

**JANET HOLMES**  
**Partch Stations**

*Harry Partch, 1901-1974*

**I. He Appeareth Before the Audience, Is Condemned**

*You only put that music on to annoy people, she said.*  
—I've forgotten who. Friend of a friend, some party,

but a thrill roils from it: when Partch sets Li Po

*I heard someone in the Yellow Crane House  
playing on the sweet bamboo flute  
the tune of falling plum flowers*

he doesn't score a flute's song, but a man  
reaching to describe his memory of it  
with a vocal imitation,

his *who-hoo-oo-oo*s in a high voice,  
higher than he would usually use;

a man telling a story about something  
he *heard*

and wants you to hear, too . . .

*Much of that which is man-made we ignore, such as  
the music of speech. Well, I'm not ignoring it.*

The plucked viola like a long-legged insect  
picks its way around the fallen petals.

*Nobody likes this, she said again.*

**II. He Filleth to Be Born in China**

Forgive him in his wishes and delusions: he is beset.

Chinese lullabies (the only ones she knew) from his missionary mother;

Mandarin from his gone-atheist father, faithlost in Shantung Province;

furniture of black bamboo, Sung Dynasty paintings they'd bought there;

*more books in Chinese, accordion-folded, with ivory thongs, illustrated  
by gory colored lithographs of the beheading of missionaries, than books in English;*

these he remembers from childhood:

they so stamp their impress that he claims he, too, sparked to life

in China—conceived in a Boxer prison camp—or later, at sea,

learning in the womb for all time his mother's queasiness as they fled—

but no:

alone of his siblings he is Californian, all.

He would have accepted that from his parents: birth in China

(perhaps *only* that).

It would have explained many things—

*Occupant is a Heathen Chinee*, the note on his last door sang.

### III. He Consigneth His Music to the Fire

*" . . . in pursuing the respectable, the widely accepted,  
I had not been faithful."*

He has been unfaithful,  
and thus does he purify himself:

the piano concerto  
the string quartet  
the symphonic poem  
the popular songs  
everything he has written

*hideously unsuited to his needs*

ash in the depths of a pot-bellied stove.

Take that, self.

And here too the sinning arm, which wrote it: burn.  
And both transgressive ears.  
Ambitious heart—  
All burn.

*As late as 1960 I was still pulling out bits of ideas  
from that pot-bellied stove, ideas stored away  
in memory—  
that mysterious structure of cells and spirit—*

Everything must be proven in the fire.

Here spark a few live cells—

What is tempered? What dies?

#### IV. He Heareth the Voice

*I see little evidence that poets have studied  
the sounds of their own voices . . .*

He liked to cite the Emperor Chun (from 2300 BC):  
*Let the music follow the sense of the words.*

The unborn listen for months  
to their mothers, and born,  
they turn for that one song  
conducted through bone,  
through fluid and dark:

it's different now—harsher—  
and the world all glare—

and some search years  
for that wordmusic,  
the mother's filtered tone  
speaking inward, to *one*—

Harry insists *all* speech  
holds melody and rhythm:  
not hers alone.

*I needed other scales and other instruments.*

Li Po speaks unaffectedly;  
and Hobo Pablo in his letter, the newsboys  
crying through the fog of San Francisco:

he heareth the voices, that we may hear.

**V. He Stretcheth a Viola by the Neck**

Partch is peevish.  
There isn't room on this fingerboard  
to find all the notes.

Should be 43 in each octave:  
they all mush together.

(People are already laughing somewhere.  
Forgive them—)

Edward Bentin helps him:  
fixes a cello fingerboard to the viola  
and Harry marks the stops with fractions and brads,

cradles the soundbox between his knees  
gingerly, to calm it.

Two over one: the diapason,  
the octave. Greek first, then the Latin.  
Three over two. The diapente.  
Sesquialterate.

In just intonation, a "perfect fifth." And so on.

*Translation:*

First he hears the Beloved speaking low.

The song comes.

To write the song down  
he must invent notation.  
To play it, he must become  
a carpenter, building new instruments  
that respond to the melodies he hears.

To perform the song  
he must teach all the musicians  
and all the singers who will ever present it  
the notations, the instruments—

You see where this is leading.  
You have been there.  
He is a long time alone—

### VI. He Dreameth the Kithara

Old woman copied the kithara from a Greek vase in the British Museum he wanted it.

She found someone to build it for her during the war, there was no wood, the guy  
used an orange  
box somebody threw out it got a good tone.

She let him examine.

Partch was thinking, *I could get an orange box.*

She figured out the tuning, being an expert on auloi and Greek harmoniai, but he  
wanted his own  
tuning and more strings arranged in chords and wanted it bigger.

*I must have one.* Also the design could be improved.

Plectra on every finger—

He awakens in Anderson Creek with a redwood timber from the wrecked bridge,  
thinking *a base*  
*for the kithara—*

Thinking *that dream was so real I could smell taste touch it.*

### VII. He Wandereth as a Hobo

Getting a ride in California: could take days,  
counting the gone cars slash by slash in pencil  
with a rail through for the fifth

like this railing preventing the cars from diving  
down from the asphalt, wrecking, their drivers thrown  
and dead, the bum still stranded

in Barstow, California, still without prospects.  
February 1940: cold, waiting.  
He fingers the smooth rail: reads

two months' worth of hobo graffiti inscribed there—  
where handouts are good, where someone is headed  
if only a ride would stop;

or who wants a husband or a wife—*eloquent*  
*in what it fails to express in words. Music*  
*hides in this everyday speech:*

Harry is homeless when he hears its lost singing,  
one voice, the tradition of China, of Greece,  
India, Arabia,

the words matter, guiding the music; the singer  
accompanies himself on an instrument  
like an ancient Celtic bard.

He rideth the rails all through the Great Depression;  
he dishwasheth, picketh California fields,  
readeth proof for newspapers—

a week, a month at a time. In the Wilderness  
he hones his theories, he dreams his new works  
unhindered. And moves along.

### VIII. He Buildeth the Chromelodeon

*A six-2/1 harmonium from which the old reeds were removed and into  
which reeds of the forty-three degree Monophonic scale were placed,  
in sequence, so that the new 2/1 covers a much wider keyboard  
extent—three and a half octaves.*

All along he had heard it in his head,  
never aloud.

Now *you* can hear it.

your hand can't make an octave on these  
multicolored keys

(not that *octave* means anything anymore—).

All the surfaces in his room covered, you notice,  
with pill bottles.

He's on a weird diet, too: he mentioned it.

Bowles, attending an early performance, wrote  
*The audience*

*convulsed, asked for it again, whereupon the piece,*

*which had given one the impression of being  
an inspired*

*improvisation by a group of maniacs, impossible to reperform,*

*was repeated  
as exactly as if it had been a playback.*

At the verge of the room, with its striped keys numbered,

it beckons you. *Go ahead and try it,*  
he says.

### **IX. He Wandereth with His Instruments**

Wisconsin	Two tons of instruments on his back,
to El Centro	the hobo in him can't settle
to Gualala	just anywhere:
to Oakland	needs
to Mills College	space
to Sausalito	and isolation
to Urbana	for rehearsing musicians,
to Yellow Springs	proper storage conditions, cheap rent.
to Chicago	Fifty—
to Northwestern University	five times he
to Urbana	relocates his private and fragile
to CoEd	orchestra. Fifteen times in sixteen years,
to Springfield	he counts up on a scrap of paper (why?).
to Petaluma	As a hobo, he carried a viola case:
to Del Mar	for viola and
to L.A.	clothes—

**X. He Playeth the Marimba Eroica**

The instrument requires a player with robust shoulders, back, arms.  
If he possesses this equipment, and is also something of a percussionist,  
the playing of the instrument is not difficult . . .

It is his *visual* aspect that the Eroica player must cultivate.  
He must give the impression of a sure winner.  
In exciting and furious passages  
he must look like Ben Hur in his chariot,  
charging around the last curve of the final lap.

**XI. He Hangeth the Cloud-Chamber Bowls**

Or, he taketh a turn toward percussion.

As in, he maketh many marimbas

from bamboo, pernambuco wood, hormigo,  
padouk, rosewood, redwood, and Sitka spruce.  
Sands them to tune them.

He has already rejected electronic possibilities.

Prefers his harmonium to an electric pump organ  
for its deferent response to the performer.

We observe here his moment of crossing-over:

a temptation of Pyrex carboys  
from the Berkeley Radiation Lab.

Let he among you who could resist, etc.

Besides, they were a gift.

Sawed in half they made the most  
delicious gongs  
(deep bells).

When he stands behind them, playing,

their curved transparencies surround him  
like so many noisy haloes . . .



**XII. He Vieweth the Gourd Tree**

*The future needs the sensuality and corporeality in music of the same kind that Walt Whitman gave to poetry.*

Literally in a trashpile.  
A eucalyptus branch  
scavenged, dragged home dead:

he made a base for it, made  
a tree of it, with fruit  
of Chinese temple bells

hanging ripe—*like papayas*,  
he thought, *the smallest*  
*at the top* . . . It looked

almost alive, colt-awkward,  
gangly. Oddly passive.  
*Conceived*

*in dynamic relationship*  
*with a human body—*  
*who glides around it*

and strikes.  
Dance and song  
and an instrument

accompanying:  
an Ancient, come back,  
would recognize.

**XIII. He Speaketh to the Audience**

The creative artist acquires a shade of anarchism

that after several decades of weathering, begins to bear  
the strange patina of the recidivist, the unregenerate criminal.

We as a people give loving attention to details of individual crime  
from a perfectly logical envy of the criminal: crime is one area

where individuality is taken for granted.  
This is hardly the case in the creative arts.

I am a profound traditionalist, but of an unusual sort.

We are trapped by our own machines,  
which tend, progressively, to remove us from nature.

My instruments are absolutely primitive.  
They are visual, as are those at a Congo ritual.

The players move in a way to excite the eye.  
This is not an abstract communication

but something that will agitate our Cro-Magnon genes.

**XIV. He Wandereth After His Death**

*Tell me Ulysses, you say you've traveled around the world,  
have you ever been arrested?*

*Nobody likes this music, somebody says—*

there's less

conviction in her voice

His vagrancy gone chronic,  
the ashes tumble piecemeal to the Pacific.

Here at the last station you can barely  
make out his white hair.

The instruments, without him, travel  
familiar patterns of eviction: they circle.

*Let not one year pass—I now say to myself—when I do not step one  
significant century, or millennium, backward.*

There are rides on the highway at Green River, but they go right on by. There are  
rides on the  
freights at Green River, too, but the Green River bull says:

"You exclamation mark bum! Get your semicolon asterisk out o' these yards, and  
    *don't* let me  
catch you down here again, or you'll get thirty days in the jailhouse!"

In Petaluma, the tune of falling roses  
and camellias  
echoes eighth-century China, vibrating  
the steel strings.

I hold no wish for the obsolescence of our present widely heard instruments and  
    music.

I feel that more ferment is necessary to a healthy musical culture.

I am endeavoring to instill more ferment.

**Harry Partch (1901-1974) was a composer whose microtonal works were largely performed upon instruments he invented. He was homeless for about eight years of his life; his hobo experiences during the Depression are reflected in several of his works. Sources for the poem include *Genesis of a Music* (Harry Partch, U. of Wisconsin P.), *Bitter Music* (by Harry Partch, edited by Thomas McGeary, U. of Illinois P.), *Enclosure 3* (edited by Philip Blackburn, The Composers Forum), and *Harry Partch: A Biography* (by Bob Gilmore, Yale Univ. P.). Instrument names (Chromelodeon, Cloud-Chamber Bowls, etc.) are Partch's own.**