

Nicholas Snowman's tribute to Harrison Birtwistle for the London Sinfonietta

Much has been said naturally enough of Harry Birtwistle's sheer musical genius but to those of us to whom he was close, our friend's extremely joyous appreciation of fine cuisine and exceptional wine will recall wonderful memories.

I discovered this essential element in Harry's nature at our very first meeting. David Atherton was conducting the first and unforgettable performances of "Punch and Judy" at Aldeburgh shortly after the creation of the London Sinfonietta which we had just formed.

"Nick, let's commission a new piece designed specifically for the Sinfonietta from Harry Birtwistle". I duly arranged to meet Harry with Tony Pay and Andrew Rosner, who later became the composer's long serving and devoted manager. We were young and rather "studenty" young men in those days, sharing a flat in West Hampstead, and lunching modestly in a local pub - Coca Cola mixed with rum was I seem to recall our most sophisticated beverage.

We met Harry as planned at Goodge Street tube station and started looking for a pub in the area. Then the great man's charming Lancastrian burr was heard suggesting we march a little further and look for "a nice little place I know round the corner". We ended up experiencing what for us was a totally unknown level of food and drink at the then renowned "L'Etoile" in Charlotte Street. An unforgettably enjoyable time was shared, the masterpiece *Verses for Ensembles* was launched and a bill of £100 arrived. I left the bill as a vital souvenir of the Sinfonietta's history in the archive. It represented half the amount of the commission fee, but then this was 1968.

Verses for Ensembles became the Sinfonietta's main calling card. Thanks to

the much missed and adventurous Decca recording manager, James Mallinson, David Atherton's tremendous recording of the piece with the Sinfonietta appeared along with much else on that courageous and brilliant series of recordings.

Our first major tour took the Sinfonietta around Europe - the Holland, Florence, Vienna and Tours Festivals under the direction of Pierre Boulez with *Verses for Ensembles* as our major British work. Harry's piece was enthusiastically received, and I believe these performances contributed to his rapidly growing reputation as well as "qualifying" this new ensemble for exceptionally generous funding from the British Council. Those were the days....

Food came back in a big way on this tour. Harry travelled with the Sinfonietta, as indeed he would for many happy years. The adventure was due to end in Sviatoslav Richter's festival in Tours. I heard again the honeyed burr of the great man - "there is a reputed three-star restaurant here in Tours". Thus, I and the percussion section, but not I imagine Harry, experienced our first three-star restaurant. As the meal proceeded Harry felt encouraged enough to ask the musicians to play even louder than in the previous performances.

For some composers, creating opera or music-theatre somehow requires a different, separate compositional process from the rest of their output. Harrison Birtwistle, however, like Hector Berlioz and the young Stravinsky, is a composer whose work in whatever form is 'theatrical'. Some commentators have seen this as a consequence of Birtwistle's period as music director of the National Theatre, where he spent eight years (from 1975) in a particularly congenial and productive environment; it was there that

he composed music for Peter Hall's production of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, which was to have a great influence on his stage pieces. But even from the 1960s it is clear that Birtwistle's musical thought is inherently dramatic and that a sense of theatre pervades all his scores.

In *Verses for Ensembles* the dramatic pattern of his earlier *Tragoedia* is taken a step further: not only is there a clear differentiation between the 'roles' of the instruments, as between protagonist and chorus, but a 'staging' is introduced as the players move from place to place in accordance with a prescribed 'production'. The ensembles of the title are families of instruments – a woodwind quintet (in which each instrument doubles and thus becomes another quintet), a brass quintet and percussion. The quintets are arranged symmetrically and the players move according to whether they are playing high or low instruments. At certain points the two trumpets take up commanding positions and there are sections in which the horn player stands while a succession of instrumentalists play in dialogue with him.

Moving players round became something of a fashion in the 1960s, but in *Verses for Ensembles* the listener becomes conscious of a ritual being enacted. It seems that a kind of 'secret theatre' – to take the title of a later Birtwistle piece – is taking place as the direct function of changes in sonic material, dynamics, timbres and pitches. If the work's sound-world recalls Edgard Varèse or Olivier Messiaen, there is nothing here of their static juxtaposition of suspended, isolated

blocks. For Messiaen, in particular, time stands still in eternity and his universe celebrates fixed truths. In Birtwistle we may hear suggestion of Messiaen and Varèse but we are always conscious of a dynamic process that is inescapably dramatic.

While Birtwistle was alive to 'European' influences – other composers' sound-worlds, the organizational preoccupations of the Darmstadt circle, the distilled poetics of late Stravinsky – he has assimilated aspects of them but still retained his individuality. And his own Englishness, reflected in his interest in such forms as the mummings' play and in traditional ballads, is a creative stimulus somewhat similar to Béla Bartók's relationship to his native Hungarian folk culture rather than a representation of some kind of ecological, pastoralizing nostalgia. Thus, a number of Birtwistle's theatre pieces, the opera *Punch and Judy* (1966-7), the 'dramatic pastoral' *Down by the Greenwood Side* (1968-9), the 'music theatre' *Bow Down* (1977) and the northern folktale *Yan Tan Tethera* (1983-4), form an important group of works based in British culture but reflecting a wider range of traditions. If Birtwistle's instrumental works tend to the condition of 'secret theatre', the stage works themselves are like planets encircled by instrumental satellites.

Verses for Ensembles was succeeded by an exceptional series of varied works commissioned by the Sinfonietta over the years. Thus, Harry Birtwistle gave us the profound satisfaction of becoming a continuous and inspiring presence for all.