

Composer of the month



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Composer of the Week
is broadcast on Radio 3
at 12pm, Monday to

Friday. Programmes in August are:

1-5 August Monteverdi

8-12 August Grieg

15-19 August Ruth Gipps

22-26 August Felix Mendelssohn

29 August – 2 September Buxtehude

Birtwistle's style



Pulse Birtwistle was fascinated by the way the remorseless ticking of actual time can be contradicted by musical time. Several pieces juxtapose them directly, such

as Harrison's *Clocks*, a set of virtuoso pieces composed for pianist Joanna MacGregor (above), and the fifth of the 26 *Orpheus Elegies*, which contains a part for metronome.

Landscape His fascination with 'ruptured continuities' is manifested in the idea of a landscape spoiled by intrusions, things that don't belong. That idea is powerfully expressed in *The Triumph of Time*, inspired by Bruegel's image of a ravaged landscape with Time riding in a cart.

English folktales These are a constant presence in his music, from the early, obstreperous *Punch and Judy* through to the quiet but violent *Bow Down*, the comic 'dramatic pastoral' *Down by the Greenwood Side* and *Yan Tan Tethera*, a 'mechanical pastoral' whose title refers to numbers used by North-country shepherds to count sheep.

Verse and refrain Alongside ritual and the cycles of nature one finds another sort of pattern-making, inspired by the literary idea of alternating verses and refrains. Obvious examples are the early *Refrains and Choruses* and *Verses for Ensembles*, and there are echoes in the numerous later song cycles such as *Pulse Shadows*.

Harrison Birtwistle

Though rooted in British landscape, Birtwistle broke new ground with his disturbing yet compelling music, as *Ivan Hewett* explains

ILLUSTRATION: MATT HERRING

When people want to praise a composer's music they often say 'it's instantly recognisable'. But that is a back-handed compliment, since it's a quality that's actually not so hard to achieve. You just need to invent a few 'tricks' or mannerisms and repeat them endlessly.

Harrison Birtwistle's music is indeed instantly recognisable, but not because it's always the same. In fact the variety of his music is extraordinary. There's the muffled sadness of *Nenia: The Death of Orpheus*, where the three clarinets and piano move hesitantly in a perpetual twilight, tinged with the silvery sound of bells. There's

scratch. That immediately made him an outsider, because reinventing music from scratch was something English composers just didn't do. We left that to those dogmatic and forbidding Europeans, the 'Angry Young Men' born ten years before Birtwistle: Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono, Karlheinz Stockhausen. Birtwistle was undoubtedly inspired by them, just as he was inspired by modernists of earlier generations, above all Igor Stravinsky (the aloof, antique ritualism of Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* and *Agon* lie behind much of Birtwistle's music).

It was a lonely path Birtwistle chose to follow, in an English musical

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the frightening power of his opera *The Minotaur*, where the thundering percussion and growling bass portray the power of the tormented, misunderstood beast, trapped in his labyrinth. There's the savage energy of *The Axe Manual*, where the pianist and percussionist caper in a dance of weirdly off-kilter rhythms. And there's the incredible complexity of the later orchestral works such as *Earth Dances*, where the layers of music evoke natural processes unfolding at their own different speeds.

So what marks all these very different things out as belonging to Birtwistle and no one else? Firstly, there's a special kind of logic, a way of thinking in musical notes. Birtwistle was often described as a modernist, and indeed he was in the sense that he turned his back on familiar harmonies and musical gestures, and set out to create a new musical language from

establishment dominated in his formative years by Michael Tippett, Malcolm Arnold and above all Benjamin Britten. To gauge Birtwistle's distance from that world you only have to compare his first opera *Punch and Judy*, premiered in June 1968 at the festival co-founded by Britten, the Aldeburgh Festival, with Britten's own most recent opera, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is suffused with the gentle magic of Shakespeare's dream-play, limned in harp and percussion-drenched harmonies and rhapsodically modal melodies which stretch tonal harmony but never leave it. Birtwistle's opera, by contrast, is blisteringly violent, just like the seaside puppet show, and much of the music is shriekingly loud and dissonant. It is said that Britten visited a rehearsal of it and strode out in disgust, though people close to him deny it.





Inspired by myth and landscape: (clockwise from left) Birtwistle with the premiere cast of *The Mask of Orpheus*, 1986; John Tomlinson in *The Minotaur*; Silbury Hill, which inspired Birtwistle's *Silbury Air*

Yet Britten and Birtwistle shared a very English characteristic, which was a suspicion of system. Just as Britten never really engaged with Schoenberg's '12-note' method, Birtwistle never embraced the fearsomely intellectual systematising of those European avant-gardists. He was baffled by the complicated form-schemes Stockhausen used to draw before starting to compose, because for him composing was a journey into the unknown. 'I like to be surprised by what I'm composing,' he would say, and his music is indeed full of surprise.

Yet what unites him with the European modernists is his determination to find a new way to compose. He did this not through 'system' but by focusing on the primordial stuff of music: pulse, the single note, repetition, contrast. Sometimes his exploration of these things was done in the simplest possible way: his *Duets for Flute* for two flutes begins with repetitions of the same note, shared between the two flutes. Sometimes it was taken to a fantastical degree of complication, as in *Silbury Air*, named after the huge man-made Neolithic hill in Wiltshire. The music launches off on E above middle C – Birtwistle's favourite note – expressed in pulses moving at different speeds, all layered one above another. So much energy is accumulated that the music bursts out



of its one-note prison, and soon we're immersed in a helter-skelter of many-layered activity, in which the ear gets pleasurably lost.

The focus on simple materials means Birtwistle's music never sounds abstract; it is always earthly concrete. And simplicity does not in any

Over the years, his ear for harmony and balance became much more acute

way imply crudity. It's true that Birtwistle's earlier works of the 1950s and '60s, where he is struggling to find himself, are not always perfectly heard. Over the years his ear for harmony and balance became much more acute, and though his music never uses conventional harmonies and is never in a 'key', the weight and colour of the harmonies is a vital factor in propelling the music's narrative. Take, for instance, the *Ritual Fragment* Birtwistle composed to the memory of Michael Vyner, director of the London Sinfonietta who had been an early champion of his music. The quiet opening chord has a Stravinskian quality of tense repose, soon obliterated

by a louder chord in the winds and brass and then – emerging through the aural fog – the solemn tread of a third harmony in the piano, which grows and grows. Each is similar to the other, but interestingly different in a way that animates the solemn ritual of the music.

Ritual is a recurring theme in Birtwistle's music, evoked by subtle designs of symmetry and repetition, which suggests the inscrutable mysteries embodied in some unknown ceremony. You feel it in the stark pattern-making of *Verses for Ensembles* and *Tragoedia* (which provided the musical basis for *Punch and Judy*), and in certain quiet, gentle miniatures such as *Dinah* and *Nick's Love Song*, composed to celebrate one very familiar form of ritual, namely a wedding.

Ritual is also an aspect of the other thing that makes Birtwistle's music instantly recognisable, namely that it delineates a whole expressive world. What makes it a world rather than just a set of personal enthusiasms is that we feel these elements are connected at a very deep level. Take Birtwistle's fondness for nature, evident from his choice to live most of his life in remote rural locations, firstly on the Scottish island of Raasay, then in central France, and finally in Wiltshire. The natural world is marked by cycles of recurrence, and one feels their presence in his music, most memorably in the opera *Gawain* (based on the medieval romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), which contains a huge five-fold 'Cycle of the Seasons'. Interleaved with it is another cycle of lullabies, hunting scenes and seductions.

That second cycle leads us back towards ritual. Nature and ritual in Birtwistle are two sides of the same coin of fatefulness, a sense of 'this is how things must be'. The inescapability of fate surely accounts for the pervasive melancholy of much of Birtwistle's music, expressed most powerfully in his *Melencolia I*, a clarinet concerto in all but name, and his first orchestral masterwork *The Triumph of Time*. The power of fate is a pre-eminent theme in folktale and myth, and it's no accident that Birtwistle's music is saturated in these things. His favourite myth was undoubtedly that of Orpheus, which gave birth to three pieces, including his single biggest achievement, the opera

BIRTWISTLE *Life & Times*

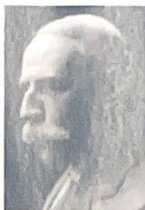
The Mask of Orpheus, premiered at English National Opera in 1986. But he also loved English sources, and loved to point out how symbols of England's pagan past such as the Green Man survived well into the Christian era. Myths are often full of violence of a very male kind, which Birtwistle's music expresses sometimes with the most spare and economical means, as in *Bow Down* – a retelling of the gruesome tale of the Two Sisters both in love with the same man – or with overwhelming force, as in *Gawain*.

But what of Birtwistle's refusal to plan his music in advance and his desire to be surprised by the act of composing? Doesn't that contradict the idea of fatefulness? Not at all. Accident and interruption can themselves take on a feeling of inevitability, and lending them that quality is precisely Birtwistle's aim. 'A continuity that is ruptured' is how he described his music, and again and again one encounters a slowly unfolding continuity riven by something alien and unappeasable, which is gradually woven into the music. Accident becomes fate.

Birtwistle's world is an inspiring one, but there's no denying it is utterly remote from contemporary musical culture. The complete absence of 'relevance' in his operas, together with the emphatically male quality of the music, its pervasive melancholy and utter refusal to fall in with the contemporary demand to be 'accessible' means that it is now bound to be a minority taste. But for those with the patience and curiosity to venture into Birtwistle's world, he offers something almost unique; a sense of being in touch with the primordial essence of music. ☺

1934

LIFE: Harrison Birtwistle is born on 15 July in Accrington, Lancashire. His mother, Madge, who runs a bakery with his father Fred, encourages him to take up the clarinet.



TIMES: Within the space of just over three months, English composers

Edward Elgar, Gustav Holst and Frederick Delius die, at the respective ages of 76, 59 and 72.



1975

LIFE: He is appointed music director of the National Theatre where he will remain until 1983, writing music for, among others, Peter Hall's production of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.

TIMES: The chaotic goings-on in a Torquay hotel amuse TV viewers as

Fawlty Towers, starring John Cleese and Prunella Scales, is shown for the first time on BBC Two.



1986

LIFE: Scored for vast forces that require two conductors, his complex opera *The Mask of Orpheus* is

met with great acclaim at its premiere at English National Opera.

TIMES: Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) is formally identified as a new disease for the first time in the UK, soon becoming better known to many as 'mad cow disease'.



1952

LIFE: He wins a scholarship to the Royal Manchester College of Music where he and fellow students including

Peter Maxwell Davies and Alexander Goehr form The Manchester School.

TIMES: On the death of her father, George VI, Elizabeth, Duchess of Edinburgh, returns to Britain from Kenya to become Queen Elizabeth II.



1995

LIFE: The televised premiere of his aggressive *Panic* for saxophone, percussion and orchestra at the Last Night of the Proms causes an explosion of complaints.

TIMES: Rogue trader Nick Leeson is jailed for six years in Singapore after his actions cause Barings Bank to collapse with losses of \$1,400,000,000 (£930,000,000).

2022

LIFE: Having suffered a stroke in 2021, he dies on 18 April at home in Wiltshire, aged 87. In its tribute, the Royal Philharmonic Society says that 'his music shook the earth'.

TIMES: During Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the city of Mariupol suffers a siege described by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a 'terrorist operation rather than a war'.

