



## Classical music

# Sir Harrison Birtwistle obituary

**Composer renowned as a great modernist whose music is imbued with stubborn power and a sense of unreachable mystery**

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Harrison Birtwistle, who has died aged 87, was that surprising thing, a deeply English composer who was also internationally renowned as a great modernist.

His modernism was of a very particular kind, rooted in the primordial formal elements of music and ritualised theatrical gesture. This gives it an air of being simultaneously modern and ancient. Like that of so many English composers before him, Birtwistle's music often feels like a slow traversal of a landscape - often a specifically English landscape. And, perhaps most important, myth (often Greek but at times English) is the music's natural ambience.

This made Birtwistle - or Harri, as he was called by those who knew him - stand apart from the European modernists, who tended to be systematisers with a keen and troubled awareness of history arising from the recent past. The negative turn of German contemporaries such as [Helmut Lachenmann](#), whose musical statements are an anguished demonstration of the difficulty of making statements, was utterly foreign to him.

For Birtwistle, the mystery of music was a positive mystery; it could be conjured through a combination of iron will and hard work. That belief reveals itself in the music, which has a stubborn power, a sense of pushing and overcoming every obstacle, which is unique. One of Birtwistle's staunchest admirers, Pierre Boulez, summed up this quality when he said: "Birtwistle's music has a great power to convince."

That sense of conviction is partly a matter of rhetoric. Birtwistle's music makes big gestures of a stony kind. Even when the music is quiet, it seems somehow massive. But the conviction is also born out of the way the music works. The pieces often begin by setting out a set of premises, often of the simplest kind - a pulse, a single pitch, a small circling figure. From this something hugely complex grows, with an inevitability easy to feel but hard to analyse. Things unfold with patient slowness, like a river flowing, or the growth of a glacier.



📷 Peter Hoare, as Orpheus the Man, and Alfa Marks, as Eurydice the Hero, in the 2019 English National Opera production of Harrison Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

If there was a moment when Birtwistle's musical vision crystallised, it was surely the day in August 1965 when his *Tragoedia*, for 10 instruments, was premiered at the Wardour Castle summer school in Wiltshire (which he had co-founded the previous year). Eye-witnesses said that at the end Birtwistle jumped up and punched the air in triumph. And rightly so, because *Tragoedia* was an astounding achievement.

It hurls itself at the listener in a series of sharply contrasted musical blocks, arranged in an ingenious cyclic pattern modelled on the formal divisions of the

Greek choric ode. The music builds a huge tension, discharged by a plunging slow gesture on the harp that is one of the great endings in music. The music of *Tragedia* is repeated note-for-note in Birtwistle's first opera, *Punch and Judy*, premiered at the Aldeburgh festival in 1968, allied to the familiar tale of ritualised cruelty, and musically augmented to produce a complex series of more than 100 short "numbers".

To hear those two pieces now is to be aware of just how far Birtwistle travelled in the creative career of more than half a century that followed. The fundamental change in this span was a move away from sharply defined blocks separated by silences to a dense continuity, made up of distinct layers or strata, each with its own tempo and character. If one had to name the key date in the emergence of Birtwistle's "new" style it would be 21 May 1986, the premiere of his opera *The Mask of Orpheus* at English National *Opera*.

This opera, which was at least 15 years in the making, was described to me by Birtwistle proudly as "perhaps the most complex work of art ever made". It is scored for a vast orchestra, which includes keening soprano saxophones and a specially invented deep bass drum. Between the scenes are danced Allegories accompanied by immensely powerful electronic music for which much of the credit must go to *Barry Anderson*, Birtwistle's co-worker at the Parisian electronic studio IRCAM where these interludes were created.

The story of Orpheus's thwarted marriage to Eurydice, his pursuit of her to the Underworld, and his own violent death are enacted in a formalised way in which actions are repeated, each time from a different perspective, and each character appears in three different incarnations: as a human being, a Hero and a Myth (represented by a huge puppet). It is undoubtedly Birtwistle's most ambitious work, and it cost him a superhuman effort. Thankfully the prediction of one critic that it was a "beached whale" of an opera and would never be produced again has turned out to be untrue; it was given *a new production at ENO* in 2019, directed by Daniel Kramer.

Entering into this second phase gave Birtwistle a new fluency. Having been a slow and uncertain composer he went on to produce an impressively large work-list, though he always insisted that doubt and "creative blocks" were his constant companions, and that none of his works ever turned out quite how he wanted. This sense of unreachable mystery may partly account for the dark, meditative quality of much of his music.

### Harrison Birtwistle - *Earth Dances* (1986)





■◀ The Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne conducted by Markus Stenz in a 2010 performance of Harrison Birtwistle's *Earth Dances* (1986)

Birtwistle may fairly be described as the great hymner of melancholy among postwar composers, and he loved the tradition of melancholy in European culture. Dowland's song *In Darkness Let Me Dwell* was the inspiration for *The Shadow of Night* (2001) and Dürer's etching *Melencolia I* lay behind *Melencolia I* (1976) and *Night's Black Bird* (2004). This strain often emerged in the numerous sets of songs for female voice and a few instruments dotted through his catalogue since the 1980s, based on poets as varied as Rilke, Lorine Niedecker, Paul Celan and Robin Blaser who was also the librettist of Birtwistle's opera *The Last Supper* (1999).

Many listeners warm most to this quiet, often miniature-scale Birtwistle, but there is no denying the sheer power of the other Birtwistle, embodied in such works as *The Minotaur* (2008), which embodies the terrifying power of the beast in its huge clangorous, brass-drenched sounds, and the orchestral masterpiece *Earth Dances* (1986), often described as a "latter-day Rite of Spring". Yet at bottom they share the same formal processes, the same tendency to channel strong, even violent, feelings into a tight framework.

They also have an expressive kinship. Even the most violent of Birtwistle's works will have quiet, tender moments, and the quieter pieces are never wholly quiet. Perhaps the most evident link is the importance, in both the meditative and orgiastically violent works, of the notion of interruption. Even the gentlest of his songs have a small crisis at some point, a new foreign element that causes a disturbance.

The effect is ambiguous; the disturbance is assuaged, made to seem normal, but it also changes the music's course. Fatefulness and accident come together, a quality shown vividly in *Ritual Fragments*, a piece written in 1990 in memory of Michael

Vyner, one-time artistic director of the [London Sinfonietta](#). The ensemble as a whole expresses a slowly pacing ritual; within this frame, each instrument pays its own homage in turn, in an outcry that both affirms the music's ritual nature but also interrupts and transforms it.

### The Minotaur - Labyrinth scene extract (John Tomlinson, The Royal Opera)



■ John Tomlinson in the title role of Harrison Birtwistle's *The Minotaur*, at the Royal Opera House, 2008.

Although one can feel the influence of other modernists on Birtwistle, above all the ritualistic side of Stravinsky, the peculiar blend of violence, melancholy and aloof formalism is all his own. This surely owes much to his early experiences as a boy in the north of [England](#), where his unusual imagination made him an outsider from the beginning.

Born in Accrington, Lancashire, Harri was the only son of Madge (nee Harrison) and Fred Birtwistle. His parents worked in the family bakery business, later acquiring a smallholding. Birtwistle remembered his first pair of shoes were actually clogs. He took up the clarinet and played it in the North East Lancashire military band.

However, his most significant childhood memory was of the surrounding countryside, where he would roam for hours. Its rugged integrity was ruptured by the arrival of an immense power station, which the young Birtwistle deeply resented as an intrusion on his idyllic existence. This surely lies behind the idea of a “continuity which has been fractured”, a phrase Birtwistle used half a century later when asked to capture the essence of his music.

In 1952, at the age of 18, Birtwistle won a scholarship from Accrington grammar school to the Royal Manchester College of Music (now the Royal Northern College of

Music), where he studied clarinet and composition. Alongside him were the other members of what would become known as the Manchester School: the pianist John Ogdon, the trumpeter Elgar Howarth (who as a conductor later became one of Birtwistle's favourite interpreters), and the composers Peter Maxwell Davies and Alexander Goehr. While Goehr and Maxwell Davies leapt ahead with amazing confidence, Birtwistle seems to have kept his composing ambitions more or less secret; everyone thought of him as a clarinettist.

But like them, he was fired up by the avant-garde music filtering into Britain from Europe, and like them he was too independently minded to become a Boulez or Stockhausen epigone. His "Opus 1", Refrains and Choruses for wind quintet, completed in 1957 after the two-year hiatus of national service, already shows clear signs of the mature Birtwistle in its formalised verse-and-refrain pattern and its fondness for a lean, wind-dominated sound.



📷 Harrison Birtwistle in 1973. By then he had completed his first big orchestral work, *The Triumph of Time* (1971-72). Photograph: David Newell Smith/The Observer

In 1965 he sold his clarinets, a symbolic declaration of intent to be a composer, and gave up his teaching job at Cranborne Chase school in Wiltshire to take up a Harkness fellowship in the US. There he completed *Tragoedia*, and later the opera based on it, *Punch and Judy*. This and the shatteringly loud, rigidly block-like *Verses for Ensembles* (1968-69) confirmed his reputation as Britain's most radical composer, alongside Maxwell Davies.

But financially this was the most precarious period of Birtwistle's life. Birtwistle's determination to compose full-time caused great hardship for his wife, Sheila Duff,

a gifted singer who before their marriage in 1958 had a varied career, and his burgeoning family. For a while they lived in an isolated cottage on the Scottish island of Raasay, where they could afford to heat only one room.

Things became easier from 1973, when Birtwistle gained two temporary teaching posts in the US. By then he had already completed his first big orchestral work, [The Triumph of Time](#) (1971-72), partly inspired by Pieter Bruegel the Elder's eponymous [engraving](#). Birtwistle's second opera, *The Mask of Orpheus*, had by now already been commissioned by Covent Garden, but it would be 16 years before it finally reached the stage, in 1986, by which time the commission had moved to ENO.

In the meantime, Birtwistle had been invited by [Peter Hall](#) to work as director of music and then associate director at the National Theatre (1975-88). The experience of working with Hall on Tony Harrison's new translation of *The Oresteia* (1981) was decisive in formulating the theatrical language of Birtwistle's opera.

In 1986, the same year as the premiere of *Orpheus*, Birtwistle was the subject of a Channel 4 television documentary, *Behind the Mask*. He had now definitively arrived, both in terms of status and musically, in the sense that his music had entered into a "late style" that it would keep for the rest of his creative career. Birtwistle went on in the following two decades to write four more full-length operas and several small-scale music-theatre pieces.

[Gawain](#), based on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and premiered in 1991, is the apogee of Birtwistle's fondness for English folk tales. Here his obsession with cycles and symmetries is still uppermost. The key actions of beheading and seduction occur twice, and at the mid-point there is a vast cyclic episode portraying the turning of the seasons. But the growth in self-knowledge of the main character shows a new willingness to admit narrative into his theatre.

### World Premiere of Sir Harrison Birtwistles "Responses"



■◀ Rehearsals for the world premiere of Harrison Birtwistle's piano concerto *Responses* by Pierre-Laurent Aimard and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, 2014

The trend continued in *The Second Mrs Kong*, first seen at Glyndebourne in 1994, a part mythic, part urban fantasy about the “spirit of Kong”, now marooned in an underworld peopled by grotesques, and his quest for his beloved Pearl (the Girl with the Pearl Earring immortalised by Vermeer). The opera even has moments of farce, not a mood one ever expected to find in Birtwistle. *The Last Supper* (Staatsoper Berlin, 2000) imagines Christ and his disciples gathered together in our own time, to re-enact the supper and the washing of the feet after “two millennia of bestiality and vileness”.

Impressive though these works are, it is hard not to feel that Birtwistle’s genius is sometimes obscured by the moralising and narrative superstructure. His theatre is most riveting where it is latent, as in *Theseus Game* for ensemble and two conductors, premiered in 2003. And his engagement with texts is most persuasive in the small confines of song settings, as in *Pulse Shadows* (1989-96), settings of nine poems by Celan interleaved with nine movements for string quartet – surely the masterpiece of Birtwistle’s later years.

At the opposite pole to the gnomic profundity of these songs is the thrillingly virtuosic *Harrison’s Clocks* (1997-98) written for the pianist Joanna MacGregor, a set of ticking, whirring musical mechanisms inspired by John Harrison, the inventor of a mechanism that would keep precise time at sea.

In his later years, spent (from 1992 onwards) in a converted silk factory in Wiltshire, the works continued to come thick and fast. Honours and appointments arrived: a knighthood in 1988, the Grawemeyer award in 1989, the first Henry Purcell professorship of composition at Kings College London, from 1994 to 2001, the Siemens prize in 1995. His 80th birthday year prompted several retrospective series and a burst of new works, including the piano concerto *Responses: Sweet Disorder and the Carefully Careless*, premiered in London at the Southbank Centre by Pierre-Laurent Aimard and the London Philharmonic conducted by Vladimir Jurowski.

Though there were no more operas on the scale of *The Minotaur*, Birtwistle composed several more chamber-sized music-theatre pieces, including two based on texts by his closest collaborator, the poet David Harsent: *The Corridor* (2008) and *The Cure* (2015). Though his creativity remained undimmed, Birtwistle’s later years were overshadowed by the increasing ill-health of Sheila, who suffered from Parkinson’s disease.



He cultivated a deliberate curmudgeonliness, which became more pronounced as his eminence increased. “I’m not establishment,” he would growl. “People think I am, but I’m not.” In 1995 he had a chance to demonstrate that when he was invited to write a piece for the Last Night of the Proms, and produced a saxophone concerto of blistering violence entitled Panic, which caused widespread offence.

### Birtwistle Panic at the Proms (feature)



■ Harrison Birtwistle's *Panic* at the Last Night of the Proms, 1995

Birtwistle’s growliness sometimes took on a scornful tone, and he was not always kind in his attitude to younger composers. But he could be a charming host too, showing visitors round the sunken garden of his home in Wiltshire, talking about the difficulties of breeding turtles, enthusing over his much-thumbed volumes of Pevsner or books on the symbolism of the Green Man. As Hall remarked, one of Birtwistle’s great strengths was his naivety. In conversation he was as likely to refer to *The Wind in the Willows* as Paul Klee or the diagrams in D’Arcy Thompson’s *On Growth and Form* (two other profound influences on him).

He never lost his fascination with the simplest elements of musical form, a fascination always expressed in an empirical way. Birtwistle was never a systematic or theorising composer, which is part of what makes him very English; that and the sheer sound of the music, with its slowly unfolding landscapes, its eruptive bawdiness, its modal, antique-sounding lyricism. Yeats once described the English mind as “meditative, rich, deliberate”; it would be hard to find a better description of the music of Birtwistle.

Sheila died in 2012. Birtwistle is survived by their sons, Adam, Silas and Toby.

Harrison Birtwistle, composer, born 15 July 1934; died 18 April 2022

