The 17 Lyrics of Li Po - Program notes

So with all pleasures of life.
All things pass with the east-flowing water.
I leave you and go—when shall I return?
Let the white roe feed at will among the green crags,
Let me ride and visit the lovely mountains!
How can I stoop obsequiously and serve the mighty ones!
It stifles my soul.

-- LiPo: His Dream of the Skyland - A Farewell Poem

Li Po (Li Bai) (~701-763 CE) is universally recognized as one of the greatest Chinese poets of the Tang period, or for that matter, of the entire Chinese literary tradition. His poetry shows the influences of the interwoven philosophical religions of his time, Taoism, Neo Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, as well as a particular fondness for nature and wine. Well educated, highly regarded by everyone, he had lifelong trouble securing a post and spent his life as a wanderer, preternaturally creative and prolific. Over one thousand poems remain, along with the stories of his improvisations, drunkenness and generosity. Legend has it that he drowned while trying to grasp the moon in the water, but he is generally regarded to have committed suicide after leaving a farewell poem (partially quoted above). (This poem is the 10th of the set of 17 Lyrics).

The parallels between Partch and Li Bai are so striking as to imagine that they are the same person, re-cycled after a period of 1200 years. Hoboes, brilliant, often drunk, deeply admired, suspicious of authority, unable to find peace or security, and spectacularly creative, they are the irritating grain of sand in society's eye that add the full dimension to our humanity - the rememberers of forgotten things.

"I am first and last a composer. I have been provoked into becoming a musical theorist, and instrument builder, a musical apostate, and a musical idealist, simply because I have been a demanding composer. I hold no wish for the obsolescence of the widely heard instruments and music. My devotion to our musical heritage is great -- and critical. I feel that more ferment is necessary for a healthy musical culture. I am endeavoring to instill more ferment."

--Harry Partch 1942

In 1930, the composer Harry Partch (1901-1974) broke with Western European tradition and forged a new music based on a more primal, corporeal integration of the elements of speech, rhythm and performance using the intrinsic music found in the spoken word, the principles of acoustic resonance and just-intonation. Borrowing from the intonation systems of the ancient Greeks, he created a scale of 43-tones per octave, in part to enable him to capture the nuances of speech in his music, and to forge purer harmony.

His unique ideas forced him to become a theorist, an inventor of musical instruments and a brilliant spokesman for his ideas. Living on the fringes of society, he was ignored by the standard musical institutions, although after reading some of his more barbed criticisms of musical culture one can understand how his presence might have disrupted the smooth indoctrination of good musical soldiers. He rejected ossified concert traditions, the 12-tone equal-temperament scale and the idea of "pure" or abstract concert music. He redefined the roles of the performing musician, composer and by extension, even the role of music in society. His body of work is rigorously constructed, sensual, alluring and emotional, and, sad to say, almost impossible to hear live, since it requires Partch's own invented instruments to be performed.

The Seventeen Lyrics of Li Po were composed between 1931 and 1933 and are among Partch's earliest extant compositions. They were composed for Intoning Voice and Partch's Adapted Viola, a hybrid instrument consisting of a cello neck grafted onto the body of a viola, its open strings sounding one octave below the violin. He used texts from the eighth century Chinese poet, Li Po, selected from Shigeyoshi Obata's 1928 English translation, The Works of Li Po, the Chinese Poet. In Partch's own words:

> *"The Lyrics by Li Po are set to music in the manner of the most ancient of cultured musical forms. In this art, the vitality of spoken inflection is retained in the music, every syllable and inflection of the spoken expression being harmonized by the accompanying instrument. The music accompaniment, or, more properly, complement, in addition to being a harmonization, is an enhancement of the text-mood and frequently a musical elaboration of ideas expressed"*
> *-- from Partch's liner notes for six of the Li Po settings for an acetate recording*

The instrument used in place of the Adapted Viola in this concert (and on the recording) is a tenor violin, a member of the new Violin family of instruments, invented, built and maintained by Carlene Hutchins of the Catgut Acoustical Society. The tenor violin has the identical tuning of Partch's Adapted Viola, with the advantage of a greater string length and a larger, more resonant body, better suited to the instrument's range. For certain songs in the set, Partch called for a flattened bridge, in order to play 3 strings simultaneously. Rather than interrupt the performance of the set to fix the flattened bridge, Mr. Mook is using a slightly modified curved bow, designed by the cellist Michael Bach, which achieves the same effect.

Partch's original score for the Lyrics of Li Po was notated on 3 staves. The top line showed the approximate 12-tone Equal Temperament equivalent pitch, the second line was transposed for Partch's Chromelodeon, which reproduced his 43-tone per octave scale in Just Intonation, and the third (bottom) line was scored in strict ratio notation for the Adapted Viola. The transcription used in this performance compiles Partch's three different scoring methods into two lines of standard Western notation, using micro-tonal diacritical marks to indicate the necessary pitch adjustments. This microtonal system was invented by composer Ezra Sims, and resolves each pitch of

Partch's 43-tone source scale to within six cents, and simultaneously offers an easy means to recognize Partch's unique brand of chromatic intervallic relationships to people not accustomed to working in ratios.

There are almost no explicit rhythms in the entire set of songs, so every interpretive choice must be threaded between two known excesses: to not submerge the text in a wash of "bel canto vowels", and other "devitalized tricks of 'serious singing'", and to not slight Partch's careful harmonies. The resulting performance must be dynamically improvised, counterpoised between the expressive needs of the poetry, the instrumental line and Partch’s stated intentions.