

TRIBUTE

# Harrison Birtwistle's music was magnificently uncompromising

He lived long enough to see his modernist music go out of fashion and come back in again, says Richard Morrison

[Richard Morrison](#)

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Sir Harrison Birtwistle

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For more than half a century the composer Harrison Birtwistle, [who has died](#) at his home in Wiltshire at the age of 87, was one of the most divisive figures in British music. His music, gritty in harmony, tough as granite in texture, dauntingly mythic in subject matter and often based on systems that were hidden from the listener, was (at least until his final, slightly more mellow years) magnificently uncompromising.

Coming from working-class Lancastrian roots, he never went out of his way to ingratiate himself with a mass audience. So when, for example, his orchestral piece *Panic* was given its first performance at the Last Night of the Proms in 1995,

the BBC's switchboards were jammed with thousands of outraged complainants who heard only discord and anarchy.

Part of that provocation was undoubtedly intentional. From his earliest important works such as *Punch and Judy* (1968), which reworked the children's seaside show into a joltingly violent music-theatre piece about abuse within the family, Birtwistle never shied away from difficult subjects or the challenge of expressing savage feelings in equally savage sounds.

That would be just as apparent later on, and on a much grander scale, in operas such as *The Mask of Orpheus* (1984, which had clearly lost none of its shock impact when revived by English National Opera three years ago), *Gawain* (1990) and *The Minotaur* (2008), as well as in ferocious orchestral works such as his 1972 masterpiece *The Triumph of Time*.



Masked dancers performing in Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus*

ALAMY

To his many admirers in the contemporary music world, however, Birtwistle was a genius who created a sound-world all his own. He was one of the first British composers to adopt the advanced avant-garde procedures of composers such as Edgard Varèse, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and followed the latter by using electronic instruments as well, though usually only to enhance and enrich a standard orchestra.

However, like Peter Maxwell Davies, his British contemporary and (initially at least) kindred spirit, he was also interested in the highly mathematical formats of medieval music, and many of his works adopted these as organising principles.

What gives Birtwistle's music its special atmosphere is the feeling that, even when there is no text, the musicians are somehow performing a sort of secret ritual that perhaps even they can only partly comprehend.

That ritual doesn't just govern the notes they play but could also extend to how they are placed on the stage, or how they move during the piece. In such pieces the instruments themselves seem to become characters in some mysterious drama.

It says much for the esteem in which Birtwistle was held by fellow musicians that, although his pieces often make huge technical demands, they have become standard repertoire for new music ensembles such as the London Sinfonietta.

Especially when dealing with journalists, Birtwistle loved to cultivate the persona of the no-nonsense Accrington lad who didn't suffer fools lightly and had little time for mushy southern sentimentality.

Those who knew him well will recall a very different person: affable, funny, self-deprecating and even gossipy in the right company. He lived long enough to see his modernist music go out of fashion and come back in again — but he himself also changed as he grew older.



Affable, funny, self-deprecating: Harrison Birtwistle

THE TIMES

There are passages in his 2000 opera *The Last Supper* and in his late chamber music in which he startles not with his abrasiveness but with a newfound tenderness and lyricism.

Characteristically, he found dark humour and plenty of musical inspiration even in his own mortality. His quirky 2012 choral piece, *The Moth Requiem*, was a richly textured lament not only for extinct moths but all mortal creatures — accompanied by a programme-note in which he bluntly announced that “soon I will be gone”. Now he has gone, but the mark he has left on contemporary orchestral music and opera will surely be indelible.