



A guide to Harrison Birtwistle's music

In the third of our new series, Tom Service writes about Harrison Birtwistle, whose elemental and powerful music feels both ancient and modern



Harrison Birtwistle in his studio at home in Dorset. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

There's one simple way to approach Harrison Birtwistle's music, one crucial maxim I want to give you above all others: Don't Panic! I refer, naturally, to the notorious premiere of Birtwistle's [Panic](#), for solo saxophone, drum kit and ensemble, which wowed, shocked, and flabbergasted the Last Night of the Proms audience in 1995; but what I mean is not that you shouldn't listen to Panic (it's one of the most dazzling and dynamic pieces written in the last 20 years) but that you should never, ever, approach Birtwistle with the cliched idea that he's some kind of scary, noise-making curmudgeon.

No: his music is a vital, essential, life force which you need to hear. Not convinced? Listen to the opening of his 1982 ensemble piece [Secret Theatre](#), and be pinned to your seat with the music's unstoppable energy.

Recovered? Right. So here's what you need in your ears and your imagination when you listen to pretty well anything Birtwistle has written in about six decades of composing, from his earliest works, such as the [Oockooing Bird](#) for solo piano, to his opera [The Minotaur](#) that had [its premiere at London's Covent Garden in 2008](#). It's a sense of the animating vital spark that's going on behind the surface of our lives, which is teeming under the skin of the natural world.

An [elemental dynamism](#) drives Birtwistle's music: it's sometimes violent yet often lyrical, it's energetic yet also melancholic, but it's always striving, always searching, always moving.



John Tomlinson as The Minotaur and Johan Reuter as Theseus in the Royal Opera's 2008 production of The Minotaur. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

His music also has an astonishing way of suggesting things that are simultaneously ancient and modern. That's not just because he has always been attracted to mythological subjects for his operas or his instrumental works, in pieces such as the gargantuan operatic labyrinth of [The Mask of Orpheus](#) or [Theseus Game](#) for large ensemble and two conductors. There's something else: if you hear music like [Earth Dances](#), his monumental orchestral masterwork of the mid-1980s, it makes sounds that you feel Birtwistle must have summoned up from the guts of the world, primordial churning and explosions that turn the orchestra into an assemblage of sonic elements rather than sophisticated products of cultural evolution. As the title says, it's as if the Earth were Dancing.

So where was the crucible of Birtwistle's creative imagination? Manchester in the 1950s. Born in Accrington in 1934, and growing up as a clarinetist playing in local theatre bands, Birtwistle studied in the north west with what would become an (in)famous group of composers and musicians: [Alexander Goehr](#), Peter Maxwell Davies, pianist John Ogdon, and trumpeter, conductor, and composer Elgar Howarth. The usual story about what this "Manchester school" achieved was that they ripped up the rule book, and made British music confront contemporary continental modernisms that previous generations and the establishment had been frightened of. That's true, to the extent that Harry, Max, and Sandy did engage with and devour everything they could get their hands on by Schoenberg or Webern or Stravinsky, and one of the pieces that changed Birtwistle's life was Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître* (you can hear him [talking about that damascene moment here](#), as part of Radio 3's award-winning Hear and Now 50 series). But just as there was a move to the modern, there was an equivalent excavation of the musical and mythical past, as Max and Harry delved into medieval music, into plainchant and polyphony, to find new-yet-old ways of structuring and thinking about what music could be. Some early pieces that resulted prove what Birtwistle learned, and how bracingly fresh his idiom still sounds today: listen to the hieratic brilliance of [Tragoedia](#), one of Birtwistle's breakthrough pieces.

But there was theatre, too. One way of experiencing Birtwistle's music (and not just his overtly theatrical pieces such as the "improvised music theatre" of [Bow Down](#), which tours in a [new production from The Opera Group](#) from the [end of this week](#)) is as continual, exciting drama. Even when writing for small ensembles, or even solo instruments, Birtwistle's music has a fundamentally dramatic impetus. He thinks of each instrument as a separate character. Listen to the doleful, languorous solo tuba in [The Cry of Anubis](#), or try his *Cortege* for 14 musicians. And you can [look at the score](#), too, and [listen to an excerpt](#) (which corresponds to pages two-eight of the score). Ten of the 14 players take turns to play a solo at the front of the semicircle of the whole ensemble, each bearing witness to the other and developing the music's warp and weft of interlocking lines. There's an appropriate sense of on-stage ritual for a piece that is subtitled "a ceremony for 14 musicians", and was written in memory of [Michael Vyner](#), but there's Birtwistle's violence and energy here too, as you'll hear.

Birtwistle will be 78 this year, and he has plans for more theatre projects, large-scale orchestral pieces, as well as solo and chamber works. He is still [taking his creative line for a walk](#) – to borrow a phrase from one of his favourite artists, Paul Klee – and still connecting with things ancient and modern, still making the Earth, and our imaginations, dance.