

THE OM CENTURY 2008-09

Notes by Patrick Scott

Tipping the Scales

October 17, 2008

Lou Harrison

Cornish Lancaran (1986)

In Honor of the Divine Mr. Handel (1991)

Main Bersama-sama (1978)

Double Concerto for Violin and Cello

John Cage

String Quartet in Four Parts (1950)

Harry Partch

Castor and Pollux

from *Plectra and Percussion Dances* (1952)

The word maverick is getting a lot of use these days – to the extent that it may have to recover its true meaning. Both a noun and an adjective, this word was coined in the American west in reference to a post-Civil War pioneer, Samuel A. Maverick, who didn't brand his calves. These unbranded animals, having strayed far from the herd, were seen as individuals lacking ownership and identification with the group. The word aptly describes the three composers from the American west featured tonight: Lou Silver Harrison, John Milton Cage and Harry Partch.

Asian Influences

Likewise, despite an abiding devotion to his Catholic faith, Olivier Messiaen, who is the overarching subject of the entire 2008-09 season of Jacaranda – The OM Century Part II – was an individual too curious, too eclectic and too experimental to be seen as anything other than a maverick, even if *non-conformiste* is the closest the French language can come to an analog.

The relationship of Messiaen to this trio of mavericks (and their wild and whimsical natures) is a shared common interest in Asia as a source of musical and philosophic inspiration, and in the case of Harry Partch, an almost archaeological interest in the music and poetry of Ancient Greece. These cultural explorations absorbed each composer during roughly the same middle period of the 20th Century, with Lou Harrison deepening his work with Javanese gamelan well in to the century's last decade.

The sound of the gamelan has had an almost incalculable impact on Western music despite its obscurity for the average listener. The meta-

phor of concentric ripples in a body of water can describe the hugely influential spell that a full gamelan, heard in the Paris Universal Exposition in 1889 and 1900, had upon Claude Debussy. He remarked in a letter to his friend Pierre Louÿs that the shadings of these scales made the Western tonic/dominant seem like child's play. Those sonic ripples reached jazz with the help of Maurice Ravel and inspired Messiaen to seek out Indonesian recordings and live performances. Benjamin Britten too was smitten, as can be heard in the *Prince of the Pagodas* ballet, and the Canadian composer Colin McPhee actually moved to Bali and wrote the first important collection of articles on the subject. Later the hugely influential American minimalists, especially Steve Reich, studied and absorbed these centuries-old traditions.



Gamelan Padhang Moncarin in New Zealand

Metallophones

The gamelan is an ornately carved collection of variously-tuned metallophones, (gongs, sets of bronze bars, and graded bell-like forms struck from above with wooden beaters covered in cloth or leather) upon which to play the music of Java and Bali. The Javanese style is elegant and stately, emerging from ancient animist religious traditions filtered through Hindu-Buddhist culture, Chinese influences and the mystic Sufism of Islam. Starting in the 16th century, trade with the Portuguese and Dutch stimulated socio-political changes that eventually split of the Javanese kingdom into two courts.

Central Javanese style now predominates and so it did for Harrison. A full gamelan contains two sets of instruments to accommodate the prevailing tunings Pelog and Slendro.

In the mid-1930s Lou Harrison was introduced to gamelan by his friend and mentor Henry Cowell who brought recordings from Berlin where he had engaged in hands-on study with Indonesians.



Henry Cowell

Harrison later heard the real thing in 1939 at the San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition. Cowell was a young California composer of enormous influence among aspiring and established American composers. Los Angeles-born John Cage hitchhiked from Santa Monica to San Francisco to meet Cowell in 1933. Harry Partch was also part of Cowell's circle at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan (including Charles Ives, Edgard Varèse, Ruth Seeger and Carl Ruggles). In 1934 Cage hitchhiked to New York, where he received a scholarship to experience Cowell's innovative teaching about world music and dissonant counterpoint.

Sidestepping Tonality

Cowell and our trio of mavericks were passionately interested in percussion. The Cuban Amadeo Roldán and the recent immigrant Varèse had just ignited a fury of interest in their all-percussion works heard in concerts organized by the Pan-American Association of Composers at Carnegie Hall, and elsewhere. Percussion evoked the machine age on the one hand, and on the other the primal throb of ancient traditions, while handily sidestepping the issue of tonality and harmony. With the depression as a background, the interest in percussion of all sorts connected composers to a new sense of authenticity and world citizenship.

Cage married Xenia Kashevaroff in 1935 and they moved to Santa Monica, where Xenia became a resident apprentice to the bookbinder Hazel Dreis. Her fellow apprentices were recruited by Cage to become his first percussion ensemble.

For Cowell the idealistic public life at the vanguard came suddenly to a halt in 1936 when

he was arrested for homosexual behavior and sentenced to 15 years in San Quentin Prison. Many worked for his early parole, not the least of whom was the woman who would become his wife. After four years of prolific composition and teaching music to the inmates, he was released and pardoned in 1942, a changed man.

A Meeting of Like Minds

The first meeting of Harrison and Cage in San Francisco is charmingly described by Leta Miller and Frederic Lieberman (*Lou Harrison*, Oxford University Press, 1998):

"one day in early summer 1938, as Lou was composing at the piano in his apartment, he was interrupted by a knock at the door. Upon answering, he came face-to-face with a young man who announced, 'My name is John Cage. Henry Cowell sent me.' Within an hour, Lou recalls, they were fast friends and were to remain so throughout their lives."

Cage, like so many at that time, was desperate for a job and Harrison, a consummate networker, found him eight gigs within a day. Soon Harrison engineered a real job at the Cornish School in Seattle with a dancer Bonnie Bird, who encouraged Cage to use her trove of 300 percussion instruments. There he also met his future life partner, dancer Merce Cunningham.



Lou Harrison c. 1940

Harrison and Cage presented joint percussion concerts in San Francisco leading to their shared composition *Double Music* (1941), a classic of the literature. Unlike the forceful drive and incendiary musical texture of Roldán and Varèse, these West coast counterparts reveled in more subtle effects and a floating sense of time. Both were becoming increasingly aware of Asian philosophy, religion and culture.



John Cage

Harrison had grown up in an apartment decorated in the Asian style and would systematically undertake, after graduating from high school, the study of Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian music.

Paradoxically both composers were unlikely students of Arnold Schoenberg – Cage in 1935 just as the Viennese composer joined the faculties of USC and UCLA, and Harrison for six months in 1943. The latter absorbed Schoenberg's dedication to method and structure while reveling in the contemporary music scene that Peter Yates has created in 1938 with his Silver Lake Evenings on the Roof – the beginnings of Monday Evening Concerts. These were restless years; both Cage and Harrison moved about the country undaunted by the economic hardship as the Depression morphed into the War economy.

Book of Changes

Cage lived briefly in 1942 with the philosopher Joseph Campbell and his wife, the dancer Jean Erdman in New York. Campbell introduced him to the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy, which helped Cage set a course for his artistic life – "Art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation." Harrison moved to New York in 1943. That year he introduced Cage to the Chinese Book of Changes *I Ching*, which eventually inspired what was perhaps Cage's most influential contribution to western music: chance operations.

Despite his reputation for detached musical processes, as Cage's struggled toward a difficult divorce from Xenia, a personal vein can be divined from a batch of poetically titled works created around 1943-44, such as *The Perilous Night*, *She is Asleep* and *A Valentine out of Season*. A year after his final separa-

tion from Xenia and his rejection of psychoanalysis, Isamu Noguchi introduced Cage to Geeta Sarabhai, a serious student of Indian music with a sweet and diligent nature, who had come to New York to understand the threat Western culture posed to Indian ways. Cage and Harrison studied with her over a five-month period.

Certainly because of the growing stress of living in New York, and his romantic loneliness, and perhaps the sharpening contrast of Eastern and Western ways from this study may have contributed to the nervous breakdown that Harrison suffered in 1947. Cage on the other hand was inspired to find areas of congruence between medieval Christian mysticism and what he was discovering from such books as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Perhaps no work better exemplifies that reconciliation than the *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1950). The purpose of music he had learned from Geeta Sarabhai is to concentrate or sober the mind to make it receptive to divine influence.



Cunningham and Erdman 1942

String Quartet in Four Parts

Begun in Paris in 1949 while keeping company with a Messiaen student Pierre Boulez, Cage dedicated the quartet to Harrison upon its completion in New York. Messiaen was composing his serial breakthrough *Four Rhythmic Etudes* for piano at the exact same time, yet the music could not be more different. With the quartet, among his last completely notated works, Cage eliminates accompaniment and harmony as well as string vibrato to achieve a serene stasis with implied movement that, simply put, allows the listener to be in the present.

Cage had worked for a long time on a ravishing ballet *The Seasons* (1947); the same cycle shapes the four movements that begin with

summer. One might hear Cages admiration for the music of Eric Satie in the Quartet's lack of overt gestures and restrained palette.

Nonetheless, the final spring is captured by a surprising and tantalizingly short quodlibet. Its jaunty phrases have an air of the Renaissance dances of Praetorius, but their construction is oddly synthetic, as though several like-sounding melodies were cut into pieces and rearranged to foil the listener's sense of direct quotation. The quodlibet form evolved over many centuries and is best known for its position as the last of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.

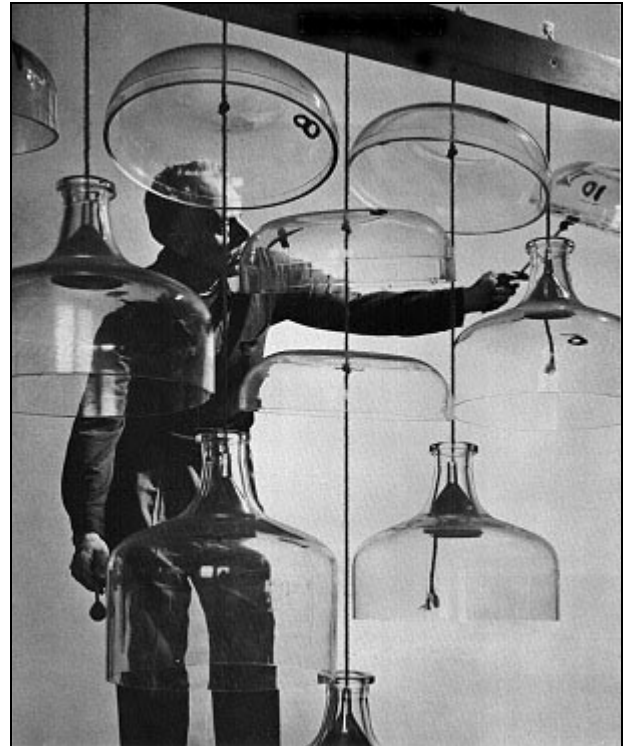
Forceful Argument

Meanwhile work on a psychological drama *The Perilous Chapel* with Erdman and Campbell helped Harrison slowly recover from his mental illness. In 1949 Virgil Thompson, composer and critic, gave Harrison a copy of Harry Partch's new book *Genesis of a Music*. It was a life-changing encounter due to Partch's forceful argument against equal temperament and in favor of his division of the octave into 43 parts – a change requiring completely new instruments to be invented. The additional revelation was that this new theoretical framework had a basis in ancient Greek principles.

Partch was born of two Presbyterian ministers who escaped China when the anti-Imperialist Boxer Rebellion was purging the country of railroad tycoons, diplomats and Christians. They settled in Arizona. Alan Rich (*American Pioneers: Ives to Cage and Beyond*, Phaidon Press, 1995) describes the rugged origins of Partch's aesthetics, "his musical education was gleaned from readings in public libraries and by associating with native American Indians in nearby villages; he once listed his influences as 'Yaqui Indians, Chinese lullabies and music-hall songs, Christian and Hebrew hymns, Congo puberty rites ...and Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov.'"

Eventually Partch secured a grant to seek out William Butler Yeats in London, who was surprisingly receptive to Partch's style of self-accompanied declaiming of the poet's translation of Sophocles while holding his long-necked adapted viola like a cello. This heady attention stopped abruptly as the money ran out forcing Partch to return to the bleakness of America at the height of the Depression. Partch fully experienced the life of a hobo which left him a ruggedly romantic figure with grandiose anger and a gritty, one might say salty, perspective.

He is a rather confounding figure due to the characteristics just described and the celebration of unvarnished roadside experiences alongside mythic dramas rooted in ancient history. Those contrasts were combined with an intensely systematic working out of rigorous microtonal theory that he made real by the invention of stunningly sculptural instruments, ideally played by a crew of hunky men.



Partch with the Cloud Chamber Bowls

The instruments featured in *Castor and Pollux* include Cloud Chamber Bowls, the Diamond Marimba, Harmonic Canon II, Kithara and Surrogate Kithara, and the Bass Marimba, requiring two players on a platform due to the height of the resonators. The work has an elaborate and not altogether satisfying story line drawn from the Greek myth and serves as the opening of *Plectra and Percussion Dances*, an hour-long work from 1952.

Despite Partch's admonitions that his is not concert music, *Castor and Pollux* is the one work that is entirely successful in the concert setting. Partch's "corporeal" music theatre conception largely evolved during the nineteen sixties with assumptions that seem unformed today. His vision is still waiting for the genius and distance needed to overcome the composer's naiveté and occasional miscalculations.



Pak Chokro c. 1971

In the case of *Castor and Pollux*, an overture of sorts, the sheer kinetic thrill of a live performance and the excitement generated by Partch's singular rhythmic brew is so intoxicating that nothing that follows can surpass its impact.

Art, Invention and Tradition

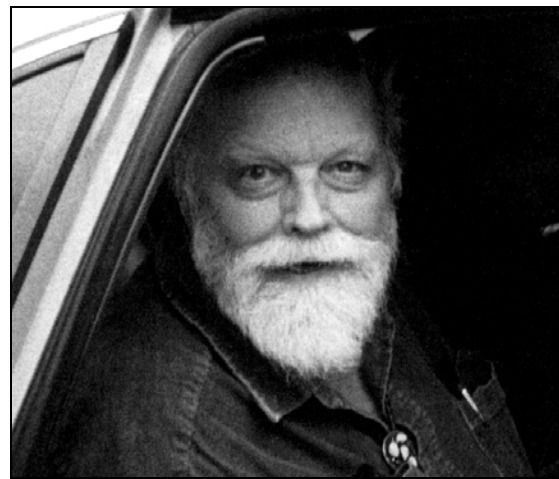
Harrison's work as an instrument builder became truly significant when he met his life partner William Colvig an ingenious and diligent inventor. Together since 1967, they build many unique gamelans including one dedicated to the Los Angeles music patron Betty Freeman. However when Harrison met Pak Chokro in 1975, a formidable influence was exerted to align Harrison with the centuries old traditions of Javanese gamelan. Born in 1909, Pak Chokro "retired" by joining the faculty of Cal Arts in 1971, and teaching for over two decades.

Three years into his study with Pak Chokro Harrison composed his most famous gamelan work with Western soloists *Main Bersama sama*, meaning "coming together." A soaring melody for French horn with a noble character is decorated by a lilting flute line played either by the pan-Asian suling, made of bamboo, or by the Western transverse flute. The haunting character of the suling, especially as played by Harrison, is captured well in the work's only recording. However, in live performance the metal flue is able to hold its own against the clangor of the gamelan without being miked.

The *Double Concerto* followed in 1982 using both tuning systems Pelog and Slendro in movements separated by a *tour de force* for

the violin and cello accompanied by an array of drums. In this performance the artist has chosen drums of Chinese, Indian, and African origin. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the rhythmic writing is so virtuosic that very rigorous Western training is required. This concerto is Harrison's most successful extended form using Western instruments with gamelan.

Cornish Lancaran, a stunningly sensuous work for saxophone and gamelan, takes its name from a traditional Indonesian form – the Lancaran – given the name of the Cornish School in Seattle that had such importance in Harrison's earlier life.



Harrison portrait by Betty Freeman

Among the last in a catalog full of music for Western instruments with gamelan is a sprightly work for the the harp. Harrison, who loved George Frederick Handel above all other composers paid his respects in 1991 with "In Honor of the Divine Mr. Handel" from *Homage to Pacifica*. The harp music bears an uncanny resemblance to Handel's harp concerto while giving the instrument an other-worldly setting with the gamelan glittering on high.

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