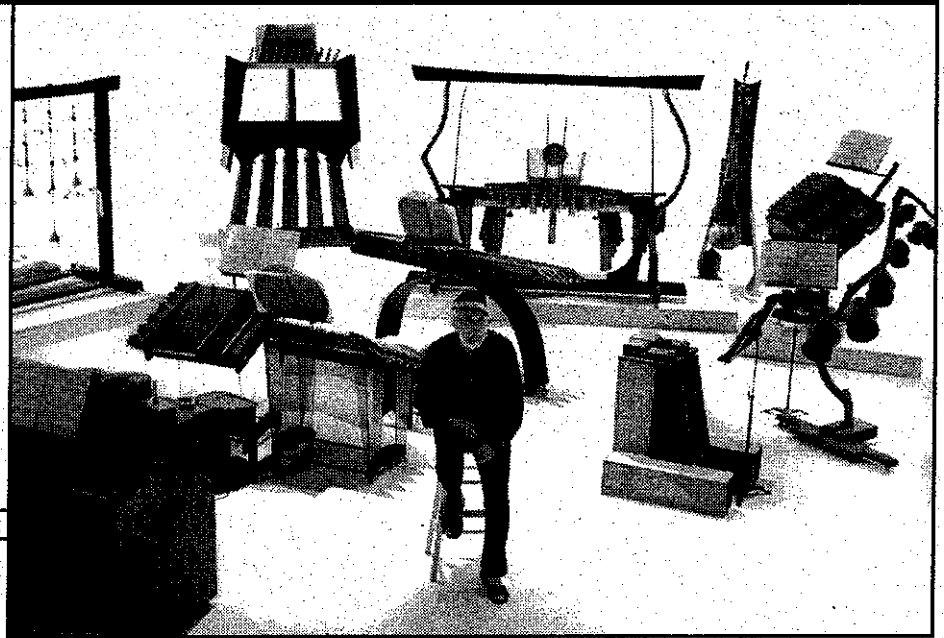


A LOT OF NIGHT MUSIC

BY ALAN RICH



Harry Partch: There is always a dreamer.

Tuning In, Tuning Out

TOWARD THE END OF A RECENT SYMPOSIUM celebrating hardcore musical creativity, someone asked what seemed to be a sensible and important question: How can a listener, confronted with an abstruse piece of new music, recognize what's going on? How do we, in other words, determine from our ears' evidence whether this is a piece of chance composition, an open-form work, 12-tone or, for that matter, a latter-day update of one of the time-honored classical forms?

Nobody had an answer. Nobody, in that distinguished aggregation of composers, scholars, educators, electronic aficionados and a critic or two — gathered together under the auspices of the Getty Institute and CalArts to celebrate the legacy of the legendary pianist/composer/guru David Tudor on the occasion of the Getty's acquiring Tudor's archives — seemed to attach much importance to whether the music and musicianship under examination was ever intended to be received, understood and welcomed into the worldwide repertory of masterpieces. Those works in that repertory, from the past or even the recent present, survive on an audience's ability to recognize their mix of inspiration and process: not only the beauty of the theme of Bach's "Goldberg" Variations, say, but the adventures that theme undergoes; not only the shape of the tone row in Schoenberg's Fourth String Quartet, but the power of its unfolding. Sometimes it takes a generation or two for the world to catch up with the works of a particular creative genius, but it eventually happens. At the Getty I was assaulted and appalled by Tudor's 29-year-old electronic work called (or uncalled) *Untitled*. What disturbed me wasn't just the aggressive ugliness of the piece; in my line I encounter plenty of that. What disturbed me more was that the work — whose 20 minutes could have been 20 hours — seemed to be only about itself, closed off and impenetrable.

There's an irony here, because, a couple of nights before at CalArts, there was another Tudor creation from about the same time that was most of all about reaching and involving an audience. *Rainforest IV* invites the crowd to wander through a roomful of gadgetry — an old car door, a sculpture of toilet floats, an inverted barrel, you name it, all wired and vibrating,

all adding up to a three-dimensional experience exhilarating in its own wacko way. Here, too, was a creation that was basically about itself, but with the extra dimension of sharing that was denied to the beset audience sitting still in the Getty's darkened auditorium. The Getty concert — Tudor and his orbit, including John Cage and Morton Feldman — had its moments, however, above all Vicki Ray's exquisite reading of some of Feldman's small piano works. Here there was sharing, inviting a listener to lean toward the music to savor every near-silent detail, as we do with the "Goldbergs" and with Schoenberg's Fourth Quartet.

YOU COULDN'T NAME TWO AMERICAN originals further apart in style and outlook than Tudor and Harry Partch, yet within 10 days both were handsomely celebrated in local halls: Tudor for his archives, Partch for the upcoming centennial of his birth (June 24, 1901). Over 12 hours last Saturday at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall there was Partch on film, Partch in photographs on walls, Partch manuscripts (extraordinary, the elegance and exactitude of his notation, of music that strayed so enchantingly beyond the limitations of mere written notes!) and, finally, Partch's music on the stage. John Schneider — guitarist, composer, baritone, microtonal guru (and host of KPFF's *Global Village*) — put together a concert mostly of works Partch composed early on for himself to, er, sing, and delivered a pretty good facsimile of the old boy's stentorian growl. Some of Partch's instruments were on hand: originals, re-creations and, in one case, a keyboard programmed to reproduce the 43-tone scale of the original Chromelodeon; the performers, members of Schneider's "Just Strings," managed their exotic gadgetry with appealing skill. On video there was larger, later Partch as well: the dance piece *Delusion of the Fury* and Betty Freeman's short documentary on *The Dreamer That Remains*. Arriving home, I played something in C major, and it was startling.

Nobody cared more than Partch about reaching an audience. In Freeman's film he talks about the need for his players to look good — "not like a bunch of California prune pickers" — and move well on the stage. At

the afternoon's symposium there was talk of producing more copies of the instruments Partch himself designed and built to manage his one-man tuning revolution — whose originals are now in the care of composer Dean Drummond in New Jersey — to enable more widespread hearings of the music. That is certainly preferable to recent attempts to hand the works over to "normal" players, as a recent stab at Partch's *Barstow* by Philharmonic players at a "Green Umbrella" concert (even with Schneider's recitation) sadly proved.

Yet there is a dead end here, similar to what I sensed at some of the Tudor discussions. The music Partch wrote for his strange and fascinating array of instruments — some two dozen, originally — stands as the audible emanation of one whole ornery, cantankerous, innovative spirit. The instruments provide the visible counterpart. Nobody else in his right mind could compose for these instruments without cloning that whole spirit. As long as there are John Schneiders to re-create passably the sounds of Partch — like all those jazz bands around claiming to rekindle the sounds of Ellington — we'll have a tenuous grip on this unique byway in the annals of American innovation. But Partch remains inimitable, in both the best and the worst sense.

Betty Freeman remains inimitable, too: a sublime local spirit whose money has gone to making new music happen — from a list of beneficiaries that includes such names as Harry Partch and John Cage, Philip Glass and John Adams, Virgil Thomson and practically anyone else who matters in new-music circles. At her insistence, there is no Betty Freeman Concert Hall, no endowed front-row seat at the Music Center, no bronze plaques or banners. Still, she couldn't prevent Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Philharmonic from a weekend of short tributes on the eve of her 80th birthday; a new piano piece by Harrison Birtwistle that Mitsuko Uchida performed on one night, a jolly short orchestral zoom by Salonen on another, and a "Song for Betty" by Kaija Saariaho on the third; music eminently deserving of a place among the evidence that serious new music can still break hearts with its pure, simple beauty. □