

Corporeality as Harry Partch's New Aesthetic

Navid Bargrivan

In the 1930s, Harry Partch abnegated the dominant tenets of the western musical practices, from the harmonic structures to the prevalent subdivision of the octave, going so far as to destroy all of his compositions to that date. In his words, this rejection was “a rebellion; the beginning of a new philosophy of music,” based on his notion of “corporeality.” He conceptualized “corporeality” as an art form where music joins dance, acting, voice, gymnastic, staging, lighting, and the sculptural beauty of the musical instruments to depict the essence of the drama. As I argue in this paper, Partch’s notion of “corporeality” not only fundamentally informs his music dramas, but is central to his aesthetic and theoretical achievements.

This aspect of Partch’s music has yet to be adequately analyzed in scholarly literature. While, scholars have largely focused on individual aspects, such as his just intonation 11-limit tuning system, his musical instruments, or his solitary lifestyle, the philosophical underpinnings of his music remain unexplained. In this paper, I analyze Partch’s 1964 magnum opus, *Delusion of the Fury*, as the epitome of Partch’s concept of corporeality. Exploring parts of Partch’s own discourse in his *Genesis of Music* and his posthumously published *Bitter Music*, I demonstrate that in *Delusion of the Fury*, Partch’s just tuned instruments and the performers, as well as the Japanese and Ethiopian rituals characterize his aesthetic of “corporeality” while granting a sense of unity to his work.