CHAPTER 2

CORPOREALITY AND MUSICAL GESTURE –

IN THE MUSIC OF HARRY PARTCH

Introduction

Imagine for a moment that you are seated in a darkened theater where a hush of anticipation has swept over the audience, such as I was when I saw Partch's *Oedipus* performed at Montclair State University in April of 2005. On stage and in the pit are the exotic forms of Harry Partch's otherworldly musical instrumentarium rising from the Earth like monoliths of a forgotten culture that has yet to be discovered. Like boughs of contorted eucalyptus, each instrument is singularly unique and beautiful—they are organically crafted in the scarlet hues of redwood or the amber haze of sitka spruce.[i] They are fused with artifacts of the 20th century: pyrex carboys, hub caps, antique liquor bottles, assorted aluminum and brass hardware, and amongst these forms are the transfigured corpses of reed organs and vintage guitars. The musicians crouch, slide, twist, and bend around their instruments in the realization of Partch's cryptic tablatures. With a crack and a boom like thunder the deep bass tones of the enormous Marimba Eroica roll through the theater, producing a shockwave that impales you in the gut. A tortured howl roars from a Harmonic Canon as the performer drags a plectrum over its steel strings. The music builds to a catharsis as you are hypnotized by the ritual magic you hear, see, and feel.

The experience of attending a live performance of Partch's music on the instruments for which it was intended is truly one that cannot be duplicated through recordings alone. While the notes on the pages of Partch's scores provide indications of the intonation complexities they

contain, this cerebral appreciation of Partch's music pales by comparison to the very intense sensory experience that can occur during a live performance, particularly one that has been staged with choreography, acting, lighting, and costumes. Partch certainly understood this equation and deliberately strove for an integrated sensory experience in his works—an aesthetic ideal he called Corporeality.

Because Partch was ambiguous in his definition of the term Corporeality there has been a fair amount of posthumous discussion on what Corporeality actually means. Partch's definition of Corporeality seems to have undergone a gradual metamorphosis as his compositional style and performance medium evolved. To understand this change, Partch's notion of Corporeality during the early phase of his career[ii] will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of the way in which the principle of Corporeality was transformed for new contexts as Partch turned towards theatrical and instrumental ensemble works during the 1950's and 60's.

By studying Partch's music one can observe that there is a vital connection between the principle of Corporeality and Partch's use of musical gestures idiomatic to the physiognomy of the instruments Partch created. The term "physiognomy" in the context of this lecture demonstration will refer to the particular geometric arrangement of sound generating components in three-dimensional space on a musical instrument that determines how the instrument is played.[iii] This lecture demonstration will examine the relationship between idiomatic musical gestures and instrument physiognomy in Partch's music, specifically noting examples from the second half of Partch's composition *Castor and Pollux*.

The investigation of Partch's music has led me to building replicas of several of his instruments: Castor and Pollux Harmonic Canons, a Diamond Marimba, and an Adapted Guitar II. I found this to be a necessary means towards appreciating the Corporeal aspect of Partch's

music in a way that would not be possible from books, photographs, and scores alone. From all of this comes the inspiration for new instruments and new music at the frontier of intonation that Partch pioneered.

Corporeality (1930-51)

The fact that Corporeality is a fundamental motivation in Partch's music can be observed in the primacy it receives as the subject for the first chapter of his book *Genesis of a Music*. Partch's discourse in these pages is a chronological survey of the history of Western music, and that of some non-Western cultures as well. In this chapter Partch establishes a dichotomy between Abstract and Corporeal music and applies this model as a polemic for evaluating the development of Western music from Antiquity to the Modern era. For Partch, Corporeality was exemplified by music that emphasized "the drama and the intimacy of the individual" because Partch viewed the human voice as "the most dramatically potent" element in creative expression.[iv]

According to Partch, vocal music that utilized accurate text declamation and tonal inflection would be considered Corporeal. In contrast, vocal music that used artifices such as melismas and ornamentation, would be considered Abstract. It is no coincidence then that one of Partch's earliest compositions using his Monophonic system, *Seventeen Lyrics by Li Po* (1930-3) is based on poetry originally written in Chinese, a tonal language in which inflection is critical for the conveyance of semantic meaning. Since Partch was setting English translations of these poems, he did not strictly transfer the tonal inflection of the spoken Chinese, but rather chose only to evoke the character of such inflection.

The music of Ancient Greece was among the paragons of Corporeality in vocal music that Partch acknowledged in the first chapter of his book. Partch hypothesized that Ancient Greek music would have had tonal characteristics reflective of the manner in which it may have been spoken. Naturally, the development of Florentine monody at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries was, for Partch, a landmark event in the renascence of Corporeality, one that he colorfully described as "a musical phoenix rising from the ashes of ancient Rome!"[v]

Partch's early conception of Corporeality was also reflected in his theoretical ideas and instrument design of the period. Partch's evolution of the 43-tone Monophonic scale during the 1930's allowed for the possibility of notating a smooth gradation of pitch.[vi] Partch called this portamento technique "tonal glide" and observed that even opera singers will unconsciously implement this effect in their attacks and releases of notes, whether it is notated in the score or not.[vii] Partch also transferred this vocal technique to his earliest completed instrument, the Adapted Viola (created between 1928-30), using a playing technique in which a single finger glides between stopped pitches on the same string.

Corporeality (after 1951)

Beginning with *Oedipus* (original version completed in 1951, premiered in 1952 at Mills College, Oakland, California), Partch created a series of theater works in which he endeavored to achieve an integration of the dramatic and musical elements for a larger effect. The concept of an integrated theater where music and drama work in synergy and not in spite of one another became intrinsic to Partch's notion of Corporeality from this point onward in his discourse on the topic. In keeping with this idea, the instruments of Partch's ensemble were built with the

intention that they be both seen and heard. Partch took care not to sacrifice visual beauty and form for the utilitarian consideration of acoustic function. Rather, both aspects of the instruments' design were given equal consideration since Partch intended that both instruments and players be on stage in order to be fully engaged in the performance. In a lecture given by Partch before a performance of his work, he is quoted as saying:

> I use the word 'ritual' and I also use the word 'corporeal,' to describe music that is neither on the concert stage nor relegated to a pit. In ritual the musicians are *seen*; their meaningful movements are part of the act, and collaboration is automatic with everything else that goes on...The various specialists do not come from sealed spheres of purity—pure art, pure music, pure theater, pure dance, pure film. As far as large involvements of music in this modern world are concerned, we have really only two choices: we have the pit, or we have the excessive formality of the concert stage...If this ritual or corporeal approach accomplishes nothing else, it frees the beautiful rhythmic movements of musicians from the inhibitory incubus of tight coat and tight shoes. [viii]

In posthumous performances of Partch's work there has been a real effort to continue the Corporeal spirit that Partch advocated during his lifetime, and sometimes even to take it to the next level. Danlee Mitchell was Partch's assistant, ensemble manager, music director, and friend during the last decades of Partch's life.[ix] He met Partch in 1956 at the University of Illinois where he was an undergraduate who played in the premiere of Partch's theatrical work *The Bewitched—A Dance Satire* (1955, premiered at the University of Illinois, March 26th, 1957). After Partch's death in 1974, Mitchell continued to organize and present performances of Partch's work. As a testimony of Mitchell's fidelity to Partch's principle of Corporeality, Mitchell has asserted that performing the music in a concert format alone cannot be considered

Corporeal. According to Mitchell, "you have to have a total theatre situation and only certain of his [Partch's] works have this potential." Among the works that Mitchell has ascribed this potential to are *Barstow*, *U.S. Highball*, *Castor and Pollux*, *The Bewitched*, *Revelation in the Courthouse Park*, and *Water! Water!*[x] A quintessential example of Corporeal presentation of Partch's work would certainly be Mitchell's production of *U.S. Highball* in 1976 with the Harry Partch Ensemble. In this production the musicians appeared in costume as the hobo characters, seamlessly integrating them into the stage action.[xi]

In 1979-80 another high watermark in Corporeal performance was achieved with the production of Partch's *The Bewitched* which was performed at San Diego State and then later the Berlin New Music Festival. Kenneth Gaburo was the artistic director, Danlee Mitchell the musical director, and Mary Lou Blankenburg the choreographer. Preparation for the production was started about eight months before the first performance, which gave the performers plenty of time to absorb and internalize the music. Before rehearsals the performers practiced group breathing and sensing exercises together. Blankenburg helped to make the performers more aware of their bodies, a process which Blankenburg described as "finding their center," by having them practice "extended weight transfers,[xii] usually to a record of the music." In describing the nascent Corporeal awareness that the musicians began to develop, Blankenburg stated, "we began to move, because our *bodies* told us to move."[xiii] The level of physicality and interaction achieved in the 1979-80 production of *The Bewitched*, although performed after Partch's lifetime, seems to have definitively fulfilled Partch's Corporeal ideal of utilizing "the whole body, the whole person, the whole mind."[xiv]

[i] Sitka spruce is a type of wood that Partch used in many of his instruments. It has a clear vertical grain and produces an excellent resonant tone. Regrettably, this type of wood has become quite expensive and difficult to obtain due to the unsustainable logging practices of the previous century.

[ii] The early phase of Partch's career may be considered to span the period beginning with his *Seventeen Lyrics by Li Po*, 1930-3 and culminating with *Oedipus*, 1951. Partch's compositions from this period are predominately based on principles of speech-intonation.

[iii] The reader is referred to Appendix B for pictures of my replica instruments. These pictures will be useful for helping the reader to become familiar with the instrument physiognomies as they are discussed.

[iv] *Genesis*, 6

[v] *Genesis*, 22

[vi] Partch's inclusion of ratios from outside of the 11 limit Tonality Diamond was done with the intention of filling in the gaps that resulted when the primary ratios were placed in ascending scalar order (*Genesis*, 131-2).

[vii] *Genesis*, 45

[viii] Partch, Harry. "A lecture delivered by Harry Partch at the University of California, Los Angeles, preceding a concert of Mr. Partch's music. May 1966." *Source* Jan. 1967: 103.

[ix] Mitchell, Danlee. Bio. 27 May 2006. < http://www.corporeal.com/dm_bio.html>

[x] *Harry Partch – An anthology of critical pespectives*, 4-5

[xi] Szanto, Jon. "The Corporeal Group." 24 May 2006. <http://www.corporeal.com/corpgrup.html>

[xii] Typically dancers practice weight transfers by slightly bending their knees and allowing the center of their bodies, located at their abdomen, to shift from side to side and front to back. This exercise can assist dancers in becoming more physically grounded in their stance.

[xiii] Glasier, Jonathan. "The Bewitched Goes to Europe." (Interview with Kenneth Gaburo, Artistic Director and Mary Lou Blankenburg, Choreographer. San Diego State University, October 7, 1979.) *Interval* fall 1979: 27-32.

[xiv] Partch, Harry. Lectures from 1950-70 transcribed by Danlee Mitchell. *Barbs and Broadsides*.