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Partch Centennial Honors 'a Philosophic Music Man'

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TIMES MUSIC CRITIC

"It seems inevitable," Harry Partch complained to The Times in 1969, when his last major work, "Delusion of the Fury," was given its premiere at UCLA, "that musicians will approach the playing of my instruments as a momentary adventure, like spending the night with a foreign whore." It has turned out to be a much more complicated situation than that.

For one thing, the metaphors have certainly changed. Saturday, UCLA (in conjunction with MicroFest) hosted a daylong Harry Partch Centennial Celebration, which included an "instrument petting zoo," with public (children included) invited on stage to try out a few examples of the famed Partch instrumentarium. But such friendly institutional outreach hardly makes Partch any less the 20th century's quintessential musical outsider today than was the irascible alcoholic when he died in San Diego in 1974.

And, however diverse his follow-

ing (the Residents, the pop experimentalists who performed in Royce Hall on Friday night, include Partch as an influence; and Partch is father of the microtonal movement), the composer is still ignored by the music establishment. In Richard Crawford's presumably inclusive "America's Musical Life: A History," a new book positioned to become the standard overview, Partch's name is a mere aside in its nearly 1,000 pages.

But then Partch hardly made it easy for his admirers. His music was written to be played on instruments of his own invention—he insisted upon them not only for their unique sound (the Marimba Eroica has frequencies so low that a "listener" feels its lowest pitches rather than hears them), and tunings (Partch divided the standard octave into 43 pitches rather than the usual 12), but also for their compelling visual effect.

The 27 Partch instruments are maintained at Montclair State University in New Jersey and are prohibitively expensive to ship for performance. Complicating mat-

Please see Partch, F12



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UCLA professor David Lefkowitz lets children Adam and Talia have a go at Harry Partch's Kithara.

Partch: UCLA Tribute Gives Musical Iconoclast His Due

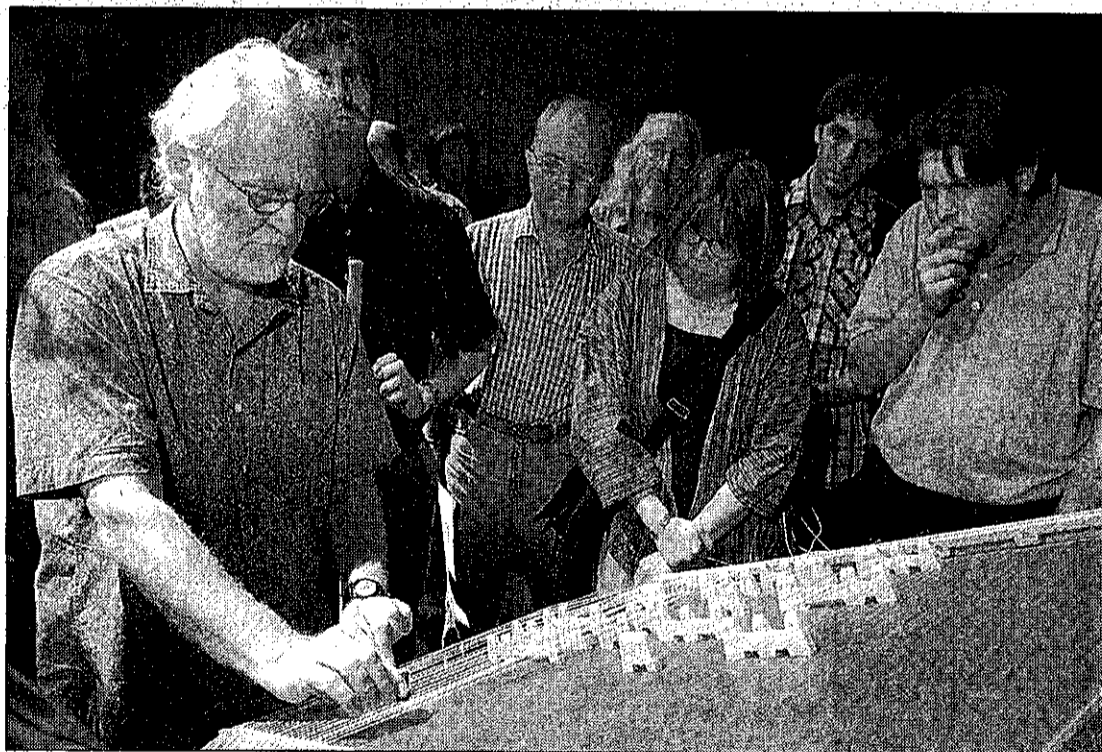
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ters further, Partch's music, from the early 1950s on, was spectacle. And peculiar spectacles those pieces, such as "Delusion," were, incorporating Partch's ideas of ritual and dance culled from his interpretations of the styles of ancient Greek, Chinese and Japanese theater.

Still, these obstacles have not deterred an interest in Partch. A group of acolytes who worked with the composer at UCLA and in San Diego during the last years of his life still carry the flame. To the embarrassment of American musicology, two young British enthusiasts have done an extraordinary job of making Partch widely accessible. Before Bob Gilmore's compelling biography was published in 1998, the longest account of Partch's life was to be found on the liner notes of old LP recordings. The composer Philip Blackburn has been responsible for reissuing many of the classic but obscure Partch recordings on CD, through the American Composer's Forum's Innova label, along with videos and, most importantly, an indispensable treasure-chest Partch scrapbook, with hundreds of pages that reproduce letters, press clippings, photographs and manuscripts.

Gilmore, Blackburn and musicians who had worked with Partch, including his closest assistant, Danlee Mitchell, were all at Schoenberg Hall to speak about Partch on Saturday and remind us that he was as colorful a composer as they come. The best-known fact about Partch, aside from his instrument-building, is that he was a hobo (and proud of it) during the Great Depression, and some of his best-known works, such as "Barstow" and "U.S. Highball," reflect upon those experiences.

The hobo years were, for Partch, just one aspect of his nose-thumbing the status quo. Indeed, he stubbornly refused to be catego-



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Philip Arnautoff plays the Harry Partch-designed Harmonic Canon that Arnautoff built in 1976.

rized. He called himself a "philosophic music man," yet he was adamant that musical speech be down to earth, the language he heard all around him. He considered, we learned Saturday, the movie "Hair" to be an artistic breakthrough. He was utterly practical, a carpenter who could make what he needed, yet he created a music so specialized that performing it could not be more impractical. He is viewed as one of the most important American experimentalists, yet he considered himself an arch-conservative, dismissive of nearly all modern music and interested in only things ancient and exotic.

So, what is to be done? Actually, quite a lot. Saturday evening was devoted to a concert by Just Strings, a group—led by the guitarist John Schneider—that specializes in per-

forming early Partch. The program, which was similar to the one that opened the MicroFest conference on microtonality at Pomona College last month, focused on Partch's work from 1929 (a delicious popular song written under the pseudonym Paul Pirate) to 1949. On hand was one original Partch instrument, the Kithara I, and several others that have been painstakingly adapted or re-created.

The program was intended as a demonstration of Partch's evolution, how he gradually found his voice. (That picture is incomplete since Partch claimed to have burned all his early traditional music—although Gilmore said he holds out hope that some works may escaped the *auto da fe*.) More important, however, was the demonstration of what dedicated performers can do to keep this music alive.

Schneider, whose gracious stage personality is the opposite of Partch's, nevertheless manages to convey the composer though his own voice, which is exactly what all lasting music must be capable of sustaining, even in such unique works as "Barstow" and excerpts from Partch's journal, "Bitter Music."

Enthralling, as well, was the entire ensemble—Gene Sterling, Rebecca Raff, William Skeen, Bryan Pezzone and Philip Arnautoff—which has impressively mastered Partch's instruments and/or performing style. Four students were a delight in performing a satirical Partch madrigal, "A Polyphonic Recidivism on a Japanese Theme."

Now, all we need is someone skilled in ritual, a Robert Wilson or Julie Taymor, to take a look at the big theater pieces.