go back to your histories, crawl between the pages and get pressed for another century."

UCLA's Partch celebration came into being as one component of this year's MicroFest, organized by John Schneider, a composer and performer who has been an avid Partch acolyte for years. Schneider has built copies of Partch's unique instruments (some of which will be on view in an instrument "petting zoo" at UCLA), performed Partch's pieces both solo and with his group, Just Strings, and generally stumped for the cultural cause of keeping Partch's music alive.

Schneider points out the influence of Partch's book "Genesis of Music," written in 1943 and reissued in 1971, on musicians such as Lou Harrison (Harrison was one of the subjects of another MicroFest event, in April, at the Claremont Colleges). In the field of microtonalism, which is to say alternate tunings, "Partch dominates the landscape."

Partch's connections to Southern California abound. His abbreviated period of formal music studies took place at USC in the 1920s (he never got a degree), and his jobs around that time included proofreading at the Los Angeles Times and ushering at concerts by the Los Angeles Philharmonic (at about that time, he submitted a symphonic poem to the orchestra, but the Philharmonic didn't bite). After stints riding the rails and lumberjacking during the Depression, he got a Guggenheim fellowship that led to various university positions, notably at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Illinois. All the while he was composing. He landed back in Los Angeles in the '60s, living in Van Nuys, Pasadena and Venice before head-

► **"THE PARTCH CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION,"** Schoenberg Auditorium, UCLA, Westwood. **Date:** Saturday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m. (concert at 8 p.m.). **Admission:** \$25 all day; \$15, concert only. (\$5 students/seniors). **Phone:** (310) 825-2101.

ing south to San Diego, where he died at 75.

Schneider is well-aware of the Partch residue in these parts. "I literally live about five blocks from one of the places where he had a studio, in Venice. My percussionist [Just Strings' Gene Sterling] played with Partch back in the late '60s. The ambience is still here."

One impressionable young musician whose life Partch touched was Blackburn, who developed an interest in experimental music growing up in Great Britain. He first encountered the composer's music when he was 16, and ended up spending 15 years producing the massive, multi-limbed project "Enclosures."

Blackburn's family was vacationing in the U.S. when he went to hear a rehearsal of Partch's "The Bewitched" played by an ensemble devoted to the composer's work. Conducted by alternative tunings composer and Partch champion Kenneth Gaburo, the work fascinated Blackburn. Blackburn went on to study music at Cambridge and then at the University of Iowa, where Gaburo taught.

In the mid-'80s, Mitchell, Partch's artistic assistant and heir to Partch's written documents, arranged to grant access to the Partch archives to Gaburo. The idea was to assemble the material into some published form. Blackburn was enlisted to help, and after Gaburo died in 1993, the task was left to him. By this time, Blackburn was working for American Composers Forum as program director, and he used the organization's clout and resources to push the project through.

"Enclosures" includes two sets of CDs and two videos. The first parts came out starting in 1995, and Blackburn may add to it in the future. The most recent installment, "Enclosure VI," available on the forum's in-house innova label, is a reissue of the original Columbia Masterworks release of "Delusion of the Fury."

The centerpiece of the project is "Enclosures 3," a 524-page collection of Partch's writing, photos, drawings, scores, and collectibles elaborately pasted together into what Blackburn calls a "bio-scrapbook." It came out in 1997 and earned an ASCAP Deems Taylor Award in 1998 (all the parts of "Enclosures" are available through www.composersforum.org).

Blackburn said the book is intended to replicate his sense of discovery when he first glimpsed the archives. "Simply looking at Harry's scrapbooks and opening the cigar boxes of photos and seeing his annotations and looking at his address books, you got an amazing glimpse of his life. We

wanted to put out a book or package or publication of some kind that would give other people the chance to experience Harry in the same way, as much as possible. To do a severe editing or censoring job would be to do a great disservice."

"Enclosures," along with such other efforts as a set of Partch reissues on the CRI label a few years ago, are part of an ongoing examination of both the man and the myth.

"If you come with certain pre-judgments about what a composer should be doing and the sounds he or she should be using and the form he or she should be putting them in, and the whole industry that goes along with that, then he doesn't fit. Then he's a

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PHILIP BLACKBURN

creator of the biographical "Enclosures" project

eccentric," says Blackburn, "But yet he sunk his teeth into the conventional institutional world for surprisingly long time.

"For someone who didn't have the usual academic qualification, he hung around music departments for a long time and would be surprised when he was rejected by them. He put himself in positions where he had a lot of offers and usually it was just one or two individuals who were enthusiastically supportive of him. And then, after a short time, the music professors would just ridicule him."

Because he was so far outside their frame of reference?

"Right, and that he thought of himself. One of the lessons that Harry had for all of us [is that] I sort of pioneered the art of survival. It inspires us [to] find our own path and make it work somehow.

"Harry had to make a lot of sacrifices in terms of having anything like a salary or retirement benefits. But he got to do what he wanted to do, and his life and his work were intricately bound up with each other."

*Josef Woodard is a frequent contributor to *Calendar*.*