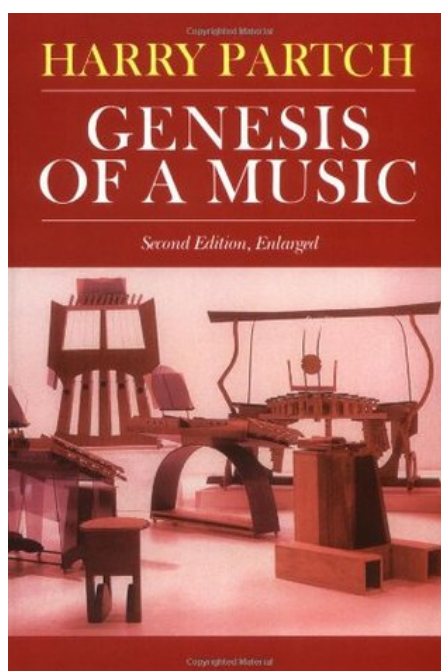




Genesis of a Music

Harry Partch

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Among the few truly experimental composers in our cultural history, Harry Partch's life (1901–1974) and music embody most completely the quintessential American rootlessness, isolation, pre-civilized cult of experience, and dichotomy of practical invention and transcendental visions. Having lived mostly in the remote deserts of Arizona and New Mexico with no access to formal training, Partch naturally created theatrical ritualistic works incorporating Indian chants, Japanese kabuki and Noh, Polynesian microtones, Balinese gamelan, Greek tragedy, dance, mime, and sardonic commentary on Hollywood and commercial pop music of modern civilization. First published in 1949, *Genesis of a Music* is the manifesto of Partch's radical compositional practice and instruments (which owe nothing to the 300-year-old European tradition of Western music.) He contrasts Abstract and Corporeal music, proclaiming the latter as the vital, emotionally tactile form derived from the spoken word (like Greek, Chinese, Arabic, and Indian musics) and surveys the history of world music at length from this perspective. Parts II, III, and IV explain Partch's theories of scales, intonation, and instrument construction with copious acoustical and mathematical documentation. Anyone with a musically creative attitude, whether or not familiar with traditional music theory, will find this book revelatory.

Genesis of a Music Details

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Author : Harry Partch

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From Reader Review Genesis of a Music for online ebook

Lane Wilkinson says

Two stars only because I didn't understand what the hell was going on. Then again, I guess my Philistine ears can't appreciate the beauty of the 43-tone scale and the 11-limit just intonation.

Phillip says

i love this book, and the time that i spent in san diego years ago studying partch's music and learning how to play the instruments. his unique vision is on par with someone like werner herzog's - a wholly original being in a sea of copycats. he's always been a huge inspiration and this book offers us a glimpse of the amazing music he left behind.

Frank Elliott says

As a young classical music student, I read this book cover-to-cover with real interest. I've also designed and built instruments for many years.

Harry Partch, who grew up in small-town Arizona before World War II, is a genuine part of Americana (and earthly music history, at least for insiders)... his explorations of "just intonation" and ways to musically exploit his own sense of 'obscure tonality' (or as it's currently labeled in music circles "microtonality"--i.e., more than 12 equal half-steps per octave) amounted to a pleasant adventure the first time I read them. In this, his magnum opus, Harry answers far more questions than he poses, a refreshing trait among authors and inventors. To those of us fascinated with such things, it's a real page-turner. The more one gets to know him, the more one realizes Harry had some very good ideas.

While Partch inspired a number of others to work in either his legacy [of using instruments tuned to 43 pitches per octave] to further promulgate his vision of a sort of modern take on Greek music composition (whence emanated what have come to be called the "church modes" meaning 'unusual' or non-major/minor scales) or to simply carry the torch for micro-tonality a bit farther down the highways (as for several years, he lived the "hobo" life) after his passing, Partch was apparently determined to not only make waves in the music world regardless of criticism, but to be willingly regarded as somewhat of an anachronism in, of all decades, the 1960s [when theoretically, "everything" was open to experiment] seems a bit tragic, even as he let his imagination soar to places quite "new" for the 1940s-60s, in my opinion.

I've listened to most of his commercial recordings, and while not all thrill me, the entirety of his output is to say the least interesting. In that sense this book doesn't disappoint. If however, you're not interested in fine points of music theory and new/old instrument building (e.g., he tweaks his viola rather extensively in early efforts to play what he hears only in his head), then this thick book may not be your bag of tea. Still it has its merits for the initiated.

Partch's partial use of found objects for building musical instruments had antecedents in many climes, however his overall scheme of emulating Greek musical theater to a visceral extent (he used the term "corporeal" for an all-encompassing stage experience combining visual and aural components) seems to me very unique, at least among American composers. He would "fit in" better today, when "recycling" is so

popular for energy conservation, IMHO. Digital methods to madness like his would be both easier and cheaper (and hence perhaps less corporeal) in modern times. But modernity itself held no joy for him.

In his own time, he was, like it or not, very much an outlier. How "odd" then, that he ended up getting so much of his work performed and recorded! Nevertheless when it comes to American composers, Partch's work remains arguably well within the labels "obscure" and "quirky," but I would argue, at times certainly also joyful and occasionally rather transcendent, like this book. Four big stars.

David Toub says

Not an easy read in many chapters, but a book I turn to again and again over the years by one of the few original composers and freethinkers.

Jesse says

There's a lot of math here. S'ppose that's to be expected in a book about microtonality, sound frequencies, etc., and the 43-note scale Harry Partch eventually created for his music. And while that's cool, that's kind of like a painter spending a book writing about how he gets his pigments. It's better when he gets deeper into why he makes the choices he makes, describes how he designed/built his orchestra, and offers some of the tactile details of the music (like a chart detailing what empty bottles of booze ring at what frequencies, such that one might repair a Zymo-Xyl). Even fast-forwarding through the math, it's pretty dry. Bob Gilmore's bio is way better.

Mick Bordet says

A fascinating read, providing a general and historic introduction into the reasoning behind Partch's investigations into and refinement of a more natural tuning system than the current standard equal temperament that we have been stuck to pretty much since the invention of the keyboard. The composer's written style is very similar to his natural speech, almost musical itself and a delight to read, at least in the earlier chapters.

The descriptions of the tuning system itself can become quite complex with numerous ratios, though the idea is clear enough that most of these sections are just trying to place the maths into a context that fits within contemporary music (e.g. this ratio is equivalent to a slightly flat G#).

A highlight, for me, were the detailed descriptions of the various instruments he has built over the years in order to be able to play the music. The only low point in the book was the chapter describing all the alternative attempts to break free of equal temperament using microtonal scales of various sorts. As this come straight after he has described his own means of dealing with the issue, it seems rather redundant.

Joel says

Microreview: Fascinating stuff reading about his thoughts on music, and the instruments he constructed to

play his unique compositions. However, though I'm well-versed in mathematics, my grasp of formal music theory-- or maybe my lack of imagination-- was not enough for me to connect the dots and figure out how his math was used in creating new scales and such. I ended up skimming over a lot of the middle chapters. Still, the book is a valuable tool in trying to understand is music, and aids in appreciating it above and beyond the enjoyment of simply hearing it.
