

CHAPTER 2
CORPOREALITY AND MUSICAL GESTURE –
IN THE MUSIC OF HARRY PARTCH

Musical and Attitudinal Techniques

As Partch continued to compose theatrical works in which the performers appeared on stage, he became more specific about what he wanted the performers to achieve visually when playing the instruments. Partch was not only concerned with the sound that the performers produced, but also the way they looked in the act of producing it, insisting that the “vision of player and instrument together must be beautiful.”¹ Performers who worked with Partch have noted how he considered the manner of performance just as important, if not more so, than musical accuracy. As Jon Szanto related in an article for the British Harry Partch Society, Partch communicated to the ensemble members “the ‘extra-musical’ attitudes and actions that he felt lead to an experiential performance. He would show how to approach an instrument with the proper physical inclination, not unlike the motivation of an actor in his part.”²

Between January and August of 1963 Partch documented his instructions on playing technique and style in his *Manual on the maintenance and repair of—the musical and attitudinal techniques for—some putative musical instruments*.³ In addition to providing a large quantity of practical information for how to tune and repair the Partch instruments, the manual also serves as a manifesto on Corporeal performance practice. Partch called this aspect of performing “attitudinal techniques” and viewed the lack of attention given to them in concert performance as a negative result of “the age of specialization.” Partch’s edict on the subject follows: “At no time⁴ are the players of my instruments to be unaware that they are on stage, in the act. There

can be no humdrum playing of notes, in the bored belief that because they are ‘good’ musicians their performance is ipso facto ‘masterly.’ When a player fails to take full advantage of his role in a visual or acting sense, he is muffing his part—in my terms—as thoroughly as if he bungled every note in the score.”⁵

Many of Partch’s instructions on playing techniques reveal a decided preference for masculine-looking performance gestures. For example, Partch gave the following direction for playing the Harmonic Canon: “The pick should never be whipped daintily in the air. It should not be used in a delicate, effeminate manner. It must be used in a strong, digging, male manner...”⁶ Similarly with the Diamond Marimba, “Do not wave the mallets in the air, daintily or otherwise. There is a tremendous loss of efficiency in unnecessary raising of mallets.” When players were to use their hands when playing the Bass Marimba Partch instructed the performers to “Flick wrists downward, in a strong, vital, bullet-like strike.”⁷ On the Marimba Eroica, one of Partch’s largest instruments, Partch wanted the performer to “look like Ben Hur in his chariot, charging around the last curve of the final lap.”⁸

Athletic grace and control was also especially important to Partch. Regarding the Kithara Partch wrote with wry humor, “Do not bend over at the waist when sliding the rod down. Both Kitharas were built in California; nevertheless, one should not give the impression of someone picking prunes off the ground in a Santa Rosa orchard.” When playing the widely spaced bars of the Bass Marimba, Partch instructed the performers to coordinate their footwork like “a round of boxing in the fight ring.”⁹ Each instrument has its own difficulties arising from its particular physiognomy. For example, when playing arpeggiated hexads on the Diamond Marimba, Partch advised the performers to make their mallet strokes curve inward. When practicing with my

replica Diamond Marimba and Harmonic Canons constructed to the same measurements as Partch's original instruments, I proved to myself the *Manual's* veracity for these instruments.

Musical Gestures and Instrument Physiognomy

Partch utilized a variety of techniques in his compositional process and his choice of techniques seems to have been made with consideration of the medium or instrumentation he was writing for. In general, Partch's writing for instruments with harmonic timbres and relatively long sustain (e.g., Kithara, or Adapted Guitar II) tends to be fixed around one or more central tonalities. Conversely, when composing for instruments with inharmonic timbres whose sound decays quickly (e.g., Boo, or Zymo-Xyl), melodic contours and rhythmic motives become the generative elements while tonality is implied incidentally if at all. This type of writing is ubiquitous throughout the second phase of Partch's work during the 1950's and 60's, and was realized by Partch with great ingenuity on all of his instruments. The technique can be described as using musical gestures (patterns) that are idiomatic to the physiognomy of a particular instrument. There are definite advantages to be gained from writing in this manner. For example, a performer having mastered the physical coordination and muscle control necessary to execute one of these types of gestures could then easily transpose it to a different part of the instrument thereby creating an automatic sequence with minimal effort. Secondly, recurring gestures assist the performer in memorization by providing elements that can be grouped together into a larger organized structure. It is imperative that performers of Partch's music memorize their parts since reading Partch's tablature scores is difficult to do while playing (especially with the larger instruments) and splitting up one's attention to read the music undermines the potential for Corporeal performance. The ensuing examples will present a cross-

section of Partch's instrumentarium in order to illuminate how this compositional technique is realized for the various instrument physiognomies.

Diamond Marimba

Partch included the Diamond Marimba in many of his works and often wrote parts requiring virtuosic skill for it. Nonetheless, the performer is aided by Partch's consistent use of familiar gestures that are highly idiomatic for the physiognomy of the Diamond Marimba.¹⁰ The most common of these gestures is a descending diagonal mallet stroke (with a subtle inward curve at the end) that allows the performer to easily play an arpeggio of any primary Otonal hexad (beginning with the 11 Oidentity) or primary Utonal hexad (beginning with the 1 Uidentity).

Musical Example 2.1 – Tonality Arpeggios on the Diamond Marimba

The image displays two staves of musical notation for Diamond Marimba. The top staff features six descending arpeggios, each labeled with a ratio and 'O' (Otonal): 1/1 O, 8/5 O, 4/3 O, 8/7 O, 16/9 O, and 16/11 O. The bottom staff features six descending arpeggios, each labeled with a ratio and 'U' (Utonal): 1/1 U, 5/4 U, 3/2 U, 7/4 U, 9/8 U, and 11/8 U. Each arpeggio is represented by a series of notes on a five-line staff, with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes are connected by a descending diagonal line, illustrating the characteristic mallet stroke.

Rapid rotation through similar intervals can be accomplished with relative ease on the Diamond Marimba by playing bars within the same horizontal row. For example within the seventh horizontal row up from the lowest tier there are five different varieties of thirds (relative

to 1/1). From smallest to largest they are: 7/6 the septimal minor third, 6/5 the just minor third, 11/9 the neutral third, 5/4 the just major third, and 9/7 the septimal major third.

Musical Example 2.2 – Rapid Rotation Through Similar Intervals on the Diamond Marimba

7/6
1/1

6/5
1/1

11/9
1/1

5/4
1/1

9/7
1/1

The relatively consistent horizontal and vertical spacing of the Diamond Marimba facilitates playing the same identities across different tonalities. The technique can be used to produce a series of identical vertical intervals while changing to a different pair of identities.

Musical Example 2.3 – Playing the Same Identities across Different Tonalities on the Diamond Marimba

16/9
16/11

10/9
20/11

4/3
12/11

14/9
14/11

1/1
18/11

11/9
1/1

¹ Partch, Harry. Lectures from 1950-70 transcribed by Danlee Mitchell. *Barbs and Broad-sides*.

² Szanto, Jon. “How It Happened...my connection with Partch.”

³ Partch, Harry. *Manual on the Maintenance and Repair of--and the Musical and Attitudinal Techniques for--Some Putative Musical Instruments*. Cuernavaca, Mexico, and Petaluma, CA, January to August, 1963. Harry Partch Archive at UIUC.

⁴ Underlining has been left as it appears in the source.

⁵ Partch, Harry. *Manual*. 2

⁶ Partch, Harry. *Manual*. 11

⁷ Partch, Harry. *Manual*. 30

⁸ Partch, Harry. *Manual*. 39 ½ (The unusual page number in this reference is as it appears in the source.)

⁹ Partch, Harry. *Manual*. 31

¹⁰ Refer to the Appendix A for a tuning chart of the Diamond Marimba