



Harrison, Lou (1917-2003)

by John Louis DiGaetani

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American composer Lou Harrison enjoyed a long and distinguished career. He is particularly well known for his use of instruments from the East, especially the Javanese gamelan, and for his melodic and lyrical musical style, despite the fact that he studied composition in the atonal musical style of Arnold Schoenberg.

One of America's most original and articulate composers, Harrison explored a number of interests, including puppetry, Esperanto, tuning systems, the construction of musical instruments, and dance. He was also actively involved in political causes, especially pacifism and gay rights.

He was born Lou Silver Harrison in Portland, Oregon, on May 14, 1917, but his family moved to the San Francisco Bay area when he was a child, and he lived most of his life on the West Coast of the United States. As a child he was exposed to a wide range of music, including Cantonese operas, Gregorian chants, and Spanish and Mexican music.

Harrison attended San Francisco State University, where he decided on music as his major and his life's work. He studied there with Henry Cowell and quickly became fascinated with melody and its powers, particularly in the music of the Orient. He also developed an interest in the works of American composer Charles Ives, some of whose musical manuscripts he later edited.

Among Harrison's early compositions is a large body of percussion music that reveals Western, Asian, African, and Latin American rhythmic influences.

As a young man, Harrison also worked closely with John Cage, with whom he wrote *Double Music* (1941) for four percussionists, and studied in Los Angeles with Arnold Schoenberg. He also composed *Canticles* and *Song of Queztlacoatl*, a reference to the Mexican serpent god.

During World War II, Harrison moved to New York and wrote music criticism for various publications. In the late 1940s in New York, he composed *The Perilous Chapel* and *Solstice*, works that reflect his admiration of Mexican music and culture.

Although Harrison was welcomed into the musical circle surrounding composer Virgil Thomson, who promoted his work, he soon decided that he did not really enjoy living in the crowded and stressful metropolis.

By the early 1950s Harrison was teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the experimental arts college where Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham also taught.

While at Black Mountain, Harrison wrote his chamber opera *Rapunzel* (1951), as well as *Seven Pastorales* (1951) and *Strict Songs* (1955). This latter group of songs was inspired by the music of the Navajo Indians and indicated his continuing interest in native folk cultures of the Americas.

In 1953 Harrison happily returned to the West Coast--specifically to Aptos, California, near Santa Cruz--and devoted himself to the study of Asian music. In 1961 and 1962 he lived in Korea and Taiwan, where he discovered various Oriental instruments and became particularly fascinated by the gamelan. He began writing his own music for this instrument.

By 1967 he had found his life's partner, William Colvig. Although he was not a composer, Colvig shared Harrison's passion for music. They collaborated on the construction of a number of instruments, including two American gamelan, one at San Jose State University, the other at Mills College. Colvig's death in 2000 marked the end of a remarkable and productive relationship.

In 1971, Harrison wrote an opera, *Young Caesar*, which relies on a group of Oriental instruments. The work deals with both homosexuality and the confrontations of East and West.

For the gamelan and other instruments, Harrison wrote one of his most famous compositions, *La Koro Sutra* (1972), a work that reflects the East's Buddhist philosophy as well as its musical sounds. He has written three dozen original works for the gamelan, often accompanied by Western instruments.

Harrison taught at various colleges in California, including Stanford University, Cabrillo College, Mills College, and the University of Southern California. From 1968, he maintained an affiliation with San Jose State University.

Harrison's later works include three symphonies and some chamber music pieces. His *Suite for Cello and Piano* (1995) indicates the continuing quality of his extraordinary productivity. Also in 1995, he wrote "Parade for MTT" for the San Francisco's Symphony celebration of the inauguration of music director Michael Tilson Thomas.

For many years, Harrison was involved in the movement for gay rights. He also worked on behalf of the ecological movement and the cause of world peace.

Harrison died on February 2, 2003 in Lafayette, Indiana. He was en route to a festival of his music at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Celebrated as one of America's most accomplished composers, and sometimes dubbed the "Santa Claus" of new music for his white beard, considerable heft, and ready laugh, he was mourned by music lovers throughout the world.

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