

Music

Harrison Birtwistle, composer, 1934-2022

His music could be spiky and visceral but it was also deeply rooted in English landscapes

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Sir Harrison Birtwistle at home in Wiltshire in 1997 © Bridgeman Images

Sir Harrison Birtwistle, who has died aged 87, liked to take his time answering the questions which everyone always seemed intent on asking him. He was the most feted British composer of his generation, adored by his younger colleagues, for whom he was an artistic father-figure. His answers, often grudging, frequently monosyllabic, usually came after a pause during which not only the question, but the entire world from which it had sprung, was weighed and scrutinised.

In conversation as in music, the important thing for Birtwistle was authenticity. If something

didn't sit right, didn't seem real, he would quickly lose interest. He would see straight through the slightest pretence. The "establishment", which welcomed him with open arms, was something he professed to never being part of; he was known to throw bread rolls at friends surreptitiously during award dinners at the Dorchester hotel.

Birtwistle's unsentimental gaze, and the aesthetically generous but artistically fearless mind from which it emerged, is evident across his musical output. From 1965's *Tragodeia*, a series of Dionysian rites structured around the form of an ancient Greek choral ode, to 2012's *Moth Requiem*, in which a life-long fascination with the butterfly's ill-starred cousins is woven into a 12-part study of sonic transformation and transience, his music is sensuous, often exquisite, but never pretty or picturesque. Rather, the feeling is always one of an unflinching engagement with the natural and human worlds, or with the turbulent point at which the two meet.

The son of two bakers, Harry (as he was called; he never knew why his parents christened him so grandly) grew up on the edge of Accrington in northern England, at home in Lancashire's wild uplands and in its industrial heartland. Many of his pieces express this interdependence of rural and urban environments, for example the opera *Yan Tan Tethera* and *Panic* (after the Greek god Pan), the *succès de scandale* of the 1995 Last Night of the Proms.



Birtwistle said: 'I wanted to write a music that would retain its mysteries' © Bridgeman Images

His musical palette can equally be traced to a world of clogs on cobblestones (the first sound he said he remembered), the clatter of machinery and the intense quiet of a simple home in which he was the only child. There was also the local brass and wind band which he joined at the age of seven, taking up the clarinet. The timbres of brass, woodwind and drum forever remained his creative home. He was never comfortable writing for strings.

It was as a clarinettist that he gained a scholarship to the Royal Manchester College of Music, where he also studied composition and found himself quickly allied with a group of contemporaries — the composers Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell Davies, the pianist John

Ogdon and the trumpeter Elgar Howarth — who together formed the New Music Manchester group, a collective devoted to the composition and performance of modern and contemporary music.

The group eventually transformed the English musical landscape from its “dusty” pastoral preoccupations. Harry found his home there simply because the world always looked and sounded different to him. As he put it later, “I have always felt that I have had a music in my head that didn’t exist. I wanted to write a music that would retain its mysteries and never become familiar.”

Birtwistle’s breakthrough came with the premiere of *Punch and Judy* at the 1968 Aldeburgh Festival. The opera, composed largely while studying at Princeton, galvanised his life-long preoccupation with the cyclical violence and renewal implicit in the folk cultures of England and ancient Greece. The opera is broken up into more than a hundred self-contained numbers, each focused on ritualising a particular effect and treating the characters not as individuals but as archetypes.

A life-long obsession was the story of Orpheus, the mythical demigod of music who charmed the spirits of Hades but was later torn apart by Maenads. Starting with *Nenia: The Death of Orpheus*, he devoted what perhaps remains his magnum opus, *The Mask of Orpheus*, to showing the character’s different, often conflicting aspects. He returned to the story, from the perspective of Orpheus’s twice-lost lover Eurydice in 2009’s *The Corridor*.

In the 1990s Birtwistle moved with his wife Sheila to a converted silk factory in Mere, Wiltshire, where he lived until his death. Sheila died in 2012. They are survived by three sons.

At an event not long after the premiere of *Panic*, whose Proms premiere lit up the BBC complaints switchboard and gained a scornful reception in parts of the press, Birtwistle was asked what he thought “the man on the street” would make of his music. An uneasy silence followed. “The man on the street,” repeated Birtwistle at last, turning over the words in a soft Lancastrian growl. “I think we’ve got a problem with the man on the street.”

As the audience chuckled sagely, as if to agree that a certain degree of ignorance about modern music among the wider public was unavoidable, the irritated expression on Birtwistle’s face gave his real meaning away. It was the establishment that had the problem. Besides, if the man on the street was present, it was Harry himself. He put it more directly afterwards: “Sometimes it’s better if people just shut up and listen.”