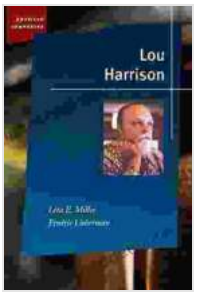
Lou Harrison: American Composer and Musical Innovator



Lou Harrison (American Composers) by Leta E. Miller

4 out of 5

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Lou Harrison (1917-2003) was an American composer renowned for his groundbreaking and innovative musical compositions. He was known for his pioneering use of non-Western instruments, particularly the Javanese gamelan ensemble, and his incorporation of Eastern philosophy and spirituality into his music. Harrison's works explored a wide range of styles and genres, from traditional orchestral compositions to experimental and electronic music. His unique and groundbreaking approach to music-making has had a profound impact on contemporary classical and experimental music.

Early Life and Musical Education

Lou Harrison was born on May 14, 1917, in Portland, Oregon. His father, a timberman, and his mother, a pianist, fostered his interest in music from an

early age. Harrison began studying piano at the age of six and later took up the cello and violin. He showed a natural talent for music and composition and began writing his own music as a teenager.

In 1937, Harrison enrolled at Mills College in Oakland, California, to study music. His composition teachers included Darius Milhaud, Roger Sessions, and Henry Cowell. These influential mentors encouraged Harrison's experimentation and helped shape his unique musical style.

Gamelan and Eastern Influences

During his time at Mills College, Harrison became fascinated with the Indonesian gamelan, a traditional percussion ensemble. He had the opportunity to study under Javanese musicians and immerse himself in the gamelan's music and culture. Harrison was deeply influenced by the gamelan's intricate rhythms, scales, and melodic structures, and he began to incorporate these elements into his own compositions.

Harrison's interest in non-Western music extended beyond the gamelan. He studied Indian classical music, Chinese opera, and other musical traditions. He believed that different cultures offer unique and valuable perspectives on music, and he sought to incorporate these perspectives into his own work.

Microtonality and Experimental Music

In addition to his interest in non-Western instruments, Harrison was also a pioneer of microtonality, the use of scales and intervals smaller than a semitone. He believed that microtones provided a more nuanced and expressive range of musical possibilities. Harrison experimented with various microtonal systems and developed his own unique tuning systems.

Harrison's interest in experimentation extended beyond microtonality. He explored electronic music, aleatoric music, and other experimental techniques. He believed that music should not be confined to traditional forms and structures and that composers should be open to new and innovative approaches.

Major Works and Compositions

Harrison's works spanned a wide range of genres and styles. His orchestral compositions include the Concerto for Violin and Percussion (1959),the Concerto for Piano and Wind Orchestra (1960),and the Symphony No. 4 (1962). His chamber music includes the Suite for Cello and Harp (1949),the String Quartet Set (1950),and the Concerto for Flute and Percussion (1961).

Harrison's gamelan-inspired compositions include the Suites for Gamelan (1957),the Concerto for Piano and Javanese Gamelan (1964),and the Symphony for Gamelan (1971). He also wrote a number of operas, including Rapunzel (1959) and Young Caesar (1971).

Legacy and Influence

Lou Harrison's music has had a significant impact on contemporary classical and experimental music. His use of non-Western instruments, microtonality, and experimental techniques has inspired countless composers and musicians. His work has been widely performed and recorded, and he has received numerous awards and accolades.

Harrison passed away on February 2, 2003, at the age of 85. He left behind a legacy of innovative and groundbreaking music that continues to inspire and challenge contemporary musicians and audiences.

Lou Harrison was a visionary composer who pushed the boundaries of musical expression. His use of non-Western instruments, microtonality, and experimental techniques created a unique and innovative musical voice that has had a lasting impact on contemporary music. Harrison's music continues to be performed and enjoyed around the world, and his legacy as a musical innovator will undoubtedly continue to inspire and influence future generations of composers and musicians.

Further Reading and Resources

- Lou Harrison Official Website
- Lou Harrison at G. Schirmer
- Lou Harrison: The American Composer Who Embraced Non-Western Music (NPR)
- Lou Harrison, Composer, 85, Dies (New York Times)
- Lou Harrison: Writings on Music and Cultural Politics (Amazon)

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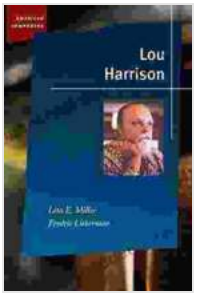

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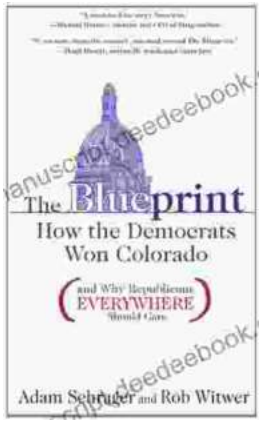

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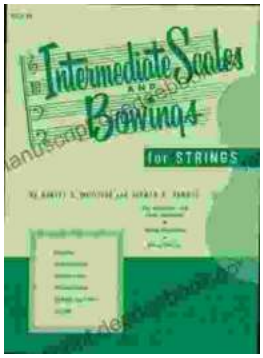

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