

THE JAMES NAUGHTIE INTERVIEW

# HARRISON BIRTWISTLE



Despite his 80th birthday looming this month, the British composer remains as much of a creative force of nature as ever – and, he says, he has absolutely no intention of taking a breather any time soon...

PHOTOGRAPHY RICHARD CANNON

We're sitting in the Savile Club in London, and Sir Harrison Birtwistle doesn't waste a moment. We've hardly exchanged pleasantries before he's leading me into a proper discussion, for which I'm not prepared. He wants to talk about 'deep time'.

He begins with the gentle observation that he's not sure what he's talking about. Neither do I, I confess with relief. But as we begin I know that he has a perfectly clear idea what he means: it will be my job to keep up. This is a typical conversation with Harry, which is what everyone calls him sooner or later, because he is a master of subtle seduction in talking about music. Within a few minutes you're led into the maze of his mind as if he's gone for a wander, before you realise that it is all a benign deception: he is utterly sure of where he's going, and surrounded by that grey halo of curly hair and beard, his eyes are diamond bright.

I'm reminded of a conversation we had some years ago at his home in Wiltshire, where we sat for a while in the shed at the bottom of the garden where he works, and he wondered aloud how imagination might have been shaped by the times when he played as a boy in disused mine workings around Accrington, where he discovered the joys of exploring dark, twisted tunnels. I feel as if I'm entering one with him.



Fortunately, he gives me a hand-hold. He's discovered, thanks to his son Silas, the poetry of Norman MacCaig (1910-96) who was one of the great figures of the Scottish literary renaissance that began in the 1930s. Since I love MacCaig's work, which is a blend of the metaphysical and rich lyricism, I begin to tune in to the Birtwistle idea of time – a sphere that stretches far beyond our mechanical description of the passing of the

days. In MacCaig's poem *Stars and Planets*, he writes: 'They seem so twinkle-still, but they never cease Inventing new spaces and huge explosions And migrating in mathematical tribes over The steppes of space at their outrageous ease.'

'The Universe is a big do-nut, isn't it?' reflects Birtwistle. 'Stretching farther than we can ever see, and really that shape is time. It's something different from day-to-day time, a poetic image really, but I find the idea of deep time attractive.' He recalls that his first orchestral piece was *The Triumph of Time*.

That conception of movement, the vastness of infinity and the 'outrageous' confidence of the planets contrasts with the puny efforts we make to measure the days, and our lives. In a way, it's that cage that Harry Birtwistle has spent his life trying to escape. He thinks of his music as a wrestling match with time, always reflecting something from the immediate past but necessarily on the move.

In the year of his 80th birthday, which is the cause of much celebratory performance of his work both at the BBC Proms and beyond, that restlessness remains. He is famously hard-working, as full of ideas as ever, and he mentions a short piece for voices and chamber orchestra – only six instruments – that he's writing for tenor Mark Padmore. I wonder if there are any full-scale operatic works in the pipeline, and when he says, 'I worry if there's





enough time' I mistakenly conclude that he's thinking of his age. He's not; it's just that there's so much else on the go.

And opera takes time. From commission to performance *The Minotaur* (2008) was a five-year job, so he has no thoughts about one at the moment. A Piano Concerto is finished – titled *Responses* – which will have its premiere in Boston later this year, and you sense that there will always be a new idea ready to set him off. That thought prompts a fascinating discussion about his method of composition.

'When you think of a work – a piece of music, anything – you think of it as a complete thing, not as a succession of notes,' he says. 'You hear it all in your mind, if you know what I mean. It's like a ball of string, tied up and bound up in itself. You don't need to tease it out. And when I've worked on an idea, it's like that. Then when I start writing, it all changes. It has to. But the idea has to be complete at the beginning, although at the end it has changed. Does that make sense?'

He illustrates his point by talking about repetition. 'When you repeat a note, it's different every time. Repetition – even in the course of a few seconds – doesn't mean that you're making the same sound. Think of an oak tree, which we all recognise. You recognise an oak leaf. They all look the same. But when you look closely you find that they're all slightly different. It's like that with notes – they change with the context, and the context is always shifting.'

The percussive qualities of Birtwistle's early work especially is one of its hallmarks, and through seven decades as a composer – he thinks he began when he was seven or eight – he's explored the tension between a sound that seems to be replicated again and again, but is different every time. We're hearing something that appears the same but is also on the move. Similarly in opera, he loves a shifting perspective that can take a scene and present it from different angles. The audience moves backwards and forwards in time, and you're never allowed to settle into a predictable pattern of expectation.

The recording of *Gawain* from the Royal Opera House made by Radio 3 in 1994, with Sir John Tomlinson as the Green Knight, has just been reissued by NMC and one of the reasons for the success of the opera – a work that brought him an audience that had barely known him before – was the startling way in which he was able to freeze the story at its turning points and allow you to see it from the other side. As an example of Birtwistle's art it's perfect – taking a poem with unstoppable narrative power, slowing it down and turning it round so that it takes on an entirely new shape. It's a remarkable opera, though last



year's production at Salzburg clearly distressed him. The size of the stage offered spectacular possibilities, but they were thrown away. Musically exciting; dramatically weak. There isn't much point in opera like that.

Drama is important to Birtwistle. His first opera, *Punch and Judy*, exploded onto

ideas in a few moments and, in the course of an evening, paint a textured backdrop for the action. As a composer's laboratory, it was a place of excitement and discovery.

Birtwistle acknowledges that he wasn't really sure what he was meant to be doing there. He simply got on with it, sometimes scribbling notes on the way to the South Bank from Twickenham where he then lived, no doubt to the bemusement of commuters. And these years honed the disciplines that he'd learned in the 1960s, turning him into a composer who, by the mid-'80s, was acknowledged as an original and powerful voice. He was knighted in 1988.

Yet wider recognition had yet to come. Two strange events conspired to complete the job. The first was the 1994 revival of *Gawain* (1990) at Covent Garden which produced a much-publicised demonstration by self-styled defenders of a musical tradition which they felt was besmirched by Birtwistle's acceptance at the Royal Opera House. But they seemed to be complaining that *Gawain* didn't sound like Lehár's *The Merry Widow*. It would have been strange if it had. And although the opera divided opinion – what new piece doesn't?

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## The *Daily Mail* said that *Panic* was 'a horrible cacophony'

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the stage in 1967 with a violent crack. The story was unforgiving, the music simmering with menace. This was the piece that first entranced the conductor Oliver Knussen, who subsequently became such a notable proselytiser of Birtwistle's music. And within a few years, Peter Hall had persuaded him to come to the new National Theatre as house composer. Presented with the challenge of stage discipline, he was able to develop a compressed style that could present complex





**COMPOSING THOUGHTS:**  
'When you repeat a note, it's  
different every time'; (right)  
Birtwistle rehearses his  
theatrical work *Bow Down* with  
poet Tony Harrison, 1977

– the idea that it was a dangerous assault on the sensitivities of music-lovers was quickly exploded. People could like it or not, but was it really a piece of subversion?

The second event was, in 1995, the decision of BBC Proms director John Drummond to schedule the premiere of Birtwistle's *Panic* for the Last Night. Not as radical as it seems, as the appearance of a short new work on the Last Night was a Proms tradition, but that didn't stop the onslaught. The *Daily Mail* said it was 'a horrible cacophony' and the *Daily Express* that it was 'unmitigated rubbish'. The papers gleefully reported TV and radio listeners ringing the BBC to complain about the insult that had been done to them.

Drummond, of course, was in his element. With the mischievous loftiness that he had perfected like no one else, he boomed his contempt for the philistines. And he won. In retrospect, it was the period in which Birtwistle's audience widened spectacularly. He would always come up with new challenges for his listeners and never be a comfortable composer, but he was accepted by an increasing number of people as an irresistible voice.



Now, on the verge of his ninth decade, he stands at the pinnacle of contemporary music-making. And, appropriately, he feels himself drawn back to 18th- and 19th-century music that for many years he had let slip away. 'Early on I only listened to music before Bach,' he reflects. That has changed. He wants to talk about Beethoven. 'The other day I was listening to Opus 111 [the last Piano Sonata, in C minor]. And listening with what you might call a composer's ear, you're struck by the astonishing music. Originality in everything. He does something amazing, harmonically speaking, and you think "How's he going to get himself out of that one?" And of course he does, every time. Miraculous.'

Birtwistle's dislike of much of the repertoire is well-known (Tchaikovsky is a particular *bête noire*, and, maybe surprisingly, Richard Strauss gets the treatment too). But then you'll also hear him expressing wonder at the Schumann Piano Concerto, although it has the label of 'concert warhorse' usually plastered all over it. In short, there is nothing angry about Harry Birtwistle. His restlessness – the desire to create something new, again and again – is shot through with a kind of serenity. There is nothing to prove now, only another intellectual and musical maze to be explored.

In a fascinating series of conversations with former *BBC Music Magazine*

editor Fiona Maddocks, recently published by Faber and Faber under the title *Wild Tracks* (reviewed next month), he talks about the creation of *Responses*, which will be heard for the first time this autumn. I ask him to describe it. 'I didn't want it to be a concerto in which the soloist and the orchestra are playing the same music. They're talking to each other instead. But it's a conversation rather than an argument. A conversation.'

That word is intriguing because it implies intimacy. Thinking about the scale of some of his orchestral works – the complexity of texture, his ability to manage a big noise and make sense of it – you're aware of way he can control forces that seem powerful enough to overwhelm everything else and turn them into something delicate. Even in his many chamber pieces – there's a birthday selection of recordings issued by ECM (see p96) – the energy seems volcanic but never threatening.

Harrison Birtwistle's voice is his own. It is passionate, but gentle; unforgiving but humane. And his energy is undimmed. When we part, he's talking about the work that still has to be done, birthday or no birthday. There's much more to come. ■

**BBC Proms** The various Birtwistle works featured at this year's BBC Proms begin with the Proms premiere of 'Night's Black Bird', played by the BBC Philharmonic under Juanjo Mena on 30 July

