

# Harrison Birtwistle: an utterly distinctive composer who wrote music of delicate beauty

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Our chief classical critic knew Birtwistle, who died this morning, for more than 40 years. He pays tribute to a musician whose creativity and imagination knew no bounds

- [Composer Harrison Birtwistle dies aged 87](#)



He and his music were never easy to pin down ... Harrison Birtwistle at the Royal Opera House in 2008. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/the Guardian

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hen you or I look out a window we’ll see more or less the

same things”, a leading British composer once said to me, “But if Harry looked out of it, he would see something entirely different.” The utter distinctiveness of [Harrison Birtwistle](#)’s music came from his utterly distinctive view of the world. He was a very singular creative figure, one of the greatest in the history of British music, I would maintain, but he and his music were never predictable or easy to pin down. I knew him for more than 40 years and never ceased to be surprised by what captured his imagination, whether it was the intricate 18th century Dutch still life in a US gallery that interested him more than any of the great 20th century paintings on show, or discussing the French fondness for eating [ortolans](#), and the now illegal techniques employed for trapping these tiny songbirds.

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For a composer whose music was rooted firmly in early 20th century modernism, in Stravinsky, Webern and Varèse, and whose work was often held up by reactionaries as an example of all that was unapproachable and difficult about contemporary music, Birtwistle’s personal tastes could be surprisingly Catholic. When he was a guest on BBC Radio 3’s Private Passions [his choices included a song by Roy Orbison](#), and he once confessed to me his love of the music of George Butterworth, especially the [Shropshire Lad Rhapsody](#), and how much he admired [Gustav Holst’s Egdon Heath](#).

In a profound way he was very much part of the English pastoral tradition, though the landscapes his music explored may be very different and often far more disquieting than those of Butterworth or Vaughan Williams. Birtwistle’s was a musical world in which ritual always played an important part too, and it’s surely no coincidence that having previously lived in the Hebrides and southern France, as well as London, he eventually settled in Wiltshire, close to the most famous of all British ritual landscapes – Stonehenge.

Though he found it almost impossible to explain exactly how he composed, and how he used the tables of random numbers that played such an important yet mysterious part in his music, Birtwistle maintained that he felt he was constantly writing the same piece, that each of his works took a different path through the same mass of musical material. Despite the

apparent complexity of his scores, their labyrinths of interconnected tempos and the multilayered textures of his orchestral music, he always insisted that they were just built from the most basic musical ingredients of pitch and pulse. In a creative career that lasted more than 50 years, he explored virtually every musical genre, but its core was unquestionably his music-theatre works.

As a child he had built theatrical sets, imagining the dramas that took place within them; it was an idea that he revived in 2004 for his music-theatre piece The Io Passion. The concept of a hidden scenario, “secret theatre”, as one of his finest ensemble pieces is called, was behind much of his output, not just the large-scale operas from Punch and Judy to The Minotaur, but also the works that defy easy categorisation, such as the extraordinary improvised Bow Down (1977), or the “mechanical pastoral” Yan Tan Tethera (1986), both to texts by the poet Tony Harrison, and the finest of all his collaborations from his years at the Royal National Theatre, his devastatingly spare score for Peter Hall’s 1983 production of The Oresteia.

Among his six full-length operas, only one, The Last Supper, premiered in Berlin in 2000, which is hobbled by its sententious libretto, seems unlikely to endure. But with the exception of Punch and Judy, productions of the others have been disappointingly few, though at least in 2019 Birtwistle was able to see The Mask of Orpheus, perhaps his greatest single achievement, on stage again, despite the shortcomings of the production. And though his music still presents many challenges to orchestras and ensembles, the brilliance of scores such as The Triumph of Time, ...agm ..., Silbury Air, The Shadow of Night and Deep Time, should ensure their place in the repertory.

In public he had a reputation for gruffness, and though he mellowed considerably over the years, he could still be blunt to the point of rudeness if provoked. “You don’t like my music. Go away!” he once commanded a fellow music-critic who appeared when he and I were chatting before a concert. Yet in private he was quietly spoken, witty and a wonderful host. Those are qualities that perhaps appear less often in his music than they might have done, but the humour that surfaces in sections of his opera The Second Mrs Kong, and the delicate beauty and intensity of his choral Moth Requiem are certainly true to character.