

Sir Harrison Birtwistle obituary

Elusive and curmudgeonly composer of modernist and uncompromisingly ‘difficult’ music whose *Panic* caused just that at the Last Night of the Proms

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Obituaries



Birtwistle in 1986. He said of the Proms that he relished “treading in a sacred cow and the attendant manure”

Panic was the name of Harrison Birtwistle’s short blitz of sound. And panic is exactly what BBC executives did when they realised that Sir John Drummond, the Machiavellian controller of the Proms, had programmed the work in the second part of the Last Night of the Proms in 1995, where it would be heard not only by the select audience of Radio 3 but also by the great British public eagerly watching on BBC One for their annual jingoistic dose of *Land of Hope and Glory*.

The *Daily Mail* described *Panic* as “a horrible cacophony” while the *Daily Express* said that it was “unmitigated rubbish”, but to Hilary Finch, the *Times* critic, the 15-minute work had “tremendous, unremitting energy which

settles only fitfully in brief, magical breaths of wind music”. As the journalist Tom Service wrote more than 20 years later: “Instead of comforting, patriotic fervour, audiences were presented with violent contemporaneity.” Yet the performance achieved its purpose: it brought Birtwistle’s name out of the avant-garde and into the mainstream, even if that mainstream had little idea what the pulverising piece of uncompromising energy for saxophone, drummer and orchestra without strings was meant to represent. The composer himself was unrepentant, relishing “treading in a sacred cow and the attendant manure”.

Few composers have attracted such notoriety for their work as Birtwistle, who seemed to revel in being the enfant terrible of British classical music. As well as the *Panic* attack, hecklers jeered the revival of his opera *Gawain* at Covent Garden in 1994, while his name became so closely associated with dissonance that magazines published jokes at his expense. Even his family could be perplexed. On one occasion they were in the audience at a BBC studio recording. When the music reached a pause his father asked in a loud voice: “Is our ’Arry done yet?”

On another occasion his eight-year-old son Silas wrote: “Most people write about my father’s music. I am going to write about some other things to do with him.” It was a wise move, because Birtwistle’s music is extraordinarily difficult to write about and even the composer himself had difficulty in talking about it. This was in part because he was, as he put it, “constantly surprised at the way pieces turn out” — a surprising confession because his music never gives the impression of having gone off in the wrong direction. On the contrary, a powerful sense of controlled, even relentless progress is one of its most marked characteristics, particularly in his ritual and processional pieces. Birtwistle had been creating labyrinths of sound all his life. As the composer Oliver Knussen once said: “Harry’s compositional strategies are so unique and completely personal to him that detailed analysis without recourse to his sketches would be futile.”

Harry — everyone called him Harry — worked in an unorthodox manner, from a shed at the end of the garden equipped with an electric keyboard, table, sofa and huge cardboard panels on which to support the large manuscript paper upon which

he wrote. Some critics felt there was something of the “emperor’s new clothes” about both the man and his music, while others believed that a red carpet of sycophancy surrounded a composer who could be both curmudgeonly and rude. Yet, despite the cacophony that emerged from his performances, the classical music world would rise as one, as they did for his contemporary Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, to defend Birtwistle from any slight, whether perceived or genuine.

Birtwistle was one of the hardest subjects to interview, with many an experienced journalist emerging in frustration from an hour in his presence with a tape of near silence punctuated with monosyllabic fragments. “Don’t know . . . can’t remember,” was a typical answer to any question, all washed down with a cup of tea (he also shared with György Ligeti, his fellow composer, a love of custard). One journalist wrote that “talking to Birtwistle is like following a pig snouting for truffles. It looks aimless, but you know something good will turn up if you just wait.” The critic Fiona Maddocks spent several months in 2013 and 2014 making regular visits to the composer at his home in a converted silk mill in Mere, southwest Wiltshire, teasing out his thoughts on a myriad topics. The result, published as *Wild Tracks* in 2014, was a rambling collection of unsorted conversations that is as enchanting as it is disorganised.

Indeed, the only subject that Birtwistle seemed to feel at ease discussing was his extensive moth collection, which he had built up since his teenage years. “Natural history . . . an unresolved dream,” he would confide enigmatically. Yet even his lepidopterans would eventually be hijacked by Birtwistle the composer in the form of *The Moth Requiem*, with its incantation of the Latin names of moths, some of them extinct or on the verge of extinction, written in 2012 as his wife was dying. It received its British premiere at the Proms in 2013, safely away from the jamboree of the Last Night.



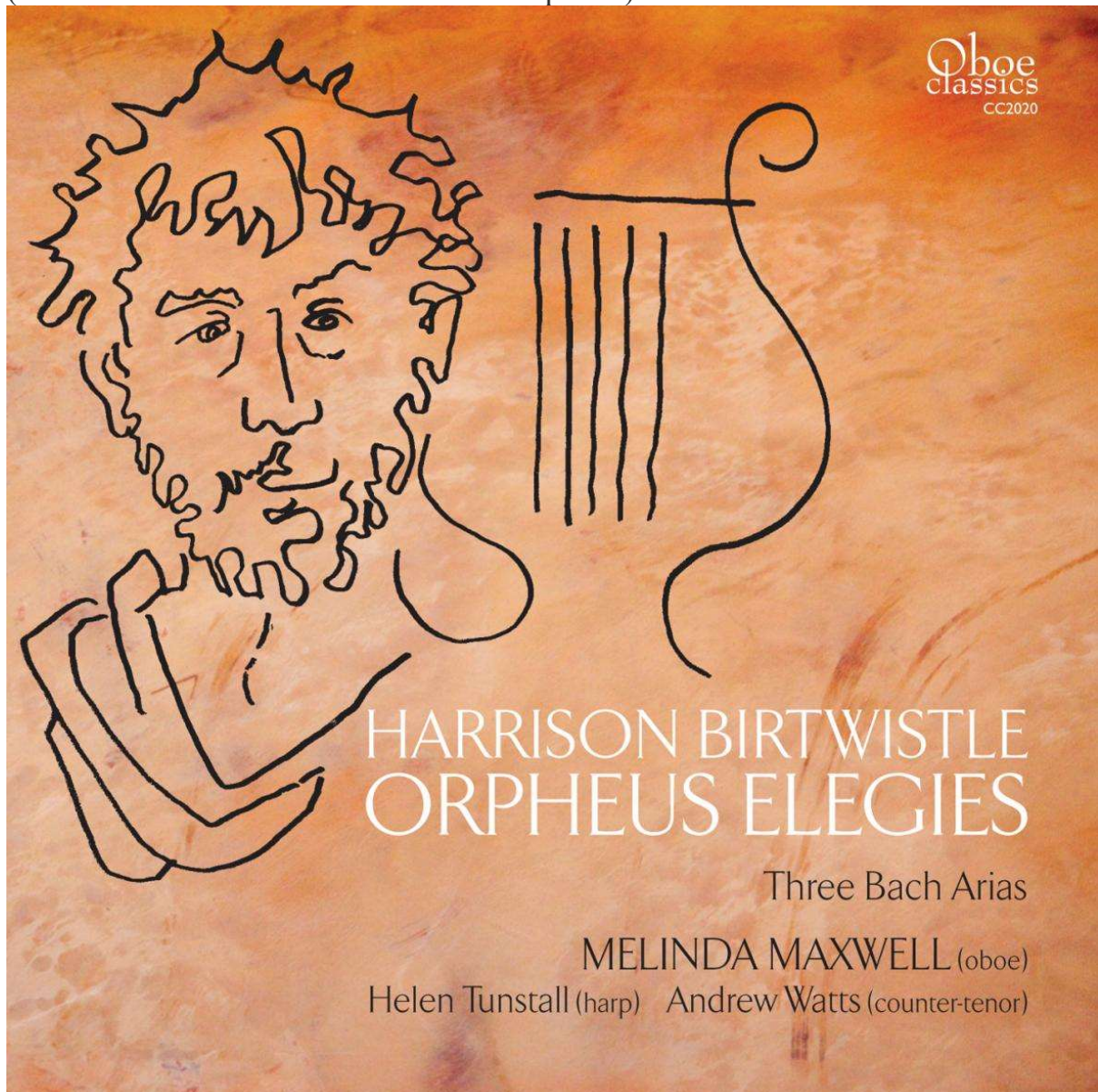
Birtwistle with the cast of *The Mask of Orpheus* in rehearsal, 1986

ALAMY

Harrison Birtwistle was born in 1934 to Fred, who had survived both Gallipoli and the Somme, and Madge (née Harrison), who came from a family of carpenters and coffin makers. They owned a small bakery and a smallholding near Accrington, a mill town north of Manchester, where his father kept pigs. “Every two weeks there’d be a delivery of great sacks of flour filling the room,” he recalled. Summers were spent with his mother’s stepsister at Fleetwood, near Morecambe.

He was an only child and retained throughout his life, though decreasingly so, a sense of isolation, of being an outsider, describing himself as “very much a loner”. He was seven when his mother, who was always sympathetic to his musical ambitions, gave him a clarinet; soon he was taking lessons and joined the local East Lancashire military band. His father owned a radiogram and he recalled hearing Richard Tauber sing Schubert. By his early teens he was playing hymns at the local Methodist chapel. A concert by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Walter Susskind playing Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* proved to be a musical epiphany.

A clarinettist from the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester lived locally and gave him lessons in a studio at the local piano showroom. “Later I used to take my girlfriends there,” Birtwistle recalled. “I used to play the piano with one hand when it all got a bit too quiet so no one would wonder what was going on.” For a while he was a builder, helping to erect council houses in Accrington by day, while in the evenings he played clarinet at the Accrington Hippodrome, accompanying pantomime and shows such as *Lilac Time*, *Kiss me Kate* and Gilbert and Sullivan (“Awful stuff. Sexless theatre. But I was paid.”).



A CD of his Orpheus Elegies
OBOE CLASSICS

Meanwhile, there was National Service as a clarinettist with the Band of the Royal Artillery based in Oswestry from 1955 to 1957, where he discovered jazz. A scholarship took him to the Royal Manchester College of Music to study with Frederick Thurston. He also studied composition with Richard Hall, another of whose pupils was Alexander Goehr. It was after a performance, by Birtwistle and Goehr, of Berg's *Four Pieces* that the two met Maxwell Davies. An informal group, with the pianist John Ogdon and the trumpeter (later conductor) Elgar Howarth, soon coalesced, with Goehr its leader.

Birtwistle, who had begun to compose, albeit almost surreptitiously, was later to say that at this stage his music was "sub-Vaughan Williams". Perhaps the latter's *Tallis Fantasia* pointed him towards modal systems and to medieval music. In any case, the stimulating shop-talk of what came to be known as the Manchester School brought new influences flooding into his musical consciousness.

His breakthrough came in 1957 after he had discovered Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* and Stockhausen's *Zeitmasse*, both seminal Darmstadt pieces. He destroyed many of his earlier works, claiming that they were "Boulez forgeries", meaning that his first acknowledged work was *Refrains and Choruses*, a short piece for five wind instruments, of which the horn is the dramatic protagonist. It was accepted for the 1959 Cheltenham Festival. "I wrote it off the top of my head. I can't justify a single note," was his characteristically blunt recollection of the work's genesis.



Birtwistle, top left, with musician colleagues from their Manchester days including Peter Maxwell Davies (back right, half hidden) Alexander Goehr (bottom left), John Ogden (centre) and Elgar Howarth (top right)

PETER MAXWELL DAVIES

Yet it did not get him out of the woods: a new piece had to be abandoned after the first rehearsal and he was forced to take on a series of menial jobs, including working in a factory near Slough and copying music for an earlier generation of composers, including Michael Tippett, Humphrey Searle and Elisabeth Lutyens.

Indeed, his life was precarious until, in 1962, he was appointed director of music at Cranborne Chase School in Dorset. “We all loved Harry,” recalled Caroline Mustill, a former pupil, “not necessarily because of the music, but because he was a very sympathetic person who took us seriously.” Later, when Birtwistle decided to focus solely on composition, he sold his entire clarinet collection to Mustill. Visitors to his schoolmaster’s home at this time spoke of an air of organised chaos, with one recalling that “chickens in the bath and nappies on the stairs, icy bedrooms and an ancient iron heated on the stove, all formed part of the enchantment”.

The school's smart young ladies endured this dour Lancastrian's *Entr'actes* when members of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra played the work at the school. It later became *Entr'actes and Sappho Fragments* and was heard at Wardour Castle Summer School, which Goehr, Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle ran for two years.

With *Tragoedia* (1965), a work that erupted from nowhere like a big bang of chamber music and contained a particularly savage horn part, Birtwistle's reputation began to grow. It was as well, because he had married Sheila Duff, a former singer, and the first of their three sons had been born. Adam is an artist whose idiosyncratic portraits of musicians appear in the National Portrait Gallery. He was followed by Silas, a sculptor, and Toby, an architect. Sheila died in 2012 after a long illness.

Offers now began to come his way. Not surprisingly William Glock, the radically reforming controller of music at the BBC, was early in the field, commissioning *Nomos*, a major work of which Birtwistle was particularly proud, for the 1968 Proms. *Carmen Paschale*, a motet with organ, was first heard at Aldeburgh, which also commissioned *Punch and Judy*, his first full-length opera (with a libretto by Stephen Pruslin). This work, a simple seaside pantomime that turned out to be a Greek tragedy of some violence, was uncompromising, lasting nearly two hours without an interval: no wonder some in the audience felt terrorised.



Birtwistle in his home studio in Mere, Wiltshire, in 2008

EAMONN MCCABE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Next came a tiny commission from Universal Edition, his publishers until 1994, to celebrate the 80th birthday of Dr Alfred Kalmus, the firm's paterfamilias. It had the engaging title *Some Petals from my Twickenham Herbarium*. Birtwistle's son, Silas, had noted that when his father emerged from the "hut" in which he worked, "he always looks round the garden. We have lots of old roses and plants and herbs." Yet Twickenham was to be the most urban of his various homes. For a while the family lived on Raasay, north of Skye; later they migrated to an austere part of Lot, in southwest France.

After Birtwistle's return from America he and Maxwell Davies formed the Pierrot Players, for which he wrote arrangements of motets by Ockeghem and Machaut and parodies of JS Bach that incorporated, for the first time, synthesized sound. However, the ensemble did not fulfil expectations and was disbanded in 1970. Meanwhile, a momentous subject was beginning to invade his mind and the first evidence of it came with a work for Matrix, a clarinet-based group for whom he wrote *Nenia, The Death of Orpheus*.

This was no more than a trailer for what is arguably his finest achievement, *The Mask of Orpheus*, which was commissioned by Covent Garden. Its premiere was delayed by nearly ten years after first the Royal Opera House and then Glyndebourne found that they could not meet the production costs. Finally, in 1986, English National Opera re-commissioned and presented it, the huge forces (including pre-recorded tapes) notwithstanding. In every sense multilayered, the work defies concise description; suffice to say it is surely a towering masterpiece. Meanwhile, in 1975 Sir Peter Hall had invited Birtwistle to become music director at the National Theatre where he stayed for eight years despite declaring that “I usually find myself recommending to producers not to include music in their new productions”.

Birtwistle maintained that his operas were not central to his oeuvre and that his best achievements lay elsewhere. Certainly *Earth Dances* is a masterwork, a latter-day *Rite of Spring*. Premiered in 1986, it received an overwhelming performance at the 1994 Proms by the Cleveland Orchestra under Christoph von Dohnanyi, who subsequently recorded it. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra commissioned *Exody* and premiered it in 1998 under Daniel Barenboim, who also introduced the controversial quasi-opera *The Last Supper* at the Deutsche Staatsoper, Berlin, in April 2000. The work was seen at Glyndebourne in 2001. In the Violin Concerto, whose soloist was Christian Tetzlaff, the solo instrument engages strenuously with different orchestral groupings, finally concluding in a mood of luminous serenity, the very last note a single pizzicato — a unique and magical effect. It was one of 13 of his works given in the Salzburg Festival’s contemporary music series in 2013. The Aldeburgh Festival heard the world premiere of *Songs from the Same Earth* and then came *The Moth Requiem*. Written for 16 female voices, alto flute and three harps, it derives from the composer’s own fascination with moths and a poem by Robin Blaser about a moth trapped, audibly, in a piano. It also reflects Birtwistle’s rage against the destruction of species and awareness of his own mortality: “Soon, I will be gone,” he was heard to growl during a pre-Prom conversation.



Birtwistle with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group
BCMG/HANNAH FATHERS

Birthday celebrations gave Birtwistle the chance of letting off steam. Apropos the likelihood of hard times for the music profession: “I’d hate to be a young composer.” To the suggestion that he might slow down, even retire: “Would you go to Beethoven and ask him that question? Or Picasso? Pablo, don’t you think it’s time to stop?” On his status: “What I don’t understand is the role I seem to have achieved, this sort of emblem. If you want an emblem for modernism and difficulty, there are many others for that.” On popular culture: “. . . which by and large is 99 per cent bollocks. That doesn’t mean there isn’t first-rate pop culture. But the requirements of this monster mean that most of it is absolute garbage.”

As he grew older Birtwistle worked faster. He had always worked with concentrated intensity but now became personally more accessible. Showered with awards and honours, he remained unchanged and unspoilt — unhurried in gait, hesitant and thoughtful in speech, slightly dishevelled in appearance. (His son Adam’s portrait, in the Royal Academy of Music, gets him right.) He was generous, writing occasional pieces for a wide range of friends. He also wrote for

children, including *Berceuse de Jeanne*, which “lasts as long as it takes for the baby to fall asleep”. He gave his sketches for *Secret Theatre* to the Friends of the Musicians’ Benevolent Fund to be auctioned. His manuscript was tiny and precise, in effect sometimes pictorial: there are orchestral pages which resemble wheeling flights of starlings seen from a distance.

In 2006 he attracted notoriety at the Ivor Novello awards, where he received the classical music prize. He had sat in the hall listening to James Blunt, KT Tunstall and others. When he was finally called to the stage, his impatience boiled over. “I’ve never heard so many clichés in a single day,” he growled into the microphone. “And why is all your music so f***ing loud?” It all played to the image of the once youthful iconoclast who had turned into the curmudgeonly grand old man of English music, an image that one sensed he perhaps cultivated rather carefully. He later confessed of the Novello debacle: “Well, I’d had a lot of champagne.”

Elusive, uncompromising and, like his music, often impenetrable, Birtwistle remained an enigma to the end, impossible to categorise but a composer who undoubtedly had something important to say. He provoked audiences as much as he entertained them and if, outwardly, he could give off the aura of a stony-faced modernist it merely served to mask, albeit substantially, the emotional depth of the man. As the bass John Tomlinson, one of the greatest performers of his music, said of his work: “It’s like a religious experience. You have to give yourself over to it.”

Sir Harrison Birtwistle, CH, composer, was born on July 15, 1934. He died from the effects of a stroke on April 18, 2022, aged 87