

Performing Arts

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On Thursday, cellist **Yo-Yo Ma**, left, joins Jeffrey Kahane and the L.A. Chamber Orchestra in UCLA's Royce Hall for Tchaikovsky's "Rococo" Variations and, with pianist Kahane and violinist Margaret Batcher, Beethoven's Triple Concerto.

In Honor of a Masterful Maverick

Microtonal composer Harry Partch fought to get his work taken seriously. Now his centennial is the occasion of a celebration.

By JOSEF WOODARD

Artists are often more complex and influential than early appearances and reputation would suggest. That's particularly true for Harry Partch, microtonal guru, composer and incurable freethinker. Since his death in 1974, his status has shifted from controversial and marginalized to controversial and *less* marginalized—a maverick whose name is sometimes even placed in the same pantheon as Charles Ives and John Cage.

One of his most famous quotes hints at the unusual nature of his creativity: "I am not an instrument-builder, but a philosophic music man seduced into carpentry."

He was indeed an instrument-builder, because he needed tools adaptable to his personal tuning system (43 tones to the octave versus the standard Western 12-note unit). But even these widely known, significant aspects of his art were just parts in a grander whole, an utterly new vision of music in which the "corporeal"—theatricality, movement and the performer's body itself—ruled over academic notions of concert life.

Born in Oakland in 1901 to Christian missionaries on the verge of losing their religion, Partch's personal history is the stuff of legend, including his Depression-era life as a hobo, recounted in his surreal songs. Later, after winning grants and academic appointments, he enjoyed a more public life as a rebel with his own cause.

Not incidentally, the Partch saga also includes extensive, significant contact with Los Angeles, which makes the Partch Centennial Celebration at UCLA on Saturday a well-placed event.

There will be presentations by Partch fans and scholars, including Philip Blackburn, creator of the biographical "Enclosures" project; Bob Gilmore, author of a more conventional biography; filmmaker Steven Pouliot, presenting his 1972 film on Partch, "The Dreamer That Remains"; and panel discussions with a



File photo
Harry Partch plays on an instrument made partly out of wine bottles and hubcaps.

longtime assistant and friend of Partch, Danlee Mitchell, and another Partch ally, Erv Wilson. In the evening, a microtonal ensemble, Just Strings, will perform music from Partch's early years.

It will be, in a sense, a homecoming. It was at UCLA that Partch staged one of his most important and critically acclaimed music theater works, "Delusion of the Fury," in 1969. Based on Noh theater and a West African folk tale, it involved danc-

ers, mimes, Partch's instruments and traditional instruments in a mix designed to open up the usual buttoned-down concert setting. A recording of that work, by CBS, became one of the few major-label records of Partch's music, which otherwise was distributed on his own Gate 5 label.

As Blackburn explains, "One irony of this upcoming event is how rejected he was by UCLA up until that point. There was a lot of back-room politicking going

on, particularly by Betty Freeman, who made that all happen, much against their better judgment." Freeman, the noted local patron of contemporary music, became a vital friend, supporter and also photographer of Partch in his last years.

The kind of thing his champions were up against is clear from some of the reviews. In a record review of Partch's "Oedipus" in 1954, Los Angeles Times music critic Albert Goldberg opined: "After the first novelty wears off one is inclined to doubt that there is much real creative force or originality to Partch's innovations."

Partch, known for his ferocious responses to critics, sent a letter to Goldberg: "Go back to your histories, crawl between the pages and get pressed for another century."

UCLA's Partch celebration came into being as one component of this year's MicroFest, organized by John Schneider, a composer and performer who has been an avid Partch acolyte for years. Schneider has built copies of Partch's unique instruments (some of which will be on view in an instrument "petting zoo" at UCLA), performed Partch's pieces both solo and with his group, Just Strings, and generally stumped for the cultural cause of keeping Partch's music alive.

Schneider points out the influence of Partch's book "Genesis of Music," written in 1943 and reissued in 1971, on musicians such as Lou Harrison (Harrison was one of the subjects of another MicroFest event, in April, at the Claremont Colleges). In the field of microtonalism, which is to say alternate tunings, "Partch dominates the landscape."

Partch's connections to Southern California abound. His abbreviated period of formal music studies took place at USC in the 1920s (he never got a degree), and his jobs around that time included proofreading at the Los Angeles Times and ushering at concerts by the Los Angeles Philharmonic (at about that time, he submitted a symphonic poem to the orchestra, but the Philharmonic didn't bite). After stints riding the rails and lumberjacking during the Depression, he got a Guggenheim fellowship that led to various university positions, notably at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Illinois. All the while he was composing. He landed back in Los Angeles in the '60s, living in Van Nuys, Pasadena and Venice before head-

► **"THE PARTCH CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION,"** Schoenberg Auditorium, UCLA, Westwood. **Date:** Saturday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m. (concert at 8 p.m.). **Admission:** \$25 all day; \$15, concert only. (\$5 students/seniors). **Phone:** (310) 825-2101.

