

By turns haunting and confrontational, lyrical and violent, Harrison Birtwistle's 1967 *Punch and Judy*, to a libretto by Stephen Pruslin, was a landmark opera of the late 20th century. The only commercial recording available to date captures all these qualities and more with immediacy and clarity.

I first heard *Punch and Judy* as a 17-year old student at Durham University, where I would spend most days (and some evenings) in the music library's listening room, poring over the scores of 20th-century orchestral and chamber works while making illicit cassette copies of the university's huge LP collection. I was at that time totally naive to the possibilities and joys of opera, but the discovery of *Punch and Judy* on the shelves was the gateway to my ever-increasing appreciation of both opera and Birtwistle.

Described by its creators as a 'source opera' (a reference to the quasi-primitive deconstruction of the opera into numerous very short numbers, as if it could have provided the formal model for all other operas), *Punch and Judy* explores the malevolent character of Punch as he tricks, terrorizes and murders in turn his baby, his wife Judy, the Doctor, the Lawyer, the Choregos (a kind of commentator-narrator) and even the hangman who is meant to mete out the ultimate punishment. Punch eventually wins over Pretty Polly when all obstacles have been removed.

From the outset, Punch is presented as a figure of pure malice, perhaps unequalled in any other opera. His first entry, an evil cackling laugh, sets the tone, and the recording captures the sense of the character's creeping entrance into the

performance space, menacing the audience as well as Judy. The Choregos—who takes on the composite role of Greek Chorus and ringmaster—has the lion's share of the work's more lyrical music. David Wilson-Johnson brings a mesmerizing authority and beauty of tone to Birtwistle's long-limbed lines, while Jan DeGaetani's

sensuous Judy provides a counterpoint to Stephen Roberts's querulous, powerful Punch. There is luxurious support from Phyllis Bryn-Julson, Philip Langridge and John Tomlinson as Pretty Polly, Lawyer and Doctor respectively.

The sound of the London Sinfonietta, here conducted by its co-founder David Atherton, has long been near-synonymous with

that of Birtwistle's music. This recording took place in 1979, 11 years after the work was premiered, after many years of regular collaboration with the composer. Whether in the spiky Sinfonia, the foreboding Prologue, or in the eerie, icily beautiful Toccatas, Passion Chorales and 'Weather Reports' that punctuate the opera, the instrumental performances are captivating in their precision and controlled abandon. Whether or not it is true that Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears walked out of the opera's Aldeburgh Festival premiere in 1968 (as legend has it), they surely cannot have failed to grasp its irresistible dramatic flair, and its potential to renew the form for the future.

Scottish Opera gives the premiere of Stuart MacRae's 'Anthropocene' at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, on January 24.

Punch and Judy, with David Wilson-Johnson, Stephen Roberts, Jan DeGaetani, John Tomlinson, Philip Langridge, c. David Atherton (1979)

For the record ...



Stuart MacRae
chooses a personal favourite