

HARRISON BIRTWISTLE

Master of myth and melancholy

Few living composers have provoked more extreme reactions from their listeners than Harrison Birtwistle. **Bayan Northcott** reveals how he found a voice to be reckoned with

He has been director of music at the National Theatre and Henry Purcell professor of composition at King's College, London; he has had major operas premiered at the Coliseum, Covent Garden and Glyndebourne; he was knighted in 1988 and made a Companion of Honour in 2001. He is Sir Harrison Birtwistle CH – an honoured figure, one might think, in the very heart of the British Establishment. In it, perhaps, but emphatically not *of* it, for there is little one could ever describe as conformist about the man or his music – or the way in which he became a composer.

'He wore a small hat with a feather in it, and had a fishing fly in his pocket,' composer Alexander Goehr recalls of their first meeting as fellow students at the old Royal College of Music in Manchester around 1952. It transpired that while growing up on a smallholding on the outskirts of Accrington, young Birtwistle had made sporadic attempts to compose in a style that vaguely resembled Vaughan Williams, but that he was now concentrating on his clarinet studies. That this taciturn country boy would eventually emerge as one of the most widely performed and praised modernist composers of his age, recipient of such international tributes as the Grawemayer Award, the Siemens Prize and a Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, would have seemed unimaginable.

Evidently he found it difficult to compose at all during his Manchester years. Maybe he felt inhibited by the loquacious Goehr's know-how and the fluent intensity of their other young Manchester co-student Peter Maxwell Davies. More likely, he was still groping for technical means to realise a musical vision that was quite different from theirs. 'You never have it all,' Sir Michael Tippett used to tell young composers: meaning that while

BIRTWISTLE'S STYLE

Fractured logic

Birtwistle appears to regard composition not so much as a means of personal expression as a metaphor for a world ruled by forces of fate and chance. By confronting formalistic procedures with chance-derived disruptions, he aims for what he calls a 'fractured logic' from which spontaneous invention and lyricism may be wrested.

Sight and sound

Birtwistle has frequently drawn upon art and art theory to suggest musical ideas: Cézanne's quest to reveal the inner structure of landscape; Paul Klee's notion of 'taking a line for a walk'; Picasso's practice of basing a whole sequence of pictures on an original image by methods of variation and distortion.

Total theatre

Rather than follow the traditional procedures of opera or music drama, Birtwistle has sought his own ways of fusing music, text and stage movement in his works for the theatre, often formalising their presentation by the use of masks and stylised gestures and breaking up 'plots' by cross-cutting and repetition.

Fixity and change

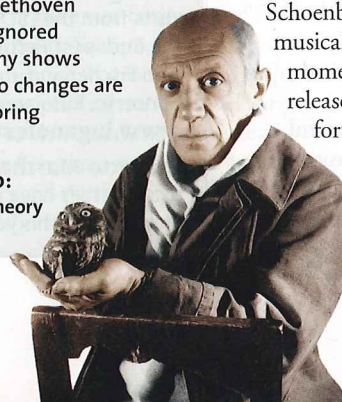
Although Birtwistle has remained essentially faithful to his basic musical principles, he has more recently found new stimulus in such composers as Beethoven and Wagner whom he ignored as a student. His harmony shows greater clarity, his tempo changes are more supple, and his scoring is more sophisticated.

DRAWING FROM PICASSO: Birtwistle often uses art theory for his musical concepts

a beginner may find he or she has a natural gift for melody or rhythm, a comparable grasp of harmony or structure may have to be struggled for – a process that can take years of formal study or trial and error. Birtwistle's typically radical response to this problem was to ignore the many things he could not do and concentrate exclusively on the few things he could, seeing how far these alone could be pushed.

In this, he perhaps most nearly approached the position of the young Stravinsky, who seems to have realised early on that he had little talent for the surging emotional continuities of such late Romantics as Strauss or Rachmaninov, and resorted, instead, to an utterly opposite anti-expressive technique of juxtaposing contrasting blocks of material within rigid grids of rhythm. Certainly Stravinsky was one of a handful of composers who, by their example, helped Birtwistle find himself. Others were Edgard Varèse and Olivier Messiaen – largely for their own extensions of Stravinskian techniques – and Erik Satie, whose *Trois gymnopédies* Birtwistle likened to viewing the same musical 'object' from three different angles. What all these composers shared, and what Birtwistle sensed in himself, was a concept of musical time quite distinct from what he called the 'goal-directed' time of the Western Classical and Romantic mainstream in recent centuries. Composers such as Beethoven, Wagner and

Schoenberg had typically developed their musical materials symphonically to create momentum and direction, tension and release, each time carrying their listeners forward on a journey to a point of arrival and resolution. By contrast, Birtwistle cleaved to a more ancient 'circular' sense of time – analogous to the ever-repeating ►





LIFE & TIMES

A quick guide to the main events in the life of Harrison Birtwistle

THE LIFE

1934

THE TIMES

1934

He is born in Accrington in Lancashire, an only child of farming parents.



1952

Wins a scholarship to study clarinet and composition at the Royal Manchester College of Music. While there he forms the New Music Manchester group with Alexander Goehr,

PETER MAXWELL DAVIES, John Ogdon and Elgar Howarth.

1965

Is awarded a visiting fellowship to Princeton University, where he completes his opera *Punch and Judy*.

1975

The National Theatre appoints him as its music director. During this time he writes

scores for *Hamlet*, *Tamburlaine*, *Volpone* and Peter Hall's acclaimed production of *The Oresteia*.

1986

His **THE MASK OF ORPHEUS** is premiered by

English National Opera and wins an *Evening Standard* award. He is made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music before being knighted two years later.

1995

Panic, a work for saxophone and percussion, is performed at the Last Night of the Proms, causing public outrage. The *Daily Mail* brands it 'unmitigated rubbish' and one viewer says the piece 'sounded like the beating of seven bells on kitchen pans' but the reaction from critics is more balanced.

2008

His opera, **THE MINOTAUR**, which casts a sympathetic light on the mythical beast, is premiered at the Royal Opera House. Bass John Tomlinson wins acclaim for his portrayal of the Minotaur itself.

2011



1934

GLYNDEBOURNE opera takes place for the first time in the Sussex Downs, starting an annual tradition that has continued, with only one interruption for renovations.

1952

After the death of her father, George VI, Queen Elizabeth II ascends the throne. Music by Walton, Howells and Vaughan Williams is played at the Coronation the following year.

1961

Accrington Stanley are ejected from the Football League. The club later becomes famous as the butt of a joke – 'Who are they?' – in a popular TV advert for milk.



1967

As The Beatles release their **SERGEANT PEPPERS** album, millions of listeners become aware of the presence of '4,000 holes in Blackburn, Lancashire'.

1982

London's Barbican Centre, incorporating a 2,000-seat concert hall that is the new home of the LSO, is opened by the Queen. Its brutalist architecture divides opinion.

1997

Diana, Princess of Wales, is killed in a car crash in Paris. Her funeral in Westminster Abbey is televised and watched by an estimated 2.5 billion people.

2005

KING KONG, director Peter Jackson's remake of the famous 1933 film, is released. It goes on to win three Academy Awards.



life-cycle, or the turning of the seasons – in which specific ideas or events may come round again and again, though always in a slightly different guise.

Certainly the few techniques he had at his disposal, and which led to his resumption of composing in 1957, were all implicitly 'anti-developmental'. These included melodic lines that fanned out and then closed back around a central pitch; harmony created by secondary lines roughly paralleling the main line; time ticked out by variously related pulses or revolving repeat-patterns – the resulting blocks of textures assembled in collage-like sequences or lodged in additive verse-refrain forms. It took a little time for the implications of his style to register with the new-music audience and then the musical public at large. While the highly articulate Goehr and Maxwell Davies were being hailed in the musical press of the early 1960s as leaders of a new British avant-garde, Birtwistle put out a sequence of enigmatic exploratory pieces and said almost nothing at all. But with the rapturously received 1965 premiere and subsequent recording of his 18-minute ensemble piece *Tragoedia*, it was suddenly evident that here was a musical sensibility and sound quite new in English music.

What was so striking was that the piece seemed at once so ancient yet so modern, so rigidly formalistic yet so wildly physical, with its interspersing of raucous processions and dances with trance-like moments of delicacy and calm. No wonder that perceptive critic, the late David Drew, characterised it as 'an earthy drama: protestant, rude, and generally at odds with traditional orders of thought and behaviour. Blood is shed; yet there remains a still centre of lyricism.' Retrospectively, indeed, it is possible to hear that *Tragoedia* already embraced most of the concepts, techniques and rules of procedure that have continued to characterise Birtwistle's output over the years. What has nevertheless enabled him to accumulate a catalogue that now runs to around 130 works, many on the largest scale, is his seemingly endless ability to juxtapose those same concepts, techniques and rules

of procedure in ever new ways. 'The sacred thing is the context,' Birtwistle has remarked. 'As soon as I move, as soon as I make a gesture, and move to another, there's a situation with ramifications. Things I would never have thought of in the first place appear. To these I have a duty...'

Following his breakthrough with *Tragoedia*, Birtwistle proceeded to exploit the work's salient characteristics in a number of different ways. One way was to monumentalise its more



A SCORE TO SETTLE:
Birtwistle composing in his
Wiltshire home in 2002

formalistic procedures in a sequence of large-scale orchestral works that would punctuate his output. In *The Triumph of Time* (1972) he strings disparate blocks of material together in the guise of an immensely slow, baleful procession. In *Earth Dances* (1986), various blocks are superimposed simultaneously, its form derived from their grinding and buckling together like tectonic plates. In *Exodus* (1997), conceived as an up-beat to the Millennium, the listening ear is led back and forth along various routes as through a complex labyrinth – the work ends with the same music from which it started to suggest there is only one way in and out.

Yet, according to Birtwistle himself, *Tragoedia* was actually conceived as a kind of musical drama abstracted from the ritual and formal aspects of ancient Greek tragedy, and its latent theatricality – the way in which the solo horn and cello are cast as ‘personages’ linking the more chorus-like block textures – would recur in a number of later ensemble scores, notably *Secret Theatre* (1984) and *Theseus Game* (2003), in which the effect is heightened by having certain players actually move around the concert platform. And *Tragoedia* also proved to be a preliminary study for Birtwistle’s first opera proper, *Punch and Judy* (1967), which, as it were, mythologises the traditional English puppet play according ancient Greek principles. Indeed, all of Birtwistle’s subsequent stage works involve a measure of such depersonalising formality, whether in his massive treatments of actual myths as in *The Mask of Orpheus* (1973–83) and *The Minotaur* (2008), or in his mythologising of medieval romance in *Gawain* (1989–91) or of the New Testament in *The Last Supper* (1998–9). Even

his ostensibly lighter entertainment *The Second Mrs Kong* (1993–4) resembles a ‘virtual’ post-modern myth for a cybernetic age.

Yet that ‘still centre of lyricism’ in *Tragoedia* has proved no less exemplary of a remote, meditative vein that has continued to resurface in his output. This is to be heard mainly in his vocal and instrumental works, ranging from such scores as *Songs by Myself* (1984), setting verses of his own, to such fine-spun cycles as his *Orpheus Elegies* for

Panic caused a tabloid scandal after the 1995 Last Night of the Proms

oboe, harp and countertenor, paraphrasing the *Sonnets to Orpheus* by Rilke. Birtwistle has sometimes described himself as prone to melancholy, by which he seems to signify not so much personal sadness, as a tendency to reflect on the limitations of human happiness and action in a world dominated by fate and chance. Certainly, few contemporary composers have sustained a more brooding stasis than that found in his *Melencolia 1* (1976) for clarinet, harp and double string orchestra (a work that Birtwistle has also described as ‘My Tallis Fantasia’). More recently, though, his fine pair of John Dowland-inspired orchestral scores *The Shadow of Night* (2001) and *Night’s Black Bird* (2004) have explored a more positive concept of melancholy as ‘a humour of the night, an inspired spiritual condition’.

All of this would seem to fit well enough with Birtwistle’s quiet-spoken, sometimes deliberately evasive and essentially private

character, and with his abiding commitment to his family and a few close friends. How, then to account for the fierce abrasiveness, the uncompromising dissonance of so much of his music? It apparently put Benjamin Britten to flight within 20 minutes of curtain-up on *Punch and Judy* at the 1968 Aldeburgh Festival and scandalised the tabloid press when Birtwistle’s orgiastic *Panic* for saxophone and ensemble was let loose on the Last Night of the 1995 Proms. Indeed, at an early age he seems to have decided that an originality of utterance could only be achieved through extremes. Yet, by whatever idiosyncratic means, he has created his own unique sonorous landscape, a whole musical world. No doubt it seems an unfriendly world to those who seek in music an enlivening entertainment or a consolatory sweetness; sometimes its lowering clouds and fearsome blasts can daunt even the most intrepid explorers. But it has its own integrity and, not infrequently, for those with ears to hear, its own strange beauty. ■

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BIRTWISTLE

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