

Harry Partch Visits Antioch (1957)

Though obscure during his lifetime, inventor, philosopher, and avant-garde composer Harry Partch (1901-1974) is now widely recognized as a significant (if eccentric) force in 20th century American music. According to biographer Bob Gilmore, Harry Partch discovered Antioch College and Yellow Springs, Ohio not long after his influential book *Genesis of Music*, released in 1949, received a favorable review from a memorable Antioch College faculty member, longtime Professor of Philosophy Keith McGary. At the invitation of McGary, an aficionado of modern music, Partch would move to town in the summer of 1957, renting a room at Ernest Morgan's apartment building on Glen Street. He set up shop in a studio arranged by McGary and Professor of Music Walter Anderson,

the most beautiful studio I have ever occupied,

Partch wrote,

a new second-grade classroom, by a modern architect with an imagination. A row of skylights'one solid glass wall, lawn and trees beyond.

A space on the Antioch College campus nearly matches Partch's description: a large upstairs classroom at the back of Weston Hall (nee Horace Mann Hall), which served for many years as the Antioch College Music Dept. Despite the accommodations, he complained of a lack of local musicians to collaborate with and was especially repelled by what he thought was a stifling local culture. He would not stay in Ohio past October, 1957.

Reprinted here is the account from the campus newspaper of Partch's first visit to Antioch College a few months before he moved to Yellow Springs.

Antioch College Record, 23 Apr 1957

Harry Partch Visits Antiochians

By Phyllis Feldman [class of 1958]

Harry Partch, quiet creator of radically new principles of music composition, enlivened the campus last weekend for those who were fortunate enough to meet him.

Guest of Keith McGary, associate professor of philosophy, and his wife, Partch brought tape recordings of

The Bewitched,

a music satire for which he wrote the music and book.

The Bewitched

was especially commissioned for the 1957 Festival of Contemporary Arts at the University of Illinois in Urbana. Its single performance at Urbana was received with a standing ovation.

Students who participated in the tape renditions at KIP studios on Sunday afternoon were equally excited. Participation is a precise description of the experience, for the vibrant, dramatic character of the music demanded direct muscular or rhythmic response.

The quality of sound in Partch's compositions is strikingly different from what the listener is accustomed to. He has discarded conventional musical usages and has constructed his own

43-tone scale and instruments upon which to play it.

Pictures of his instruments included a lyre-type invention called a kithara, which has 72 strings and is played by two musicians, one on either side; an other-worldly creation composed of cloud-chamber bowls, or the suspended tops and bottoms of Pyrex carboys, played with mallets; and a group of percussive elements which Partch calls

Spoils of War,

including brass artillery casings and a whang gun [a piece of spring steel controlled by a pedal that makes a 'whang sound].

One of the most exciting parts of Partch's technique is his use of the human voice. Spoken and chanted sounds are frequently integrated into his compositions. Partch referred, in this connection, to a poet friend of his who has refused to write his poetry down. He chants it to the accompaniment of a drum, so that his expression will not be limited to refining the appearance of a printed word.

Partch mentioned the Japanese kabuki tradition as one which integrates the art of dance, music, and poetry.

The arts are one,
he said.

Kabuki artists grow up learning all of them'there is no problem of trying to integrate them later in life.

Partch's largest and most important production,
Oedipus Rex,
was performed at Mills College in 1952.

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