

The Music of Myth

Andrew Clements pays tribute to Harrison Birtwistle

Harrison Birtwistle composed six more-or-less full-length operas and six smaller-scale music-theatre pieces, as well as a couple of pieces for dance, and scores for National theatre productions while he was music director and then associate director there between 1975 and 1988. Yet in a profound sense everything he wrote was informed by theatre and his very personal sense of it, whether overtly in his stage works or in the undisclosed scenarios – the ‘secret theatre’, to borrow the title of one of his most celebrated ensemble pieces – that lay behind his orchestral and instrumental pieces.

Birtwistle, who died on April 18 at his home in Mere, Wiltshire, aged 87, was born in Arrington on 15 July 1934. As a child in wartime Lancashire he constructed theatre sets for the dramas he imagined. Just how much his instrumental writing depended upon his ideas of music theatre was made explicit in his first work to gain widespread acclaim. *Tragoedia* for ensemble (1965), with its use of instrumental role play and musical structure based upon the elements of Greek tragedy. That link was then emphasized in his first opera, the ‘tragic comedy or comical tragedy’ *Punch and Judy*, given its premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1968, which as well as being constructed from a mosaic of closed Baroque forms – sinfonia, toccata, passion aria, passion chorale, etc – also incorporates the whole of the score of *Tragoedia*. Whether or not voices were involved, Birtwistle had already made it clear that his music was *about* theatre.

Birtwistle said on a number of occasions that he thought he was always writing the same piece, that all his ideas were hewn from the same block of musical and dramatic material. In its deliberately alienating, almost mechanistic way, the savagely expressionistic *Punch* effectively did present all the dramatic and thematic elements that he would explore in his subsequent operas and music theatre – the use of age-old stories, whether mythic or rooted, like *Punch*, in English folklore (which he also invoked in the music theatre piece *Down by the Greenwood Side*, first performed the following year), the obsession with ritual and cyclic forms, the reversal of time and the passage of the seasons. And while at that stage in his career Birtwistle had little interest in opera as other composers conceived it (if he ever did), *Punch* is effectively a number opera, even if the ‘numbers’ aren’t quite the same as those of Handel, Mozart, or Rossini.

The Mask of Orpheus, his treatment of the Orpheus legend first commissioned by the Royal Opera in 1969, but which then passed through several different operatic hands before English National Opera finally took on the premiere in 1986, is a number opera too, though on an unprecedentedly complex and massive scale. Birtwistle had set out to create, in his own words, ‘a formal world that was utterly new’. His ideas on drama had been further refined by

his experiences at the National Theatre, and particularly by working on Peter Hall's 1983 production of *The Oresteia*, and *The Mask of Orpheus* would remain his most extraordinary and singular achievement. For many years after the ENO premiere, he hoped that another company would take up the work – several plans for productions came to nothing – and although the 2019 staging at ENO managed to traduce much of the power and ritual intensity of the work's drama, Birtwistle was at least able to see again what he regarded as his most important work. The quality of his score did still shine through, not only in the powerfully wrought vocal lines and orchestral writing, but in the darting, shimmering electronic interludes, which he had realized at IRCAM in Paris in close collaboration with the composer Barry Anderson.

The conception and realization of *The Mask of Orpheus*, with its triple casting of the leading protagonists, an orchestra devoid of strings, its circularities and absence of a linear narrative, seem to give little thought to the sheer practicalities of putting a work of such density and complexity on stage. Birtwistle called it a 'lyrical tragedy', and in many ways it is regarded as an 'opera' only because it's hard to imagine anywhere other than an opera house being able to accommodate its musical and theatrical demands. But *Gawain*, which was first performed at Covent Garden in 1991, is designated as an opera, and was suddenly much closer to the operatic mainstream in almost every respect. The subject matter, the medieval story of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, is typical Birtwistle territory, but the treatment of it is much more direct and linear than in any of his previous theatre works, and the orchestral writing in particular is more gestural than before too; a visit to Bayreuth for Harry Kupfer's production of the *Ring* while he was composing the score had left its mark.

For the first time with *Gawain*, then, one could perhaps talk of Birtwistle as an 'opera composer'. Though in the stage works that followed his approach was never entirely conventional, and his music remained as challenging as ever, they seemed to show more awareness of what a difficult art form opera is to get right, and of what a composer can do to make that process as smooth as possible. *The Second Mrs Kong* was first performed at Glyndebourne in 1994, with Philip Langridge, who had previously taken the leading role in *The Mask of Orpheus*, as Kong. With its fantastical mix of historical and fictional characters brought together in a witty libretto by Russell Hoban, it created what is the nearest thing in any of Birtwistle's operas to a flesh-and-blood human story, and ought to have had all the ingredients to be a popular success, but that has not turned out to be the case. While it's easy enough to understand the neglect of the tendentious *Last Supper*, which was first performed at the Berlin Staatsoper in 2000, the failure of *Mrs Kong* to gain further productions or even a commercial recording remains hard to understand.

The Minotaur, another Covent Garden commission, in 2008, created much more of an impact. Through most of his career Birtwistle made a point of using a different librettist on each opera, with some of whom he had a better relationship than others. But for what proved to be his final large-scale theatre piece he worked again with David Harsent, who had

written the text for *Gawain*. He'd first become interested in the idea of a work around the story of Ariadne, Theseus and the Minotaur when he read a scenario for a Minotaur ballet by the Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and thought the opera contains many of his usual tropes – the use of repetition and ritual especially – it is first and foremost a work of perfectly paced dramatic immediacy, while in the Minotaur himself, conceived as a part for the bass John Tomlinson (who had created the role of the Green Knight in *Gawain* too), Birtwistle created perhaps his most rounded character portrait.

After *The Minotaur* came just two more theatre pieces, both to librettos by Harsent and both composed for the Aldeburgh Festival. They returned to his persistent preoccupations with Greek myth: *The corridor* (2009) recreates the moment when Orpheus turns to look back at Eurydice in the underworld and loses her forever, while *The Cure* (2015) focuses on an episode in the story of Jason and Medea. Scored for just a few singers and a handful of instrumentalists, they were the last in the series of music theatre pieces that had emerged in parallel with his larger-scale works, and which had begun in 1969 with *Down by the Greenwood Side*. It had also included the remarkable improvisational *Bow Down* (1977) and the 'mechanical pastoral' *Yan Tan Tethera* (1986), both to texts by the poet Tony Harrison, whom Birtwistle had met through his work at the National Theatre, and *The Io Passion* (2004), for which the starting point was a stage set that he had imagined, just as he had done as a child.

All these works, large and small, form the central core of Birtwistle's achievement as a composer, which is certainly the most important in British music since Benjamin Britten, and one of the most significant in Europe in the last half century. Some of his greatest orchestral and ensemble pieces could not have existed without the theatre works that anchored them; the relationship between the two may not subsequently have been as explicit as it was with *Tragoedia* and *Punch and Judy*, but it was vitally important, nevertheless. It all came from the same creative block, one of immense originality and inexhaustible theatrical imagination