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# Harrison Birtwistle

Composer

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“A great original ... one of the most gifted composers of his generation”

**The Times**

Sir Harrison Birtwistle CH was born in Accrington, England in 1934 and studied clarinet and composition at the Royal Manchester College of Music, making contact with a highly talented group of contemporaries including Peter Maxwell Davies, Alexander Goehr, John Ogdon and Elgar Howarth. In 1960 he sold his clarinets to devote his efforts to composition, and the following year travelled to Princeton as a Harkness Fellow where he completed the opera *Punch and Judy*. This work, together with *Verses for Ensembles* and *The Triumph of Time*, firmly established Birtwistle as a leading voice in British music.

The decade from 1973 to 1984 was dominated by the monumental lyric tragedy *The Mask of Orpheus* and by the series of remarkable ensemble scores now performed by the world's leading new music groups: *Secret Theatre*, *Silbury Air* and *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum*. Large-scale works in the following decade included the operas *Gawain* and *The Second Mrs Kong*, the concertos *Endless Parade* for trumpet, the piano concerto *Antiphonies*, and *Earth Dances*.

Birtwistle's works of recent decades include *Exody*, premiered by the Chicago Symphony and Daniel Barenboim, *Panic* which received a high profile premiere at the Last Night of the 1995 BBC Proms with an estimated worldwide audience of 100 million, and *The Shadow of Night* commissioned by the Cleveland Orchestra and Christoph von Dohnányi. *The Last Supper* received its first performances at the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin and at Glyndebourne in 2000. *Pulse Shadows*, a meditation for soprano, string quartet and chamber ensemble on poetry by Paul Celan, was released on disc by Teldec and won the 2002 Gramophone Award for best contemporary recording. *Theseus Game*, co-commissioned by RUHRtriennale, Ensemble Modern and the London

Sinfonietta, was premiered in 2003. The following year brought first performances of *The Io Passion* for Aldeburgh Almeida Opera and *Night's Black Bird* commissioned by Roche for the Lucerne Festival. A disc featuring *Night's Black Bird* has since won the 2011 Gramophone Contemporary Award and the 2012 BBC Music Magazine Premiere Recording award.

His opera *The Minotaur* received its premiere at the Royal Opera House in 2008 and has been released on DVD by Opus Arte. It has since returned to the Royal Opera House for a revival in early 2013. In 2009, his music theatre work *The Corridor* opened the Aldeburgh Festival and toured to the Southbank Centre and the Bregenz Festival, with further performances in New York and Amsterdam. *Angel-Fighter* for voices and ensemble was premiered at the Leipzig BachFest in June 2010, his *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* was premiered by the Boston Symphony and Christian Tetzlaff in 2011, as was *In Broken Images* commissioned by MITO and the London Sinfonietta in celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the unification of Italy.

Later compositions include *Fantasia upon all the Notes* (2012) for the Nash Ensemble, *Gigue Machine* (2012) for Nicolas Hodges, *The Moth Requiem* (2012) commissioned by the Netherlands Chamber Choir, BBC and Danish Radio, *Songs from the same Earth* (2013) for the Royal Philharmonic Society, *Construction with Guitar Player* (2013) for Julian Bream Trust, *Responses: Sweet disorder and the carefully careless* (2014), the concerto for piano and orchestra premiered in his 80th birthday year (commissioned by Bavarian Radio, London Philharmonic, Casa da Musica Porto and Boston Symphony Orchestra), *The Cure* (2015) which acts as a companion chamber opera to *The Corridor*, co-commissioned by Aldeburgh Music and the Royal Opera House.

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More recently he has composed *The Silk House Sequences* for the Arditti Quartet (2015), *Five Lessons in a Frame* for the London Sinfonietta and Ensemble Musikfabrik (2016), *Deep Time* commissioned by the Staatskapelle Berlin and the BBC (2017), conducted by Daniel Barenboim, *Three Songs from the Holy Forest* for Das Neue Ensemble, *Intrada for piano and percussion*, commissioned by Southbank Centre, De Doelen and the Library of Congress, *Donum Simoni*, a fanfare for Sir Simon Rattle's opening season as Music Director of the LSO, and *Keyboard Engine, construction for two pianos* commissioned for Pierre-Laurent Aimard and Tamara Stefanovich which received its world premiere at the 2018 Aldeburgh Festival, alongside further performances at the Carnegie Hall, Cal Performances and Koelner Philharmonie and elsewhere.

Current works and future plans include *Duet for Eight Strings* for Adrian Brendel and Lawrence Power commissioned by the Nash Ensemble and premiered at Wigmore Hall, *Pictured Within, Birthday Variations for M. C. B.* for the BBC Proms, and *...when falling asleep* for BCMG. He is also writing a piece for the Reina Sofía School of Music and a major orchestral work co-commissioned by the LSO, Barbican Centre, Orchestre de Paris Luxembourg Philharmonie, Swedish Radio and Casa da Musica, Porto.

In October 2019, his opera *The Mask of Orpheus* was fully staged by English National Opera for the first time in 33 years, conducted by Martyn Brabbins and directed by Daniel Kramer.

The music of Birtwistle has attracted international conductors including Stefan Asbury, David Atherton, Pierre Boulez, Daniel Barenboim, Martyn Brabbins, Christoph von Dohnányi, Peter Eötvös,

Daniel Harding, Elgar Howarth, Vladimir Jurowski, Oliver Knussen, Ingo Metzmacher, Sir Antonio Pappano, Sir Simon Rattle, David Robertson, Robin Ticciati, Franz Welser-Möst and Ryan Wigglesworth. He has received commissions from leading performing organisations and his music has been featured in major festivals and concert series including the BBC Proms, Salzburg, Glyndebourne, Holland and Lucerne Festivals, Stockholm New Music, Wien Modern, Wittener Tage, and the South Bank and Barbican Centres.

Birtwistle has received many honours and prizes, including the Grawemeyer Award in 1986 and the Siemens Prize in 1995; he was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1986, awarded a British knighthood in 1988 and made a Companion of Honour in 2001. In 2013, he was asked to judge the Toru Takemitsu Composition Award and later in 2015, he received the Wihuri Sibelius prize for music and a BASCA Award for *Responses: Sweet disorder and the carefully careless*. He was Henry Purcell Professor of Music at King's College, University of London (1994-2002) and is currently Visiting Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Recordings have been released on the Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Teldec, Signum, NMC, CPO, Metronome and ECM labels.

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