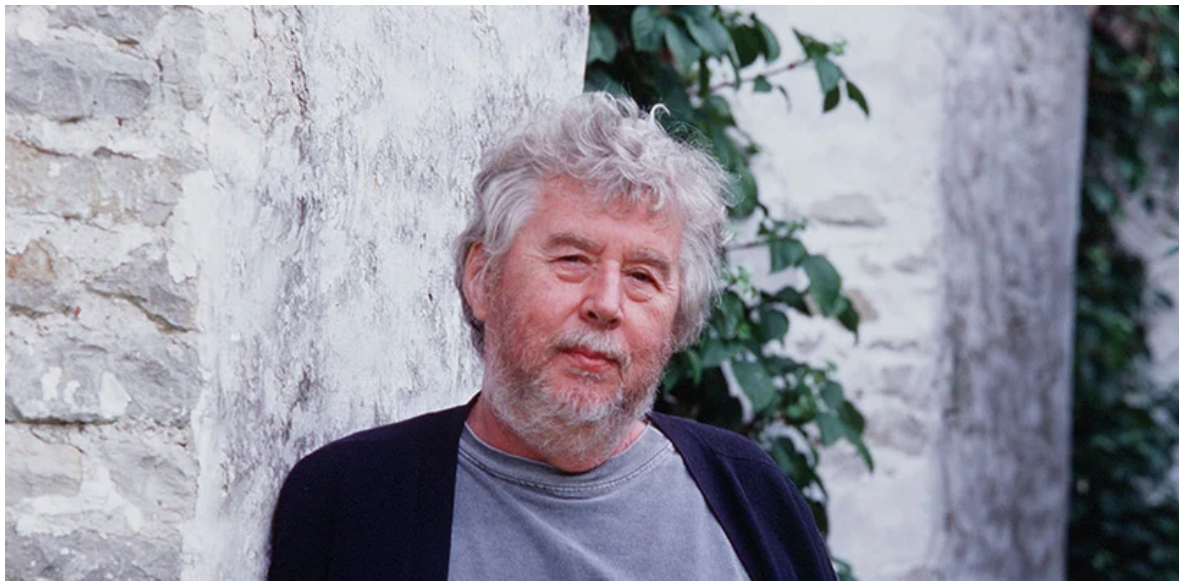


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## Sir Harrison Birtwistle CH (1934–2022): A reflection on a life, by Jonathan Cross

(april 2022)



**Following the death of Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Jonathan Cross pays tribute to the leading British composer of his generation.**

It took more than three decades for Harrison Birtwistle's landmark opera *The Mask of Orpheus* to receive its second full staging. Many, like me, who had been present at its premiere in 1986, were changed by it. It opened up extraordinary new worlds. While the 2019 production by Daniel Kramer for English National Opera divided audiences and critics, there was unanimity on the power and originality of the musical experience. When the octogenarian Birtwistle and his librettist Peter Zinovieff came to take their curtain call on the opening night, the entire house rose to its feet. This was fitting. It was as if Birtwistle's work had come full circle, from its roots in 1960s experimentalism when the embryonic ideas for the piece began to take shape, now to appeal afresh to a new, young public not even born when the opera had first been seen in that very same London theatre. It was, quite simply, thrilling to observe a new generation finding its own way into Birtwistle's music and being enthused by it.

*The Mask of Orpheus* could never be described as an 'easy' work. Its ambition is vast, rich, combining singing, text, theatre, mime, a huge orchestra, electronics, and an intricate musical vocabulary that presents not a linear narrative but rather a central idea from multiple perspectives. Modernist. Uncompromising. These might be considered more appropriate words. And yet somehow it still manages to speak directly, not abandoning operatic forms, but rather rethinking their lyrical conventions for the late twentieth century. This is what struck me so powerfully when encountering the work in 2019: for all its structural complexity, I was left with the image of Orpheus as an ordinary individual, overcome by grief, lamenting the woman he had lost, who finds his life no longer supportable. And this seems to be the secret of so much of Birtwistle's music: always challenging, yet always essentially clear and simple in the way it articulates the essence of human experience.

Directness was a facet of the man as well as of the music. Born and raised in Accrington, Harry – as he was universally known – retained throughout his life not just a soft, lilting Lancastrian accent but also a certain Northern straightforwardness. He knew what he wanted. And he just got on with it. (Beneath the gruff façade, however, there was a gentle, humorous man, who enjoyed sharing the simple pleasures of his garden and kitchen.) His earliest surviving piece, written when he was a teenager, is for piano and is called *The Ookoing Bird*. Its essential simplicity, its repeating structure, its interest both in the mythical and natural worlds, are all also defining facets of his mature work. It is almost as if he emerged fully formed as a composer, his later compositions being just a working out of these ideas on larger canvases and in new contexts. The beautiful *The Moth Requiem* (2012) for twelve female singers, three harps and alto flute, for example, is cut from the same cloth and speaks with the same melancholic voice. So many of his works were shaped and coloured by his early musical experiences in the North of England, playing as a clarinettist in a military band and in an amateur opera company's pit orchestra. Sounds of wind and brass instruments dominate his earlier music (even *The Mask of Orpheus* has no string section); he relished writing for north-country brass bands in *Grimethorpe Aria* and *Salford Toccata*; and he drew on northern folk tales for his music theatre works *Bow Down* and *Yan Tan Tethera*. Elsewhere, the craggy landscapes of his childhood re-emerge, most notably in his magnificent orchestral work *Earth Dances*.

He entered the Royal Manchester College of Music in the early 1950s as a clarinettist. And it was there he made the connections that were crucial for his later development as a composer. Composer Peter Maxwell Davies, pianist John Ogdon and trumpeter Elgar Howarth were all fellow students. So too was composer Alexander Goehr, son of Schoenberg pupil Walter Goehr, who acted as a conduit not only for the work of the great continental figures of the early twentieth century but also for the latest music coming out of Paris and Darmstadt. Together they founded the New Music Manchester group in order to explore

these works, as well as to premiere their own. In fact, Birtwistle emerged from his compositional chrysalis relatively late, completing his 'opus 1', *Refrains and Choruses*, at the end of 1957, which was subsequently selected by the Society for the Promotion of New Music for performance at the 1959 Cheltenham Festival.

His music first caught wide critical attention in 1960s. The sounds he was making in works like *Tragoedia* and *Verses for Ensembles* were bold and exciting. He won a scholarship to study in the USA and it was there he completed his 'tragic comedy or comical tragedy', *Punch and Judy*, premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1969, and which went on to be performed many hundreds of times all over the world. Stylised, ritualised, aggressive violence tempered by a reflective lyricism, it announced a composer not only with a distinctive musical voice but also one completely at ease in the theatre. After a formative period spent working as Music Director at the National Theatre – including making the outstanding music for Peter Hall's production of Tony Harrison's northern dialect translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy – he went on to write a prodigious series of operas that continued to explore mythological subject-matter: *Gawain* and *The Minotaur* for the Royal Opera House, *The Second Mrs Kong* for Glyndebourne, *The Last Supper* for premiere by the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, and the smaller-scale *The Ilo Passion*, *The Corridor* and *The Cure* for Aldeburgh. Layered narratives and repeating structures remain a feature of all these works, but also increasingly a focus on character, as well as a more direct kind of lyricism. The hard edges of *Punch and Judy* were smoothed away somewhat, to reveal a new concern for expression, often of a darkly melancholic kind. Even when Orpheus was not the actual subject of a work, his lamenting voice was still palpable.

This dark melancholy also found its way into his instrumental music. The dawn of the new millennium saw another landmark work for large orchestra, *The Shadow of Night*, taking its inspiration from various 16th-century melancholic sources, followed by its companion piece *Night's Black Bird*, and the equally monumental *Deep Time*. This lattermost work reveals another longstanding preoccupation of the composer – going back at least as far as *The Triumph of Time* (1971–2) – with time and its articulation, not just across the duration of the pieces themselves, but conjuring up a sense of the sublime when confronted with vast, slowly changing, geological processes.

In recent years, in between fulfilling these large-scale commissions, Birtwistle has demonstrated the more intimate aspects of his compositional identity. Often working alongside particular players, he produced an important body of chamber works that have found a regular place in the concert hall. His *26 Orpheus Elegies*, for example, settings of Rilke for a typical Birtwistle combination of oboe, harp and countertenor, are beautifully poignant; *Songs for the same Earth* for tenor and piano bring to his friend David Harsent's poetry gentle and evocative resonances;

the *Bogenstrich* pieces for cello and piano resulted from a close exploration of the string instrument's musical and expressive possibilities with Adrian Brendel.

In later decades Harrison Birtwistle became a figure of international standing. Major festivals in Europe, Asia and America featured his work. Commissions came from far and wide, and noted conductors were keen to programme his work, including Barenboim, Boulez, Eötvös and Rattle. He won important prizes – most notably the Grawemeyer Award and Ernst von Siemens Music Prize – and received countless honours, among them a Knighthood, the Companion of Honour, and Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Yet, for him, such success was essentially incidental. What mattered most was the daily routine of disappearing off to his shed (a version of which followed him wherever he lived) to put notes on paper. He once expressed utter surprise when someone asked him when he was going to retire. 'I just don't think he understood what I do', was his bewildered response when later relating the encounter. Composing was never a job for him. It was his very being. Music just kept flowing from his mind and out of his fingers, with increasing productivity as the years went by. Once he had produced enough material for one piece, he would draw a double bar, and then start immediately on the next. In a sense it was this focus, this single-mindedness, that gave his music its unmistakable identity. He composed for himself, not for others. What anyone else thought of his music (aside from those performing it) was of little consequence to him. Even when his music caused uproar, as the premiere of *Panic* at the 1995 Proms notoriously did, he was never bothered. There was certainly something naughtily provocative about this particular piece, intruding into the polite silliness of the 'Last Night'; but equally, having been commissioned to write for that occasion, he could hardly have produced anything different. He knew what he wanted, and he simply did what he did. Pan, embodied in *Panic*'s solo saxophone, was – like Orpheus, like the Green Knight, like the Minotaur – just another of those mythical creatures with which Birtwistle became obsessed, and through which he was able to articulate deep ideas about time and identity, longing and loss. This is the essence of the music of Harrison Birtwistle, and the source of its power. This will be its enduring legacy. And it is to this music we shall return time and again to continue to mine its immense riches.

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Photo: Sir Harrison Birtwistle in 2002 (Hanya Chlala)

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