

CLASSICAL

## Harrison Birtwistle interview: the 'difficult' composer on taking *The Mask of Orpheus* back to ENO

As his opera is revived after 33 years, Birtwistle explains why modern music is not popular enough

**Bryan Appleyard**



Birtwistle and ENO's music director, Martyn Brabbins  
BRYAN APPELYARD  
The Sunday Times, October 20 2019, 12:01am

A strange metallic sound rises outside, from St Martin's Lane. I had just asked Sir Harrison Birtwistle, 85, if he still composes all the time. "Like at this moment, you mean? Yes." Not quite what I meant, but he'd heard that street sound. "I'm thinking of the tempo of that note out there. Because it came out of phase. Not because it was actually regular, but I knew that, through the air, it had sort of lost its tension..." The noise recurs. "Now we can hear what it is."

This man, always and everywhere, never stops being an artist. He is often said to be the greatest composer in the world. He is also often said to be difficult, grumpy, so when he appears in the room — a Womble-ish figure, a garden gnome — I am a touch edgy.

"You're from Bolton," he says at once. He is from Accrington, about 20 miles north of Bolton, so perhaps he thinks I'm an effete southerner. But no, we embark on a mutually sympathetic lament about the appallingly depressed state of the towns north of Manchester.

He once spoke to another Accringtonian, the novelist Jeanette Winterson, who told him “Don’t go back to Acc”, so now he doesn’t.

We are at the Coliseum, home of English National Opera, to discuss a new production of his opera *The Mask of Orpheus*. I say new, but it’s only the second full production; the last was the premiere, here at the Coliseum, in 1986. Does this lack of performances upset him?

“I don’t care,” he says. He really means this. It’s out there, written, recorded. His job is done. In any case, everybody knows about this opera. It is the only one of its kind.

Martyn Brabbins, the music director of ENO, has joined us. “It’s an extravagant thing to say about a piece,” he states, “but there was nothing that preceded this, nothing led to it happening. And there’s been nothing like it since.”

To describe what happens on the stage is impossible in this space. Suffice to say, the three main characters appear in different forms in different parts of the stage; and, crucially, there is no linear narrative. The story leaps back and forth. Birtwistle uses myth — here and elsewhere — as a shortcut, an elemental simplicity at the heart of all this dazzling complexity.

“I don’t have to think about the psychology of these people” he says. “I had an idea of trying to make an opera that uses the facilities of cinema, so time doesn’t have to be linear. Because, when you tell a myth, it has to be a known myth. I am treating the subject matter like a rough cut and the narrative in the way I do a pure, simple musical idea. But what seemed to be more potent to me about this story was that the subject matter is music.”

Brabbins chips in: “It’s all about the invention of music — and, in fact, Harry invented a new kind of music for that.”

It took him 10 years to write. At one point, he simply changed the central myth to the story of Faust. It was still, he says, the same opera. But then he changed it back. Ever since that first production, there has been talk of another, but the plans keep fizzling out. It’s expensive to do, although only as expensive, Brabbins notes, as a Wagner. It needs a big wind, brass and percussion orchestra. No strings, which is odd, because Orpheus’s instrument is a lyre. Why?

“They take up too much room.” I mime myself sawing away at a fiddle, elbows out. “Exactly,” Birtwistle says. But we both know it’s a joke.

His mother bought him a clarinet when he was seven, and he practised furiously. “Practice makes perfect, they say. Nobody practised more than I did. There’s a whole stream of musicians who don’t practise, don’t need to practise. I needed to practise. And I can tell you one thing — practice does not make perfect. It makes you a bit better.”

In fact, he never wanted to be a musician, but a composer. “I wanted to write music. A lot of composers are imagos. They come into the world fully developed as a butterfly. It took me longer to discover what I was. I had a sort of funny notion that I was rather pretentiously trying to invent music that didn’t exist.”

He could not have arrived at the Royal Manchester College of Music at a better moment. There he met Peter Maxwell Davies, Alexander Goehr, John Ogdon and Elgar Howarth.

Together they became the Manchester School, a modernist gathering intent on the very new and the very old — they wished to get back to forms of music that predated the Romantic and the baroque. In Birtwistle's case, he was trying to revert to a point where he could write something like the very first music.

After that, he was on his way. One influence — *Le Marteau sans maître*, by Pierre Boulez — is worth mentioning. It introduced him to the expressive possibilities of modernism. He diverged from the master's perfectionism, however, because he likes a bit of "dirt" in his pieces.

"Boulez was a jeweller. I'm a woodcarver or a mason. He was a great ally of mine. I used to have this thing with him — pauses. What is the pause in music? And I said, 'You know, Pierre, they're not long enough.' He said, 'Show me.' So he's conducting, and gets to where the music pauses, and I grab his arm and hold it to make the pause last longer, and he's like a horse trying to pull away."

Over the years, Birtwistle's music turned out to be contentious. There have been a few noisy anti-Birtwistle protests, a sort of musical Extinction Rebellion by people claiming this was the end of music. The idea that he is difficult persists, helped by his very public disdain for popular music. But on this he has mellowed somewhat.

If Birtwistle is difficult, it's because the times are too simple and people do not have a chance to remember. The vast churn of content required of pop music demands a process of mass forgetting. "It's a monster that needs feeding more and more, and the information is less and less," he says. "It's to do with memory in music. For instance, if you have a Picasso, it can sit on the wall and become part of your memory, even if you only subliminally see it. In music, time is really ephemeral. Modern music is not heard for long enough for it to become familiar. You're not getting anywhere near being familiar with it."

Familiarity is crucial. He explains it with the story of a stone. "I've got a stone I brought into the house. And that stone I use — what do I use it for? I use it for a lot of things. But originally it came in as one thing, I think to keep the door open. This stone has become familiar, because I use it for other things, and it has an identification. One of my cleaning ladies threw it out. On a pile of stones. So I looked for it, and there it was. It was speaking to me."

Or, as Flaubert put it: "Anything becomes interesting if you look at it long enough."

I quote something the conductor Antonio Pappano said to me, that he didn't mind people listening to rock'n'roll as long as they know about Chuck Berry. They had a tradition.

"Yeah, I know about Chuck Berry, but they don't know about Birtwistle."

This is not bitterness, it's a mild shrug. He is so utterly independent in everything, as pig-headed as we northwesterners are always said to be, that he is well beyond bitterness. I remind him of something he once said that makes the point. He sometimes uses pure chance as a means of composition, cutting up music and reordering it. "I deal in random things," he

said, “which save me from the cliché of my intuition.” I tell him I find this thrilling. “Well, boredom with my intuition I would say now.”

He also remarks that he doesn’t have a “vision” — a contemporary cant term — or rate inspiration highly. “I mean, it lasts about five minutes. Then you’re landed with a memory — an ever-decreasing memory of something — and you spend the rest of your time sort of putting fuel on it to keep it alive.”

Intuition, vision and inspiration are three things people assume an artist must have, and here is Birtwistle rejecting them all. What, then, do artists do?

His practical answer is that, every day, he walks down to the composing shed in the garden of his house in Wiltshire, sits in front of A3 sheets of paper and begins — but where? Oddly enough, almost always with the E above middle C. “That’s the basis. That’s from where I begin. I don’t have to make a decision there, either.”

Brabbins jumps up to play the note on a nearby upright piano. “It’s very nice,” he says, “but Orpheus actually starts with a G.”

All of which is not quite as relevant as it sounds, because mere notation is not enough to capture Birtwistle’s music. Brabbins says at one rehearsal the orchestra played three chords exactly as written, and Birtwistle at once said it was all wrong,

“You have to get beyond notation,” he explains. “I grew up with an affectation from Stravinsky, who said all you need is a dynamic level, you don’t need to express it.”

Birtwistle’s wife, Sheila, died seven years ago; he lives alone. He has three children and six grandchildren. None of his children has gone into music. “I didn’t want them to go through what I went through in music,” he says. “And I didn’t want to go through it with somebody else. I mean, I was going to be the clarinet player of the Hallé orchestra, according to my mother. I had other plans.”

So what do artists do? In Birtwistle’s case, the answer is easy: he conquers linear time. No time lines run through the paper on which he composes. The Mask of Orpheus is omnidirectional in time; it is now and always. At one point, he describes a piece of his that is intended to be endless.

You’re always seeking endlessness, I say. “Yeah.”

You’re always going for something infinite. “Yeah. Are we done? Have I said everything?”

Yes, though there is always more.

We part, and he gives me a big hug and two kisses. He’s come a long way from Accrington.

*The Mask of Orpheus, Coliseum, London WC2, until November 13*