

MEDIA REVIEWS

Partch. *Bitter Music, Music of Harry Partch*, Vol. 1. Bridge 9349A/C, 2011. CD.

Partch. *Plectra and Percussion Dances, Music of Harry Partch*, Vol. 2. Bridge 9432, 2014. CD.

Partch. *Sonata Dementia, Music of Harry Partch*, Vol. 3. Bridge 9525, 2019. CD.

When Ben Johnston addressed the Center for Music Experiment at the University of California at San Diego four months after Harry Partch died, he opened by lamenting that there was

little certainty that any continuity will result from [Partch's] life's efforts. Practically none of his works are performable without his instruments, and there is only one set of those. They are quite perishable and very difficult to maintain in playable condition. If anything of his work is to survive beyond a very few years . . . the effort will have to be well supported.¹

Though that support has been fairly sporadic, and Partch's original set of instruments has yet to find permanent funding and accommodations in the almost fifty years since his death, tenacious performers have found ways to present Partch's music by replicating his instruments. These replicas range from one or two copies made by musicians like Bradford Blackburn to the complete set built by Ensemble musikFabrik in Cologne.

The second largest collection of replicas rests in Los Angeles under the care of the Partch ensemble and its artistic director John Schneider. Starting with a new version of the Adapted Guitar I in 1992, Schneider and his compatriots built a replica every few years until they amassed a collection of fourteen reproductions. They fostered a steady schedule performing Partch's music as well as new compositions in solo concerts and in collaboration with ensembles from the San Francisco Symphony to the Prism Saxophone Quartet. And they began recording Partch's music in an ongoing series with Bridge Records that has seen three releases over the past decade.

Performing and recording Partch's music on replica instruments is not without controversy. Partch famously erected a theoretical and performative edifice around his concept of Corporeality, where music, musicians' physical presence, the instrument's visual and aural impact, and stagecraft are all combined and interdependent. Although he founded his own "Gate 5" label to record and distribute his music and worked closely with filmmaker Madeline Tourtelot on film versions of his works, Partch felt those releases were mere impressions of his work and only served as introductions to his musical world. Take away his instruments, and some believe that any recording is a copy of a copy where the original becomes as blurry as the faded pages of a Xeroxed newspaper article. As Danlee Mitchell, Partch's right-hand man, heir, and executor wrote in 1995, "Partch's music is best displayed on the instruments of his own creation, and no others, in spite of any one person's naive

¹ Ben Johnston, "The Corporealism of Harry Partch," *Perspectives of New Music* 13, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1975): 87.

enthusiasm to perform Partch's music by other means (thereby cheapening its original aesthetic intent)."² The website for the Harry Partch Estate puts it even more succinctly: "Accept no substitutes."³

John Schneider's Partch ensemble has leaned into this controversy from the start of its recording career. *Music of Harry Partch*, Vol. 1, released in 2011, was a deluxe recording of Partch's musical journal *Bitter Music*. Partch wrote the journal in 1935 and 1936 as a chronicle of his travels through the various programs set up by the West Coast's New Deal-era agencies, complete with piano notation of hobo speech and charcoal sketches of his surroundings. In 1950, he burned the manuscript, and it only survives thanks to a microfilm copy a colleague made that year. Since Partch struck it from his catalog, physically destroyed what copies he knew, and notated it in equal temperament, some musicians and scholars feel it should be studied but not performed. Excerpts from *Bitter Music* appeared on Innova's *Enclosure Two: Historic Speech-Music Recordings from the Harry Partch Archives*, but the Partch ensemble's 2011 recording was the first time it appeared in its complete form. The ensemble went a step beyond simply performing the journal, creating a podcast-worthy version of *Bitter Music* where the instruments appear as ghostly echoes when they are mentioned, full performances of "The Letter" and "By the Rivers of Babylon" illustrate the text, and multiple voices supplement the original narration. It is an admittedly compelling and beautifully produced recording, but one that acknowledges openly and aurally that any performance of *Bitter Music* is an interpretation, whether it employs Partch's original instruments or not.

Music of Harry Partch, Vol. 1 was a success, earning a 2012 Grammy nomination for Best Classical Compendium and leading Bridge to move forward with Vol. 2, *Plectra and Percussion Dances*, which features a collection of three compositions Partch wrote in the summer of 1952. The three dances are whimsical and wild—he called the collection "Satyr-Play Music for Dance Theatre"—and are the first instrumentally conceived works in his output. Partch released these pieces three times on Gate 5 Records, but never recorded all the movements of "Even Wild Horses." In addition to recording the complete versions of these pieces for the first time, the ensemble included the introduction Harry Partch recorded for a 1953 broadcast, but they strangely put it at the end of the CD instead of the beginning. As with *Bitter Music*, the production quality is stunning; this release represents the richest and fullest recordings of Partch's music currently available, with bell tones ringing from the Cloud Chamber Bowls and the Bass Marimba's lowest notes full but never cloudy or rumbling. Not surprisingly, the *Plectra and Percussion Dances* won the 2014 Grammy for Best Classical Compendium that eluded *Bitter Music*.

For their most recent release, the Partch ensemble has gone even further into the ephemera of Partch's output, digging up first versions of well-known works. *Music of Harry Partch*, Vol. 3 features two pieces that have not been recorded before

² Danlee Mitchell, "Statement on Performance: October 12, 1995," http://www.corporeal.com/dm_state.html.

³ Jon Szanto, "Corporeal Meadows: The Legacy of Harry Partch," <http://www.corporealmeadows.com/>.

because, as with *Bitter Music*, Partch scavenged the pieces for later compositions and discarded the earlier versions. The first of these pieces is *Sonata Dementia* (1950), an instrumental work with the characteristically droll movement titles “Abstraction and Delusion,” “Scherzo Schizophrenia,” and “Allegro Paranoia.” Never fully satisfied with it, Partch reworked *Sonata Dementia* in 1952, changing the title to “Ring Around the Moon” and including it in *Plectrum and Percussion Dances*, which the Partch ensemble recorded for Vol. 2 of this series. Since Partch made few changes between the two scores, it begs the question if we wouldn’t be better served by a different work taking *Sonata Dementia*’s place. That kind of question does not plague the second of the new recordings—Partch’s score to Madeline Tourtelot’s film *Windsong* (1958). Partch rewrote his score for this work into a dance-drama titled *Daphne of the Dunes* (1968) and included it on the Columbia Records LP *The World of Harry Partch*. Since that 1969 record, *Windsong*’s music has been better known as *Daphne of the Dunes*, and it is a pleasure to hear the complete score outside the film for the first time on Vol. 3. As with the first two volumes of Bridge’s Music of Harry Partch series, the production and engineering are stellar, and the sound quality even surpasses that of Vol. 2, particularly with the balance among the trumpet, baritone sax, and Partch’s instruments in *Ulysses Departs from the Edge of the World*, a work initially written for Chet Baker and Gerry Mulligan and later retitled *Ulysses at the Edge*. As with Vol. 2, Vol. 3 also includes bonus historical recordings, in this case the Edison cylinder of Native American chants Partch transcribed in 1933 and a 1942 performance of *Barstow*.

Even with the impeccable production and well-deserved plaudits heaped on this series, I have two caveats to offer. The first relates to the instruments used in these recordings. While the Partch ensemble does not hide the fact that they play on replicas, their promotional materials and packaging do not highlight that fact either, making it easy for someone listening on Spotify to be unaware that they are hearing copies. However, listeners can tell the difference between Partch’s original instruments and those featured here as the Partch ensemble replicas have a much darker tone color without all of the original instruments’ sharp and bright overtones. Having heard both sets live, I can attest that the Partch ensemble also has a longer sustain, a feature that makes the group sound more polished but misses some of the ragtag nature of Partch’s originals. The second relates to the scholarship that informs the liner notes and back cover material. Bob Gilmore’s essay for *Bitter Music*’s liner notes is marvelous, as is the inclusion of many of Partch’s writings, but in other cases the writers seem to have missed recent scholarship, from the claim in Vol. 1 that *Bitter Music* was a “long-lost journal” before Bridge’s recording to the assertion in Vol. 3 that Partch’s Eastman lecture was thought “long lost . . . until now.” In both cases, scholars have been examining those documents for decades and they have been the focus of recent scholarship.⁴ Still, there is much to recommend on these recordings, from their making readily available a cache of music

⁴ *Bitter Music* was first published in Harry Partch, *Bitter Music: Collected Journals, Essays, Introductions, and Librettos*, ed. Thomas McGeary (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), and the Eastman performance was discussed in Andrew Granade, *Harry Partch, Hobo Composer* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 233–34.

not before captured on recording to their striking design and sound quality. Hopefully listeners captivated by what they hear on Bridge's *Music of Harry Partch* series will be led to seek out Partch's historic records and discover a musical landscape they could never have imagined otherwise.

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Music Division, *The New York Public Library, Digital Collections*, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/divisions/music-division>.

The digital collections of the New York Public Library (NYPL) boast nearly nine hundred thousand items that include prints, photographs, maps, manuscripts, published music, and streaming video. Within NYPL, the Music Division describes itself as

One of the world's preeminent music collections—documenting the art of music in all its diversity—classical and opera as well as the whole spectrum of popular music including spirituals, ragtime, jazz, musical theater, film, rock and world music. While the division contains many scores and manuscripts from centuries past, its curatorial mandate is an activist one, placing major emphasis on capturing the creative output of contemporary composers.¹

Despite this focus on contemporary composers, little of that content is accessible in the Music Division's digital collections. Likely because of issues with copyright and intellectual property, most of the materials available online are from the first half of the twentieth century or earlier. With just over 140 digital collections of material, or just over nineteen thousand items, the digital collections—as in almost any major archival repository—are a fraction of what is available for onsite use. More than half of these digital collections include three items or fewer, while only twenty collections currently include more than one hundred items. Many of the items are published sheet music, pieces of iconography, and music journals from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Collections of several prominent American composers, such as John Cage and Henry Cowell, are also included.

The robust, linked metadata and the clear presentation of specific items are two of the strengths of the NYPL's digital collections. Metadata provided include title, collection, dates/origin, library locations within the NYPL, topics, genres, physical description, resource type, and unique identification number. Almost all of these data are hyperlinked to aid users in locating additional related materials. Similarly, NYPL's presentation of the digital items facilitates ease of use. Upon clicking on a specific item, users are presented with several options for viewing the material: individual scans of each page with the ability to zoom and rotate items;

¹ Music Division, The New York Public Library, Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/divisions/music-division>.