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ASIAN MUSIC AND THE UNITED STATES

Paper by Lou Harrison, Delegate from the U.S.A.

Good Colleagues and Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen -

It was my fortune, this last summer, to teach and study in Berkeley, California, at the American Society for Eastern Arts' Center for World Music and Related Arts. I was surrounded there by the sounds of Javanese and Balinese gamelans, European Renaissance and Baroque music, the Koto, Bulgarian bagpipes, P'ip'a and much else besides, and it is with great joy that I thank you for the opportunity to be here in another such rich and brilliant assembly, among world-music friends.

I think that it was hoped that I might speak to you in some way about the concern for Asian music in the WEST, and I supposed that to mean Europe, Canada, Mexico and South America too. I cannot do this. Indeed, I will do well to be able to give you some impression of our concern for and interest in Asian musics in even the greater part of the United States, for, as many of you already know, California, where I come from, is the most populous, the richest and the most vigorous state of the country right now and keeps one very busy. Nonetheless, I can report to you a little more broadly; - though, you must understand, by no means completely.

Like you, I am a composer, and am part of a chain of composers in the United States who share a permanent interest in Asian musics. The chain does not go back very far, I must admit, but it is growing daily in length and strength. Charles Griffes and Henry Eichheim were early ones, though still within this century, and then Colin McPhee and the wonderful Henry Cowell and Harry Partch followed. McPhee, as many of you know, went to Bali in the 1930's, fell in love with it, and devoted the remainder of his life to studying and writing about Balinese music in art and society. We have had to reconsider very little indeed of what he so lovingly transmitted to us. English speaking musicians are fortunate indeed in his work, and he composed one or two pieces of importance as well. Henry Cowell was more broadly great, and was the first to establish regular classes in the United States in "Music of the Peoples of the World"--classes which he began to give after his studies in Berlin with Von Hornbostel, and which on both coasts of the United States set the norm for what Ethnomusicologists now call "the general course." I myself took his course in San Francisco in the 1930's and became deeply enamoured of several kinds of world musics. Now I have been teaching such a course for nearly eight years and thus carry on his tradition (as I do in other ways, too, I hope). Many of you probably know of Henry Cowell and the very broad range of his interest in Asian musics. Indeed, the finest works of his last years include the two Concerti for Koto with western style symphony orchestras, and his works under Persian commission and inspiration. You may not be quite so aware that for at least two or three generations of American composers he was a kind of "central information booth" - if he himself couldn't answer your question he always knew who could! Thus, his interest in Asian musics was spread at large among us, and I've little doubt that the present rapidly rising prestige of, and indeed insistence

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on, world music in educational circles in the United States is due in fair part to the spread of the ideas and attitudes that his enthusiasm and orderly brilliance stimulated in all who encountered him. Harry Partch, who died last year, was raised with Chinese lullabies and Amerindian tunes, and his wondrous opening out of a whole new future in the realm of intonation was very much a part of his realizations that an interest in any music other than that of one's own ethnic at once confronts one with all of tuning. We have all experienced this. He found and declared the virtues of it for us all.

In my own generation...other than myself...Peggy Glanville-Hicks (an Australian of American and Greek residence) has been fully devoted to Indian and Mediterranean musics, and the great Alan Hovhaness, raised in Boston and a pupil of Frederick Converse, as it were "discovered" his Armenian fatherhood early in his career, burned about 100 "opus's" (as had Harry Partch earlier), set out to learn the immense liturgy of the Armenian Christian Church as well as the entire secular music of the Middle East, created a lasting set of masterpieces, and has gone on to know and encompass the musics of India, Korea, and Japan as well. Both Hovhaness and I do have actual training in performance on Asian instruments—he on Hichiriki and I on Pipi', Cheng, Hsiao, Ti Tze and others, and both of us have done studies in the history and theory of several Asian musics.

Chou Wen Cheng, a pupil of Edgard Varese, who now owns the Varese home in Manhattan and is concerned with the preservation of the Varese heritage, has used his Chinese cultural background to successful effect in a number of well known works for western instruments. He has made a paraphrase of the Yang Kwan San Tieh (the Triple Refrain at Kang Kwan Pass) for modern piano, from the Ch'in original.

Let me review now: Griffes and Eichheim had heard and loved Asian musics and composed out of such direct inspirations--Cowell had studied Asian musics in Europe, with a European, until his more direct studies about the Koto with Shinichi Y^uize in 1962-63, and Hovhaness and I have studied in Japan and Korea and Taiwan and in the U.S.A. under Asians, and have composed out of such knowledge.

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Nowadays: many of the finest Indian musicians live in the United States--"What a pleasure (said an Indian friend of mine over a year ago) to come here to be able to hear our best musicians!"--and now, in the U.S.A., we have wonderful young persons who learn music on a world basis. Increasingly, in the United States, all facets of our art are being taught together as "Comprehensive Musicianship" and the stated goal of our Music Educator's National Conference" and the "National Association of Music Schools" is that such musicianship shall be, in effect, planetary. Thus, I am delighted to tell you that at the California Institute of the Arts, and at San Jose State University (where I teach) and in many, many other educational institutions in the U.S.A. now, ear training and other such studies are as likely to include dictation from Cheng, Gender Wayang, or Santur, as from Clarinet, Piano or Violin--indeed, in this new way, they are all mixed up, so to speak, and all of those are expected really to be HEARD, and all of them are taught and are regarded as co-equal.

Actually, we, in the U.S.A., are experiencing a shortage of needed teachers, instruments and "transmission centers," for this thrust is so strong that one wonders what to do. We have an "open" record policy too in the United States--the record stores are stocked with discs, tapes and cassettes from all over the planet--which aggravates the matter too. In the larger metropolitan centers there are radio stations which regularly include Asian musics in their programming. Our pupils in some cases become entranced with world music through all this and then come to us as teachers to learn more, and how to do it themselves. Perhaps they have begun such studies somewhere also. The pupil may want to continue Javanese Gamelan work--but we have no Javanese gamelan in the school--so we come to an agreement that they will study Hsiao, because we can get Hsiao's--and so on similarly. Here I should add that a number of universities (and even some community colleges) are offering Asian music studies, the most notable among them being the University of California at Los Angeles and Santa Cruz, The California Institute of the Arts, the University of Washington in Seattle, Wesleyan, and Brown and Goddard on the Eastern seaboard and there are others too.

At the grade level, too, Asian music is being introduced, sometimes by visiting artists. During the past several years, for example, the organization called "Young Audiences" has presented Lily Chin, William Colvig, and Richard Dee (all pupils of mine) in several hundred concerts of Chinese music in the public schools of central California, mostly in the Santa Clara Valley. It should be added that for a number of years Messrs. Colvig and Dee and myself have presented numerous concerts of Chinese and Korean music throughout the United States along with new compositions by all three of us for the same instruments.

Besides trying to collect Asian instruments for our educational use, and lure the needed teachers, we try to solve the availability of instruments in another way too. I myself have designed, and had built, a number of perfectly satisfactory Chengs, Piris, and other instruments over a number of years. Only this summer I was urged by a distinguished Chinese musician seriously to consider the manufacture of Ch'ins. We have already, with potter friends, produced many excellent Hsüans, both in stoneware and in porcelain.

Due to the kindness of Lucrecia Kasilag, I personally own a fine Kulingtan ensemble, which we use. Still, for other purposes, I, with my friend William Colvig, a Sheng player too, who can repair and teach that instrument, have also created out of aluminum slabs and steel and aluminum tubes, beer-can resonators and the like, "An American Gamelan", which, in the five years of its varied life, has had very much use. And this impulse is not private to us. The knowledgeable (in many musics) and gifted composer Barbara Benary, who teaches now in Livingston College of Rutgers University in the State of New Jersey has, by her own hands, constructed a complete Javanese Gamelan (on which she teaches) to the designs of Dennis Murphy, who will soon receive his doctorate from Goddard College for an instructional thesis on this subject. I also know a young man who may be about to establish a Balinese gong foundry on Manhattan island itself.

Young persons in the U.S. increasingly turn to the crafts as a way of life and some of these have encountered Asian prototypes. Thus at every street fair now (and there are many of them) there is a maker of bamboo flutes. I saw one recently who was also assisting children to make their own flutes.

More often than not this maker will offer a kind of shakuhachi, acculturated from the Japanese, which has changed somewhat in the "translation", but which still bears clear evidence of its Asian origins.

What we in the United States can't afford to buy--or be able to get because we may for the time be "ugly Americans"---we may yet be able to construct... though we lack the advantages of what is called medieval technology. There is little doubt in my mind that medieval technology has produced the most beautiful musical instruments of our planet, but we must make do now with what we have now.

And so I come to other young ones. After the second world war a kind of "international atomic style" of music flourished, often promoted by huge electronic firms (at least in its electronic aspect) which eschewed formal rhythm, melody, and other aspects of music. I myself never liked it, though many did, and am happy that a large group of younger composers in the United States are now interested in kinds of musics that matter to me, including, in large part, Asian musics. Thus, the music of Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass, to name only three prominent ones, explores repetitive and shifted patterns (we used to call all this permutations in my day--they call it "phasing" now) which are regularly rhythmic and clearly melodic and tonal as well and which often sound gamelan-like. La Monte Young has been exploring extended listening to single ratios--but they are real ones, for example--seven to six, and not the surds of equal temperament. Peter Plonsky, a pupil of Morton Feldman[†], plays multiplonic oboe[‡], Earle Brown + Franco Donatoni Carnatic, or South Indian flute fluently, has studied both Javanese and Balinese gamelan and composed a number of fascinating works for them. He has a strangely compelling melodic gift and I feel sure that we may expect much of him. Just parenthetically, I cannot resist telling you that he can stand right in front of you and with his own voice produce a "live" tape performance, quite indistinguishable from the collage "musique-concrete" tapes so popular a few years back. He is another living proof of Henry Cowell's dictum that the voice always imitates the instruments, not vice versa.* Again, Daniel Schmidt, who moved from tape and electronic composition to five years' very concentrated study of Javanese gamelan and is now a fine Rebab player, recently composed a majestic work for the Rebab with the American Gamelan constructed by Mr. Colvig. He too, will be heard from. Philip Corner, a little older and living on the east coast, has written a few works of abstract and "minimalist" nature which he calls "Gamelans" and which are fun to play and attractive to listen to. But I could go on like this, and there are many persons of whom I don't yet know.

phasing

calls

You may sense, then, that in the United States there is considerable engaged interest in Asian music and may rest assured that it is most likely to grow. Finally, I extend to you the eager invitation of the Pacific Foundation to send tapes of your own works to the music directors of two of its radio stations. Charles Amirkhanian is music director of Station KPFA in Berkeley, California, and guarantees that he will broadcast your works, and he hopes that you will also send biographical and any other information as well so that he may intelligently speak of you and your works. In Los Angeles, David Cloud, of Station KPFA, North Hollywood, California will do the same. If you send the tapes to each, then you will be broadcast in at least two American Cities. We would like this. Please help us.

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* my 'mind emission' slid phoneme vocal trance was originally an attempt to sing the 6 part count point 1st mt of Boulez' 'Le Marteau sans maître' with one voice, and adding the vocal imitation of Bismillah Khan shenai played on a hand-tuned motorless turntable L.P. with live needle.

† tongue tip
‡ tongue blade