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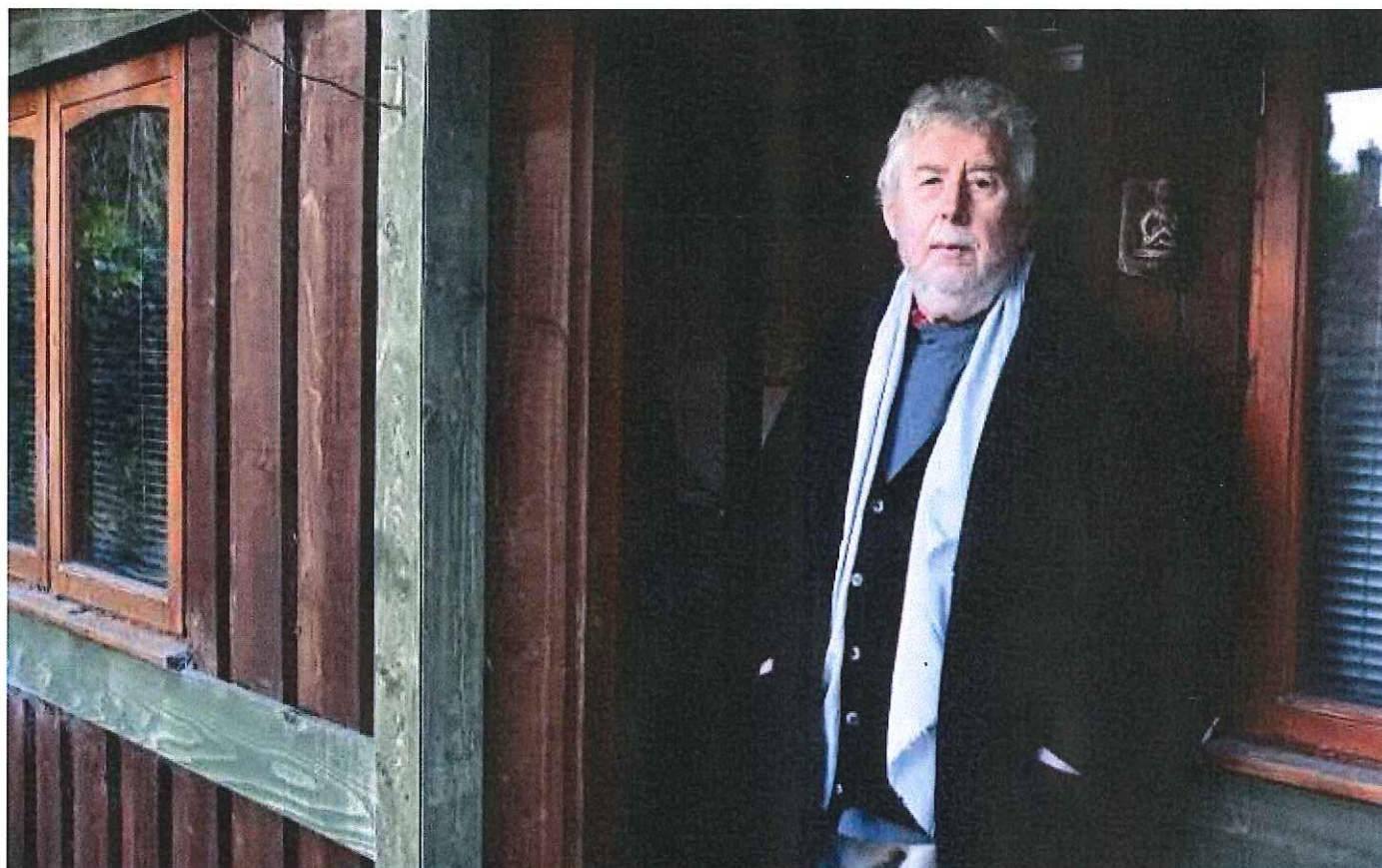
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Harrison Birtwistle: the welcome return of a Proms maverick



Composer Sir Harrison Birtwistle CREDIT: REDFERNS



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By **Ivan Hewett**, CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

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Harrison Birtwistle is our greatest living composer. As he prepares for this year's classical music extravaganza, he talks to Ivan Hewett

The Proms made Harrison Birtwistle a household name, but not in the way he would have wished. Twenty-two years ago, the BBC's switchboard was sent into meltdown when one of his compositions featured on the sacred Last Night, just before Elgar's Land of Hope and Glory. A gritty, uncompromising concerto for alto sax, jazz drummer, wind, brass and percussion, it was met with incomprehension by television viewers, many of whom did not hesitate to share their opinions with the broadcaster.

For days afterwards, the comment columns and letters pages of the national press were full of venom directed towards Birtwistle and modernist composers in general, whose work was deemed wilfully ugly and aggressive.

Today, Birtwistle's music remains challenging, but the man himself is generally considered to be Britain's greatest living composer. A dark, mythic, irrational power courses through his operas *The Mask of Orpheus*, *The Minotaur*, *Down by the Greenwood Side* and *Gawain*, and his vast orchestral tableau *Earth Dances*, though a gentler, more reflective strain can be heard in his clarinet concerto *Melancolia I* and his song cycle *Pulse Shadows*.

And this year the 83-year-old is back at the Proms, in the company of one of classical music's most popular and revered figures, Daniel Barenboim, who conducts Birtwistle's new orchestral piece *Deep Time* on Sunday, having already conducted the world premiere in Berlin.



Daniel Barenboim CREDIT: GETTY

The two men have the utmost respect for each other -- Birtwistle describes Barenboim as "one of the most extraordinary musicians I've ever met" -- but the fact is, the pair two really musicians couldn't be more different. Barenboim sits fair and square in the centre of classical music -- the great tradition from Bach to Wagner and beyond --, whereas Birtwistle has hardly any tradition behind him. There's something

unfathomably ancient about his ritualistic patterns and stark modal melodies. They seem to come from a time before culture had been invented.

Nevertheless, Barenboim seems to have no trouble appreciating the music of the curmudgeonly Northerner. "This is the third time I have asked Harri to write a piece for me. Not because I am stubborn, but because I think he is a wonderful composer," Barenboim says when I reach him on the phone in Berlin.

"What I like about him is the way he deals with big sound masses. Other composers deal in single lines, but with Birtwistle you have these interactions between whole sections of the orchestra." And, Barenboim adds, the title of the piece points to something very distinctive about it: "To me the piece is about timelessness; it could go on for ever."

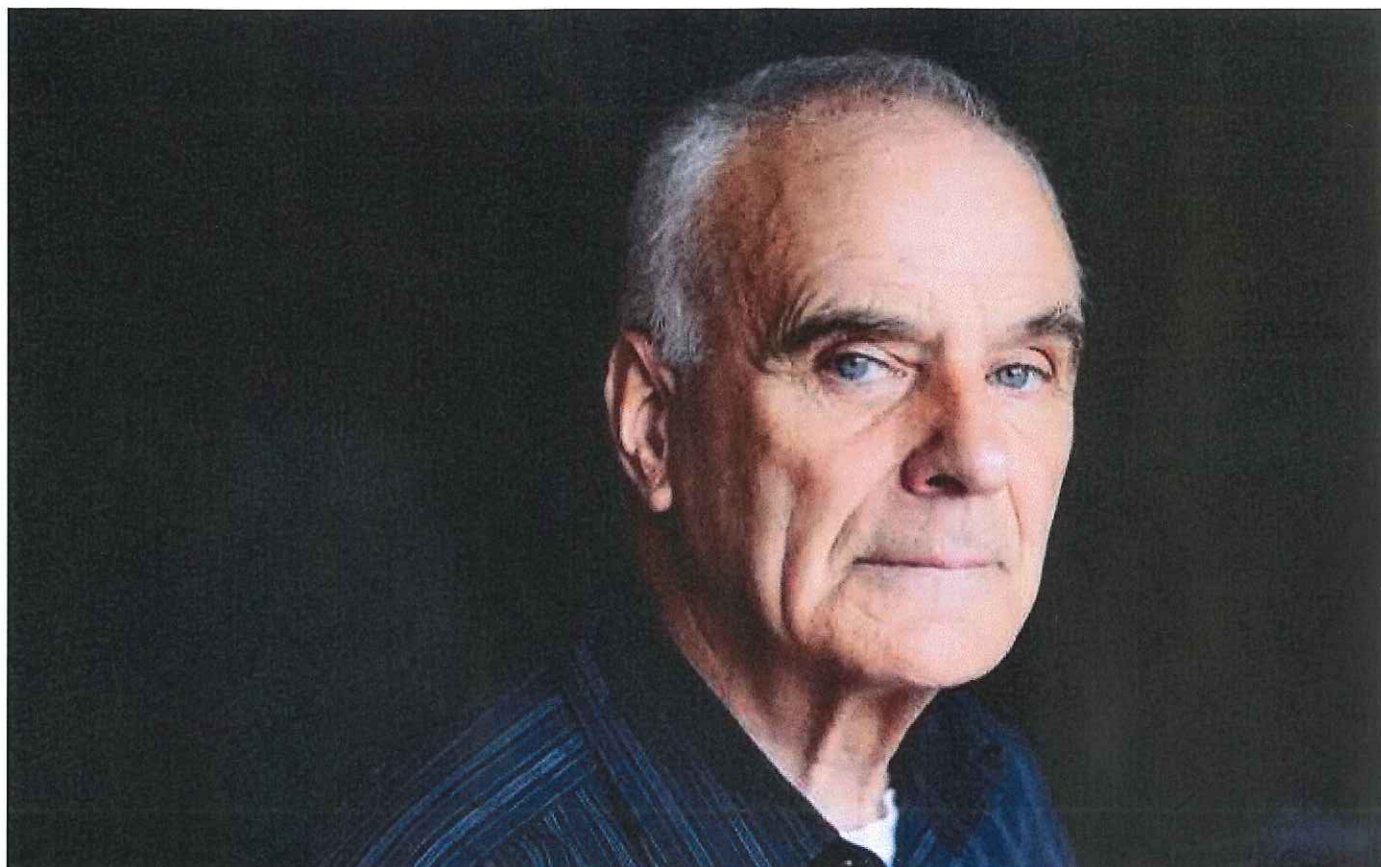
Birtwistle admits that time moves in a special way in this new piece. "I'm interested in the incredibly slow pace of geological change," he says.. "I've been reading about the 18th- century Scottish geologist James Hutton, who said that the way rocks form 'shows no vestige of a beginning, and no prospect of an end'. You have things staying unchanged for millions of years, but then the geological record shows that there was a sudden catastrophe, like a giant eruption, which could happen very fast."

It is tempting to suggest this interest in timelessness may also be connected to the stage that Birtwistle's has now reached in life.

"Time is strange, isn't it?" he says. "It seems to go faster [these days], which I suppose is what everyone of my age says. But sometimes when I'm lying awake at night – I don't sleep well now – it seems vast and interminable. I try to embrace that and enjoy it, but it's difficult."

The composer's wife, Sheila, died in 2012, and, since then, he has lived alone in an eccentric house in Wiltshire that was once a silk factory. The factory floor is now a sunken garden, with a pond where Birtwistle breeds turtles (he has a proper countryman's informed interest in nature). At the bottom of the garden is the hut where he composes, every day except when travelling. The lure of the possible, the thought that he might get it exactly right next time, is what keeps Birtwistle at his desk and looking forward. But he is not immune to the odd regret.

One unfortunate chapter in his past was his estrangement from the other great British composer of recent decades, Peter Maxwell Davies. They were exact contemporaries, and were both students in Manchester in the 1960s, Birtwistle at the Royal Manchester College of Music, Maxwell Davies at the University. But they fell out in the later that decade and hardly spoke to each other again.



Sir Peter Maxwell Davies in 2009 CREDIT: DAVID ROSE

What was the cause?

“Well, I’d created an ensemble to play new music called the Pierrot Players, which was supposed to be a resource for all the composers working at that time. But then Max wrote this incredible piece for the group, *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, and that took the whole idea of the ensemble away from me. It just became a vehicle for this one piece.”

So he was miffed? “Yeah, I was miffed, especially when I was put in the position of trying to write a piece in competition with his. I tried to resolve the problem, but he wasn’t interested. It’s a shame because you know I was great friends with Max.”

Now with Maxwell Davies gone, and many of his other contemporaries, who does he see eye to eye with?

“Very few people, but you know I’m not bothered by that feeling of being on my own,” he says. “In fact it’s a good feeling. It means I’m not in competition with anybody.”

The people he feels closest to are still the great modernist pioneers – Stravinsky, Debussy, and the great post-war modernists such as Pierre Boulez. And above all, Beethoven. “I love Beethoven because he is the greatest master of discontinuity. The great American modernist composer Morton Feldman once said, ‘It’s not how you get into an idea that’s important, it’s how you get out of it.’ Beethoven always finds a brilliant way to get out of a corner”.

The mention of Beethoven as a model suggests that Birtwistle isn’t as isolated from the great swim of classical music as he likes to make out. And Barenboim points to a parallel between Birtwistle and opera. “One of the things I find very interesting in Birtwistle’s music is the way things can happen simultaneously,” he says. “Think of the conversation we’re having now. You say something, I listen, I reply, you listen. In an opera this can happen all at once, and it’s something I find also in Birtwistle’s music.”

On Sunday, Barenboim has the task of bringing Birtwistle’s dense, turbulent, fascinating score to light, and is relishing the task. “You know, I have always tried to avoid conducting a piece because someone says, ‘Oh,

you really must conduct so-and-so's music, he has a big reputation," because then you are not making music from a sense of real conviction. Of course, not every piece I have commissioned has been equally good, but I can truly say this one is a wonderful piece. People ask me 'what is your favourite piece?', and I cannot say, because my favourite piece is whatever I am conducting at the time, if I believe in it. So when I conduct Deep Time on Sunday, that will be my favourite piece."

And what about Birtwistle? Does he entertain any thoughts of retirement? He insists not.

"I'm driven to do it because it's so damned interesting," he says.

"The most interesting relationship I have is the one with what I do, as a composer. There's something I'm trying to reach in all my pieces, and I still don't know if I'll ever get there."

Daniel Barenboim conducts the Staatskapelle Dresden in the UK premiere of Harrison Birtwistle's Deep Time on Sunday July 16 at the Royal Albert Hall (0845 401 5040). Hear the concert live on BBC Radio 3 and for 30 days thereafter on the BBC iPlayer

A history of classical music in 50 short pieces



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