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## THE CRITICS

### MUSICAL EVENTS

#### OFF THE RAILS

by ALEX ROSS

A rare performance of Harry Partch's "Oedipus."

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Of all the triumphantly weird characters who have roamed the frontiers of American art, none ever went quite as far out as the composer Harry Partch. His exit from civilization has assumed the status of legend, and it's all true. The turning point in Partch's life came in 1935, after he spent six months travelling through Europe on a grant. He was thirty-four years old; his explorations of new tunings and instruments had aroused smatterings of interest. In the hope of making an opera from William Butler Yeats's adaptation of Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex," he had met with the poet in Ireland, and had received his blessing. But few others grasped what Partch was after, and when he returned to the United States he couldn't summon the will to beg for more money. Instead, he decided to drop out, and it wasn't your feel-good hippie kind of dropping out. He spent much of the next eight years living as a hobo—riding trains, doing manual labor, sleeping in shelters or in the wild, contracting syphilis, working occasionally as a proofreader, and, all the while, rethinking every parameter of music. One day in 1940, while passing through Barstow, California, Partch found some graffiti along a highway, and he saw in it what no one else could have seen, material for a rasping, pugnacious song: "It's January 26. I'm freezing. / Ed Fitzgerald. Age 19. Five feet ten inches. / Black hair, brown eyes. / . . . I wish I was dead. / But today I am a man."

Partch, whose "Oedipus" recently had a run of performances in Montclair, New Jersey, was destined to be different. He was born in Oakland in 1901, and spent much of his childhood in the lonely railway outpost of Benson, Arizona. At the age of eighteen, he moved to Los Angeles, where he studied music at U.S.C. One pivotal early experience was his romance with the actor Ramón Samaniego, whom he met when both were ushers at the L.A. Philharmonic. Samaniego ended the affair shortly after becoming Ramon Novarro, the silent-screen idol. That disappointment helped cement Partch's determination to reject the mainstream. He could be difficult, and, with enough alcohol in his system, impossible. But there was something incorrigibly pure about him. Yeats said he was "very simple," and did not mean it as an insult.

Early on, Partch started asking himself why there were twelve notes in the Western scale. Reading the history of tuning, he paid special attention to the theories of Pythagoras and other ancient Greeks, who codified the relationship between elemental harmonies and vibrating strings. (If you pinch the midpoint of a rubber band tuned to C and then pluck it, the tone goes up to the next higher C. At a third of the length, the tone rises to a G. With fractions of a fourth and a fifth, you get another C, then an E. Together, these notes spell a lovely major chord.) Since the early nineteenth century, Western music has been tuned according to the equal-temperament system, which adjusts the neat Greek ratios in order to create a standardized scale. Partch wanted to restore the eerie "rightness" of the old tunings. At the same time, he added minute gradations, or microtones, until he had a forty-three-tone scale, each interval controlled by ratios of integers.

He summarized his thinking in a 1949 book entitled "Genesis of a Music," which begins with the most startling forty-five-page history of music ever written. The art really began to go downhill, we're told, when Johann Sebastian Bach got his grubby fingers on it. Partch held Bach responsible for two trends: (1) the movement toward equal-tempered tuning, which meant that composers could not absorb the scales of other world traditions; and (2) the urge to make music ever more instrumental and abstract. Although Bach advocated neither of these things, Partch's critique of the long-term denaturing of music still packs a punch.

The irony is that Partch himself was sometimes suspected of being a professional originator, a paper genius who tried to write his way into history with outré gestures. In fact, he invented his forty-three-tone scale not to inflict another system on the world but to allow for a new style of vocal setting that followed the contours of the speaking voice. In his insistence on reuniting song and word, he mirrored another outlying genius of twentieth-century music, Leos Janáček, whose notations of the music of speech bear a fascinating resemblance to Partch's hobo travelogue "Bitter Music," minus the nude drawings. If Partch wanted "to find a way *outside*," as he once said, he also wanted to find his way back, to a ritualistic, bardic art. On this point, he and Yeats—not the gay-hobo type—understood each other perfectly.

Perhaps the most impractical, and charmingly quixotic, aspect of Partch's project was that it could be realized only on instruments that he himself had constructed. Starting in the thirties, he hammered together an orchestra of strings, keyboards, and percussion. The Instrumentarium, as it is known, faced an uncertain fate after Partch's death, in 1974; his following resembled a scattered, disorganized cult. Six years ago, the instruments found a home at Montclair State University, under the care of the composer Dean Drummond. The

collection includes adaptations of familiar instruments—viola, guitar, reed organ—along with resonating objects that double as dramatic sculpture: the Cloud-Chamber Bowls, which consist of Pyrex carboys that Partch obtained from the Berkeley Radiation Laboratory; the Kithara, modelled on a harplike instrument seen on Greek vases; and the Marimba Eroica, whose lowest notes are produced by five-foot-high blocks that the percussionist must stand on a riser in order to play. Made of redwood, spruce, bamboo, and rosewood, the instruments look as awesome as they sound.

The stylish new Kasser Theatre, on the Montclair campus, hopes to become a center for next-wave programming, a BAM West. With this production of “Oedipus,” it succeeds. The staging was by members of New York’s Ridge Theatre group: the director Bob McGrath, the filmmaker Bill Morrison, and the visual designer Laurie Olinder. The action is split between the mythic world and the sitting room of Sigmund Freud, who is psychoanalyzing the title character. Morrison’s films draw on old Austrian newsreels, including slow-motion shots of the funeral of Chancellor Dollfuss. As in other Ridge productions, such as “Everyday Newt Burman” and “Decasia,” the images summon an atmosphere of worlds in decline, of ancient terrors surfacing. The superb cast included Robert Osborne, as Oedipus; Beth Griffith, as Jocasta; and David Ronis, as the Spokesman (a.k.a. Freud). Daniel Keeling made Tiresias a mad preacher, with a bit of Ray Charles thrown in. Drummond led the Newband ensemble in a virtuosic performance.

What of the music itself? It is staggeringly strange, but also achingly beautiful. Partch said that his “Oedipus” should achieve “emotional saturation, or transcendence,” and, by gods, it does. It begins slowly, with the bigger instruments held in reserve and long stretches of the play delivered as straight dialogue—in ersatz Yeats, because the poet’s estate stupidly withheld permission for Partch to use the original. Then the screws begin to turn. The chorus of women sings winding laments that devolve into wordless cries; the cello unfolds fragments of another long, dark song; the Marimba Eroica emits its mind-bending basement tones; tribalistic dances and sonic rave-ups take over; and, amid the fog of microtones, pure Pythagorean consonances appear like ghosts. The climax is Oedipus’ interrogation of the Herdsman, during which he discovers the awful truth. The simplicity of Partch’s method—sending words into the listener’s brain along all musical channels—creates hair-raising tension, an aria of the uncanny.

At one point, I wondered why Oedipus’ voice kept swooping up and down in singsong patterns. Had Partch really stayed true to his philosophy of speechlike song? Then I remembered what I’d read in Bob Gilmore’s biography of the composer—that the model for the music was Yeats’s voice, chanting lines like “For death is all the fashion now, till even Death be dead.” ♣