Classical

# The wound in the score

*For Harrison Birtwistle, composing his wildly intricate music always meant grafting*

*by* KATE MOLLESON

Beginnings and endings: Harrison Birtwistle thought a great deal about both.

Let's deal with beginnings first. The composer cared intently about how to raise the curtain. He often launched us right into the action, from where he would make marvellous things happen with time: deep time, geological time, mythic time, skewed time, the sort of time where beginnings and endings can refract and telescope and loop back. His music, in all its gobsmacking newness, is also somehow primordial, tapping into stories and archetypes that seem as though they have always been there.

Birtwistle was one of the major composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. His death in April at the age of 87 closes a significant chapter in British music. He was serious, wry, generous, sometimes gruff, singular, funny and formidably determined. He loomed large for those who knew him and for those who knew his music—even for those who only knew *of* his music. His compositions had a not-unreasonable reputation for scary complexity, even though his aim was to write down the sounds in his head with as much clarity and directness as possible. It just so happened that those sounds could only be expressed by combining wildly intricate parts. "Writing music is an accumulation of detail," he said. "It's all detail." Another way he phrased it: "when you put two things together, you end up with another form of one."

His own beginning was in Accrington, Lancashire, in 1934, the only child to bakery owners Fred and Madge. They bought him a clarinet, which he became very good at playing. He joined local theatre bands and made his way to study music in Manchester, where he met a group of fellow musicians—Peter Maxwell Davies, Alexander Goehr, John Ogdon, Elgar Howarth—who became known collectively as the "Manchester School." They were interested in modernism, in ancient music, in rituals, myths and rugged theatre. Birtwistle, particularly, was interested in how the very old could be remade as the radically new.

His breakthrough piece was *Tragoedia* (1965), which emerged the same year he sold his clarinets and fully committed to being a composer. From there he was off, exploring brutal puppet tales (*Punch and Judy*) and mummers' tales (*Down by the Greenwood Side*), biblical tales (*The Last Supper*) and old English tales (*Gawain*). There were folk ballads (*Bow Down*) and Greek legends aplenty: *Panic, The Minotaur, The Mask of Orpheus* and more. He kept coming back to Orpheus—he saw himself as a sort of Orphic figure. "Orpheus sings sublimely every time," he said. "He messes up every time."

Likewise, Birtwistle grafted. He said he heard "wounds" in his scores. "It's bloody hard work, writing music," he conceded, but he wouldn't stop grafting.

There's a melancholia to the Orpheus story that chimed with him, too. Listen to his *Moth Requiem* (2012), a gorgeous piece written while his wife Sheila was ill, taking its lead from a poem by Robin Blaser about a moth caught inside a piano lid. It's scored for the magically eerie combination of 12 female singers, three harps and alto flute. The drama is vivid—from the start we're there with the moth, trapped, determined—but Birtwistle was never one for straight-up descriptive music. This is a luminous elegy of memory, shadows, loss.

What about endings? In his orchestral piece *Deep Time*, inspired (a word he hated) by the geologist James Hutton, Birtwistle picks up on the conclusion Hutton came to in 1788 that "we find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end." Sitting at his kitchen table in Wiltshire, Birtwistle once told me over cheese and whisky that he read a lot of crime novels. "Hardly anybody is any good at finishing things," he said. "I used to get to the last two chapters then throw the book away. It's different if you know exactly what the story is about. Then it becomes about how you tell it, like telling a joke."

Which he proceeded to do. This was the joke, first told deliberately badly: "a penguin goes into a bar and says, 'I've lost my brother.' The barman says, 'what does he look like?'" I admit I did laugh. "OK," Birtwistle grimaced, determined to prove his point. "A man walks down the street with a penguin. Someone comes up and says, 'you should take him to the zoo.' The man replies, 'we've just been there. Now we're going to the movies.'" This time we both laughed.

So it was about how the joke is told, how the piece unfolds. "Whatever you do, you take something and push it as far as you can," Birtwistle told Fiona Maddocks in their wonderful conversation diary *Wild Tracks*. Maybe his greatest legacy is that conviction to make everything he did an expression (he hated that word, too) of his creative ethos. Tending the garden, cooking a meal, making a mark on the manuscript. Do it properly, do it utterly. ◆