

# Letter to the Editors

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To the editors:

My congratulations to you on your publication of Philip Blackburn's review "Harry Partch and the Philosopher's Tone." Through his curating of the Partch legacy, Blackburn has raised Partch from the dead that he might for once speak for himself—no small achievement, to say the least, and above all when done by one who is a singular creative artist in his own right. It speaks well of you that you published his review, and your publication in general is palpable evidence that there are at least a few other voices in the wilderness of contemporary culture.

As for myself, a voice in the wilderness for longer than I care to remember, I might be called a posthumously born composer, impervious to the spirit of this or any other age with all its (and their) attendant inanities. My encounter with Partch—I met and corresponded with him throughout much of the 1960's and our last meeting was on the occasion of *Delusion of the Fury* in Los Angeles—would remain a light in the darkness of a rather convoluted and difficult odyssey through various intellectual and artistic incarnations, until finally I realized what it was that he had been telling me all along—that I might just as well be myself, however disquieting that may be at times, there being no one else to assume the responsibility. And, like him—or for that matter any serious creative artist

or thinker—like it or not, I would simply have to find my own way, a message familiar to anyone having experienced a true reading of Nietzsche. ("Follow not me, but yourself! But yourself!") Although I employ an expansion of Partch's tuning system and two instruments modeled on his (a Harmonic Canon of 66 strings and an Adapted Cello), my music and its engendering aesthetic, more deeply rooted in the traditions of Western art music than I would have cared to admit until very recently, are entirely different from his. This is all as it should be—anything less would be tantamount to treason and subject to the direst of consequences. Just as there was in truth only one Nietzschean, who died mad in the streets of Turin, there could be only one Harry Partch. And for such singularities as they we must be forever grateful, since at least for we happy few they are the great liberators on the way to lonely tasks all our own.

As to the creative process itself, I can only refer the reader to Nietzsche's comment "one does not ask who gives—one receives," or for that matter to Gustav Mahler's "we do not compose, we are composed." To respect a composer's intention is not a question of assuaging his or her vanity, even less of turning them into a corpse by being relegated to the wasteland of "greatness"—it is simply a matter of honor, and strangely enough, self-respect. An interpretative artist of worth, and such do exist and have always existed, finds his

or her freedom precisely within the bounds of the composer's vision—after all, this is what the composer did—and thus becomes the composer's accomplice. Sadly, the bestowing of the mantle of "greatness" seems predicated on nothing other than the possibility of mutilating an artist's work, a possibility directly proportional to the degree of "greatness" accorded the given artist. A poignant example of a disease rampant over the last few decades, known as the "director's opera," is cited by Charles Rosen in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books* concerning a staging of Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*, in which the action took place in a men's public restroom with a gratuitous homosexual rape going on in the background. You might search Verdi's scores and libretti for the slightest hint of such goings on and never find them—but, never mind, the director knows better by virtue of some mystical sense denied ordinary mortals. One might just as well appropriate Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* as the vehicle for a Christian fundamentalist extravaganza—perish the thought! In effect the composer's work becomes background music for the director's agenda, constituting nothing less than an act of assassination perpetrated on the composer's work, not unlike the appropriation by choreographers and dancers of any music they happen to take a fancy to as background for displaying athletic and/or histrionic virtuosity, frequently without even the common courtesy of crediting the composer. Although the interpretive boundaries of Partch's work and those of Western art music are very different, the principle remains the same—if you wish to write an opera that takes place in a men's public restroom with a gratuitous homosexual rape going on in the background, by all means do so, but please do not drag Verdi into it. Partch's work is of the same order of significance as that of the much revered body of Western art music, revered frequently for all the wrong reasons,

and deserves the same respect and consideration often denied said revered masters by interpretive "free spirits" on an eternal joy-ride of self-discovery. Having argued for years—perhaps millennia—that Partch's work must be approached and understood on its own terms (the lived concrete of the Buberian "Ich und Du," as it were), I have more often than not found myself greeted with breathless incomprehension turning quickly to hurt feelings and outright hostility for pointing out that Partch's music is rooted entirely in his dramatic vision and totally meaningless outside of that vision. And I am not alone in this experience. Although I did not see the recent production of "Delusion of the Fury," I have absolute confidence in Blackburn's knowledge, experience, and judgement to concur with every word of his review, down to the last punctuation mark. In an age dominated by philosopher kings and queens on the order of the Baal Shem Madonna, both his review and your publication are among the best refutations of the spirit of the age and its attendant inanities—and that is all to the good.

Phillip Arnautoff

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