

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Dreyer, Martin. 1975. 'Review of *Genesis of a Music* (2nd edition) by Harry Partch'. *Contact*, 12. pp. 42. ISSN 0308-5066.

GENESIS OF A MUSIC (2nd edition), by Harry Partch  
Da Capo Press, 1974 (\$18.00)  
also Harry Partch: DELUSION OF THE FURY  
CBS M2 30576, three-record set (5.95)

MARTIN DREYER

Tired of tearing around with the trendies? Browned off with Berio and Boulez? Finding the avantgarde spaced-out or the rearguard reactionary? Then settle down with a copy of *Genesis of a Music* in hand or *Delusion of the Fury* on the turntable. Oriental fragrances will displace your continental claustrophobia. You may even rekindle what remains of your musical innocence.

Harry Partch is 20th century music's supreme Blakean innocent; beyond that he is difficult to pigeonhole. Let us start from his dislikes. He has had nothing to do with Western music since the disillusionment of his 20s (he was born in 1901), when he burnt all his compositions in a cathartic spasm and achieved a new exhilaration. As an American he detested the European chauvinists of New York, Hollywood's "mindless caterwauling", and by-the-yard mood-muzak. Who doesn't? But Partch set his mind to constructive alternatives. He also deplored what he saw as the extreme specialisation of creative participants in the performing arts: a theatre of dialogue without music or a concert of music without drama, these he calls "basic mutilations of ancient concept". This is more than a plea that we resume the search for a *Gesamtkunstwerk* at the end of the rainbow. It is a demand for a rediscovery of music's by now lost origins.

Starting from the hypothesis that music's roots lie in natural body rhythms and speech intonation, he abandoned traditional scales, instruments and forms as perpetuating the breed of technically accomplished but minutely specialised, blinkered musician he most abhors: the inevitable product of Western worship of 'progress' in the arts. His opening survey of historical trends, entitled 'From Emperor Chun to the vacant lot', is an entertaining account of his own reawakening to "Corporeal" music, contrasted to a wasteland into which "Abstract" music has lured us. Among the influences on

his work that he admits are Yaqui Indian songs, Chinese lullabies, Hebrew chants for the dead, Christian hymns and Congo puberty rites. All are musics of necessity, all are vocal, all have mystical, even magical, connotations.

Corporeality for Partch stems from "the essentially vocal and verbal music of the individual — a Monophonic concept". All expression begins with the human voice, "the most dramatically potent and the most intimate tonal ingredient a creative man can put into his music". He excludes 'serious' singing from this category. So he reserves particular admiration for ancient Greek drama, Japanese Noh plays and early 17th century Florentine music-theatre. His own first embodiment of this revived corporeal philosophy was in settings of 17 lyrics of Li-Po (8th century A.D.) for intoning voice and viola, completed in 1933. The viola is fretted to facilitate playing of the 43-tone scale which Partch evolved to reflect tiny inflexions of vocal intonation. In his own recording of the work, now regrettably unavailable, there is an extraordinary correspondence between voice and instrument — at times they cannot be differentiated.

The intricacies of the new scale, which amounts to a division of the whole tone into eight roughly equal parts, are explained in minute detail in *Genesis* and consume half the book. These pages, always carefully written, will delight any mathematician, but they provide valuable material for any musician reviewing just intonations, equal temperaments or the Pythagorean "3-Idea Paralysis", as Partch calls our circle of fifths. To accommodate the new scale and its derivatives, Partch personally designed and built some 27 instruments, mostly keyboard and percussion, with evocative names like Eucal Blossom, Zymo-Xyl, Cloud-Chamber Bowls and Spoils of War. A series of excellent photographs, several in colour, show them to be works of art in themselves.

It is hard to believe that the first draft of *Genesis* was written in 1928, so contemporary is its impact, though the first edition was not published until 1947. It has long been out of print, and this new edition fills a vital gap. Three new chapters and several appendices have been added, providing fascinating details on the instruments and their notations, and on his six major music-theatre works, culminating in *Delusion of the Fury* (1965-6), now available in a recording produced under the composer's supervision. Subtitled 'A Ritual of Dream and Delusion', it embodies the Greek idea of tragedy juxtaposed with comedy, its two acts (without interval) comprising a Japanese-based drama — "a music-theatre portrayal of release from the wheel of life and death" — and an African farce. Six new instruments were constructed specifically for *Delusion*. The instrumentalists are the Chorus, and whenever possible join the singers, who must also dance, act and mime, in ritualistic utterances on stage. Even when rare 'American' words are used, they sound more appropriate to the jungles of Borneo than to Western arts. What is needed now is a film of the work in this country, though its hypnotic rhythmic momentum will still excite even the most jaded ear. With the two records of *Delusion* comes a discussion-demonstration disc, in which Partch himself describes all his instruments. This is by far the quickest way to an appreciation of the personality of the man and the sounds of his music.

Ideally, book and records should be experienced together. It is always refreshing when a composer is articulate enough to produce a well-reasoned testament to his life's work. *Genesis of a Music* blends a healthy scepticism with a wry sense of humour. It is a good read. But it is also essential reading for any global villager concerned with the future of music or a future for music.