
Harrison Birtwistle

Selected Reviews

Keyboard Engine **Carnegie Hall (October 2018)**

"Now 84, Birtwistle has composed only a handful of piano works, most notably the brilliant *The Axe Manual* for piano and percussion and the five-movement *Harrison's Clocks*. Both of those demonstrate the composer's interest in musical machines, a curiosity on show again in his latest work, *Keyboard Engine, A Construction for Two Pianos*. A fiendish 24-minute puzzle box where the gaps seem as crucial as the notes that fall between them, the piece forces the musicians to rely on an osmotic sense of the music's inner pulse plus the occasional spasmodic bodily twitch.

As the work builds momentum, driving stereophonic rhythms ricochet across the divide... Aimard and Stefanovich chattered away, the sense of finishing each other's sentences palpable at times. Despite the hectic activity, fleeting contrapuntal melodies emerge to be tossed back and forth, while lingering harmonic clusters give root to the endless whirlwind motor rhythms. On a single hearing, *Keyboard Engine* is a tough nut to crack, but though it took a while to sense the method in Birtwistle's madness, the work gradually grew in clarity like a puzzle slowly being solved, before enigmatically disappearing just when you thought you had it in your mental grasp." – **Clive Paget, *Musical America***

Donum Simoni MMXVIII **London Symphony Orchestra (September 2018)**

"Harrison Birtwistle provided the three-minute curtain-raiser, Donum Simoni MMXVIII – Simon's Gift. A heavyweight among fanfares, it set us up for an evening of searing playing from the brass in particular, trumpets glowing up high, tuba chattering down low, wind and drums and bells joining in to make a great snarling rumble. The last word goes to the lone tuba, a deadpan sign-off adding a touch of humour." – **Erica Jeal, *The Guardian* ******

"In a show of gratitude, the Barbican Centre and LSO jointly commissioned a "Simon's Gift" thank-you present from Harrison Birtwistle to open this concert. Donum Simoni MMXVIII is a grand title for a short fanfare... like all self-respecting fanfares, it begins in the brass – though in their growling lowest range – and percussion and woodwind join to build powerfully before the music quickly burns itself out again, settling back in the low brass." – **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* ******

"Birtwistle's new fanfare achieves a lot in just three minutes, and it's a handsome gift to Sir Simon Rattle" – **Richard Bratby, *The Spectator***

Keyboard Engine **Snape Maltings (June 2018)**

"The brand new work was the 'construction for two pianos' Keyboard Engine, commissioned by the festival for Aimard and Stefanovich, and a fierce challenge to their astonishing virtuosity. Lasting 25 minutes, it's a typical Birtwistle sequence of musical clockworks. It is sometimes shared between the pianos, which run at cross purposes or generate explosive climaxes, and every so often stutter to a halt, only to take off again in a totally different direction." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* ******

"Spikey, angular, intense, strident and complex, it was quintessential Birtwistle brutality." – **Richard Morrison, *The Times* ******

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***Three Songs from the Holy Forest* Snape Maltings (June 2018)**

"Dear Dusty Moth, the centerpiece of *Three Songs from the Holy Forest*, was one of the Birtwistle novelties at Aldeburgh last year. These settings of Robin Blaser's poems explore the same fragile, disintegrating world as Birtwistle's *Moth Requiem* in 2012, with the soprano... accompanied by a chamber ensemble in which a solo flute plays the prominent role, echoing the voice's halting phrases as the text disintegrates in the final song." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* *******

"Wispy and enigmatic... Birtwistle's *Three Songs from the Holy Forest* continued his fascination with moths, via the poetry of Robin Blaser. With Oliver Knussen conducting a small ensemble that rarely rose over a sepulchral whisper, the effect was akin to eavesdropping on a secret ritual." – **Richard Morrison, *The Times* *******

***Earth Dances* BBC Symphony Orchestra (October 2017)**

"To judge from those swaying legs and curving arms, Martyn Brabbins might have been conducting something by Johann Strauss, but appearances were deceptive. The enormous score before him was actually Harrison Birtwistle's *Earth Dances*, and the music never came near a waltz.

Written in the mid-1980s, this half-hour orchestral monolith has always stood as a jagged peak of Birtwistle's combative art. Yet its horizontal layers of textures and rhythms, constantly shifting under us like tectonic plates, could rarely have appeared as cogent, tense and exciting as they did in this superlative account.

Through all the growling and tumult, from long-breathing brass to slashing percussion, the BBC Symphony Orchestra's musicians pitched the notes with tremendous panache, guided and stirred by Brabbins's lusty precision and genius for moulding the most intransigent sounds into music that throbs and sings. Never one to milk applause, the composer had to be yanked from the audience by Brabbins to come on to the platform and face our cheers." – **Geoff Brown, *The Times* *******

***Deep Time* Dresden Staatskapelle at BBC Proms (July 2017)**

"It's an immensely powerful, sometimes breathtakingly beautiful work, one of Birtwistle's finest orchestral achievements, and already played with astonishing assurance by Barenboim and his orchestra." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* *******

"In a culture dominated, as ours is, by youth, technology and pop, it was rather marvellous to be put under the spell of minds remote from all that. Certainly, the mind of Birtwistle is about as independent of fashion, unbiddable and unbudgeable, as a creative spirit can ever have been. His new orchestral essay — a 25-minute movement, rumbling, pulsing and convulsing, constantly revising and renewing itself, inspired by ideas of vast timespan and cataclysmic geology, and happily switching between faintness, lyrical intimation and frenzy — could only be by him. He is a walking definition of originality, and relevant comparisons are to be made only with his own pieces." – **Paul Driver, *The Sunday Times***

"The work was inspired by the vast slowness of geological time, and the way this slowness is occasionally riven by sudden catastrophes and slippages. The piece itself revealed a more human scale, with a melancholy cor anglais solo arousing

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memories of Birtwistle's earlier processions, and moments of pulsating energy in marimbas and plucked cellos. It was grandly impressive, in an inscrutable sort of way." – **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* *******

"Birtwistle's fingerprints are all over this new work — the fascination with layers of time, the growling echoes of the distant past, the rhythmic tread of passing years, each as distinctive as ever." – **Richard Fairman, *The Financial Times* *******

"The concert began with the UK premiere of Harrison Birtwistle's *Deep Time*, which uses a big canvas (from filigree strings to subterranean tubas and contra-bassoons) powerfully to evoke the layering over billions of years of geological strata." – **Barry Millington, *Evening Standard* *******

The Last Supper

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (January 2017)

"The *Last Supper* was designed as a millennial work. Convened by Ghost (Susan Bickley), Jesus and his disciples survey some of the miseries visited upon the world since their last meeting in Jerusalem. References to looking through "the three zeros of the year 2000" sounded awkward at the time, as did the hurried apologies to "Jews, blacks, Aborigines, women, gypsies [and] homosexuals", but Birtwistle's music has worn well. Its heft and humour spring from the page in sharp flecks of pizzicato strings, sinister tattoos from the side drum, coppery, cimbalom-like chords and thick knots of sound from double basses, low woodwind and accordion. The choral writing (sung by the BBC Singers) is superb." – **Anna Picard, *The Times* *******

"When *The Last Supper* was new, in a pre-9/11 world, some of its concerns felt outmoded. How wrong we were. Now it has proved its enduring pertinence." – **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer***

"Birtwistle's music feels tremendously lyrical, even opulent 17 years after the opera's premiere. It's quite often blunt and uncompromising, but the Latin choral motets that accompany Christ's three visions summon remarkable poise and focus in his choral writing, and his lengthy foot-washing scene, in which Christ humbles himself before each of his disciples in turn, has an astonishing sense of pathos even amid its wailing orchestration that's only increased by its inexorable repetitions." – **David Kettle, *The Arts Desk* *******

"Birtwistle's ritualistic writing is marvellous, layer upon layer of skewed time and perspective underpinned by a grim, grand pace unfolding from the bottom of orchestra. The sound palette is dense and dark and strange with contrabass clarinet, tolling timpani and no violins, and Birtwistle fills the surface with sudden swooshes of dynamism and odd colours. A sombre accordion accompanies the recitatives; a hi-hat whispers a sleazy riff straight out of a noir flick." – **Kate Molleson, *The Guardian* *******

"So it was largely left to Birtwistle's score to make the point, which in its own strange way was a hugely satisfying outcome. His music has a universal quality: literally, in the way it encompasses myriad references, from ancient exoticism to reinvented medievalism to out-and-out modernism; spiritually, in the pungent colourings that illuminate the largely linear narrative of the main characters." – **Ken Walton, *The Scotsman* *******

Five Lessons in a Frame – World Premiere

London Sinfonietta, St John Smith Square (June 2016)

"A few weeks shy of 82, Harrison Birtwistle still dominates the contemporary music scene... Birtwistle's *Five Lessons in a Frame* refashions five instrumental duets as a single piece, with the "frame" being the ensemble music that surrounds, connects

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and muses upon the virtuosic pairings. Each duo steps out of the band to deliver its limelight moment, while a centrally placed side-drummer is the ringmaster — summoning, exhorting or dismissing each segment with peremptory taps or melodramatic rolls.

So the piece has affinities with those classic Birtwistle masterpieces where an instrumental ensemble seems to enact a visual ritual or drama to which only the composer has the script. *Five Lessons*, however, is different in mood: mellow, reflective and distinctly elegiac at the end, where the music — like life itself — seems to fragment into whispers then silence. Very haunting." — **Richard Morrison, *The Times* ******

"Harrison Birtwistle, 82 this year and now the undisputed grand old man of British contemporary music, is enjoying an Indian summer, the new pieces coming with amazingly frequency. The latest was placed shrewdly at the end of last night's concert from the Sinfonietta, to keep us all in a state of anticipation... Birtwistle's new piece *Five Lessons in a Frame* had neither brilliance nor sheen, but that was precisely its strength. It was a reminder that Birtwistle has now arrived at the serene "classical" phase of his career. Ideas from his past are coming back in a spirit of tranquillity, rather than their original angry assertiveness. Here the idea was of a formal ritual, pairs of players coming forward to ruminate in dialogue with each other. The other 11 players at first provided discreet musical frames for these, but this straightforward pattern soon became blurred in fascinating ways." — **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* ******

"The composer had written duets for some of the Sinfonietta players, long-term collaborators, for his own 80th birthday concert. Now those duets have been set in a musical "frame" that unites them. Each pair of players (except the less mobile cello and double bass) move forward for their solos: clarinet and trumpet, horn and trombone, violin and viola and so on. The spatial impact is startling, as if these minimal resources — 13 players including only one percussion instrument, the side drum — are expanding to the limits of character and sound. In an evening of new music, this was true freshness." — **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer* ******

"*Five Lessons in a Frame* — the title recycled from a Birtwistle score of the 1960s — grew out of a series of duets he has been writing for the Sinfonietta's principals. The new piece provides a setting for the sequence of miniatures, but being Birtwistle, it's not all as straightforwardly formulaic as that. There are actually six "lessons" (two of the duets coincide) while the chorale-like material of the frame constantly changes on its reappearances between them, becoming ever more extended and elaborate. A snare drum at the centre of the ensemble acts like a master of ceremonies, prompting each pair of instrumentalists to begin and end their lessons, sometimes punctuating them as well. It's not a major work, but the result is another of Birtwistle's instrumental rituals, which operates according to its own mysterious set of rules." — **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* ******

***The Silk House Sequences* - World Premiere Arditti Quartet, Wigmore Hall (November 2015)**

"...the main interest was the premiere of Harrison Birtwistle's new piece, *The Silk House Sequences*. If the title suggests smooth elegance, opulence and languor, forget it. At 81, Birtwistle is writing music that's as bristling, rhythmically abrasive, dissonant, tightly knit and mysteriously dramatic as ever.

The quartet (named after his house in Wiltshire) comprises 19 sequences. All are distinct in character, with florid solo breaks for each instrument (the stratospheric cello solo is especially noteworthy), but unified by a sense of many layers of repeated motifs meshing, or not meshing, as they whirl along their frenetic routes. Then there are moments of high drama when all four instruments come together to create what are in effect aural exclamation marks. Not easy listening, but exciting — and brilliantly delivered by the indefatigable Ardittis." — **Richard Morrison, *The Times* ******

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"Birtwistle's 25-minute single movement returns to one of his long-established principles, that of meshing and layered musical clockworks (the sequences of the title) that generate a large-scale form of tremendous energy. The layers sometimes resolve into melody and accompaniment, and sometimes break off for moments of intense solo lyricism before the giant mechanism comes to an almost arbitrary halt." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* *******

"...the world premiere of Harrison Birtwistle's latest string quartet, a piece that thrills in thwarting expectations. Despite its title, *The Silk House Sequences*, which refers to Birtwistle's home in Wiltshire, south-west England, this is not a paean to the British countryside. Nor does it follow the example of Birtwistle's previous quartet, *The Tree of Strings*, which unfurled through a series of seamless steps. Instead, this 30-minute work lurches between furious outbursts and stillness, between lyricism and mechanical gestures, often reveling in conflicting rhythmic patterns. It all adds up to an intricate mass of ideas, yet one that fits together as snugly as a jigsaw." – **Hannah Nepil, *The Financial Times***

***Panic, Antiphonies, Slow Frieze, Crowd* Hodges / Weiss / Schreiber (MET CD 1079)**

"...with Marcus Weiss on saxophone [*Panic*] this WDR recording... matches that raw, in-your-face vividness and explosive energy... Still, it is the recording of *Antiphonies*... which provides the biggest revelation here. The score was revised in 2005 and that is the version Nicolas Hodges plays here, the revision making it more structurally convincing, and intensely, involvingly dramatic than I've ever heard it before, turning the climactic manic section – a Boulez-like toccata – into a virtuoso tour de force.

The two smaller-scale pieces on the disc are welcome firsts, too. *Slow Frieze*... a series of episodes for piano and ensemble, in which the two protagonists seem to inhabit entirely separate musical worlds, moving in parallel and only rarely reinforcing each other in a slow, intensely beautiful processional.

Crowd... is a haunting, timeless piece, full of stark attacks and lingering resonances, which manages to sweep away all the harp's usual associations with rippling, watery affects." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* *******

"The three works on this disc (...) are no less formidable in their technical and expressive assurance. (...) the music in this spellbinding performance still comes across as a celebratory lament." – **Arnold Whittall, *Gramophone***

***Birtwistle Songs 1970 – 2006 (TOCC 0281)* Das Neue Ensemble (December 2015)**

"This attractive selection of Harrison Birtwistle's shorter vocal and instrumental pieces highlights the special lyric eloquence and dramatic intensity of his smaller-scale compositions, sustained for more than 30 years. Linked to an 80th birthday event in Germany, and with a revealing interview thrown in, it's the ideal introduction to a modern British master." – **Arnold Whittall, *Gramophone Magazine***

***Angel Fighter, In Broken Images, Virelai* BBC Singers & London Sinfonietta (NMC D211)**

"Birtwistle unleashes all his powers as a stage composer [*Angel Fighter*] onto Stephen Plaice's text, using the whole building to create a thrilling dramatisation of the Bible story, with the life-and-death struggle of the Angel and Jacob at its heart. [...] It's enthralling stuff, as is the moment when radiant trumpets call the Angel back. [...] Four clear orchestral sections [*In Broken*

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Images] (as in Gabrieli's multi-choir canzonas), including percussion, spar against each other in a complex play of collision, fragmentation and integration. The London Sinfonietta under David Atherton, lend it both soul and zinging edge. Birtwistle's vivid orchestration of a medieval Virelai is an inspired sign-off". – **Helen Wallace, BBC Music Magazine *******

***The Cure & The Corridor* Aldeburgh Festival, Linbury Theatre (June 2015)**

"Harrison Birtwistle and his librettist David Harsent have composed an operatic double bill that, in its very different way, reveals just as much of humanity's most basic fears and passions... All this is cloaked by Birtwistle in a coruscating, twisty score of intense and at times almost ecstatic sounds. At 80 he clearly has no need of Medea's rejuvenating potions." – **Richard Morrison, The Times *******

"Mr. Birtwistle's music has its characteristic ancient yet modern, familiar yet novel quality. "The Corridor" is frenetic, vehement with a harsh edge. Smooth, almost seductive moments surprise in "The Cure," but when Medea is weaving her spells, mellifluous gives way to a ritualistic, mechanical savagery, unnatural and feral... Mr. Birtwistle's musical sense and Mr. Harsent's abilities as a poet need little assistance. They have written musical theater of the highest quality — and still, in its own way, more than radical." – **David Allen, The New York Times**

"Birtwistle's music looks at the tale as dry-eyed as ever. There is no softness or sentiment, only cold analysis and hardened emotion. The music confronts time and death on their own terms, implacable, merciless, its hard-edged detail chiselled with impeccable playing by the six musicians from the London Sinfonietta, conducted by Geoffrey Paterson." – **Richard Fairman, The Financial Times *******

"As always with this composer, the vocal lines are alternately lyrical and jagged, while the instrumental writing – at moments reminiscent of Japanese gagaku – is ornate and intricate, with the harp performing a percussive function." – **Michael Church, The Independent**

"Birtwistle's score contains some arresting inventions, such as the viola's lengthy excursion in triplets as Medea signs of the changing moon (itself a vivid contributor to the *mise en scène*). – **Paul Driver, The Sunday Times**

"*The Cure*, more mellifluous in mood, takes the story of Jason and his ailing father, Aeson. The witch Medea gives Aeson a rejuvenating potion, with terrible consequences. It makes a powerful case against eternal youth if one were needed... Birtwistle's score, melancholy, vivid, exquisitely lyrical, marks yet another advance in his distinctive compositional process. His fingerprints are all over it of course, but somehow he has discovered yet new ways to make music theatre on this intimate scale." – **Fiona Maddocks, The Observer *******

"The most exciting moment of the week was the première of Harrison Birtwistle's chamber work, *The Cure*, at Aldeburgh. Finally here was something with a bit of guts, a bit of life." – **Igor Toronyi-Lalic, The Spectator**

"Birtwistle's instrumental writing is spare and keenly vivid." – **Andrew Clements, Opera Magazine**

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Wild Tracks

Fiona Maddocks

"*Wild Tracks* is the most entertaining book on the subject of music I have ever read, which I did straight through in two or three sittings, and is almost impossible *not* to do, because it is so gripping. Structured like a thriller, it has a couple of mysteries at its heart.

Fiona Maddocks has constructed this volume so artfully that it often gives as much pleasure as reading a novel. Not necessarily a novel about music or composers – it's not Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, though Harry has his Leverkühn moments. With its purposeful diversions and digressions, its interjected conversations with Harry's enchanting family, friends and colleagues, with its whiffs of gossip (usually substantial enough to count as history), its attention to food, wine and the visual aspects of houses, gardens and interiors as well as pictures, *Wild Tracks* is, I think, a small, genuine masterpiece. To me it recalls my favourite "novel," Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. A wonderful subject for Harry's next opera. Maybe he needs a librettist." – **Paul Levy, Arts Journal**

In Broken Images – Music of Harrison Birtwistle **Southbank Centre (December 2014)**

"Beautifully wrapped and meticulously presented, there can have been few finer gifts for Harrison Birtwistle at the end of his 80th-birthday year than Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (in its austere original 1920 version), Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques* (played to thrilling perfection by Pierre-Laurent Aimard) and Stravinsky's *Orpheus* (under Vladimir Jurowski's super-cool direction).

But at the heart of the London Philharmonic's revelatory and brilliantly executed programme was Birtwistle's own gift to Aimard and his audience: the UK premiere of his 25-minute *Responses: Sweet disorder and the carefully careless*, for piano and orchestra.

The title of this overwhelming and uplifting piano concerto really says it all. This is a work of micro-precision and macro-energy, the outworkings of an intellect and a vast orchestra on the boil — and both at the top of their form. The score quivers with minute subdivisions of time and space, and intensely marked dynamics. Ear, mind and fingers are given a nonstop workout, as material fractures, explodes, collides and responds, sweet flute fragments blown on the wind, brass and multiple percussion soloists luring and leering.

And under it all, that deep, dark sense of the earth itself breathing. Those moments of withdrawal, inbreath and wonder, so typical of Birtwistle, here become more frequent, more deeply felt. They counterbalance the composer's addiction to "hocketing", that medieval contrapuntal device by which sound and silence hiccup, in stop-go, staggered sequences of self-igniting energy. In this respect, Birtwistle's new piece is influenced by his 2008 *In Broken Images*, a plethora of fragmented musical events played superbly the day before in the London Sinfonietta's celebration of the composer in the Queen Elizabeth Hall — the opening night of the Southbank's Birtwistle festival.

This concert, bristling with energy, ended with both David Atherton and Geoffrey Paterson conducting *Theseus Game* and began with the world premiere of two new little *Duets*. Numbers three and four in Birtwistle's continuing series were, respectively, *Violute*, an elfin flute teasing and taunting a violin; and *Echo*, horn and trombone, standing far apart, catching each other's resonances in a testing interplay of time and timbre." – **Hilary Finch, The Times *******

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"In Broken Images (2008), taking its title from a Robert Graves poem and expertly conducted by Geoffrey Paterson, offers a sort of Birtwistle Guide to the Orchestra, or at least the large ensemble so beloved of contemporary composers (doubtless stimulated by the pervasiveness of the Sinfonietta). The four sections — string, wind, brass and percussion — are clearly disposed on stage, and their exchanges are dramatic.

The tempering of modernist constructivism with personal idiosyncrasy seems to be at issue here. The composer must not be "too precise in every part", a frequent failing of the post-Schoenbergian serial music on which Birtwistle cut his teeth. But his own imagination has never subordinated itself to mathematics, and certainly doesn't in this turbulent, scherzo-like, brilliantly multilayered score (a melodic thread always on hand to lead us through the maze of invention). The performance, with the soloist Pierre-Laurent Aimard, was quite stunningly good — the soloist-and-tutti relationship, Birtwistle's abiding concern, went into a dazzling new dimension." – **Paul Driver, *Sunday Times***

"All this was the perfect context for the following night's UK premiere of Birtwistle's new piano concerto, *Responses: Sweet*

Disorder and the Carefully Careless... There are hints of mischief – wah-wah trumpets in a jaunty fast episode, for example – but it's a serious piece. And yet it wears its dense textures lightly, and the piano always has the space to be heard as it questions the orchestra." – **Erica Jeal, *The Guardian* *******

"From the first scintillating rattle of tambourine, crasher and castanet machine, into which the piano bursts with a swift flourish, to the final, hushed violin harmonics, shape and intention are clear. Apparently similar patterns change minutely, invented afresh with each appearance. Muted brass, wah-wahing distinctively, offsets long woodwind lines. Aural timbres are spare rather than lush, taut but lyrical.

In the penultimate bar, tubular bells are struck for the first time, creating (with vibraphone and crotales) an unearthly metallic chime to end the work. The piano's final notes sound only when all else has died away, a nonchalant upbeat, as if opening a door to a new adventure." – **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer***

"Aimard brought out the variation-style repetitions with commanding clarity, while Vladimir Jurowski and the London Philharmonic provided the requisite accompanying virtuosity." – **Michael Church, *The Independent* *******

"Indeed the defining characteristic of Sir Harrison's music is its difficulty.... To write pieces that more people could understand with little or no effort would mean losing exactly what makes the music exciting. For the music to be meaningful, it is up to the audience to put in the effort. If the enthusiasm at Friday night's concert is anything to go by, the reward certainly justifies that effort." – ***The Economist***

Responses – World Premiere Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks (October 2014)

"The focal point of the Musica-Viva concert at the Herkulesaal of the Residenz was the new piano concerto by Harrison Birtwistle. There is no long introduction in which the protagonists – piano and orchestra – introduce themselves then gradually move towards each other in classical manner. Birtwistle sees the 'together and against each other' of piano and orchestra as a permanent dialogue: the piano asks very audibly the questions, the orchestra gives the answers. This is why, according to Birtwistle the main title is 'Responses'. He made sure that the piano is always audible, not only during the wonderfully well balanced and transparent chamber music-like sections, but also in the forceful, solid blocks of sound, which seem to almost burst with vigour...." – **Gerhard Rohde, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung***

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"The musical interaction of piano and orchestra has, for good reason, always been an endeavor requiring compromise. Birtwistle accepts this problem and transfigures it into a great and powerful mystery." – **Reinhard Brembeck, *Süddeutsche Zeitung***

Exody

Royal Albert Hall, BBC Proms (September 2014)

"The next piece, Birtwistle's Exody, was surely placed there to jolt us out of our reverie. Written to mark the turning of the millennium, the piece is a giant processional, gathering lots of energies and leading them to the moment when everything changes. You might imagine that process as a big crescendo, but what Birtwistle gives us is something much more subtle, which builds and subsides in waves and keeps turning back on itself." – **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* *******

"...the half-hour journey is a tough one, though full of wonderful sounds – shimmering, high-lying string chords; long, unison wind lines that unravel into a dozen parts or evaporate in flurries of decoration..." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* *******

Birtwistle Proms Portrait Concert

Cadogan Hall (September 2014)

"The program, which was conducted by composer Oliver Knussen and featured the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, was an excellent example of what makes Birtwistle remarkable." – **Mark Swed, *Los Angeles Times***

Three Settings of Lorine Niedecker

ECM Recording 476 5050 (August 2014)

"That such a group of renowned musicians should have come together to record this music says much for the esteem in which the composer is held in his 80th year, and it is hard to imagine these accounts being bettered any time soon." – **Richard Whitehouse, *International Record Review***

Parade's End

Cadogan Hall, Proms Matinee (August 2014)

"...a brilliantly arresting piece that pits a physically demanding solo part against an orchestra of strings and vibraphone – the latter functioning as the trumpet's echo and alter ego, often picking up the soloist's notes to shadowy effect. A study in discontinuity, the piece resists normal musical impulses: the composer describes it as cubist in the way its lines intersect and escape, and it certainly has Picasso-like energy." – **John Allison, *The Telegraph***

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Night's Black Bird

Royal Albert Hall, BBC Proms (August 2014)

"As delivered by Juanjo Mena and the BBC Philharmonic in Prom 18, Harrison Birtwistle's *Night's Black Bird* - now ten years old - retained all its intriguing power." – **Michael Church, *The Independent* ******

"*Night's Black Bird* is the first of seven works by Harrison Birtwistle coming up at the Proms in the composer's 80th birthday year, and it's a dark-hued, opaque gem. Inspired by a lute song by the arch-melancholic English Renaissance composer John Dowland, and written in 2004, it is a pungent depiction of night in which the comforting, enveloping aspects of darkness are somehow evoked in the same sinking, sliding music as its potential terror.

Much of it involves the kind of low, textured sounds whose nuances should by rights get flattened in this huge space. But Birtwistle's layered writing sounded silky and vital here as played by the BBC Philharmonic under Juanjo Mena, and the woodwind pealed out their bird calls spikily, as though they were the only elements of this piece not half hidden." – **Erica Jeal, *The Guardian***

Birtwistle at 80, Barbican Centre (May 2014)

Gawain

BBC Symphony Orchestra

"Even in the shorter version, this retelling of the dark-ages story of Gawain and his journey from Arthur's court to fulfil the challenge of the mysterious green knight is a formidable work to experience – musically often extraordinary, but sometimes hard to take dramatically. It's the most Wagnerian of all Birtwistle's scores, and even the story itself has Wagnerian resonances.

Gawain himself is a kind of Parsifal figure; the two women, Morgan le Fay and the Lady de Hautdesert, recall Kundry; while the Green Knight and his alter ego Bertilak are some ways like the Ring characters of Hagen and Hunding, respectively. The orchestra is huge – there are three tubas, a vast percussion section and a cimbalom adding a special tang to the sound world, by turns darkly forbidding and gleamingly sensuous – and the sense of epic unfolding is hard to mistake." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* *****

"Heroically intense and committed though it was on the musical level." – **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* ******

"A stunning account of *Gawain* (1991) won a standing ovation for the composer, as well as for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the conductor Martyn Brabbins and an exemplary cast led by John Tomlinson, Leigh Melrose, Laura Alkin and Jennifer Johnston." – **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer* *******

"This was an outstanding musical performance... So thick and rich and male and meaty is Birtwistle's orchestral writing that the listener gulps for air. Cimbalom and tuned percussion clatter like bones in a fast boiling stew of tubas, euphonium, contrabass clarinet and contrabassoon, a gritty scurf of strings and piccolos above them. Riddles and Latin motets twist and turn in eloquent, glamorous shrieks, yawns, groans and shivers for choir (the BBC Singers) and solo voices." – **Anna Picard, *The Times* *******

"Musically, *Gawain* arguably represents Birtwistle at his most monumental, with a score that can knock us flat when the brass are at their most climactic, or the harp and cimbalom sounds reverberate around the hall." – **Sam Smith, *MusicOMH* ******

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"The tension is constant, ulcer inducing – you long for a shard of light to pierce through the cloud, but there are only occasional waves of bigger, louder tension." – **Kimon Daltas, *The Arts Desk***

"This was a monumental evening for a work that deserves notice." – **Simon Thomas, *WhatsOnStage* *****

"The Barbican performance provided a new, thrilling encounter with a big, important opera of our day...The BBC SO was alert to the colours, intricacies, power and delicacies of the astonishingly rich and utterly personal score... [an] engrossing and unforgettable evening." – **Andrew Porter, *Opera Magazine***

Earth Dances **London Symphony Orchestra**

"The London Symphony Orchestra played Birtwistle's epic-sized *Earth Dances* (1986). Conducted with mesmerising authority by Daniel Harding, the LSO was on fire. I could not take my ears off the orchestra." – **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer* *******

"At an unbroken 35 minutes, *Earth Dances* forms a formidable single span of music. Rising out of the deepest sounds of the orchestra, its dances rarely feel as if they have shaken off their roots in the earth. The work clearly takes the brooding atmosphere of a pagan rite from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and from Ravel's *La Valse* comes its overall shape, where dances move in and out of a haze. But the sound of Birtwistle – the screeching high wind, the heavy brass chords chained to the ground – is entirely his own, and it is his ability to create a sound-world and not let go that makes him also a redoubtable composer of opera." – **Richard Fairman, *The Financial Times* ******

"This was the second concert in the Barbican's splendid 80th-birthday celebration of Birtwistle, and the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Daniel Harding, began it with a meticulously prepared, authoritative and, indeed, exuberant

performance of a work which is one of the most stimulating and exacting concertos for orchestra ever written. The geological language comes irresistibly to mind simply because the music really does mirror the Earth's own creative processes: evolving with its red-hot rhythmic, melodic and harmonic elements in a constant state of flux as one "dance" overlays the other, colliding and re-forming in a complex rite of spring.

The LSO's percussion section, two bass tubas and chanting woodwinds snapped and shuddered within the mighty surges of strings. And they fluttered from darkness into searing light with such energy that the music hit its audience in the viscera. Our own inner rhythms of pulse and breath seemed at times to be charged up with those of the music." – **Hilary Finch, *The Times* ******

"Harrison Birtwistle's *Earth Dances* is one of the big symphonic landmarks of the late twentieth century." – **Michael Church, *The Independent* *****

"The concentration then response of those present suggested that *Earth Dances* is still well able to leave its mark." – **Richard Whitehouse, *Classical Source***

Birmingham Contemporary Music Group

"Knussen's performance showed that *Tragoedia* still seems as confrontational now as it must have done at its premiere in 1965,

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its aggression barely confined within a formal scheme derived from classical tragedy, with cello, horn and harp as the three solo protagonists, and the other instruments acting as a chorus.

It paved the way for Birtwistle's first opera *Punch and Judy* and launched over a decade of major works, right up to the 1977 ensemble piece *Silbury Air*. That was there too, at the end of the programme; it's still one of Birtwistle's greatest achievements, and Knussen and BCMG delivered it with an edge-of-the-seat sense of mystery and drama." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian*** *****

"At Birmingham Contemporary Music Group's Sunday-night tribute concert one could sense mingled feelings of surprise, awe and affection in the packed audience. Surprise, that age should have the temerity to turn our leading avant-gardiste into a white-haired, benign figure, receiving our applause. Awe and affection at the sheer magnitude of his achievement, of which this shrewdly planned and beautifully performed concert gave us a birds-eye view." – **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph*** *****

Yan Tan Tethera **Britten Sinfonia**

"The beguiling whimsy of this piece, as with much of Birtwistle's music, seems to present less of a challenge to performers and audiences alike as the years progress... There is not a wasted note in the score, whose constantly churning sounds are by turns rich and delicate." – **John Allison, *The Telegraph*** *****

"Our hero Alan may have been incarcerated under the great hill for seven years; but I realised that I had been made to suffer over three times as long before being able to hear this glittering score again." – **Nick Breckenfield, *Classical Source***

"It certainly allowed all the beauties of Birtwistle's glistening, mysterious score, with its constantly shifting "music of the hill" underpinning everything, to be appreciated in all its detail under Baldur Brönnimann." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian*** *****

Fields of Sorrow **Britten Sinfonia**

"The connection with Holst was a direct one here: his *Fields of Sorrow*, the last of a group of Canons for unaccompanied voices, sets the same Ausonius text that Birtwistle used for his work of the same name nearly 40 years later. The layers of Birtwistle's magical, interlocking network of musical mobiles – with its choirs of woodwind, chiming pianos and percussion, as well as a solo horn, underpinning the choir and its antiphonal solo sopranos – were all balanced with great care by Brönnimann." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian*** *****

Down by the Greenwood Side **Brighton Festival (May 2014)**

"The power of *Greenwood Side* is that it reaches into the misty roots of English folklore for its archetypal characters and plot, but evokes a dysfunctional, irrational and violent underworld that feels horribly modern — or rather, perennially lurking in every era. Birtwistle's score, pungently brought to life here under Christopher Stark's assured direction, is much the same: the

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instruments are those named in the *Cornish Floral Dance*, but the harsh, haunting sounds they produce suggest the very 20th-century anguish of industrial decline, social disintegration and personal psychosis. A grim but gripping show; shame there are no more performances." – **Richard Morrison, *The Times* ******

"Others will be mesmerized by the fierce clarity of the sonorities, conveyed through an ensemble modeled on the Cornish Floral Dance's "cornet, clarinet, and big trombone/ Fiddle, cello, big bass drum/Bassoon, flute and euphonium". The virtuosic writing for clarinet, Birtwistle's own first study at conservatoire, is particularly impressive." – **Rupert Christiansen, *The Telegraph* *****

"With its aggressive unpredictability and rough-theatre manners, Birtwistle's "dramatic pastoral" is redolent of its period, but it also exemplifies the composer's preoccupation with myths and folk tales." – **George Hall, *The Guardian* ******

***Moth Requiem*, Nash Ensemble Wigmore Hall (March 2014)**

"In the Fantasia, a harp mediates between a string quartet and a woodwind duo with something of the suavity of Ravel's Introduction and Allegro, that Nash staple for which Birtwistle was commissioned to provide a match. In *The Moth Requiem*, the busy harps evoke the fluttering of moth wings through murk, a density conjured up by the unrelievedly clustery choral texture, for all that Birtwistle's distinctive, "pinging" writing for female voices can elsewhere seem luminous. It is an arresting essay." – **Paul Driver, *The Sunday Times***

"Birtwistle is one of the UK's greatest composers (if not the greatest). It is a lovely idea, and masterfully realised. Birtwistle's years of experience enabled him to weave an intoxicating sonic tapestry. The fragmenting of texture and musical material in the work's final stages is impeccably timed. This is nothing short of a masterpiece." – **Colin Clarke, *Opera Today***

"Here is a sound-world that seems to stretch back centuries. What Birtwistle has fashioned is a miniature mausoleum, crafted in cool, granite slabs and echoing to the lament of the high priestesses of the species." – **Richard Fairman, *Financial Times***

"Birtwistle's blistering score here comes vividly across especially when all concerned throw themselves into it so wholeheartedly." – **Guy Weatherall, *Classical Music***

***Moth Requiem* Signum Classics, SIGCD368 (April 2014)**

"This is real choral music, stretching the bounds of the medium [...] This is luxury casting, though the performance is one of stunning virtuosity from all concerned [...] The remarkable opening of his Requiem, where the imprisoned moth is conjured up with extraordinary vividness, and its ending pensive yet imposing. I was hooked from start to finish. We expect virtuosity from the BBC Singers, but this performance leaves one gaping in admiration [...] Enthralling music." – **William Hedley, *International Record Review***

"I doubt whether anything the year brings for Birtwistle's 80th birthday is going to dim the lustre of this excellent recording of his choral music. As with other movers and shakers, he is his own man, whose sound and voice we immediately catch, recognisable from any two notes he puts together [...] The *Moth Requiem* is an extraordinary leap of imagination. No one could fail to catch the quality of the composition as one of the most personal of Birtwistle's recent scores. Terrific stuff, with already the feel of a classic." – **Stephen Plaistow, *Gramophone Magazine***

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"This is a wonderful and important release of his powerful and often delicate works. 'On the Sheer Threshold of the Night' is direct, poignant and exquisite [...] This disc is the most fitting tribute imaginable to Birtwistle on his 80th birthday." - **Michael Tanner, BBC Music Magazine ******

"Recorded after a memorable Proms premiere last year, The Moth Requiem is one of Birtwistle's most austere beautiful works.

Scored for women's voices, three harps and alto flute, it movingly pairs Robin Blazer's poem triggered by a memory of the sounds made by a moth trapped under a piano lid with the hauntingly evocative Latin names of moths themselves. The Ring Dance of the Nazarene, featuring a standout contribution from Roderick Williams, is similarly striking, as are the performances and recording." - **Classical Music**

"The centrepiece of this outstanding disc of choral works by Harrison Birtwistle, all recorded for the first time, is one of the beautiful and most intensely personal of his recent scores. 'The Moth Requiem' was first performed in 2012, and brought to the UK and last summer's Proms. Its core is a setting for 12 female voices with an ensemble of alto flute and three harps, of a poem by Robin Blazer, librettist of Birtwistle's opera The Last Supper. The text takes a description of a moth trapped inside the lid of a piano at night as the starting point for a meditation on transience and loss; around it the singers sing the scientific names of a dozen species of British moth, some of them common, others teetering on the brink of extinction. The instruments weave in and out of the voices, sometimes evoking the noise of the insect bumping against the piano and its strings, sometimes taking off on flights of their own; the sound world is fragile and exquisite, the music spare and elegiac."

– **Andrew Clements, The Guardian *******

"This vital new collection of choral works offers a handsome snapshot of one of England's foremost living composers, Harrison Birtwistle, who will celebrate his 80th birthday in July. Mr. Birtwistle's characteristic melodic angularity and rhythmic complexity are duly represented in six pieces written between 1965 and 2012, including two strikingly evocative recent triumphs — the buoyantly mystic "Ring Dance of the Nazarene" and the shadowy, haunting "Moth Requiem" — with all of it sung supremely well." - **Steve Smith, New York Times**

" This [is a] stunning new release from Signum Classics. The textures conjured up by this seemingly insignificant memorialisation are as magical as anything in Birtwistle's recent music, combining wit, lyricism and subtle dynamism in equal measure." - **Europadisc**

"Birtwistle creates a multilayered ecstatic texture." - **Robert Hugill, Planet Hugill**

"The Moth Requiem is a Requiem to nature in peril and our own wider commemoration of loved ones lost. This poignant piece engages our full attention for its relatively brief running time." – **Adrian Edwards, Editor's choice, Gramophone Magazine**

Moth Requiem – UK Premiere Cadogan Hall, BBC Proms (August 2013)

"The disappearance of living things underlies the elegiac feel of the work, though, as Birtwistle suggested, there is anger in it, too. Blazer's text – The Moth Poem – recalls that the location of the source of a mysterious sound in his home was a moth trapped inside a piano. Strange and subtle effects from the accompanying instruments – played here by Lucy Wakeford, Helen Tunstall and Hugh Webb, alongside flautist Philippa Davies – give the result an enriched atmosphere, with the words dissolving in cloudy textures punctured by sudden, percussive stabs. The result is a fascinating addition to Birtwistle's oeuvre." – **George Hall, The Guardian *******

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Birtwistle hinted at the anger prompted by his own recent losses. His new piece certainly burned with anger at many points, the women's voices raised in protest over the thrumming sound of three harps and low flute. Held in precarious balance with anger was another atavistic response; to purge death through mourning and ritual. The ending, with its soft curtain of women's voices set against implacable plucked strings and blown pipe, was riveting. – **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* ******

"The complex word setting and luminous yet dense textures in as many as 12 "real" (ie undoubted) parts, links plausibly to medieval renaissance models, but the requiem is quintessential of Birtwistle. The three kinds of sonority are virtually his calling card, and he has rarely called on us so poignantly as here." – **Paul Driver, *The Sunday Times***

"It is considered, thoughtful, polished, a testament to deep passion, passion that has been turned over & over in the mind & honed in the process. It is this—passion—that emerges from the piece more than anything else, woven through the soaring vocal climaxes, the intricate lacework in the flute & harps, the dance-like episode at the centre, the overlapping bouts of chatter, & the gorgeously rich occasions when the singers coalesce onto radiantly shining chords." – **Simon Cummings, *5:4***

Gawain **Salzburg Festspiele (July 2013)**

"As played by Vienna's ORF Radio Symphony Orchestra under Ingo Metzmacher, Birtwistle's darkly rasping score came across with a richness and even sensuality that ought to have won it new friends. Its long, ritualistic tone is just one aspect that suggests Wagner's influence, and this Wagner anniversary year does perhaps justify *Gawain* as the right choice for Salzburg. Audiences previously unfamiliar with Birtwistle will recognise something in a composer less interested in individuals than in archetypes, who is always ready to send his characters on riddle-strewn journeys of self-discovery." – **John Allison, *The Telegraph***

"The score's impact was at once powerfully inexorable and endlessly fresh. This high-profile production confirmed that *Gawain* is assured a future life, whatever directors choose to do with it." – **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer***

"In its Romantic modernism, *Gawain* is perhaps the closest of the composer's opera to a continental sensibility, and certainly the most Wagnerian – hence it was also eminently suitable for the Wagner bicentenary... The biggest cheers, rightly, went to the conductor Ingo Metzmacher, who bound together Birtwistle's grand, growling score into a powerful package." – **Hugh Canning, *Opera Magazine***

Songs from the same earth **Aldeburgh Festival (June 2013)**

"Aldeburgh's loyalty to Birtwistle was reconfirmed in a commission for a major new song cycle, premiered at Snape Maltings. Birtwistle and his poet, David Harsent, have been creative soulmates ever since *Gawain*. Now they have produced *Songs from the Same Earth*, which creates a series of ten poignant vignettes expressing the pain of loss. In music of bleak melancholy, sound stutters out of silence, words rage and ricochet against the piano; both seem to be searching for a direction.

The poetry seems to describe a place and a time where body, mind and spirit pull apart: seems to, because the work's entire register is one of elusiveness, illusion, uncertainty. A face is glimpsed "in the mirror when the silvering slips ... your hands busy about your face, the memory fading fast . . ." Mark Padmore found luminous shades of grey in his eloquent tenor voice, while

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Andrew West, accompanying, provided a graphic cardiogram of response." – **Hilary Finch, *The Times***

"On first hearing, the Birtwistle and Harsent set doesn't suffer by comparison with the earlier masterpieces; on the contrary, it builds on both in various ways. The pair's common fascination with the melancholic snapshot, and the use of natural images to build complex narratives of longing and loss strikingly similar to Schumann and Heine's, is beautifully born out in Birtwistle's tightly controlled and stylistically cohesive material." – **Guy Damman, *The Guardian***

The Minotaur, Royal Opera House – Revival

"Five years on, a revival allows us to reconsider those first impressions. And as the overture's great surges of sound body forth the projection of sea-swell on the front-drop – with the percussion spilling into boxes on either side of the pit – one realises anew what an orchestral master Birtwistle is." – **Michael Church, *The Independent***

"One must respect and admire a composer of such integrity, so assured in his technique and so steadfast and confident in his imaginative journey... in the opera's last moments, as the dying Minotaur assumes a tragic dignity, Birtwistle proves that he can write powerfully and expressively for the human voice." – **Rupert Christianson, *Daily Telegraph***

"Harrison Birtwistle's opera *The Minotaur*, like the myth it is based on, reveals deeper truths on each re-hearing. When it was new in 2008 David Harsent's richly poetic libretto and Birtwistle's score already seemed a potent mix, but as this revival makes clear, closer acquaintances with its complexities rewards the listener." – **Barry Millington, *The Evening Standard***

"Birtwistle's score is characteristically abrasive, at times hitting home to devastating effect; yet elsewhere its hyper-tense lyricism is equally impressive." – **George Hall, *The Stage***

"The Minotaur's first revival, with all three main singers returning, confirms it as a work of extraordinary power." – **Erica Jeal, *The Guardian* *******

"Birtwistle's visceral piece has lost none of its immediacy since it first appeared at Covent Garden. In fact, although the shock value is as high in Stephen Langridge's skilful production, the relationships between its major characters seem more intense, and the opera's psychological message hits harder." – **Neil Fisher, *The Times***

"The inexorable pace of this monolithic score, in fact consisting of constant, bring threads of melody rising up from low woodwind to sinewy high strings, and splashed with every kind of sensuous percussion from temple blocks and bongos to harp and cimbalom, will crush you if you don't listen and overwhelm you in the best sense if you do." – **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer***

"The opera looks good and sounds overwhelming. Birtwistle's music moves at a slow, inexorable pace, piling up sounds that hang in the air, such as dark clouds of strings or the long, wailing cries of the woodwind, interrupted when drama calls by explosive percussion and drums played by musicians outside the pit." – **Richard Fairman, *Financial Times***

"When *The Minotaur* was first performed in 2008, it was the work's sheer dramatic power and faultless pacing that above all seemed so overwhelmingly impressive. This time around, in the Royal Opera's first revival of Stephen Langridge's spare, elegant production and without the outstanding trio of principals who created their roles five years ago, it was the sheer beauty of Birtwistle's music and the way it defines the visceral drama so precisely that regularly took the breath away. Ryan Wigglesworth, who had taken over when Antonio Pappano withdrew from the revival with tendonitis, teased out the score's long skeins of string lines, its fusillades of percussion and the extra tang provided by cimbalom and saxophone with the practiced assurance of a

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conductor who understands Birtwistle's sound world completely. As a piece of music theatre, too, the opera seemed as impressive an achievement as it did at the premiere." – **Andrew Clements, *Opera Magazine***

"Birtwistle's score, proving the composer a master of pacing both of drama and orchestral colour, and *The Minotaur* to be a 21st century opera classic deserving performances everywhere. It is a great night in the theatre. It is grand opera in the grandest sense of the word, very strong, very special, powerfully staged by director Stephen Langridge and designer Alison Chitty. Birtwistle writes from the heart, big structures, beautiful arched melodies. Dark, violent and intense like his early *Punch and Judy*, it is magnificently melancholy, forcing you to focus on the bestial side of human behaviour. The opening of Dowland's song

"*In Darkness Let Me Dwell*" subtly pervades the score, like the doom laden clang of the cimbalom. The music falls downwards whenever there is a descent, and in the most haunting of its orchestral Toccatas a twisting winding melody on strings evokes Theseus journeying with the ball of string down through the treacherous Labyrinth to kill the Minotaur. John Tomlinson has an unnerving ability to bring out the pathos and deep anguish of this poor 'half and half'. Seeing it from the Minotaur's point of view is a stroke of genius. Like the Minotaur himself, John Tomlinson's performance could well become legendary and is superbly captured on the ROH Opus Arte DVD, the World Premiere Recording, conducted by Antonio Pappano, a must for all who saw it or missed it." – **Malcolm Crowthers, *Facades Online***

In Broken Images

London Sinfonietta at Queen Elizabeth Hall – UK Premiere

"*In Broken Images* is the latest in a line of works that Harrison Birtwistle has composed over the last 40 years for the London Sinfonietta. In many ways, too, this new piece harks back to the very first of those Sinfonietta commissions. It takes its title from a line by Robert Graves and was first performed by the group in Milan last year. The work's four instrumental groups – woodwind, brass, strings and percussion – echo and react to each other as though in a latter-day Gabrieli canzona. As such, *In Broken Images* explores ideas of antiphony and role play that Birtwistle first tackled on this scale in *Verses for Ensembles* in 1969.

He introduced the new piece in conversation with Tom Service, explaining how he instinctively uses compositional techniques that earlier in his career had demanded large amounts of pre-planning. But the way in which his blocks of musical material move in and out of focus, become submerged and resurface again in different forms, or just occasionally combine into gestures of seismic intensity, still seems the product of a mysterious ritual of which the audience only experiences one element.

David Atherton, whose connection with Birtwistle also stretches back over more than four decades, conducted the thrilling premiere at the end of the Sinfonietta's portrait concert devoted to Birtwistle; he had preceded it with an equally pungent account of *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum*, a mesh of interlocking musical clockworks that Birtwistle composed for the group in 1977." – **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* [4 stars ****]**

"Last night's London Sinfonietta concert was notable on several counts. First, it presented the UK premiere of a work by Harrison Birtwistle, whose music has always loomed large in the ensemble's repertoire. Second, it saw the return of conductor David Atherton, one of the co-founders of the Sinfonietta 44 years ago. And third, it brought Birtwistle himself to the platform to discuss his music in some detail with Tom Service.

Given that Birtwistle is the kind of composer who shrinks from revealing too many of the secrets of his art — he's not interested in "dispelling mysteries", he told us — it was never going to be easy for an interviewer intent on clarifying matters. Service, however, has not only a formidable knowledge of Birtwistle's music but also the ability to put his finger on its distinctive features. The consequent sparring between composer and interviewer was spiced with humour but illuminating too on issues such as Birtwistle's compositional choices, his personal take on serialism and his characteristic deployment of "musical mechanisms".

The latter are evident both in the *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum* of 1977 (delivered here with admirable precision) and in the new work, *In Broken Images*. In both works percussive, rhythmically articulated ideas are juxtaposed with more horizontal,

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layered textures. Atherton brought out the spiky, visceral quality of those gestures in the performance of *In Broken Images*, achieving the kind of raw beauty that is present in so much of Birtwistle's music but which ultimately defies analysis.

Five Distances, Birtwistle's idiosyncratic confrontation with the medium of the wind quintet, and *Cortege*, in which the players walk the stage engaged in a po-faced ritualised game, completed the programme. Both were dispatched with impressive virtuosity by conductorless ensembles." – **Barry Millington, *Evening Standard* [4 stars ****]**

"And the new piece certainly sounds – even on just one hearing – classic Birtwistle. With some twenty-six players separated into instrumental types – strings to the left of the conductor, woodwinds to his right, brass in front and percussion behind – *In Broken Images* unfolds with a cohesiveness that keeps the groups largely together with similar material, starting with an extended brass fanfare. It's thrilling stuff." – **Nick Breckenfield, *ClassicalSource.com***

"As ever in Birtwistle's work, different perspectives are very much part of the concept. And as so often, there is a sense – a raw, violent sense – of the antique. Loss, melancholy, defiant tribute came together in a deeply moving work and performance...Finally came the United Kingdom première of the 2011 work, *In Broken Images*, first performed by the London Sinfonietta at the MiTo Settembre Musica Festival...Once again, a mechanistic quality of layering was brought powerfully to the fore in another, unmistakably hieratic composition." – **Mark Berry, *SeenandHeardInternational.com***