

Harrison Birtwistle (1937 – 2022)

- 1934 Born 15 July in Accrington, England. Only child of Lancashire farmers. Grows up on small holding on edge of the town.
- 1941 His mother buys him a clarinet and he has lessons with leader of the Accrington military band, which he eventually joins.
- 1945 Begins composing. Few early works survive, with exception of *Oockooing Bird* for piano (c.1950).
- 1952 Wins scholarship as clarinettist to Royal Manchester College of Music (now the Royal Northern College of Music), where he studies with Frederick Thurston (clarinet) and Richard Hall (composition). Fellow students include the composers Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell Davies, the trumpeter Elgar Howarth and the pianist John Ogdon.
- 1953 With fellow Manchester students founds the New Music Manchester group as a vehicle for exploring important twentieth-century works as well as for playing their own music.
- 1954 Hears Messiaen's *Turangalîla-symphonie* in London, conducted by Walter Goehr – 'an absolute magical moment'.
- 1955 Undertakes national service (1955-57) as a clarinettist with band of the Royal Artillery.
- 1956 Only London concert by New Music Manchester group (9 January), organised by William Glock at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, including works by Goehr, Maxwell Davies, Lutyens and Hall, but not Birtwistle, who appears only as clarinettist.
- 1957 Attends a London concert (6 May) where he first hears Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître* alongside Webern's *Concerto* op.24 and Stockhausen's *Zeitmaße* – a formative experience. Undertakes postgraduate clarinet studies (1957-58) with Reginald Kell at Royal Academy of Music, London, followed by a short period playing with Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. Completes his 'Opus 1', *Refrains and Choruses*, on New Year's Eve.
- 1958 Signed up to be published by Universal Edition, with whom he remains until 1994. Marries Sheila Duff. Undertakes variety of non-musical jobs.
- 1959 *Refrains and Choruses* selected by Society for the Promotion of New Music and premiered at the Cheltenham Festival by the Portia Wind Ensemble. Birth of first son, Adam.
- 1960 *Three Sonatas for Nine Instruments* chosen by SPM for performance at Aldeburgh Festival, but withdrawn after first rehearsal. Score unpublished, but now housed at Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, Switzerland. John Ogdon premieres *Précis* for solo piano at Dartington Summer School. During this period teaches at three Dorset preparatory schools: Claysmore School and Knighton House (Blandford), and Port Regis (Shaftesbury).
- 1961 *Monody for Corpus Christi* selected to represent Britain at ISCM Festival.



- 1962 Appointed Director of Music at Cranborne Chase Girls School, Wardour Castle, Dorset (1962-65).
- 1963 Pupils of Knighton House and Port Regis Schools give premiere of *Music for Sleep*, commissioned by Musical Times and Music in Education. His second son, Silas, is born.
- 1964 Co-founds (with Goehr and Maxwell Davies) the Wardour Castle Summer School, with Michael Tippett as President. *Entr'actes and Sappho Fragments* premiered at Cheltenham Festival.
- 1965 *Tragoedia* premiered at second (and last) Wardour Castle Summer School to great critical acclaim. His third son, Toby, is born.
- 1966 Wins a Harkness Fellowship for two years' study in the USA. Becomes Visiting Fellow at Princeton University, where he completes the composition of *Punch and Judy*.
- 1967 Completes his American studies at University of Colorado at Boulder. Co-founds Pierrot Players with Maxwell Davies and Stephen Pruslin. Their first concert at Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, includes premiere of *Monodrama* (later withdrawn) to a libretto by Pruslin and dedicated to Maxwell Davies.
- 1968 *Punch and Judy*, to a libretto by Pruslin, premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in the presence of Benjamin Britten. *Nomos* commissioned by the BBC Proms and premiered by Colin Davis and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Approached by newly established London Weekend Television to write a TV opera on the subject of Orpheus, but project falls through.
- 1969 *Down by the Greenwood Side*, to a text by Michael Nyman, premiered at the Brighton Festival. Peter Zinovieff collaborates for first time on tape parts for *Linoi, Four Interludes for a Tragedy* and *Medusa*. Approached by Royal Opera House Covent Garden to commission an opera that eventually becomes *The Mask of Orpheus*, to a text by Zinovieff. Commission later passes to Glyndebourne (1973), then English National Opera (1975).
- 1970 Premiere in London of *Nenia: The Death of Orpheus*, to a text by Zinovieff. The Pierrot Players disband (and become the Fires of London).
- 1971 *An Imaginary Landscape*, a BBC commission, is premiered by Pierre Boulez and BBC Symphony Orchestra at ISCM Festival in London.
- 1972 *The Triumph of Time* premiered in London by Lawrence Foster and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Writes his only film score to Sydney Lumet's *The Offence*, with electronic realization by Zinovieff.
- 1973 Appointed Cornell Visiting Professor of Music at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania. Begins composition of *The Mask of Orpheus*, Acts 1 & 2 (1973-75). *Chronometer*, his only piece exclusively for tape, prepared with Zinovieff, is premiered in London.
- 1974 At invitation of Morton Feldman appointed Visiting Snee Professor at State University of New York at Buffalo (1974-75).
- 1975 On return from America moves to island of Raasay in Inner Hebrides. Appointed Music Director, National Theatre, London. Scores include *Hamlet* (1975), *Tamburlaine* (1976) and *Volpone* (1977). Also works on other productions in collaboration with composer Dominic Muldowney, including *Julius Caesar* (1977), *The Cherry Orchard* (1978) and *As You Like It* (1979).

- 1977 *Bow Down*, to a text by Yorkshire poet Tony Harrison, is premiered at National Theatre.
- 1981 Writes highly acclaimed music for Peter Hall's production of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy at National Theatre in a new translation by Tony Harrison. Featured composer at Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. Resumes composition of *The Mask of Orpheus*, Acts 2 & 3 (1981-84).
- 1982 Becomes Associate Director, National Theatre, and moves to Lunearde in the Lot region of France. Begins work at IRCAM, Paris, with composer Barry Anderson on the electronic music components for *The Mask of Orpheus*.
- 1984 London Sinfonietta premieres *Secret Theatre* at his fiftieth birthday concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Invited to Japan for a major retrospective of his music in Tokyo. First full-length study of his music published by Michael Hall (*Harrison Birtwistle*, Robson Books, London).
- 1985 Directs Summerscope Festival at London's South Bank Centre under the title 'Harrison Birtwistle: His Fancies, His Toys, His Dreams'.
- 1986 Premiere of *The Mask of Orpheus* by English National Opera at London Coliseum, conducted by Elgar Howarth and Paul Daniel, directed by David Freeman. Wins prestigious Grawemeyer Award from the University of Louisville. *Yan Tan Tethera* premiered by Opera Factory/London Sinfonietta at Queen Elizabeth Hall. *Earth Dances*, another BBC commission, is premiered by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Peter Eötvös - 'a desolate, disturbing rite of spring for this decade' (Nicholas Kenyon). Made Chevalier des arts et des lettres by French government and Honorary Fellow of Royal Academy of Music.
- 1987 *The Mask of Orpheus* wins the Evening Standard Award for Opera. *Endless Parade* is premiered by trumpeter Håkan Hardenberger and the Collegium Musicum of Zurich. The work is commissioned and conducted by Paul Sacher and this association leads in 1989 to the Paul Sacher Stiftung's acquisition of all the manuscript material in Birtwistle's possession and an ongoing archival relationship.
- 1988 Knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. Major BBC 'Endless Parade' Birtwistle Festival at the Barbican Centre, London including UK premiere of his trumpet concerto *Endless Parade*.
- 1989 Discovers poetry of Paul Celan in translation and begins *9 Settings of Celan* (1989-96).
- 1991 *Gawain* premiered at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. Wins Evening Standard Award for Opera a second time. Featured composer at Wien Modern festival.
- 1992 *Antiphonies* premiered in Paris by Philharmonia Orchestra and Joanna MacGregor (piano), conducted by Boulez. Appointed to Board of the South Bank Centre, London (1992-2002).
- 1993 Appointed Composer-in-Residence to London Philharmonic Orchestra.
- 1994 Appointed first Henry Purcell Professor of Composition at King's College, London (1994-2002). *Gawain* revived at the Royal Opera House in revised version, followed by a recording (Collins Classics 1996). *The Second Mrs Kong* premiered by Glyndebourne Touring Opera and subsequently revived at Glyndebourne Festival (1995), with further new productions (in German) in Heidelberg and Vienna. Tour of *Earth Dances* by Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Christoph von Dohnányi includes USA, Salzburg Festival and the BBC Proms, followed by a recording (Decca 1996).



- 1995 Awarded the Ernst von Siemens Foundation Prize. Tribute concert of *Secret Theatre* and *Endless Parade* given in Munich. Moves to Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers. *Panic* premiered at the Last Night of the Proms to controversial critical acclaim.
- 1996 Moves from France to new permanent home in Mere, Wiltshire. *Pulse Shadows* premiered in Witten, Germany. South Bank Centre's 'Secret Theatres' Festival includes UK premiere of *Pulse Shadows* and a new semi-staged production of *The Mask of Orpheus*, followed by a recording (NMC 1997). Mitsuko Uchida is soloist in US premiere of *Antiphonies* with Los Angeles Philharmonic and Boulez.
- 1997 Appointed Director of Composition at Royal Academy of Music, London.
- 1998 *Exody* premiered in Chicago by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, followed by its European premiere at the BBC Proms. Simon Rattle conducts *The Triumph of Time* with City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in UK and at Konzerthaus in Vienna. Made Fellow of King's College, London. Update to Michael Hall's study of his music published (*Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years*, Robson Books).
- 1999 Rattle conducts *Earth Dances* with CBSO in UK and Vienna
- 2000 *The Last Supper* premiered at the Staatsoper, Berlin, conducted by Barenboim. The production travels to Glyndebourne Touring Opera (conducted by Elgar Howarth) in the autumn and Glyndebourne Festival the following summer. Two full-length studies of his music published by Robert Adlington (*The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*, Cambridge University Press) and Jonathan Cross (*Harrison Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music*, Faber & Faber).
- 2001 Boulez tours *Earth Dances* with Ensemble Modern Orchestra, opening three major festivals: musica viva in Munich, Wien Modern, and European Music Month in Basel. Made Companion of Honour by Queen Elizabeth II. Chairholder in Composition at University of Alabama (2001-02).
- 2002 Returns to the Royal National Theatre to provide music for Sir Peter Hall's production of Euripides' *Bacchae*. *The Shadow of Night*, a Cleveland Orchestra commission, is premiered under Dohnányi in Cleveland, with a subsequent performance at Carnegie Hall, New York. Teldec recording of *Pulse Shadows* wins Gramophone Award for Contemporary Music.
- 2003 *Theseus Game* for ensemble and two conductors premiered by Ensemble Modern at RUHRtriennale and by London Sinfonietta at Huddersfield Festival. *The Gleam*, a Christmas carol, premiered at King's College Cambridge Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols.
- 2004 Featured composer at Aldeburgh Festival, including premiere of chamber opera *The Io Passion*. Featured composer at Lucerne Festival, including *Night's Black Bird* commissioned as a companion piece to *The Shadow of Night*. An extended 70th birthday celebration under the title 'Birtwistle Games' is held at the Southbank Centre, including a major retrospective of his music and an exhibition of some of his 'falling line' drawings.
- 2006 Begins series of *Bogenstrich* ('bow-stroke') compositions for various combinations of cello, voice and piano.



- 2008 *The Minotaur* premiered by The Royal Opera, Covent Garden, conducted by Antonio Pappano. Production subsequently released on DVD by Opus Arte. *String Quartet: The Tree of Strings* premiered by Arditti Quartet in Witten and then toured around Europe.
- 2009 *The Corridor*, a new music-theatre piece based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, initiates the Britten Studio at the Aldeburgh Festival, with further stagings at the London Southbank Centre, Holland Festival, Bregenz Festival and in the USA. Act 2 of *The Mask of Orpheus* given semi-staged performance at the BBC Proms to mark his 75th birthday. Full-length study of *The Mask of Orpheus* by Jonathan Cross published (Ashgate).
- 2010 The cantata *Angel Fighter* premiered at the Leipzig BachFest in the Thomaskirche.
- 2010 Made Honorary Doctor of Music by Cambridge University, to add to similar honours already received from City, Hull, London, Manchester, Salford and Sussex Universities.
- 2011 Christian Tetzlaff premieres *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, followed by the European premiere at the BBC Proms. *In Broken Images* (after Gabrieli) premiered by London Sinfonietta in Milan and Turin to mark 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy. NMC recording of *Night's Black Bird* (disc also containing *The Shadow of Night* and *The Cry of Anubis*) wins Gramophone Award for Contemporary Music.
- 2012 Appointed Visiting Professor at the Royal Academy of Music. Complete strings quartets recorded by Arditti Quartet on Aeon label. *Gigue Machine* for solo piano premiered by Nicolas Hodges in Stuttgart and played at the BBC Proms. Death of his wife Sheila. Full-length study of his theatre works published by David Beard (*Harrison Birtwistle's Operas and Music Theatre*, Cambridge University Press). Premiere in Amsterdam of *The Moth Requiem*.
- 2013 Revival of *The Minotaur* at The Royal Opera in London (January 2013), featured composer at Salzburg Festival including a new production of his opera *Gawain* (July – August 2013). Judged Toru Takemitsu Composition Competition.
- 2014 80th birthday year including a series of five concerts at the Barbican Centre London during May featuring some of his most important compositions including *Gawain* (BBCSO), *Earth Dances* (LSO), *Silbury Air* (BCMG), *Yan Tan Tethera* (Britten Sinfonia) and *Tree of Strings* (Arditti Quartet). The South Bank's tribute in December 2014 featured the UK premiere of *Responses: Sweet disorder and the carefully careless* (LPO Jurowski) written for Pierre-Laurent Aimard and premiered in Munich with subsequent performances in Porto and Boston, the London Sinfonietta performed *Theseus Game* and *In Broken Images*. *The Axe Manual* was performed by Colin Currie and Tamara Stefanovich. Faber publish *Wild Tracks*, a book of conversations between the composer and Fiona Maddocks. He received honorary degrees from the University of Oxford, Birmingham Conservatoire and Edge Hill University.
- 2015 *The Cure* world premiere for the Aldeburgh Festival and the Royal Opera House. *The Silk House Sequences* for the Arditti Quartet. Received the Wihuri Sibelius prize for music and BASCA Award for *Responses: Sweet disorder and the carefully careless*.
- 2016 Complete works for string quartet performed by Arditti Quartet at Wien Modern. *The Corridor* and *The Cure* featured at the Holland Festival. *Five Lessons in a Frame* jointly commissioned by the London Sinfonietta and Ensemble MusikFabrik and performed in London.

- 2017 World premiere of *Deep Time* with Daniel Barenboim and the Berlin Staatskapelle, UK premiere at the BBC Proms. Composer in Residence at Casa da Musica, Porto including performances of *Earth Dances*, *Theseus Game*, *Panic*, *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* and *Silbury Air*. Curates concerts for the Berliner Festspiele, Barbican Centre and at Plush Festival. *Dear Dusty Moth* commissioned by Acht Bruecken Cologne for Das Neue Ensemble.
- 2018 World premiere of *Keyboard Engine – Construction for Two Pianos* with Pierre-Laurent Aimard and Tamara Stefanovich at Snape Maltings, *Intrada* for piano and percussion (Nicolas Hodges and Colin Currie) received premiere performances at the Library of Congress Washington and Southbank Centre London, *Three Holy Songs* commissioned by Das Neue Ensemble Hannover to include *The Literalist* from the Robin Blaser texts, *Donum Simoni* for the LSO/Barbican to mark the opening season of Sir Simon Rattle's tenure as Music Director of the London Symphony Orchestra. A new version of *Pulse Sampler* was performed with the London Sinfonietta. *Deep Time* wins BASCA's Best Orchestral Composition at the British Composer Awards, marking Birtwistle's eighth win at the awards.
- 2019 World Premiere of *Duet for Eight Strings* for the Nash Ensemble performed by Lawrence Power and Adrian Brendel at Wigmore Hall, *...when Falling Asleep*, a song for Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, and *Pictured Within, Birthday Variations for M. C. B.* for the BBC Proms. *The Mask of Orpheus* is revived at English National Opera for the 19/20 season's Orpheus myth series, conducted by Martyn Brabbins and directed by Daniel Kramer. Concerts of note include *Night's Black Bird* by the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester and Robin Ticciati, *Shadow of Night* by the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Simon Rattle, the Netherlands premiere of *Responses* by Pierre-Laurent Aimard and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra with Vladimir Jurowski, and *Deep Time* Portuguese premiere at Casa da Musica Porto. Featured for the first time on BBC Radio 3's Composer of the Week, interviewed by Donald Macleod at his home in Wiltshire.
- 2020 *old man asleep* is written for the Reina Sofia School of Music in Santander. World premiere is delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Further planned performances include *Cortege* by Aurora Orchestra at Kings Place in London, *Deep Time* by the Basel Sinfonietta and also the Royal Academy of Music Symphony Orchestra at the Aldeburgh Festival
- 2021 *old man asleep* receives its world premiere at the Reina Sofia School of Music. Birmingham Contemporary Music Group gives a livestreamed performance of *Roddy's Reel*, and the Nash Ensemble perform *Duet for Eight Strings* again at Wigmore Hall.
- 2022 Performances include *Nomos* at the Casa da Musica in Porto, *Endless Parade* with Hakan Hardenberger and conducted by Daniel Harding, and *Deep Time* in London, performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted by Edward Gardner. A disc of chamber works is recorded by the Nash Ensemble, released on BIS Records.
- 2022 Dies at his home in Mere, Wiltshire, on 18th April 2022, aged 87.