

Harrison Birtwistle, Fiercely Modernist Composer, Dies at 87

His labyrinthine, theatrical works placed him in the first rank of 20th-century English composers, though his music was often tagged as “difficult.”

By David Allen

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Harrison Birtwistle, whose intensely theatrical compositions and uncompromising modernism made him the most prominent British composer since Benjamin Britten, died on Monday at his home in Mere, England. He was 87.

His death was announced by a spokesman for his music publisher, Boosey & Hawkes.

Mr. Birtwistle’s granitic, earthy works revealed their secrets slowly, and their structures were labyrinthine. Dissonant, weighty and to some ears forbidding, they often dwelled on similar themes from piece to piece, interrogating kindred ideas from different angles, developing ideas touched on earlier.

“I can only do one thing, and there is nothing else,” Mr. Birtwistle, who was active mainly in Europe, said in 1999.

What Mr. Birtwistle did, however, he did in a unique style of indelible permanence. Reviewing “The Shadow of Night,” the critic Paul Griffiths wrote in *The New York Times* in 2002 that that orchestral work was “like all its predecessors: something strikingly new but heavy with echoes from the past and, indeed, the future.”

“This is music made to speak now, authoritatively,” he added, “and (like little else in our time) made to last.”

Myth provided much of Mr. Birtwistle’s subject material. In “Gawain,” which was given its premiere at the Royal Opera House in 1991, the legend was Arthurian. Greek sources wove a more constant thread, from instrumental works that borrowed ancient structures like the early “Tragoedia” (1965), to his most successful operas: “The Mask of Orpheus,” a massively complex expansion of the tale that won the prestigious Grawemeyer Prize in 1987, and “The Minotaur,” an unsparingly graphic work with baying crowds and a rape scene; it had its premiere at Covent Garden in 2008.

“Birtwistle’s score is relentlessly modernistic, its astringency serving to underscore the opera’s violence and unrelenting tension,” the critic George Loomis wrote in *The International Herald Tribune*.

“One did not expect this crusty composer to turn mellow at 73, and he has not done so,” Mr. Loomis continued, adding that “this is not music from which one derives much sheer pleasure, but it is intently theatrical.”

Mr. Birtwistle’s interests were always primarily in drama and form, whether writing for the opera house or the concert hall. His compositions tended to be deeply ritualistic, as blocks of material were etched and etched again in sounds dominated by woodwind, brass and percussion.

Orchestral players were sometimes treated as if they were akin to characters in a theater. In such works as “Verses for Ensembles” (1969), “Secret Theatre” (1984) and “Cortege” (2007), instrumentalists played musical and dramatic roles, moving between ensembles and around the stage. The moving “Concerto for Violin and Orchestra” (2009-10) engaged the soloist Christian Tetzlaff in a series of duets with individual players, dissecting and reforming the genre even while extending it.

Mr. Birtwistle was inescapably an English composer, taking inspiration from distant predecessors, such as the Renaissance musician John Dowland, and incorporating even old techniques like the medieval hoquet. He had no time for the pastorals of more recent forerunners like Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose influence on his earliest works was quickly abandoned.

Mr. Birtwistle delved instead into the more harrowing side of nature, as in his unearthly “The Moth Requiem” (2012) for female voices, and the volcanic “Earth Dances” (1986), a vast score that divided the orchestra into six bubbling, geological “strata” of instruments, each erupting over separate time scales. It was often compared to Stravinsky’s classic “Rite of Spring.”

“You can find Birtwistle’s music ‘difficult’ or not, or like one piece more than another,” the composer Oliver Knussen said in “Wild Tracks,” a diary of conversations between Mr. Birtwistle and the journalist Fiona Maddocks. “But it seems to me that you can’t be indifferent to it. And that’s the mark of a great artist, I think.”



Harrison Birtwistle was born on July 15, 1934, in the mill town of Accrington, England, north of Manchester. He was the only child of Fred and Madge (Harrison) Birtwistle, who together ran a bakery.

Harry, as Mr. Birtwistle was universally known, trained not as a composer but as a clarinetist, taking up the instrument at age 7 and first playing in the local military band and in small theaters. At the Royal Manchester College of Music, which he entered in 1952, he played clarinet in small contemporary music ensembles, some of the work written by his fellow students his fellow students Peter Maxwell Davies and Alexander Goehr, who went onto significant careers of their own.

The gritty urbanism and industrial brass of Mr. Birtwistle's youth drew him to sounds he heard in avant-gardists like Stravinsky and Varèse, Messiaen and Pierre Boulez, who all became strong influences. (Mr. Boulez himself later conducted and recorded many of Birtwistle's works.) But few of Mr. Birtwistle's own early pieces survive, and his first published composition, "Refrains and Choruses," was not given its premiere until 1959.

After national service, for which he played in the band of the Royal Artillery from 1955 to 1957, Mr. Birtwistle took teaching jobs while continuing to compose. His breakthrough came in 1965, with the premiere of "Tragoedia" and the awarding of a Harkness Fellowship to study in the United States. As a visiting fellow at Princeton University he completed "Punch and Judy," a murderous operatic take on puppet shows that premiered at the 1968 Aldeburgh Festival in England. Britten, who died in 1976, reportedly left halfway through.

Following spells teaching at Swarthmore and the State University of New York at Buffalo — the latter at the invitation of the composer Morton Feldman — Mr. Birtwistle was appointed the music director of the National Theater in London from 1975 to 1983. His scores for "Hamlet," "Volpone" and Peter Hall's production of the "Oresteia," among other plays, were lost.

Mr. Birtwistle cemented his reputation in the 1980s with an extraordinary series of scores that included the orchestral "Secret Theatre" and "Earth Dances" as well as "The Mask of Orpheus," a four-hour masterpiece with a libretto by Peter Zinovieff. It was so elaborate that it took its composer more than a decade to write.

"For Mr. Birtwistle, there is no 'main action,'" John Rockwell of The New York Times wrote after the premiere of "Orpheus" at the English National Opera in 1986. "He has deliberately thwarted the narrative flow, or even the epic progression, of normal opera in favor of a dizzying montage of flashbacks, repetitions, reconsiderations and parallel actions."

The music was "unrelentingly dense and driven" on a first hearing, Mr. Rockwell added. "But if one allows oneself to start accepting the opera's gnomic conventions, its earnest search for the underlying truth behind our culture's notions of music, poetry, sex, love and death take on an undeniable power."

Mr. Birtwistle's work was always controversial. His "grim, raw, amorphous soundscapes make few concessions to narrow ears," as the critic Alex Ross wrote in 1995. For the 1994 revival of "Gawain" at Covent Garden, two antimodernist composers coordinated a heckling campaign against what one called Mr. Birtwistle's "sonic sewage."

The following year, "Panic," a raucous work for saxophone, drum kit and orchestra, was featured in the Last Night of the Proms. Its appearance in that traditionally jingoistic ceremony caused some in the press and the public to sputter with rage.

"I was treading on a sacred cow and the attendant manure," Mr. Birtwistle later joked. He denied that his music was all that difficult, and refused the premise of questions about the accessibility of his compositions. "Panic," he laughed, was "the nearest piece I've got to fun!"

Mr. Birtwistle, who was knighted in 1988, married Sheila Duff in 1959. She died in 2012. He is survived by three sons, Adam, Silas and Toby, and six grandchildren.

Asked by Ms. Maddocks in 2013 whether there was a continuity in his life from his childhood to his years as a composer, Mr. Birtwistle, whose gruff public persona hid a warm and witty personality, said that he had "achieved much more than I ever imagined."

"I've never felt I had ambitions for myself, only for my idea, and for it materializing into something worthwhile," he added, laughing.

"But I'm still here, still trying. And I'm still exactly the same."

Alex Traub contributed reporting.