

# INVESTIGATING SYMBOLIC MEANING IN PARTCH'S *DELUSION OF THE FURY*

Taylor Brook

## Abstract

Harry Partch's seminal work, *Delusion of the Fury* (1966) represents the culmination of a creative life developing a deeply personal music. Partch's music may be better understood through an analysis of its symbolic meaning, relying upon his concepts of *monophony*, *corporealism*, *tonalities*, and the "One-Footed Bride," a diagram he developed to link expressive qualities with interval regions. After considering some of the unique challenges of analyzing Partch-like instrumentation and notation, this article connects Partch's "One-Footed Bride" to pitch organization in the score of *Delusion of the Fury*. This analysis describes how Partch implements his 43-tone just intonation scale, showing how his pitch system is closely linked to the design of his instruments, his use of motives, the harmonic organization of his music, and its large-scale form. Following a focused analysis on the Exordium of *Delusion of the Fury*, this article considers some details of harmonic organization, vocal writing, and formal structure as well as broader organizational principles and tendencies that apply throughout this large-scale work.

## Keywords

Harry Partch — just intonation — musical meaning — twentieth-century music — music theater

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## Introduction

In the 1920s, Harry Partch (1901–1974) perceived a crisis in American concert music, believing that the classical tradition had strayed from humanist ideals and was lacking both originality and a connection to society.<sup>1</sup> Partch became convinced that in order to create meaningful art he must rethink music fundamentally, developing his own instruments, notation, tunings, and musical forms as well as new conceptions of musical expression and aesthetic. Indeed, Partch presents an extreme case of a composer who built a personal tradition, creating an idiosyncratic music. This is not to claim that Partch takes no outside influence, but that his influences are multifarious, from a variety of cultures and traditions, which are metabolized towards an original synthesis. Through his theories and a lifetime of devoted and concentrated work, Partch created music that is richly imbued with musical symbols and meaning that have yet to be fully recognized, analyzed, and explained. The task of outlining symbolic function is a particular challenge as his body of work, both words and music, must be considered as something akin to a self-contained tradition from which an original semiotic code arises.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Gilmore, *Harry Partch, A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 46.

Uncovering the symbolic level of meaning in Partch's music demands a close analysis of his scores, which is challenging due to the barriers presented by his unique notation and instrumentation. As a result of these challenges, there is currently little scholarship that connects an analysis of Partch's scores, and the organization of pitch, rhythm, form, and orchestration therein, with musical meaning. This article attempts to decipher Partch's musical language through an analysis of his seminal work *Delusion of the Fury* informed by his "One-Footed Bride," a diagram that associates expressive qualities with interval region (see Figure 3).

Partch's life was devoted to the quixotic task of creating his own Gesamtkunstwerk, integrating the arts to (re)forge a connection between art and the human condition, a connection that Partch envisioned existed in Ancient Greek drama as well as experienced in the living tradition of the Chinese Opera that Partch attended in San Francisco at the Mandarin Theatre as a young man.<sup>2</sup> Through his art, Partch contributed to disparate fields, including experimental music, folk art, theatre, choreography, visual arts, and gender/sexuality. This article, however, is largely constrained to the specific relationship between how symbolic meaning is developed through musical materials. Partch may have bristled at such a specialized and rarefied pursuit, but, as musicologists begin to explore Partch's contributions more widely and microtonality becomes increasingly common among composers, a deeper understanding of how Partch realized his musical theories is foundational research.

### *Overview of Delusion of the Fury*

*Delusion of the Fury* was completed in 1966 and premiered at UCLA in 1969 with full staging and costumes under the direction of the composer. A large-scale music theater piece, *Delusion of the Fury* calls for twenty performers who are all expected to play instruments, dance, act, and sing over the course of the 90-minute performance. *Delusion of the Fury* takes the form of two distinct, but thematically related, dramas with an overture, entitled "Exordium," and an "Entr'Acte:"

Exordium (instrumental)  
 Act I: Delusion of the Fury (tragedy)  
 Entr'Acte (instrumental)  
 Act II: Justice (comedy)

The two acts, while linked by their examination of anger and its futility, are otherwise contrasting: a profoundly serious adaptation of Noh drama that confronts purgatory and the afterlife in the first act is followed by an adaptation of an Ethiopian folk tale with a commonplace and humorous plot in the second act. To use terms dear to Partch: Apollonian and Dionysian elements are balanced through these two contrasting acts.

Act I is based on *Atsumori* by Zeami Motokiyo, which is an example of the Japanese dream genre of Noh. The story features a samurai who was slain in battle and lingers in the world as a ghost. His killer visits his grave seeking atonement and is faced with the infuriated samurai ghost, whereupon the two engage in combat. During the battle, the killer throws down his weapon and offers himself in sacrifice. Realizing the futility of anger, the ghost of the samurai forgives his killer, and his soul is finally released into the afterlife.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew S. Granade, "Rekindling Ancient Values: The Influence of Chinese Music and Aesthetics on Harry Partch," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 4, no. 1 (February 2010): 3-13.

Act II is an adaptation of an Ethiopian folk tale entitled “Justice,” which is a parable about misunderstandings. This satire features a gradual escalation of conflict caused by compounding misunderstandings between an old woman goatherder searching for a lost goat and a deaf hobo. The two characters are brought before a judge, who is blind and completely misunderstands the situation, confusing the woman and hobo for a feuding couple and dismissing them without resolving their dispute. Figure 1 provides a still image from Act II, Scene 5, from the original production of *Delusion of the Fury*, where the judge pronounces his verdict. Figure 2 is a still

**Figure 1.** Photograph from the original stage production, 1969, of *Delusion of the Fury*, Act II, Scene 5. Image from the Harry Partch Collection, 1914-2007, Series 15, Music and Performing Arts Library, Sousa Archives and Center for American Music, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Photographer: Ted Tourtelot. © 2022, The Harry Partch Estate — Danlee Mitchell, Executor. Reprinted by permission.



**Figure 2.** Photograph from the film production of *Delusion of the Fury*, 1969. Image from Harry Partch Estate Archive, 1918-1991, Series 4, Sousa Archives and Center for American Music, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Photographer: Ted Tourtelot © 2022, The Harry Partch Estate — Danlee Mitchell, Executor. Reprinted by permission

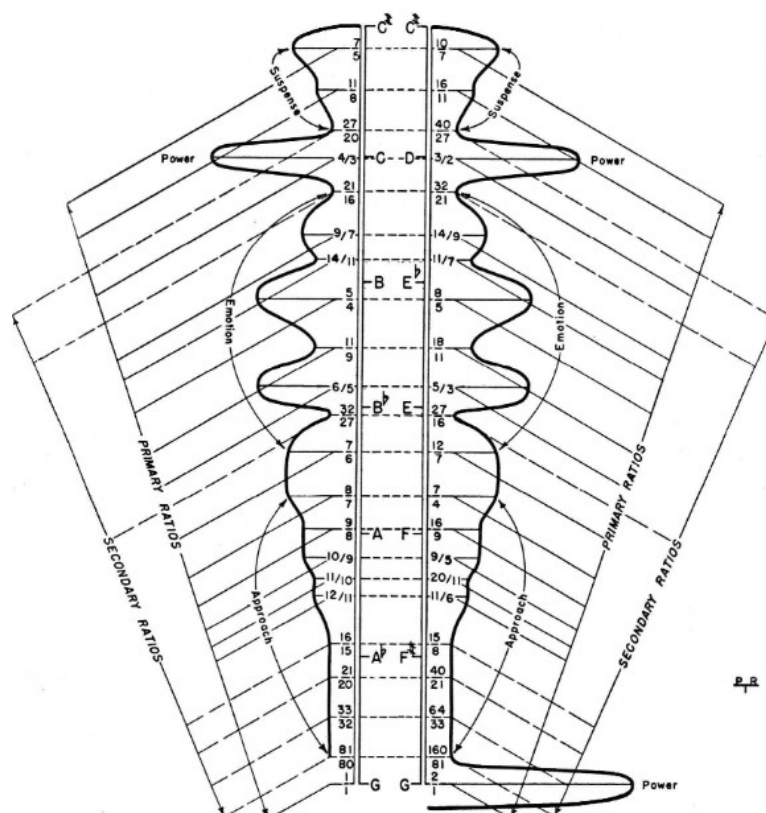


image from the original 1969 film production of *Delusion of the Fury*, providing a close look at the Noh-inspired costuming for Act I. The way in which Partch takes inspiration from Noh Drama in Act I of *Delusion of the Fury* is a complex and fascinating discussion that is beyond the scope of this article but has been addressed in an article by Will Salmon.<sup>3</sup>

### *The One-Footed Bride*

Partch highlights meaning and expressivity in his work through his concept of *corporealism*, which is a performance aesthetic that emphasizes expressive immediacy and a connection with the body.<sup>4</sup> Partch's related concept of *monophony* describes a principle of organizing musical materials based upon the human capacity for the perception of justly-tuned intervals. Partch creates corporeal meaning from otherwise abstract musical intervals by connecting them with symbolic expression in his *Genesis of a Music*.<sup>5</sup> The connection between interval and emotion is most directly communicated in his "One-Footed Bride," a diagram that correlates expressive content to diatonic interval regions shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** "The One-Footed Bride: A Graph of Comparative Consonance," as printed in Partch's *Genesis of a Music*.<sup>6</sup> © 2022 by The Harry Partch Estate — Danlee Mitchell, Executor. Reprinted by permission.



<sup>3</sup> Will Salmon, "The Influence of Noh on Harry Partch's *Delusion of the Fury*," *Perspectives of New Music* 22, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1983-Summer 1984): 233-45.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Johnston, "The Corporealism of Harry Partch," *Perspectives of New Music* 13, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1975): 85-86.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, 155.

The pitch organization in *Delusion of the Fury* adheres to Partch's lifelong implementation of his unevenly spaced 43-notes-per-octave just intonation scale. The One-Footed Bride visualizes the symmetrical structure of Partch's scale, showing the intervals (in fraction notation) ascending the left side of the image toward the tritone, from where they fold back down the right side toward the octave (2/1). The One-Footed Bride contains parallel expressive regions on the two mirrored sides: the seconds with the sevenths are *approach*, the thirds with the sixths are *emotion*, the fourth, fifth, and octave are associated with *power*, and the tritone region with *suspense*. By organizing the intervals in this way, Partch situates his 43-note-per-octave scale within a diatonic superstructure, suggesting that the many intervals within each region could be considered an expressive shading. In 1940, Partch made a comparison between a painter, who has access to seemingly infinite shades of red, versus the composer for whom "there are no shades of C-sharp, no shades of red, for him. The one shade that his gods will allow him to use is before him. He is taught that that is enough; it is good, traditional, and proper, and he feels a vague sense of immorality in even wondering about those possible bastard C-sharps."<sup>7</sup> With this statement considered, Partch's 43-note per octave scale can be understood as rectifying the lack of subtle tonal shading in 12-tone equal temperament tuning.

### *Partch Instruments and Tonalities*

Partch's instruments were designed not only to accurately play the notes of his scale, but also to reflect his principles of pitch organization into harmonic groupings that he referred to as *otonalities* and *utonalities*. Intervals with common denominators are grouped as otonalities and common numerators are grouped as utonalities. For example, the 12/7 interval has two identities as a member of the 12-Utonality and of the 7-Otonality. Intervals may belong to more than two of these otonalities and utonalities, the most obvious example being the fundamental 1/1, which is part of every possible otonality and utonality, and the 4/3 interval, which is part of the 3-Otonality, 1-Utonality, 3-Utonality (as 12/9), and 9-Otonality (as 12/9). This method of organizing intervals according to shared numerators and denominators is not a purely abstract appeal to mathematics but reflects a relationship of sensory consonance: an otonality forms an overtone series and a utonality forms an undertone series. In other words, there is a relatively consonant relationship between the notes of a given otonality or utonality.

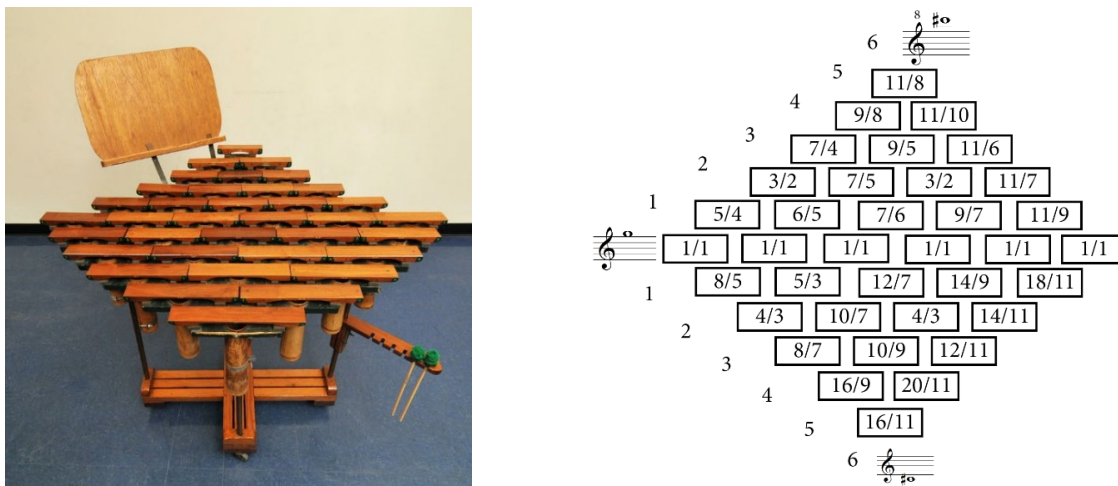
Partch embeds his musical theories in his invented instruments through their tuning, design, and layout. Idiomatic gestures on his instruments reflect pitch organization as a byproduct of instrumental design. The most straightforward examples come from two of his custom-built marimbas: the Diamond Marimba, which is a physical manifestation of the tonality diamond (see Figure 4) and the Reversum, which is an inverted tonality diamond. A tonality diamond is a two-dimensional representation of just intonation interval relationships invented by Max Friedrich Meyer and adopted by Partch as well as many other composers and theorists working with just intonation. The layout of marimba bars on these two instruments reflects both the primacy of the core of Partch's scale (11-limit just intonation)<sup>8</sup> and the grouping of pitches in otonalities and utonalities. Furthermore, the layout of the bars offers an intuitive way of shifting

<sup>7</sup> Harry Partch, *Bitter Music* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991): 159-160.

<sup>8</sup> Just intonation is the method of using whole-number ratios between frequencies for tuning musical intervals. 11-limit signifies that 11 is the largest prime number used in an interval ratio.

from one utonality or otonality to another via common tone by pivoting from an upward to a downward diagonal set of bars or vice versa (a technique that Partch relies on heavily in the Exordium section of *Delusion of the Fury*). For example, on the Diamond Marimba, the wood bar that is one row above the middle on the far-right side (11/9) is both a member of the 11-utonality and the 9-otonality. For an example from a performer's perspective, one could play the topmost upward diagonal set of bars, which are all part of the 1-otonality, then pivot on the 7/4 bar and follow that downward diagonal to access the 7-utonality.

**Figure 4.** Diamond Marimba (a) color photograph and (b) “Block Plan of the Diamond Marimba”, as they appear in Partch’s *Genesis of a Music*. Photographer: Ted Tourtelot © 2022, The Harry Partch Estate — Danlee Mitchell, Executor. Reprinted by permission.



Partch’s Kithara I, an upright 72-stringed instrument with a large wooden body, encourages playing chords in a single utonality or otonality by strumming the open strings, which are grouped in sets of six. This grouping in hexads also reflects Partch’s harmonic organization as each utonality and otonality contains six notes as an inherent feature of the 11-limit system (the first 11 partials of the overtone series contain 6 unique pitch classes).

The player of the Adapted Guitar II, which is tuned to a 9-Otonality for *Delusion of the Fury*, can easily transpose the entire hexad by playing the instrument with a slide. Conversely, some of the instruments fulfill other roles: the Chromelodeon I (a reed organ) provides the complete 43-tone per octave scale in sequence from low to high with the keys of the instrument color-coded to the Otonalities to help orient the performer. The clarity of pitch provided by the reed timbre of the Chromelodeon I makes this instrument ideal for providing pitches to double the vocalists in performance, which Partch nearly always does. Thus, the ability for the Chromelodeon I to access the complete scale is paramount.

The Marimba Eroica is the lowest-pitched of Partch’s instruments and has only four notes: 9/5, 11/8, 12/7, and 8/7. Conspicuously missing is the fundamental note (1/1), something one might logically expect to be included as the root of the entire scale. What this omission reflects is Partch’s preference for tonicizing notes other than 1/1 in his music, a point we will return to later. All of Partch’s instruments are designed not just to play the scale but also to facilitate pitch organization by linking theory and practice as corporeal manifestations of his music theory.



Finally, the timbral qualities of the instruments themselves are worth addressing. As Rudolf Rasch puts it:

A problem when studying Partch is the relationship between theory and practice. *Genesis of a Music* presents a well-formed, unitary theory of music and intonation. But the majority of Partch's instruments are percussion (which have sounds of inharmonic overtone structure) or plucked or struck strings (which have a rapid decay). Neither category is very well suited to illustrate or make manifest subtle differences in tuning and intonation. Listening to Partch's music, one is, of course, aware of certain 'intonational color' but it is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the intonational details of the Monophony from the arpeggios and ruffles.<sup>9</sup>

Theoretical foundations were clearly important to Partch, but he was not solely concerned with the listener's perception of pitch systems; Partch does not compose music to illustrate and prove the worth of his theories. Some passages in *Delusion of the Fury* provide clear and sustained harmonies and melodic lines, whereas elsewhere in the work one hears this "ruffling" that Rasch refers to. However, it would be a disservice to the breadth of Partch's music to expect that it must always clearly project the theoretical harmonic underpinnings. However, a consideration of timbral features that obscure the perception of pitch should be considered when attempting an analysis that links intervals with symbolic meaning.

#### *Partch's Pitch Organization in Practice*

In contrast to the meticulous construction of its tuning system, pitch in Partch's music is written freely around the larger structure of his scale, his conception of the One-Footed Bride, and its tonalities and utonalities. Having composed music with these elements for his entire adult life, Partch relies on a deeply lived-in understanding of his materials and an intuitive approach to composing. Indeed, Partch saw no inherent value in his musical theories, but they were a necessary starting point after rejecting equal temperament. Partch's theories served as a guide to create meaningful, corporeal music, the impulse to write in just intonation originating from a desire to compose for intoning voice with dramatic effect.<sup>10</sup>

*Delusion of the Fury* begins with an instrumental introduction entitled Exordium. Early on in the Exordium there is a striking passage from measures (mm.) 40 to 45, where a slowly rising melodic line develops into the harmonic progression provided in Example 1. A melodic line in octaves leads into this passage, developing into three-part harmony and building toward a climactic moment at m. 45. Throughout this phrase, the density of the orchestration increases in tandem with harmonic density, but a sustained presentation of the harmonies is maintained by the Chromelodeon I. This harmonic progression is overlaid with constant glissandi of hexachords in Kitharas I and II. The harmonies in this passage largely conform to Partch's groupings by tonalities and utonalities as shown below the staff in Example 1 with a half-note harmonic rhythm.

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<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Rasch, "A Word or Two on the Tuning of Harry Partch," in *Harry Partch: An Anthology of Critical Perspectives*, ed. David Dunn (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, 194.

**Example 1.** Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*, “Exordium,” mm. 40–45, score reduction — © 1971 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.<sup>11</sup>

8/5 +13.7c 16/9 -3.9c 20/11 +35c 15/8 -11.7c 40/21 +15.5c 160/81 -21.1c 4/3 -2c 3/2 -2c 7/4 -31.2c 9/5 +17.6c 16/9 -3.9c 11/6 +49.4c 7/4 -31.2c 20/11 +35c 40/27 -19.5c 16/11 +48.7c 3/2 -2c 8/5 +13.7c 5/3 -15.6c

8/5 +13.7c 4/3 -2c 16/11 +48.7c 11/6 +49.4c 10/9 -17.6c 6/5 +15.6c 1/1 1/1 1/1 9/7 +35c 4/3 -2c 7/5 -17.5c 21/16 -29.2c 11/8 +51.3c 40/27 -19.5c 4/3 -2c 32/21 +29.2c 5/4 -13.7c

1/1 1/1 12/11 -49.4c 1UT 3UT 1OT 9UT 9OT 11UT 7UT 11OT 1OT 1UT 5UT

(just minor triad) (overtone chord)

The upper melodic line in mm. 40–41 of the Exordium features a contraction of melodic intervals as it ascends, beginning with a melodic step of 10/9 and then shrinking down to a minuscule 27 cent (hundredth of a semitone) step from the 15/8 to the 40/21 in m. 41. In the following measure we hear some of the rare chords that use 1/1 in the bass part. The second half note of m. 42 is a just minor triad, consisting of the 1/1, 3/2, and 6/5. The following half note is something like an overtone chord, with the 1/1, 5/4, and 7/4 intervals all present. The reduction in Example 1 exemplifies the non-systematic approach to harmonies that Partch employs: a general adherence to tonalities and utonalities is clearly present but notes that do not fit into this framework are also included.

Partch’s intuitive approach and conception of theory as a means to an end are also reflected in his use of slides and moveable bridges on his instruments to play pitches outside of his 43-note scale. This ability to play intervals outside of the scale is most notable in the Kitharas and guitars, where entire hexachords can be transposed with sliding Pyrex bars. During the passage shown in Example 1, at m. 42 of the Exordium, both Kitharas use slides to produce several notes that are outside the 43-tone scale; however, these chords still fit within Partch’s system of pitch organization of utonalities and otonalities and as such are a logical extension of the scale.

### *Orchestration and Motive*

Returning to Partch’s instruments and their entanglement with pitch organization, the very first musical gesture we hear in *Delusion of the Fury* is a strumming up and down over the strings of the Harmonic Canon I. The strumming of the Harmonic Canon I creates a motive that is inextricably connected to the instrument: the tuning, timbre, and technique cannot be separated from a motive that, through repetition at key moments in the piece, becomes a sound object.

The strings of the Harmonic Canon I are tuned to a collection of pitches tonicizing 16/9, as shown in Example 2. This motive is used by Partch to divide large-scale sections of the performance, like a brief interlude or a sonic signal. This motive is particularly important in the Exordium, where it is featured prominently during the opening and closing phrases.

<sup>11</sup> This and following score examples derived from: *Delusion of the Fury* by Harry Partch © 1971 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc. Reprinted by Permission.

Audio: Harry Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*, recorded 1969 (LP, Columbia Masterwork/M2 30576, 1971): side A, track 1, 2:35-2:55.



**Example 2.** Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*, “Exordium,” m. 1, strumming the Harmonic Canon I —  
© 1971 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.<sup>12</sup>

The musical notation shows a sequence of notes on a staff. Above the staff, three intervals are labeled:  $3/2$  of  $16/9$ ,  $81/64$  of  $16/9$ , and  $5/4$  of  $16/9$ . Below the staff, the following intervals and cents values are listed:  $16/9$  (-3.9c),  $4/3$  (398c),  $21/20$  (-15.5c),  $9/8$  (+3.9c),  $7/6$  (-33.1c),  $10/9$  (-17.6c),  $10/9$  (-17.6c),  $7/6$  (-33.1c),  $9/8$  (+3.9c),  $21/20$  (-15.5c),  $4/3$  (398c), and  $16/9$  (-3.9c).

This Harmonic Canon I motive places  $16/9$  in the bass with  $4/3$  above, forming a perfect fifth ( $3/2$ ) between these two lowest notes. The following four notes ( $21/20$ ,  $9/8$ ,  $7/6$ , and  $10/9$ ) are a variety of thirds in relation to the  $16/9$  bass, resulting in the impression of a blurry triad due to the close proximity of the highest four pitches. The perception of blurriness in the harmony is furthered by the minor variations in pitch between the many unison strings of the Harmonic Canon I tuning. This motive reflects the typical relationship between Partch’s clearly structured theories versus implementation of pitch in his music: although the 3-Otonality is dominant, it is combined with other tonalities through the addition of thirds in a way that explores the idea of a blurred triad.

By relating this Harmonic Canon I motive to the “One-Footed Bride,” an interpretation of the expressive meaning of the pitch content becomes possible. The motive establishes the  $16/9$  as a local fundamental, placed in the bass and as the root of a quasi-triadic harmony. The  $16/9$  interval is associated with the approach region of the “One-Footed Bride,” suggesting a sense of tension and suspense. The approach region is emphasized often throughout Act I, a feature that will be discussed in more detail in the section on large-scale form. With  $16/9$  as a local fundamental, the  $3/2$  interval above the  $16/9$  grounds the root note with the power region, while the various thirds represent the emotion region. These various thirds, in forming a cluster of pitches in the emotion region, provide a sense of ambiguity; this triad is not major, nor minor, nor neutral, but all three superimposed.

Partch’s musical motives tend to be short melodic fragments with clearly identifiable, simple shapes. Three versions of the most prominent motive from the Exordium section of *Delusion of the Fury* are shown in Example 3. With a few exceptions, Partch’s just intonation system does not allow for precise transposition of a melodic unit; a true transposition or inversion of a melodic motive is often impossible in Partch’s uneven scale. The motive provided in Example 3 can be found throughout the Exordium in many forms, three of which are shown in Example 3a–c. Each of these motives undergoes mode mutation as it conforms to the 43-note scale; the overall shape of the motive is retained but the melodic intervals are not replicated precisely.

<sup>12</sup> Audio: Partch, *Delusion of the Fury* (LP, Columbia Masterwork): side A, track 1, 0:00-0:05.

**Example 3a.** Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*, “Exordium,” m. 12, motive — © 1971 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.<sup>13</sup>

**Example 3b.** Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*, “Exordium,” m. 25, variation of motive — © 1971 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.<sup>14</sup>

**Example 3c.** Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*, “Exordium,” m. 71, expansion of motive — © 1971 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.<sup>15</sup>

While the first two versions of the motive, Examples 3a and 3b, are only different in terms of starting pitch and interval size, Example 3c provides an example of how the motive is transformed rhythmically into a contrasting meter. This motive can be reduced to an elementary rise and fall shape, mirroring the strumming motive of Harmonic Canon I (Example 2). Moreover, Partch often juxtaposes the Harmonic Canon I motive with a version of the rise and fall motive (Example 3) in close proximity, exposing their similar contour. Indeed, the two motives are representations of the same root idea of a rise and fall in pitch.

This simple motion of a rise and fall dominates both the Exordium and Act I of *Delusion of the Fury*. Another striking example appears at the climactic moment at the end of Act I, Scene 4, “A Son in Search of His Father’s Face,” as well as during the battle in the following scene, where the Chromelodeon repeats a rising and falling line several times.<sup>16</sup> At this moment, the rise and fall motive sounds like a continuous glissando as the Chromelodeon plays chromatically up and down the keyboard, touching upon each adjacent note in the 43-tone per octave scale to produce very small interval steps, presenting a smeared version of the rise and fall motive.

<sup>13</sup> Audio: Partch, *Delusion of the Fury* (LP, Columbia Masterwork): side A, track 1, 0:45-0:52.

<sup>14</sup> Audio: Partch, *Delusion of the Fury* (LP, Columbia Masterwork): side A, track 1, 1:28-1:34.

<sup>15</sup> Audio: Partch, *Delusion of the Fury* (LP, Columbia Masterwork): side A, track 1, 3:53-3:56.

<sup>16</sup> Audio of the Chromelodeon rise and fall motive, heard at the end of Act I, Scene 4, “A Son in Search of His Father’s Face”: Partch, *Delusion of the Fury* (LP, Columbia Masterwork): side B, track 2, 5:30-5:55.

The central drama in Act I revolves around the ghost of a slain warrior who is unable to pass into the afterlife because he is tied to the terrestrial world by his desire for revenge. This rise and fall motive may represent his purgatory, the rising up in pitch as an attempt to ascend to the afterlife and the descent in pitch pulling his soul back down in a vicious cycle. The rising line creating a sense of longing and aspiration; the descending line creating a sense of sadness and despair.

### *Vocal Writing*

Partch's concepts of corporeality and monophony situate the body and the human voice as the primary aesthetic objects and the focus of artistic expression. To fulfill Partch's ideals, the voice must be utilized in such a way that speech and melodic line are clear and meaningfully address human experience. There is a marked difference in vocal writing between Partch's late works, like *Delusion of the Fury*, and his early works, such as *Songs for Li Po* (1930-1933) or *U.S. Highball* (1943). In Partch's early works it is typical for a solo voice to perform a quasi-spoken setting accompanied by a single or small number of instruments. These early works represent the development of a folk-like Americana style that emerged from Partch's time as a hobo and the music he was exposed to and documented during those years (hobo songs, regional speech patterns, and Native American music from the south-west most notably). From 1950 onwards, Partch devoted most of his creative energy towards large-scale music theatre works that include large instrumental ensembles, multiple solo voices, chorus, staging, and choreography. In these late works, from *Oedipus* (1950) to *Delusion of the Fury*, the use of voice is more varied, mixing the quasi-spoken style with more elaborate vocal melodies. Furthermore, Partch often calls for an intoning chorus in these late works, which he models after the chorus in Ancient Greek drama, primarily singing in unison or relatively simple harmonies.

Voices first appear in *Delusion of the Fury* in Act I, Scene 1, "Chorus of Shadows," with the entrance of the intoning chorus. A transcription from early on in this scene is shown in Example 4, the top staff providing the part of the chorus and the lower staves the instrumental accompaniment (Kithara and Chromelodeon respectively). The chorus hums notes centered around F3, shifting pitch by extremely small intervals, each roughly 15 cents from one another. These minuscule shifts give the impression of a slow bend rather than a series of discrete pitches. This impression of bending is reinforced by the legato setting, the continuous closed-mouth hum, and the timbre of a chorus singing in unison. As new notes are introduced by the chorus, the impression is not of a melodic step but rather of a subtle shift in harmonic identity. Returning to Partch's analogy between musical notes and a painter's colors, these pitch inflections around F3 are akin to different shades of a color and the smearing of pitch that results from the orchestration could be further understood as a subtle gradation of color. The accurate performance of these precise and minute changes of pitch in the chorus is aided by doubling in the accompaniment: the lower notes of the Chromelodeon I dyads are in unison with the chorus, and the upper notes of the dyads harmonize the vocal line with various types of just thirds. A Kithara also reinforces the chorus with chordal accompaniment, strumming hexachords that match the tonality of the sung notes, changing between the 9-Utonality, 11-Otonality, and 11-Utonality.



Of the vocal passages analyzed in this article, this is the most varied in range and register, touching upon intervals from every expressive region of the “One-Footed Bride.” This diversity of intervals is the result of the gradually descending melodic contour that projects a sense of lamentation. However, the suspense region, as represented by the intervals 40/27, 10/7, 7/5, and 11/8, is emphasized in the middle of each of the four short phrases provided in Example 5. The other emphasized interval is the 11/10 from the approach region, which is held as a sustained final note for two of the four phrases. This mixture of notes in the vocal line is combined with an instrumental accompaniment that is also varied in terms of intervals and tonalities. The instrumental accompaniment for the vocal line provided in Example 5 mixes and shift tonalities without strongly emphasizing any specific one. The desired effect could be to represent the tumultuous feelings of the pilgrim, the mixed emotions that he experiences as he approaches the shrine of the warrior he killed and the overwhelming remorse that follows.

Act I, Scene 5, “Cry from Another Darkness,” takes place at the shrine of the slain warrior, who appears as a ghost before the pilgrim and engages his killer in combat. The son of the ghost-samurai also arrives at the shrine in hopes of communing with the ghost of his father, who he now finds engaged in combat with the pilgrim, the killer who came to make amends. Just as the ghost-samurai is about to kill the pilgrim, who has thrown down his weapon and offers himself as a sacrifice, he realizes that there is no purpose in revenge and forgives his killer, overcoming his anger and finally achieving peace in the afterlife.

As the Ghost-Samurai character realizes that his anger is fruitless and shortsighted, he exclaims “You are not my enemy!” to the pilgrim, as shown in Example 6. Once again, the pitch moves within an extremely small interval, this time from a 40/27 to a 3/2, a span of only 17 cents. This moment could be considered the climax of Act I, and Partch draws our attention to the words by silencing all the instruments except for the Chromelodeon, which continues to double the vocal line. Partch portrays the samurai-ghost’s struggle to achieve a moment of transcendence as the warrior’s soul finally attains peace. This interpretation is strengthened by the way the air in the Chromelodeon is allowed to dissipate and naturally fade off at the end of the phrase, tone painting the ghost leaving the material world and entering the ethereal plane. The setting of “You are not my enemy!” moves from suspense (40/27) to power (3/2), reflecting the progression from struggle and tension to peace and release. Similar to the use of a leading tone to create tension in common-practice tonality, the proximity of the 40/27 to the 3/2 creates a sense of tension, of a dissonance that points towards a proximate consonant resolution. In this example, the relationship of sensory consonance and dissonance with the expressive regions of the One-Footed Bride is clearly communicated by the two intervals of 40/27 and 3/2.

**Example 6.** Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*, Act I, Scene 5, “Cry from Another Darkness”, p. 112, system 30, Samurai Ghost revelation moment — © 1971 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.<sup>20</sup>

40/27  
-19.5c

3/2  
-2c

you are not my e - ne - my!

<sup>20</sup> Audio: Partch, *Delusion of the Fury* (LP, Columbia Masterwork): side B, track 3, 4:23-4:36.

The music in the farcical Act II of *Delusion of the Fury* starkly contrasts Act I in expressive character; where Act I is severe, serious, and supernatural, Act II is earthy, quotidian, and lighthearted. Example 7 shows some of the playful melodic vocal writing from Act II, Scene 4, “The Misunderstanding.” This passage is sung by a chorus of villagers after they are entertained by a quarrel between a hobo and an old goatherder who misunderstand one another to the point of great frustration.

**Example 7.** Partch, *Delusion of the Fury*, Act II, Scene 4, “The Misunderstanding,” p. 212, system 33–p. 213, system 35, chorus excerpt — © 1971 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.<sup>21</sup>

The vocal line provided in Example 7 includes only four notes: 1/1, 5/4, 4/3, and 21/20. Moreover, the 21/20 always resolves down to the 1/1 and the 5/4 always resolves up to 4/3 and by doing so give the impression of ornamentality, functioning as upper and lower neighbor notes respectively. With the 21/20 and 5/4 removed from the pool of structural notes, only the two notes from the power region of the “One-Footed Bride” remain. In summary, approach and emotion resolve to power in the chorus part, reflecting the dynamic between the villagers and the two feuding characters as they are entertained by their fight and then bring them before the judge.

Throughout *Delusion of the Fury*, Partch sets the voice as the principal part and the text can be easily understood, both essential features of his monophonic concept. Throughout “The Misunderstanding,” and in typical Partch fashion, the vocal lines are reinforced by unison doubling in the Chromelodeon part. For most of this scene, the vocal notation in the score only shows the nearest equal temperament pitch, which further suggests that the singers should be matching pitch with the Chromelodeon to attain the correct tuning. Partch composes lines that would be considered simple to perform for contemporary vocalists with experience performing microtonal music. As a just intonation pioneer, Partch relied on a singer’s ability to match pitch to achieve the tuning he desired rather than expecting singers to be able to produce the precise intervals on their own. This approach made it possible for each performer to be a dancer, instrumentalist, and singer all at once, achieving his performance aesthetic of corporealism.

The power regions are prominent in the vocal parts of the old goatherder and hobo during their quarrel as well, suggesting that they are both attempting to project strength. The two quarrelling characters also touch upon notes from the approach and emotion regions, and usually move through these regions simultaneously. In another Partch music-theatre piece, *Daphne of the Dunes* (1958/1967), Partch builds up an association of 16/9 with Apollo and 3/2 with Daphne creating a tonal contrast between these characters.<sup>22</sup> In Act II of *Delusion of the Fury*, it appears that the hobo and goatherder are two sides of the same coin as Partch does not attempt to contrast these characters but unify them harmonically.

<sup>21</sup> Audio: Partch, *Delusion of the Fury* (LP, Columbia Masterwork): side D, track 1. 5:18–5:40.

<sup>22</sup> Glenn Hackbarth, “Daphnes and the Dunes: The Relationship of Drama and Music,” in *Harry Partch: An Anthology*, 52.



### *Phrase Structure and Block Form*

Partch contrasts his concept of corporealism with what he calls “abstractionism,” described as music for music’s sake, and points to J.S. Bach as the most notable example of a composer of abstract music.<sup>23</sup> Partch associates traditional forms like theme and variations or sonata form with abstractionism and calls for a more open and fluid approach to musical form. In some regards, *Delusion of the Fury* takes a traditional approach to phrase structure and pitch, with shifts in harmony and pitch tonicization providing formal delineation on the small scale of individual musical phrases and the large scale of sections and scenes. Conventional modes of organizing the flow of a piece are recontextualized through their relationships with novel approaches to pitch; clear and familiar formal organization aids in the comprehensibility of the less predictable and unfamiliar pitch structures that Partch employs.

*Delusion of the Fury* features clearly delineated temporal blocks on multiple time levels, not unlike Stravinsky’s well-documented block form.<sup>24</sup> Considering these blocks from largest to smallest, the movements, large sections, phrases, sub-phrases, single bars, and beats are all organized as blocks. These blocks are defined by shifts in orchestration, meter, rhythmic character, tempo, and pitch collection. The large-scale sections feature more drastic changes involving tempo and meter while the smallest blocks that make up the phrases may be defined by changes in tonalities and utonalities and/or changes in orchestration.

At the level of musical phrases (usually 8 to 32 measures long), abrupt changes in pitch collection and drastic shifts in instrumentation commonly define the start and end points of a block. On the sub-phrase level (usually 1 or 2 measures long), blocks are often formed through a call and response, alternating between solo instruments or small instrumental groups. These sub-phrase blocks feature some durational flexibility through extensions or truncations of the musical material as it passes between the instruments. Most commonly, changes in the length of sub-phrases are facilitated by complete repetitions of an entire block rather than the type of phrase extension one would find in a Classical or Romantic work that extends through elaboration. Considering the relationship between pitch and orchestration as outlined previously, we understand that shifts in instrumental combinations are inextricably linked with harmonic changes. Each level of the phrase structure in *Delusion of the Fury* is delineated by changes in pitch collection as the orchestration shifts in the call-and-response sections. In other words, Partch’s instruments produce a finite collection of notes and so changes in instrumentation necessitate changes in harmony.

With this block-like organization and the integration of harmony with orchestration understood, tonalities become associated with sections of music both short and long, which can be used to identify dramatic contrasts and expressive meaning by relating them back to the “One-Footed Bride.” Previous sections have addressed these contrasts on the scale of short phrases and the following section will explore large-scale form.

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<sup>23</sup> Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, 48-49.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph N. Straus, *Stravinsky’s Late Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 81-82.

### *Large-scale Form and the Return of the One-Footed Bride*

The largest sectional divisions of *Delusion of the Fury* are the Exordium, Entr'acte, and the various scenes from the two acts. Figure 5 provides a summary of these sections along with a list of the prominent pitches and tonalities employed in them.

The most prominent pitch and tonality in *Delusion of the Fury* are the 16/9 and 3-Otonality respectively. This extensive emphasis of 16/9 is reflected by the previously discussed recurring rise and fall motive created by strumming the Harmonic Canon I, which is used to open and close the Exordium, Act I, and the Entr'acte. Partch also creates a sense of tonal coherence and closure by beginning and ending *Delusion of the Fury* with the 3-Otonality. Through this tonal emphasis, Partch not only uses the intervals to reinforce an interpretation of the text and dramatic action, but also provides a *tinta*,<sup>25</sup> to borrow a concept from Verdi, for the work as a whole.

In Act I, Scene 4, "A Son in Search of His Father's Face," the 11/8 is sounded at the precise moment the ghost first appears. As an interval in the tritone region, the 11/8 is associated with suspense, and in combination with the narrative, projects a decidedly uncanny and unsettling quality. This is the first introduction of the 11/8 as a prominent note in *Delusion of the Fury*, and it remains salient through the remainder of Act I in Scenes 5 and 6 as well. In the same scene, the 7-Otonality is used for the dance of the father and son. Partch associates the 7/4 interval that grounds the 7-Otonality with "approach," which in this case points to an expression of longing, both a longing between the father and son as well as a longing for vengeance. Both the 7/4 and 11/8 are among the higher partials in the context of Partch's 11-limit system of just intonation; they are more complex and unfamiliar than the 5-limit intervals that form the basis

**Figure 5.** Table Summarizing the Large-scale Form of Partch's *Delusion of the Fury*

<i>Title</i>	<i>Prominent Pitches</i>	<i>Prominent Tonality</i>
Exordium	16/9	varies
Act I, Scene 1: "Chorus of Shadows"	5/3, 4/3	3O
Act I, Scene 2: "The Pilgrimage"	16/9	varies
Act I, Scene 3: "Emergence of the Spirit"	16/9, 4/3	varies, 3O
Act I, Scene 4: "A Son in Search of His Father's Face"	5/3, 4/3, 11/8, 10/7, 12/7	varies, 3O, 4U, 7O
Act I, Scene 5: "Cry from Another Darkness"	5/3, 11/8, 9/5, varies	Varies
Act I, Scene 6: "Pray for Me"	7/5, 11/8, 16/9	3U, varies
Sanctus and Entr'acte	8/7, 9/5, 16/9	7O, varies
Act II, Scene 1: "The Quiet Hobo Meal"	varies	varies
Act II, Scene 2: "The Lost Kid"	1/1, 5/3	3O, varies
Act II, scene 3: "Time of Fun Together"	16/15, 6/5, 1/1, 10/9	11U, 11O, 5O, 1O
Act II, scene 4: "The Misunderstanding"	16/9, 9/5, 8/5, 8/7	5O, 1U
Act II, scene 5: "Arrest, Trial, and Judgment"	3/2, 5/3, 9/5, 3/2, 1/1	3O, 1O
Act II, scene 6: "Pray for Me Again and A Strange Fear"	3/2, 16/9	3O

<sup>25</sup> The term "Tinta" refers to a musical color that permeates an entire opera.

of our major and minor scales. These unfamiliar intervals serve to create a grave and otherworldly aura that reinforces the supernatural elements of the Noh drama.

Throughout Act I the prominent intervals and tonalities are nearly all associated with emotion and approach, according to “The One-Footed Bride,” suggesting the themes of longing and suffering portrayed in the story. The moment of realization as the ghost-samurai declares “You are not my enemy,” as discussed previously and shown in Example 6, is the dramatic climax of Act I. When the ghost realizes the futility of anger and vengeance, we hear one of the few instances in Act I of the  $3/2$  interval relating to power, perhaps depicting the father’s empowerment and a sense of transcendence as he chooses not to give in to his anger. Reserving the  $3/2$  for this important moment in Act I creates a striking effect, a stable and consonant interval that contrasts the pervasively complex harmonies throughout the act. The arrival of the  $3/2$  provides not only an expression of power but of clarity and release as this stable interval is finally achieved, providing relief after the enduring onslaught of relative dissonance preceding it.

The Entr’Acte that divides Acts I and II parallels the Exordium in terms of the rhythmic language as well as the return of the Harmonic Canon I strumming motive (see Example 2). Act II is a comedy featuring bumbling characters, celebratory diversions, humorous misunderstandings, and dramatic irony. Act II, Scene 2: “The Time for Fun Together” portrays a joyous scene of social celebration, an exuberant expression of pure positivity. This movement is the first time in the entirety of *Delusion of the Fury* where the note G, the  $1/1$  and most acoustically consonant note in the system, and the 1-Otonality based upon this root note, are prominently heard. The music in this scene begins with an extended unison  $1/1$ , which is then developed into a harmony in the 1-Otonality. Indeed, the  $1/1$  root note of the 11-limit just intonation system that Partch avoided throughout Act I is often included in Act II, reinforcing the light and comedic nature of the satire.

In Act II, Scene 4, “The Misunderstanding,” a crowd of villagers close in around the two main characters of the hobo and old goatherder and bring them before the village judge to resolve their dispute. This scene is accompanied by a dramatic series of chords that highlight the 1-Utonality. In the following scene, “Arrest, Trial and Judgment,” the trial begins with the  $9/5$  note from the “approach” region of “The One-Footed Bride” prominently displayed, providing a sense of suspense and tension. When the judge delivers the sentence, the pitch moves to the  $3/2$ , associated with power, reflecting the stature and authority of the judge. The celebration of the villagers that follows this sentencing returns the music of Act II, Scene 2: “The Time for Fun Together,” with its emphasis on the root  $1/1$  and the 1-Otonality, in contrast to the minor-sounding 1-Utonality of the previous scene. From this description of the “Arrest, Trial, and Judgment” there appears to be a clear relationship between pitch organization and dramatic action, one that is not based on theme or motive but on Partch’s conception of the inherent expressive qualities of the intervals.

Act I, scene 6, and Act II, scene 6, are linked as prayer scenes, entitled “Pray for Me” and “Pray for Me Again” respectively. The music in these scenes is features sustained harmonies played by the Chromelodeon. By referring to the music from Act I at the end of Act II, along with the dramatic indication of a “riot of pantheistic deities,” we return to the supernatural elements and more severe tone of Act I. To conclude *Delusion of the Fury*, Partch retreats from the world of satire and returns to the serious matter of the struggle to overcome anger and frustration. Following this scene, and as a final coda at the very end of *Delusion of the Fury*, Partch returns to the Harmonic Canon I motive (Example 2) that began the work and returned throughout at key moments of transition.

## *In Conclusion*

*Delusion of the Fury* is the culmination of Partch's lifelong experimentation in music theater and remains an impressive achievement. As his final large-scale work, *Delusion of the Fury* presents Partch's musical language at its most developed. This article explores some ways to begin understanding the symbolism embedded in Partch's scores and takes steps toward a broader understanding of his conception and realization of musical meaning. The "One-Footed Bride" provides a link between Partch's theory and practice that serves as an entry point to interpreting the symbolism in his music. While the music of Partch carries an immediate expressivity that can be heard in performance without explanation, an analysis informed by the "One-Footed Bride" along with motivic, formal, timbral, and rhythmic considerations of all of Partch's works is necessary to truly understand the richness of his musical language and how it functions. Finally, in the spirit of the corporeal aesthetic that Partch pursued, an analysis such as this should ultimately be incorporated into a larger consideration of its writing, dance, and staging; as Andrew Granade states, "Through Corporeality, Partch sought musical meaning in the corporate act of creating music, not in the musical object itself."<sup>26</sup>

## **About the Author**

Taylor Brook writes music for the concert stage, electronic music, music for robotic instruments, generative music software, and music for video, theatre, and dance. His music is often concerned with finely tuned microtonal sonorities as well as unique approaches to the integration of electronic sound and digital media.

In 2018 Brook completed a Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) in music composition at Columbia University with Fred Lerdahl and was a 2020 Guggenheim Fellow in music composition. Currently Brook is the technical director of TAK ensemble.

### **TAYLOR BROOK**

[taylor.brook@gmail.com](mailto:taylor.brook@gmail.com) | [Taylor Brook's website](#)

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<sup>26</sup> Granade, "Decoding Partch's Aesthetic," 176.

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