BIRTWISTLE AND BEYOND

CULT FOLLOWING

Harrison Birtwistle’s Earth Dances triggered a series of fresh, inventive works from a new wave of British composers. Thirty years after the groundbreaking premiere, Philip Clark explores how the compositional landscape shifted dramatically beyond 1986.

Gilbert & George were favourites to win that year’s Turner Prize as Kingsley Amis’s The Old Devils scored at the Booker Prize, while The Sun was reporting on the gastronomic liberties that Freddie Starr had taken with a hamster. In the world of modern composition, though, one name was being discussed beyond all others. On March 14, 1986, Harrison Birtwistle’s 40-minute slab of pure orchestral muscle, Earth Dances, was premiered at the Royal Festival Hall as Peter Eötvös flexed the BBC Symphony Orchestra – a performance that became a turning point in British music.

The inner-structural engine of Birtwistle’s composition – a procession of instrumental layers rotating around one other rather warily, each displaying characteristic melodic hooks.
Michael Finnissy's music-theatre piece *The Undivine Comedy* appeared around that same time and its visceral span terrified me — but nor could I stop listening. And circling all this activity was the inescapable presence of Harrison Birtwistle, whose new piece *Endless Parade* for trumpeter Håkan Hardenbergh, with vibraphone and strings, was earnestly discussed on BBC 2 arts slot *The Late Show* under the tag ‘Could this be the piece that finds a new audience for classical music?’ — a programme I watched repeatedly until my mother accidently recorded *Dallas* over the top.

All this music appeared to me as *sound*, but the awareness of a naysaying backlash kept coming. Steve Martland appeared on television to deliver an unmistakably Boulezian polemic against Boulez, his punky leathers and skinhead haircut contrasting noticeably against Boulez's beige jackets and orderly comb-over. During an edition of *The South Bank Show*, John Adams discussed his choral and orchestral piece *Harmonium*, making it clear that he had no truck with post-Schoenbergian schools of composition. And the debate continued to rage on via sleep, apparently, Radio 3. A feature about younger British composers had the presenter spit out Steve Martland's name venomously, the explicit message being that grooves and tonality ought to remain off-piste, and that no serious composer should ever use a diminutive form of their name. And as I grappled with the debate, I engaged with the musical results — Turnage's *Three Screaming Pigs*, MacMillan's *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* and an LP of Martland's orchestral *Babi Yar* paired with his two-piano *Drill*.

The great learning of Birtwistle scores like *Earth Dances* and *Endless Parade* is the value of shifting perspective. The instrumental latticework that sits between the prevailing markers is important too and only by viewing (and hearing) a landmark beacon from numerous perspectives can you begin to grasp the essential wholeness of its being. Likewise, the culture clash being crudely categorised as a tribal war between Modernism versus a post-modern counter-attack was blinkered and self-limiting. Finnissy and Tippett relished drawing on the vernacular and popular culture; Turnage had studied with Hans Werner Henze, and music tends to be more subtle and nuanced than any argument surrounding it. And the latticework between landmarks gets overlooked when debate becomes simplistically polarised. Discussing ideas surrounding music can become a way of ducking out of considering how that music itself might be operating, technically and in terms of its cultural backstory. Birtwistle's *Earth Dances*, at every turn almost, throws up incidental, and you suspect, serendipitous detail — inflections and overtones of instrumental combinations sounding beyond the authorial

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Simon Rattle was six years into his stint with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and instrumentalists with a zeal for new music like pianist Joanna MacGregor (Collins Classics) and percussionist Evelyn Glennie (RCA Victor) had a knack of stepping out from behind the safety of the classical barrier and into mainstream consciousness. New music remained visible on television. Michael Tippett's extended Indian Summer was documented in great detail by the BBC with documentaries marking his big birthdays and the making of his final opera

New Year. Channel 4, that cultural dust-bowl of reality TV and property programmes today, broadcast Leaving Home, Rattle's landmark series on new music, and a series of meaty lectures by Boulez on Stockhausen, Cage, Berio et al.

All of which, just like the formal engineering of Earth Dances, brings us full circle. The coincidence of Birtwistle managing to unveil a major orchestral score and such a starkly original opera like The Mask of Orpheus at the same time - an achievement backed up by weighty analysis in the press and on broadcast media – elevated him to an unassailable position of prominence; the last 'great' recognised British composer in a lineage that includes Elgar, Walton, Vaughan Williams, Britten and Tippett. But listening to British orchestral music written after Earth Dances confirms that this was no hype – Birtwistle’s triumph was rooted in the music itself. Composers like David Sawer, Simon Holt and Diana Burrell clearly needed to think, and hard, about where to position their own music post-Earth Dances.

Birtwistle’s orchestral palette – strings backgrounded as skeuomorphic woodwind and brass writing, punctuated by percussion counting the apparently uncountable – offered an alluring alternative to the conventional orchestral tempera. His music orbited the pulse-labyrinth of time like no other. This sound world was compulsively addictive – it was easy for a composer to lose their own identity inside the Birtwistlian terrain.

Finnissy, Harvey and Dillon certainly had no need to lean against Birtwistle’s piece as their new works made their way into the world, but the sense of British music walking with a newly found confidence was palpable. In his Madonna piece, Harvey pulled off his old trick of fusing timbres and orchestration techniques culled from Stockhausen and the French spectralists with a clarity of soaring line that could indeed make larks ascend, while Finnissy’s Red Earth invoked the parched, roaring hot Australian outback with a carefully configured, microtonal-harmonic marinade that was seeping inside every melodic pore as you listened. Dillon’s Helle Nacht certainly owed something to Finnissy and to Brian Ferneyhough, but spoke with its own ripe, off-tonal harmonic language.

Turnage’s Three Screaming Pies impressed me deeply at the time. Here was a composer, I felt, who understood how to embed the spontaneity and roughed-up timbres of jazz into orchestral music. I’ve just listened to the piece again, probably for the first time since the late 1980s, and time has not been kind to it. That tradition of British composers - hello Constant Lambert and Richard Rodney Bennett – tining what amounts to low-grade harmonic invention with jazz inflections had found a new voice. Meanwhile Steve Martland’s project fell down because, for all his verbal provocations, the actual notes on the page felt alarmingly prosaic and conservative:

Birtwistle, Joanna McGregor and Pierre Boulez working on Birtwistle's Antiphonies in Paris in 1992

control of the composer. And the rich weave of British music also depends on those ‘unbelongers’ who slip between the cracks, who cut across false boundaries placed around composers for ease of orientation: John White, Christopher Fox, Hugh Davies, Richard Emsley, Tim Hodgkinson, Gavin Bryars and Christopher Hobbs, whose work variously responded to the experimental seeds sown by Cornelius Cardew and other strains of the European avant-garde, counterpointed against composers whose work feels like an aesthetic footnote to RVW and Britten: David Matthews, Hugh Wood, Robin Holloway. Britten died in 1976; Cardew in 1981.

The mainstream emergence of the internet a decade later – not christened ‘the information superhighway’ because of reason – has helped pathological ‘unbelonger’ composers to become masters of, if not their own fortune, then at least their destiny; but online proliferation has also contributed to the fragmentation of British new music. The analogue, pre-internet era was the last hurrah for that holy trinity of new music promotion, when music publishers, performers and a record industry prepared to chance its arm could actively change hearts and minds – a model that had its final flourish with EMI Classics’ support of Thomas Adès in the late ’90s.

Collins Classics recorded Peter Maxwell Davies obsessively and also issued a set of CD singles of music by Birtwistle, John Taverner and Benedict Mason under the banner 20th Century Plus; Nimbus was where you went if you wanted to hear the latest piece by George Benjamin; Robert Saxton and Turnage found a home at EMI Classics; and the Manchester-based Factory Records, the label founded by rock honcho Tony Wilson to issue music by post-punk groups like Joy Division and Happy Mondays, launched its own classical division where Martland and a disc of pianist Rolf Hind playing MacMillan, Finnissy and Bartók rubbed shoulders with other releases of music by Mozart, Handel and Shostakovich. Rock journalist Stuart Maconie reviewed Hind’s disc in pop-music bible NME, and classical music – as the late-1980s jazz revival that had been headlined by the likes of Courtney Pine and big-band Loose Tubes began to flatline – apparently became marketable and sexy.

Nourishing the media-feeding frenzy were figureheads with real cultural clout. By the time Earth Dances appeared,
Poulenc or Milhaud with a rock backbeat. As things turned out, the idea of a radical alternative to the Modernist mainstream rooted in popular culture failed to take wing largely, I think, because composers born in the 1980s and '90s were saturated in pop culture, and what had seemed provocative in Tippett had become another settled ingredient rather than an active catalyst.

Two years after Earth Dances, the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Oliver Knussen premiered Lighthouses of England and Wales by Benedict Mason, the very definition of an 'unbelonger' composer. The sense Birtwistle engenders of a slow, deliberate meander through a landscape is upended. In Mason's piece the orchestra gets physically dragged through a landscape that is unfolding around it like time-lapse photography, with the listener watching from a discreet distance. Vaughan Williams's Sea Symphony and Debussy's La mer hover in the background as Mason uses the metaphor of lighthouses as a conduit for harmonic beams of light, the concert hall, he said, 'representing the model of this island's coastline'.

Sitting two years ago at the 2014 Proms listening to Mason's Meld, with instruments spatially secreted inside every box and passageway the Royal Albert Hall had to offer, I thought about the distance British music has travelled since 1986 and Earth Dances. Younger composers doing interesting and innovative work (Edward Henderson, Jennifer Walshe, Tim Parkinson, Richard Skelton and Claudia Molitor) are too often hived off to the cultural margins, while the broad mainstream, epitomised by those Last Night of the Proms concert openers regularly doled out to younger British composers, can too often feel lacklustre. Mason is one composer whose reconfiguration of the time-space continuum in music ought to be as celebrated as Birtwistle's innovations were 30 years ago, but our culture today, obsessed with soundbites and the ephemeral, is too quick to place in a box ideas it would rather label 'maverick' or 'eccentric'. I didn't like everything I heard in 1986, but I liked the 'not liking': the debates felt urgent and worth having – a sign, I think, of a healthy cultural environment.

To hear excerpts from some of the works mentioned, and to download a free sampler from record label NMC, visit gramophone.co.uk

RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS

Birtwistle and beyond: the changing terrain of British music

**Harrison Birtwistle**

*Earth Dances*

Ensemble Modern / Pierre Boulez

DG (A/04)

Peter Eötvös's original recording, fine though it is, has long since been superseded by the likes of Dohnányi and this powerhouse performance from Pierre Boulez.

**Michael Finnissy**

*Red Earth*

BBC SO / Martyn Brabbins

NMC

The earth dances, too, as Finnissy's taut orchestral score, played by an on-form BBC SO, invokes the imposing, ancient beauty of the Australian desert.

**Steve Martland**

*Martland Anthology*

Steve Martland Band

NMC (11/15)

This memorial anthology includes some of Martland's most notable 1980s scores, including *Crossing the Border* – his paraphrase of Bach's Chaconne in D minor.

**Benedict Mason**

*String Quartet. Double Concerto, etc*

Arditti Qt et al

Bridge (00/94)

Mason's Lighthouses of England and Wales is deleted, but these orchestral and chamber works are a weighty introduction to his inscrutable music.

**Discover • Challenge • Inspire**

Harrison Birtwistle • Michael Finnissy • Jonathan Harvey

Judith Weir • Mark-Anthony Turnage • Peter Maxwell Davies