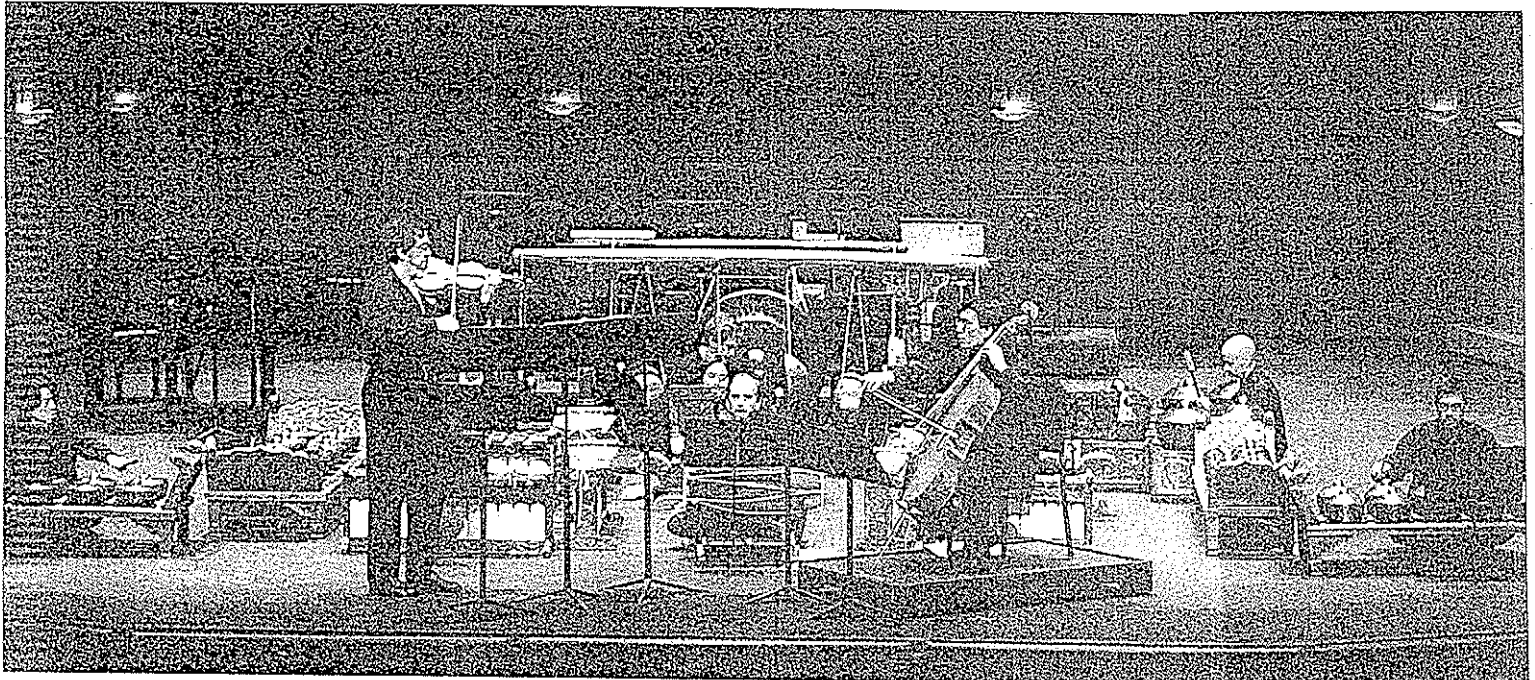


## REVIEW



ASIAN INFLUENCE: Violinist Raymond Kobler and cellist Timothy Landauer join the Harvey Mudd College American Gamelan in Lou Harrison's Double Concerto for violin, cello and gamelan. MIKE SCHWARTZ, THE REGISTER

# OF-T-IGNORED MUSICAL GEMS

Pacific Symphony's annual American Composers Festival spotlights Lou Harrison's music.

By TIMOTHY HANGAN  
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

About this time every year, the Pacific Symphony's American Composers Festival starts up again and once more my ears are thrown into a state of disbelief. These thematic explorations of a composer's work, or a particular part of a composer's work, put together by music director Carl St.Clair, American music historian Joseph Horowitz and others, invariably uncover lost gems in our national repertoire, music which for reasons that are not instantly fathomable is virtually ignored by our performing institutions.

This year's festival (the sixth) - dubbed "Uncharted Beauty: The Music of Lou Harrison" - more or less takes up the topic explicitly. As Friday night's opening concert at the Irvine Barclay Theatre showed, Harrison's music has a lot going for it, even from an

average listener's point of view - things like melodies, consonant harmonies and a predilection for soothing sonorities. So what is it, exactly, that keeps this music out of the mainstream, where Horowitz claimed it should be?

A couple of answers were suggested amid all the gorgeous sounds. For one thing, Harrison (1917-2003) was a musician who didn't choose to be limited by national identity. Looking elsewhere for inspiration, especially Asia, he eschewed both easy Americana and complex Europeanism - he just doesn't sound like other classical music, though he's clearly in the tradition.

Another thing: Harrison didn't have a single style, or even, perhaps, a signature voice. Friday's pieces separately revealed strong French and Javanese influences, and a kind of talent for musical mimicry. (Stravinsky also didn't have a single style, but he had a voice.) St.Clair mentioned a regret in not being able to in-

clude some of Harrison's 12-tone music (the composer studied with Schoenberg), which surely would have underlined the point.

Lastly, Harrison's music embraced simplicity and gracefulness in a time when composers were going mad for total serialism and other forms of bleep-and-scratch music. Harrison's style, by contrast, can sound too easy to respect.

None of which is to suggest that it doesn't deserve it. The music on the opening program proved at the very least entrancing and sometimes better. It began, as audience members were strolling in, with the otherworldly chiming

of the Harvey Mudd College American Gamelan, a decorative ensemble of tuned bells, gongs and drums, seated on stage and led by Bill Alves. Alves and Horowitz then discussed the characteristics of this Javanese style of gamelan before performing Harrison's own 1981 "Gending Demeter," spare, contemplative, somewhat impersonal music.

With the Double Concerto for violin, cello and Javanese gamelan from 1982, however, Harrison turned contemplation on its head. This is a sometimes wild (the second movement is called "Stampede"), soaring, headlong work, with big Romantic solo lines and a momentum like a train. At the same time, there is a Baroque-like sensibility at work here, a constancy of motion that gives the piece more cumulative than eventful impact. Violinist Raymond Kobler and cellist Timothy Landauer dug into it passionately and proficiently, with the Mudd College Gamelan in sup-

### American Composers Festival

- **With:** Pacific Symphony; Harvey Mudd College American Gamelan; Raymond Kobler, violin; Carl St.Clair, conductor
- **When:** May 19
- **Where:** Irvine Barclay Theatre
- **Next:** 8 p.m. on Wednesday and Thursday at Segerstrom Hall
- **How much:** \$20-\$78
- **Call:** (714) 755-5799

port.

Selections from two ballets written in 1949 were performed in the second half, and hard to believe they were by the same composer. "Solstice" - for two cellos, bass, trumpet, flute, oboe, celesta and tack piano (thumbtacks are inserted into the hammers of the instrument, giving it a rinky-tink sound - revealed the composer already enamored with the gamelan, the sound of the

combined keyboard instruments with the bass, using a stick to hit the strings rhythmically below the bridge, providing an exotic, ringing ostinato.

The Suite from "The Marriage at the Eiffel Tower," on the other hand, was pure French froth, recalling Offenbach, Ravel, Stravinsky and the music of Les Six. The music was composed for a Dadaist ballet by Jean Cocteau; the narration here was supplied by an old recording, with none other than Harrison and a wacky Virgil Thomson doing the silly honors. A pastiche of frivolity, Harrison's "Eiffel Tower" music nevertheless manages a range of playfulness - a peppery-harmonized wedding march, a trumpet-and-drums military pronouncement, a piano blues, an elegant waltz, a noble funeral march and dance hall pizzazz. St.Clair led a large chamber orchestra in a nifty performance. Pure fun. Let's hear it again.