

Harrison Birtwistle: the music of myth

Harrison Birtwistle's music has always drawn on the rituals and stories of English folk. But is the bucolic Latitude festival ready for disembowelling and murder?



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Harrison Birtwistle: found stimulation in the very new. Photograph: Hanya Chlala/BBC

Harrison Birtwistle's mythic musical universe might extend back to the Greeks – Orpheus has been a consistent refrain in his music – but he has also long been connected to the rituals and stories of British folk traditions. From the archaic but new-minted theatre of *Down by the Greenwood Side* in 1969, to the marking of time in his 1977 ensemble work, *Silbury Air*, and *Yan Tan Tethera* (1984), the title of which, based on words from an ancient northern English dialect, is numbers for counting sheep. More recently there has been the Scottish inspiration of *Tree of Strings*, an astonishing string quartet he composed in 2007 that refracts the warp and weft of the bagpipes' pibroch, music that's tied to the highland barrenness of Raasay, an island off Skye where Birtwistle lived in the 1970s.

**The Opera Group and
London Sinfonietta
*Bow Down***

Latitude Festival,
Henham Park,
Southwold, Suffolk

Starts 12 July 2012

Box office:
0871 231 0821
[Venue details](#)

Another key work in Birtwistle's relationship with the folk tradition is *Bow Down*, his 1977 opera with a libretto by poet Tony Harrison, that is currently being toured by the Opera Group. This is essential Birtwistle in its rawness of expression, the way it combines music and theatre to tell a story that has multiple resonances in folk traditions from America to northern Europe, and in the power and terror of the drama that the seven actors and

instrumentalists create.

The tale is a version of the "Two Sisters" story: "There were two sisters who will die / One drowns wet and one drowns dry." A suitor comes to woo the fairer of two sisters, but the dark sister drowns her sibling. The body floats downstream only to be plundered by a bestial miller, and is later rediscovered by a musician who fashions a musical instrument from the remains. Asked to play at the wedding of the dark sister and the suitor, the musician's instrument instead starts to sing of the murder; the guests turn on the dark sister and she is buried alive.

The challenge for anyone remaking *Bow Down* after its 1977 premiere (it was made in rehearsals at the National Theatre at a time when strikes meant there was no possibility of lavish sets or costumes, so the piece had to be as pared down as possible), is that the score is partly a record of the notations created between that first group of players and actors. Frederic Wake-Walker's new production, which is supported by the London Sinfonietta, amounts to a new version of the piece, conceived for the special relationships between his cast of musicians and players. Nervous about any new production of one of his strongest creative achievements, which is also among his most fragile works to perform, Birtwistle has been impressed by the young cast's understanding of the piece and their commitment to the work's special kind of music-theatre. Special, too, are the places in which the production has been performed: an old market at the Brighton festival, a forest at the Norfolk and Norwich festival, a warehouse in east London for the Spitalfields festival, and still to come, an open air stage at Latitude in Suffolk. Latitude's fertile mix of different musics, different ways of telling stories through poetry, dance, literature as well as song, resonates with the fundamentals of *Bow Down* – but whether a festival audience are ready for a spot of gory sororicide, disembowelling and live burial, remains to be seen.

Birtwistle has roots in the many different places he has lived. Born in 1934, he grew up in Accrington in Lancashire (his voice and his accent have never left there), and as a young clarinettist, he played in theatre bands and began composing. There are pieces by the young Birtwistle from the age of nine, works he doesn't acknowledge (one of his sons, Silas, has these precious scores in his possession). One of the earliest pieces he does recognise is *The Oockooing Bird*, a solo piano piece that is full of a subtle charm and quirkiness that sounds, with the knowledge of his mature music in your ears, like a premonition of the wilder rhythms, rituals and harmonies he would later unearth.

The shock that Birtwistle and Maxwell Davies created was as much of the old as of the new. The discovery of the structures of pre-baroque and medieval music inspired Birtwistle to a way of thinking about music that circumvented the ossified traditions of post-romantic harmony they were being taught in Manchester. But he also found stimulation in the very new: hearing Pierre Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître* for the first time, he discovered a world of sonic exoticism, as well as the revelation that it was possible to create melody, line and febrile expression in modernist music.

Birtwistle's refraction of these influences ancient and modern acquires another dimension in the way he divides musical time into blocks of material, as if a cubist painter were let loose on the familiar parameters of music – melody, harmony, rhythm – the music's power coming from its combination of structural austerity and unbound harmonic and melodic abrasiveness. Birtwistle has often explored the tension between freedom and constraint, between ritual and improvisation, and has produced some of the most dynamic, essential music of the past 50 years – or, indeed the past 200.

At the end of his Wiltshire garden – which he designed himself, complete with its elaborate but formal water-feature, like something from ancient Greek aquaculture – is Birtwistle's composing hut. Inside are reams of manuscript paper rolled into scrolls, with sketches, drafts and completed versions of his pieces. Some leaves of the bigger than A3-size paper contain just a single chord or collection of notes, discarded ideas to which he might return later; others contain the workings-out for whole sections of pieces. His hand is small, precise, but painterly, his finished scores a concatenation of tens of thousands of notes, innumerable lines taken for different walks through the space-time of his notation and the musical labyrinths of his works.

That image, of "taking a line for a walk", comes from one of Birtwistle's favourite artists, Paul Klee. A preoccupation with Klee and his theories was an inspiration for one of the definitive Birtwistle pieces of the late 1970s, *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum*. Using Klee's idea of the difference between "dividual" and "individual" phenomena – the difference between, say, the endlessly divisible nature of water, as opposed to the singularity, the indivisibility, of a bottle of water – Birtwistle conjured a series of different musical materials. The question was then how to repeat these blocks of material, and how to transform them. On their own, each block is like a little machine of processes and patterns, but nothing ever repeats in quite the way you expect. That's because Birtwistle used a series of random numbers to help generate how the blocks would recur, how long they would last, and even what notes they would use.

At Latitude, Birtwistle's most unflinching and most raw vision of music theatre in *Bow Down* will take to the stage as a murderous pastoral, a telling of a folktale as ancient as any myth but which will be remade as if for the first time. To listen to Birtwistle's instrumental music or to watch any of his theatrical works is to realise the connections that bind us all to the archetypal experiences of death, renewal, of the landscape and the labyrinth. The drama of *Bow Down* isn't something that happens just to the actors or the musicians on stage: if it's performed as it should be, you should feel it's happening to you, too. As with everything Birtwistle has ever written, the piece should be a glimpse of the endless cycles of time and story that turn, usually unseen, underneath the surface of all of our lives.