

### A HONEYED THUNDER

BY ALAN RICH

Wednesday, May 24, 2006 - 12:00 pm



#### Hybrids

Even in his much-regretted absence, the late Lou Harrison remains a glowing presence. The paltry three concerts of his music in Orange County over the past few days that have been passed off as this year's Pacific Symphony American Composers "Festival" left much great music unplayed, and wasted time on insignificant works. Even so, there was obvious love behind the planning, and Lou came through loud and clear. Eva Soltes' documentary film clips showed the 100-year-old gamelan guru Pak Chokro talking about Lou, his eyes filled with reverence. A stageful of kids from the nearby Harvey Mudd College banged away on their gamelan

Composer Lou Harrison (Photo by Betty Freeman)

instruments with pride and precision under Lou's onetime disciple Bill Alves. And you knew some of the reasons for Lou's importance among us, and why he is so sadly missed.

On the first concert, a bunch of time was squandered on Lou's old-timey and rather silly piece of pseudo-Satie called *Marriage at the Eiffel Tower*, even though the astute programmer, Joseph Horowitz, had bothered to resurrect tapes of the narrations from a previous performance, delivered in the twee, buttery tones of Virgil Thomson and Lou himself. You could wish that conductor Carl St. Clair had instead been up to one of Lou's big symphonies. We used to hear these great, garrulous (and therefore very Lou-like) works regularly when Lou was around to run his own festivals at Aptos, and Dennis Russell Davies was around to conduct. Why not now?

"His music was so spare in design as to seem naive," wrote *The New Yorker's* Alex Ross, "but it was not simple, and he was not a simple man." Alex's tribute, dated March 3, 2003, on the occasion of Lou's death, is brief but speaks all about the man and his music; it's on Alex's Web site, [www.therestisnoise.com](http://www.therestisnoise.com), and it appeared at the time, ironically, when this country had finally become aroused to the significance and

stature of Harrison's music. Lou had died, at 85, on his way to a college festival of his music in Ohio; earlier that year a similar celebration had taken place at Juilliard, a major awakening of New York's ears to his West Coast-based music. Conductors around the world — America's Davies, the Netherlands' Reinbert de Leeuw — have taken up the cause.

"Cherish the hybrids," Lou used to say, and say again as a mantra, "they're all we've got." His early years saw a search for ingredients for the ideal mix: a dash of Schoenberg here, a soupçon of Satie there. Gradually we sense an epiphany, the emergence of a musical language that is Lou Harrison's and no one else's. The great *Double Concerto* of 1981 — an old friend, actually, with recent performances by Xtet at LACMA resounding in the memory — served to open proceedings last week with exactly the proper calling card. The work is pure mongrel, and wonderful of its kind. The background is, of course, the honeyed thunder of the small gamelan — and that was already a sight, five very undergrad-looking kids whomping away at the devices from a culture half a world and half a millennium away. Against this, the solo instruments play an almost continual rhapsodic line that seems to have both shape and no shape at all. There is other music like this: some Terry Riley perhaps, but there the melodic impetus is more Celtic than Pacific.

It's probably pointless, however, to seek out resemblances; there are just so many notes in the world, after all. What has happened here, and it is more delightful than anything else, is that Harrison has accomplished an overlay of Western concerto principles onto this alien foundation, made it adhere in some strange and cockeyed way, and turned out something close to a masterpiece. This exhilarating *Double Concerto* is just that. It's easy to make the distinction in dealing with new music that diatonic harmonies plus tunes equals conservative, and that abstruse harmonies plus bristling melodic lines equals progressive. But those equations break down constantly in the real world, and they do with Lou.