

## Concerto for Organ and Percussion

Lou Harrison was born on May 14, 1917, in Portland, Oregon,, and died on February 2, 2003, in Lafayette, Indiana. He composed his *Organ Concerto* in 1972, and it was first performed the following year by Philip Simpson with the San Jose State University Orchestra. The first San Francisco Symphony performance was given in June 1997; John Walker was organist and Michael Tilson Thomas conducted. Walker was also the soloist in the most recent performance, with MTT conducting, in June 2000. The score calls for a percussion ensembles of six great bells, three temple blocks, celesta, tube chimes, small Chinese crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, bass drum, snare drum, three wood drums, glockenspiel, three muted gongs, three high suspended gongs, three low suspended gongs, güiro, jangles, maracas, piano, six muted large plumber's pipes, large rasp, rattle, three tom-toms, and vibraphone. Duration: about twenty minutes.

For more than forty years Lou Harrison was one of the Bay Area's most distinguished musical citizens. Born in Portland, Oregon, and raised in San Francisco, he was part of and witness to some of the twentieth century's most important developments in our country's music. In 1934, he became a student of Henry Cowell, and although the formal teacher-pupil relationship went on for only one year, the deep friendship endured until Cowell's death in 1965. At Cowell's suggestion, Harrison went to Los Angeles to work with Schoenberg. ("He constantly moved me—and all his students—in the direction of simplicity—bring out only the salient—and when he dismissed me, he urged me above all to study Mozart.") After Los Angeles, Cowell (as Harrison put it) "spread me around," getting him jobs, the first of them as accompanist for modern dance classes at Mills College. The 1940s were Harrison's time on the East Coast. Again through Cowell, he met Virgil Thomson, the *Herald-Tribune's* music critic, and Harrison added to the luster of the *Tribune's* arts pages. At the same time, he contributed to the invaluable journal *Modern Music*, served as editor for New Music Editions, and conducted. In 1947, he led the first complete performance of the then thirty-eight-year-old Symphony No. 3 by Charles Ives. After his return to the West Coast, Harrison became more and more interested in Korean, Chinese, Mexican, and other non-European music. Much of his work is composed for orchestras of Asian instruments, Indonesian gamelan, or ensembles that mix Western and "exotic" instruments. One of his gifts to the music world in this part of the country continues to be the Cabrillo Festival, which he co-founded in 1963 at Cabrillo College in Aptos, where he lived for many years. The San Francisco Symphony enjoyed an especially close relationship with Lou Harrison during Michael Tilson Thomas's first year as Music Director. In fact, that season, 1995-96, opened with Harrison's *Parade for MTT*, commissioned by the SFS. Harrison was also an important presence in the 1996 American Festival, during which portions of his *Organ Concerto* were performed. That music proved so popular that Michael Tilson Thomas programmed the entire work for the American Mavericks festival in 2000.

Lou Harrison tells us this about his *Organ Concerto*: "In 1972, I was asked by Philip Simpson, who was then teaching organ at San Jose State University, for a work for his instrument. Within a day or so I also received a request from Anthony Cirone, director of the San Jose State University Percussion Ensemble, for a work for his year's concert. [Anthony Cirone played percussion in the SFS from 1965 until his retirement in 2001.—*Ed.*] The two requests came so closely together that it occurred to me to try combining the two. It also seemed to me that since

the percussion orchestra can make a lot of sound and the pipe organ can make a lot of sound too, to put them together and see what would happen.

“The work was premiered in 1973 and is dedicated to Gibson Walters, who made it possible, and to Anthony Cirone and Philip Simpson who asked for it. For this work, Bill Colvig made for us some stunning now wooden drums . . . very large cube-like instruments suspended from a large rack, and he also added to the set of large gas cylinder bells which we had previously used in my ‘Heart Sutra.’

“Because the organ is a sustaining tonal instrument, and much of the percussion I wished to use was to be of abstract sound without specified fixed pitch, I felt that an intermediate group of percussion instruments of fixed pitch ought to be used.

“Thus, there is a chorus of piano, glockenspiel, vibraphone, celeste, and tube chimes which bridge between the organ and the abstract percussion section. My pleasure in the keyboard treatment of Henry Cowell lead me to the use of large sections of ‘cluster’ writing for which Bill provided felt padded slabs and which require special techniques from the organist. My feeling in the last movement was originally meant as a kind of homage to those syncopated sections in César Frank. Although it is composed entirely in an inverted mode from ancient Greece, and is commonly construed by audiences as a sort of jazz festival, the central largo movement is another of my works using that eight-tone mode which runs half-step, whole-step, half-step, whole-step, etc. . . . a mode which I always find a pleasure to use.”—**Michael Steinberg**

Michael Steinberg, the San Francisco Symphony’s program annotator from 1979 to 1999 and a contributing writer to our program book until his death in 2009, was one of the nation’s pre-eminent writers on music. We are privileged to continue publishing his program notes. His books are available at the Symphony Store in Davies Symphony Hall and at [sfsymphony.org/store](http://sfsymphony.org/store).