

MUSIC REVIEW

A hard guy to encompass

American Composers Festival 2006 sets itself the daunting task of getting a handle on Lou Harrison's hedonism.

By MARK SWED
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Lou Harrison was a high-end hedonist. Along with courtesy, he proudly elevated greed and lust into virtues.

His greed was artistic, not materialistic. "I spread my toys over a large acreage," he often said of his embracing, mastering and then making his own a wide variety of world music.

Lust was lust. But his playing field was again expansive and required room for soul as well as body.

Harrison, who was the dean of West Coast music when he died three years ago at 85, is the subject of the Pacific Symphony's American Composers Festival 2006, which began Friday night. He's sixth in line, after Copland, Dvorák, the *echt*-eclectic William Bolcom and two festivals devoted to Pacific Rim influences.

But it was clear from two concerts held over the weekend that Harrison's music does not stand apart from so much as, like a giant sponge, absorb all around it. A feisty individualist, he was an outsider artist who happened to be the ultimate musical insider. He was an expert geneticist-composer who made musical hybrids no one had ever heard before, particularly in his pioneering grafting of Asian musical instruments and genres onto Western ones.

And he wrote melodies — gorgeous, unpredictable, brain-sticking melodies — with the best of them. "Uncharted Beauty" is the title of the Harrison festival. The beauty is evident. But this composer had a formal side as well. Along with everything else, he was pretty good at chart-making, to say nothing of calligraphy, painting and poetry.

The weekend's concerts — Friday night at the Irvine Barclay Theatre, Sunday night in Founders Hall at the Orange County Performing Arts Center — were designed as an extended introduction to Harrison in advance of an orchestral program Wednesday and Thursday. Harrison is a big, clumsy subject,



Photographs by RICARDO DEARATANIA *Los Angeles Times*
GRAND DUO: Violinist Jennifer Koh joins pianist Ursula Oppens at the Orange County Performing Arts Center.

chamber music events.

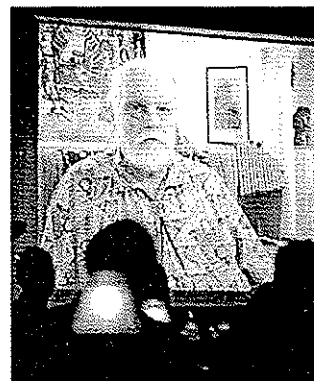
Joseph Horowitz, the festival's artistic advisor, brings an East Coast perspective. But Carl St. Clair, Pacific Symphony's music director, had a personal connection with Harrison in student days, which helped personalize the programs. Brief excerpts from filmmaker Eva Soltes' Lou Harrison Documentary Project offered loving close-ups of new music's red-shirted, white-bearded Santa tapping away on his home-made gamelan and delivering pearls of unconventional wisdom in an ageless, childlike, high-pitched voice.

Friday's program split Harrison's personality between Java and Paris. The first half featured a typical Harrison hybrid from the early 1980s — the Double Concerto for Violin, Cello and Javanese Gamelan, with Ray-

vey Mudd College American Gamelan. The second half was devoted to French-tinged ballet suites from 1949 — "Solstice" and "The Marriage at the Eiffel Tower" — written when Harrison was briefly living in New York and under Virgil Thomson's influence.

Sunday night, Harrison's personality got split a second way. First came a look at the influence on him of Henry Cowell, the rough-hewn composer from the Bay Area who led the early 20th-century assault on the piano and who was among the first composers to collect music from around the world. Two formal, late Harrison chamber pieces, "Ariadne" and the Grand Duo for violin and piano, made up the second half.

In all this, there was, for my taste, too much splitting and not



COMPOSER: Lou Harrison in documentary footage.

John Cage, Harrison was a groundbreaking percussion composer in the 1930s and '40s; percussionists of the Pacific Symphony played instead Cowell's "Pulse" and "Double Music," a work Harrison and Cage wrote together in 1940 as a kind of stunt.

The performances were uneven, though when good, very good. The Double Concerto had trouble getting off the ground, especially in a theater with acoustics dry for delicate Javanese instruments. St. Clair, however, led members of his orchestra in a marvelously vigilant account of "Solstice" demonstrating that, even in his early years, Harrison was inspired at mixing and matching — here with a chamber ensemble that included a celesta and a piano with tacks stuck to the instrument's hammers.

On Sunday, Ursula Oppens offered magnificent, hall-filling performances of Cowell's piano music, strumming the strings and hitting exhilarating tone clusters on the keys. Heather Clark was an overly intense flute soloist in the angular-lined "Ariadne."

But Grand Duo, with its curious combination of Western sonata form, ancient dance and polka, got what was surely its grandest performance when Jennifer Koh joined Oppens. Written in 1988, this major work had not until Sunday attracted major soloists. Koh was free and rhapsodic, Oppens commanding. But as with much else in this admirably ambitious festival, there were compromises. The wondrous Air, the score's longest movement and its heart, was omitted. And Koh miscalculated by applying vibrato, which is not part of Harrison performance