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HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

*Delusion 2.0;*

*Harry Partch*

and the  
Philosopher's



*Tone*

***Delusion of the Fury***

**Harry Partch**

**Japan Society, December 7, 2007**

**by Philip Blackburn**



I believe in many things; in an intonation as *just* as I am capable of making it, in musical instruments *on stage*, dynamic in form, visually exciting. I believe in dramatic lighting, replete with gels, to enhance them. I believe in musicians who are total constituents of the moment, irreplaceable, who may sing, shout, whistle, stamp their feet. I believe in players in costume, or perhaps half-naked, and I do not care which half; perhaps only with headpieces, *but something, just something*, that will remove them from the pedestrian, the city-street, the beloved-and-dutiful-son or daughter, the white-shirt-and-tie or evening-gown syndrome.

I believe in Bass Marimbists with footwork as beautiful as that of skilled boxers, in kitharists who move the trunks of their bodies like athletes. I believe in all sounds of the human voice, free from the bel-canto straitjacket. Finally, I believe in a total integration of factors, not as separate and sealed specialties in the artificially divorced departments of universities, but of sound and sight, the visually dynamic and dramatic, all channeled into a single, wholly fused, and purposeful direction.  
*All.*

—Harry Partch, *Statement*, 1960

**H**arry Partch's (1901-1974) *Delusion of the Fury* is back: a legendary 1960s work as alive and powerful today as it was in the heyday of West Coast counter-culture. In many ways this mature masterwork of hybrid music-theater represents the culmination of Partch's iconoclastic life; employing as it does the majority of his unique handmade instruments, tuned to his system of acoustically pure Just Intonation intervals, and telling a compelling pair of serious and silly humanistic tales by means of dance, vocalizing, movement, music, lighting, and costumes. While almost all his other works have been performed since his death in 1974—either on his own set of original instruments led by Danlee Mitchell and now Dean Drummond, or by John Schneider's West Coast replica set—the music for *Delusion* is especially hard to play. Twenty players, who can commit to months of grueling rehearsals,

must learn a new notation and memorize over an hour of music that has more than enough time-signature changes to demand extraordinary focus. The players must also sing, whistle, stamp their feet, and project visual agility and engagement; this is no pit orchestra or concert recital. It is a lifestyle commitment. And you need to spend years working your way through Partch's smaller and simpler pieces before tackling this one.

To compound matters, three lead actors must bear the weight of the drama and be equally adept at stylized movement, dance, and acting, as well as in possession of extraordinary vocal abilities; thanks to our climate of over-specialized training, performers typically excel in one discipline but are lacking in the total range of abilities required for Partch's integrated art form.

Even if the performers are capable, the management team needs tons of money, shared vision, clockwork coordination and an extraordinary degree of collaboration. Unifying art forms in the West has been an uphill battle for centuries partly because of this; just ask Wagner.

It's a tall order to mount such a work, and anything short of success in Partch's terms is sadly typical yet still lamentable—Partch himself had a long history of less than ideal productions. Even when he was at the helm of a production, his singular value-system was difficult to inculcate in a team of rookie collaborators.

By and large the Japan Society performances December 5-8, 2007, were a prodigious achievement. A new generation of fans (at least the portion that managed to score a ticket to the sold-out, Uptown-priced run of shows) saw the original Partch instruments in all their glassy, woody glory; heard a well-rehearsed band play his fragile, addictive and soulful music; and saw a visual feast of sexy dancers, fluid lighting, and assured actors. You could be forgiven for thinking you had experienced an authentic representation of Partch's vision (and the standing ovations and favorable press reviews attest to that), but he set high standards for his art and the production had a couple of telling flaws. In most cases, a theater work with a few production miscalculations would be forgivable; in Partch's case, any botched element betrays a deeper misunderstanding of his total ideals, and proves fatal.



Act I treats with death, and with life despite death.

Act II treats with life, and with life despite life.

They have this in common: both convey the mood that reality is in no way real: this despite the very different locales, subject matter, and the very different paths toward the awareness of unreality.

Both—essentially—are happy in their focus; the reconciliation with some kind of unreal death makes the one with some kind of unreal life possible.

—Harry Partch, *Scenario for Cry From Another Darkness* (aka *Delusion of the Fury*), December 30, 1964

*Delusion of the Fury* (originally entitled *Cry From Another Darkness*) is a dramatic work of ritual music theater in two sections: a tragedy followed by a comedy. As such it follows the ancient Greek practice of linking a tragedy with a less tragic but still poignant satyr play immediately afterward (just as Partch had done with his settings of the *King Oedipus* tragedy followed by the bathetic *Plectra and Percussion Dances* in 1952).

The acts are based on a Japanese Noh play (*Atsumori*, as translated by Arthur Waley) and an Ethiopian folk tale (from the book *African Voices*, edited by Peggy Rutherford). Yet despite their exotic origins, they are intended as directly relevant to contemporary life: Partch, for instance, often brought up ancient Greek myths in everyday conversation—the stories were alive and immediate for him. Although he is best remembered for his homeless wanderings during the Depression and the works based on hobo life of that period, Partch was globally minded long before multi-culturalism was fashionable. He set texts of Chinese poet Li Po in the 1930s, but *Delusion* was his only major dramatic work using non-European material.

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I am drawn to the Oriental attitudes because, in the Orient, there has never been any great separation of the theater arts, therefore no need to conceive of integration... I should emphasize that I do not think or plan on the level of reproducing anything, but rather in terms of revitalization of the over-specialized Western theater, through transfusions of old and profound concepts.

—Harry Partch, Proposal to the Ford Foundation to spend a year in Japan, Dec. 8, 1962

Partch wanted integration among the art forms, a literal, relevant, powerful *Gesamtkunstwerk* that speaks directly to our lives and human condition. The abstract, European arts he felt were symptomatic of losing touch with our whole selves and compartmentalizing our multi-faceted roles in life:



[I want to] be aware of the total potential of any human involvement. The musician as dancer, the dancer as ditch-digger, the ditch-digger as physicist, the physicist as hobo, the hobo as messiah, the messiah as criminal, or any other conceivable metamorphosis.

—Harry Partch, *No Barriers*, 1952

He complained that we go to the opera and get singing, the ballet and get dance, a concert and get music, drama and get words: “basic mutilations of ancient concepts.” How much more powerful would the experience be if we were struck by them equally, all at once?

These ideas are fused in his notion of One Voice—his version of a “Unified Field Theory”—that has as its kernel the facts of basic acoustics. Small number ratios (such as described by Plato and Pythagoras) are the purest form of tuning musical intervals, and by happy (but debatable) coincidence, when we intone our speech in heightened dramatic situations, we hit similarly subtle microtonal inflections in the resulting melodic contour: Inflections that the 12 equal fixed notes of the piano cannot even approximate. (Ironically, skilled concert performers on Western string, brass, and wind instruments play naturally in tune—by ear—according to these fine shadings of the harmonic series, yet their conventions and terminology are incompatible with Partch’s nomenclature.)

Rather than take the common approach and have the speech-singing voice conform to the available instruments, he did the opposite; he gave Voice the primary role and constructed the necessary instruments to support it (along with corollary unique notations, rehearsal and transportation difficulties, and the life of penury that ensued). Harmonics, Tuning, Voice (loosely combined under the term Monophony) then became extended beyond the mere articulation of vocal language to encompass the whole body and mind under the term Corporeality. This term not only implies a “body feeling” in performance but also an implication of focus and dedicated mindset, a performance intensity, presence, and charisma that are typically neglected or constricted in routine concert music.

Partch was a musical philosopher and once stated that he was as interested in the “idea” of music as he was by music itself. His works stand as uncompromising expressions of theoretical concepts; equally important as intellectual demonstrations as they are powerful in effect.

Partch saw ritual as a linking element between his familiar worlds of ancient

Greek myths and contemporary America; Ulysses' wanderings were exactly those of his own freight hopping in the 1930s; Dionysian idol worshiping rituals were exactly those he saw in Elvis or The Beatles. The purely formalistic structures that had developed in instrumental music since the 17<sup>th</sup> century with their own rules of harmony and counterpoint and architectural forms of sonata, rondo, and fugue were anathema

to him because they had no connection with drama or storytelling *per se*.

They were useless to him; they wasted their potential for wholeness. It is one thing to theorize about how art forms should all support each other—his book, *Genesis of a Music*, deals with this—it is another to put it into practice.

During his career, whether he was riding the rails or working with undergrads, Partch's artwork is inextricably linked to the circumstances of his life; it is always autobiographical to some degree. It is consequently tempting to see in the conciliatory tone of *Delusion's* Act I a similarly resigned and mellow Partch at the end of his tempestuous life. It is equally easy to see the hobo in Act II as a version of Partch himself 30 years earlier stating, "But I'd rather be a hobo"; a political defiance against the establishment.

Yet, Partch is no longer around. It is not the 1960s any more and producing any work after the author's death presents its own set of challenges and opportunities. To compound the difficulties, Partch was especially precise and thorough about how his work should be presented and what it should convey. (Where aspects were left unspecified he always provided instructions on the boundaries of acceptable interpretation; guidelines that any producer would presumably want to know.) There is also an absence of a track record to refer to; some Partch works have been performed many times (*Bewitched*, *Castor & Pollux*) so we have a tradition that can withstand a wider range of personal interpretation. In the case of *Delusion*, it was done once and imperfectly at that ("Academically static modern dance and the ultimate nadir in costume



treachery,” as he described it in 1972 to Madeline Tourtelot). Does a revival under such circumstances have a greater duty to be faithful to the artist’s original intent? To set the record straight before future generations reinterpret it? If only to learn what he envisioned for the work?

By analogy, prior to the 1980’s Early Music movement and its advocacy of historically informed performance practice of Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music, performances of Monteverdi, Bach, and Perotin still took place, but they largely missed the point. They used inappropriate instruments, tunings, and phrasing that bludgeoned the works’ original purpose and sensibility. We are now, thanks to scholarship, in a better position to realize a different aesthetic in musical performance and appreciate qualities absent from the blindly received tradition. The works thus become fresh and new to our ears precisely because we have questioned every assumption and performed them in an un-contemporary way. Fidelity to a work’s idea through an informed reading of the text can be a path to discovery and authenticity; appropriating some of the ideas and taking them intentionally in new directions is something else.

When does a new conception of a work, if it is that at all, actually mask inability and not reveal inventiveness? Nietzsche addresses this symptom rather acutely in “On Style,” aphorism 290 from *The Gay Science*. Here’s an excerpt: “It will be the strong and domineering natures that enjoy their finest gaiety in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own. . . . conversely, it is the weak characters without power over themselves that hate the constraint of style. They feel that if this bitter and evil constraint were imposed upon them they would be demeaned; they become slaves as soon as they serve; they hate to serve.” This seems to address rather precisely the problem with such approaches and a problem of our epoch. Directors think the only way for them to be creative is to mutate however they wish what they are directing because of their inability to achieve the creator’s original vision. If they don’t include their ‘point of view’ they don’t think they are ‘doing anything.’ The result of being rooted in their ego instead of the vision of the work.

So the first questionable statement regarding *Delusion*’s revival comes from the festival director:

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Our challenge was to see how far we could get from Partch’s original creation, yet still remain loyal to his concept—without dropping into the pitfall of mounting a museum piece that even the creator himself would no doubt hate.

—Yoko Shioya, Artistic Director

Are works from the 1960s necessarily museum pieces already? Is Partch's favorite musical, *Hair*, from the same era, less relevant because it is a period piece? Is the original choreography to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* somehow less powerful because it assumed a different audience culture? The fear that a work may seem "dated" may stimulate a producer to "update" it, but does that solve the problem? Was there a "problem" in the first place? Some works are considered "timeless": who decides?

Here is a piece, *Delusion*, that had never been done totally right, and the director already wants to stretch it away from its roots? This anyhow was the shaky premise for this performance. It takes the hare-brained challenge of separating Partch's concept from his concrete instructions; a path that led to Partch's condemnation during his lifetime and has surely become no more fruitful since.

How then to realize an authentic vision of his canon now that his ashes have been floating off the Santa Monica Pier for over 30 years? There have been several attempts. Currently there are about 1.4 sets of instruments his music can be played on, based in Venice, California (think Muscle Beach and Flower Power), and Montclair State University, New Jersey (think leafy burbs). This original set is led by Dean Drummond who met Partch at the age of 16 and performed with him for a couple of years late in Partch's life—surely a formative influence for any teen.

Everyone takes away from a Partch encounter a different sense, based on the circumstances of the discovery and what resonates with their own latent interests. Ben Johnston, for instance, who knew him in the 1950s, became a sophisticated composer (and teacher) of microtonal concert music. James Tenney, David Dunn, Johnny Reinhard, and Phil Arnautoff likewise had their musical worlds expanded. Others more distant from the source (including Paul Drescher, Skip LaPlante, and me) became sound-sculptors. Few swallowed Partch whole. Dean Drummond developed as a composer, leader of Newband, and ultimately guardian of the Partch instruments through an arrangement with Partch's heir Danlee Mitchell to borrow them in 1989. (Note I didn't use the word "Instrumentarium," a now-common neologism that Partch never used and might have thought designated the tools of his trade as peculiar specimens in glass jars.)

Theater is considered to be a collaborative art form; playwrights, actors, set designers, and directors all work together to mount a production as a collective effort. Partch, however, went farther than most modern authors by not only composing the music but also specifying in detailed and imaginative terms the costumes, characters, movements, and motivations of all the performers. In this regard he is similar to ancient Greek poets who likewise took on the whole

range of production tasks—providing music, costumes and choreographic gestures (*chieronimia*) in addition to the dramatic narrative.

During his life, while he needed people to realize these visions in his productions, Partch (like his near-contemporary, Samuel Beckett) left little leeway for personal interpretation or competing viewpoints. His singular vision and aesthetic led to notorious spats with the likes of Alwin Nikolais (*The Bewitched*, 1957), Joyce Trisler (*The Bewitched*, 1959), and Kenneth Anger (*Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* misappropriated Partch's *Plectra and Percussion Dances* in 1954), who abandoned Partch's instructions and suffered the consequences. Who knows what revenge Partch may have concocted had he seen the recent version of his *Castor & Pollux*, revamped as *Calculus & Politics* and choreographed by Molissa Fenley first at Mills then at the Joyce Theater in New York the week following the *Delusion* production? It would not have been a pretty sight.

Given that Partch's instructions and vision for his works are well documented and easily available, is it possible to stage an authentic production that differs significantly from his concrete instructions? How far can one take the letter of his score and retain the spirit? Does the producer always trump the playwright, or only if he's dead? Could a deliberately "inauthentic" production illuminate hidden aspects of the work, even one we've never seen? When does honoring a work's integrity by realizing and stretching its intrinsic qualities become an irresponsible smash and grab?



The musicians must of course be in costume, and I have a singularly clear idea as to what the costumes should be like as to detail and what they should convey: a sense of magic, of an olden time, but never of a precise olden time. They should certainly not suggest anything that is either Japanese or Ethiopian.

The basic garment of the musicians should be a huge pair of pantaloons, wrapping around the waist in East-Indian fashion. In Act I they should also wear a poncho-like garment—a single, full piece of cloth with a neckhole. It must be completely unadorned, without collages or beads or anything that tinkles in the light. The poncho is discarded at the end of Act I. During Act II the musicians are naked from the waist up.

To compensate for this very simple costume each musician will wear a fantastic headpiece. Each will be different, or frequently different.

In contrast, the three principals would wear more imaginative costumes, and imaginative make-up. Wigs certainly, but no headpieces.

—Harry Partch, Scenario for *Cry From Another Darkness* (aka *Delusion of the Fury*), December 30, 1964

How then did the Japan Society performance of *Delusion of the Fury* match up to Partch's original vision?

“A” for effort, to be sure. The production was professional and clearly the result of hard work, a generous budget, and highly skilled participants. *Delusion* is one of the largest of Partch's ensemble works and certainly the most musically demanding. It was written after a period at the University of Illinois when he had effectively simplified his writing to accommodate ever larger casts of thousands. Away from the pressures of student productions and settled in a Petaluma chick hatchery, Partch could resume his experiments with more sophisticated writing for virtuoso musicians (though he had none at his disposal at the time).

This production also served to put the 1969 UCLA premiere (with its well-known recording and lesser known film version, both on Innova) in perspective. It is always a shock to hear a live performance of a work that you are familiar with only through one recording, and this time was no exception. The notes were the same, but listening in a live setting in an auditorium, the instrumental timbres are more fragile and crystalline than the close-mic setup. You appreciate for the first time what the original Columbia recording engineers did to rebalance the instruments to bring out particular melodic lines. Many of the instruments in their live incarnation have a narrow dynamic range, making it difficult for any conductor to bring out the parts and balance them well, even if—as Drummond was—he were not engaged in playing an instrument himself. Balancing the ensemble thus becomes an exercise in instrument placement on stage, so the quieter ones are nearer the audience and have a greater chance of being heard in *tutti* sections. While the wide spread of the instruments on stage helped the ear distinguish the daemon of each instrument most of the time, the Chromelodeon reed organ and kitharas could have been more prominent at times. One of the kitharas and the Mazda Marimba actually had subtle electric amplification in this production, as Partch had sanctioned during his lifetime, thus allowing instruments to be placed more for visual effect than acoustic projection.

The experience of the Marimba Eroica, however, was superior when “heard”