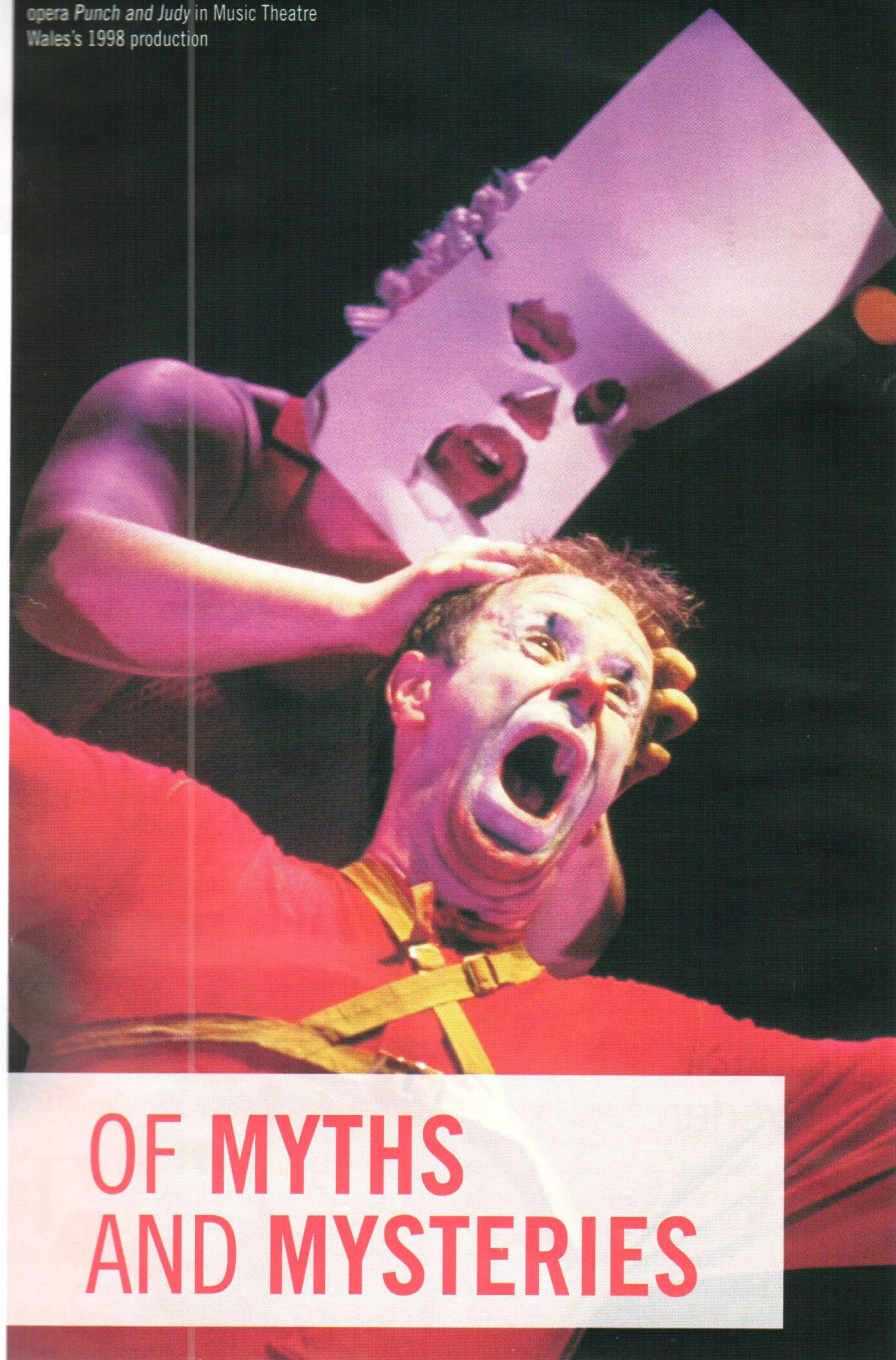


Violent beginnings: Birtwistle's first opera *Punch and Judy* in Music Theatre Wales's 1998 production



OF MYTHS AND MYSTERIES

Harrison Birtwistle, who turns 80 this year, has left a highly individual mark on the world of opera, throwing light on the shadows of the psyche through a combination of classical myth and English folklore. Roderic Dunnett celebrates the composer's work for the stage over four decades.

The Ancient Greeks had words for it. *Mythopoeia*: the making or fashioning of myths; or perhaps *mythologia*, the retailing of myths; *mythoplastia*, the coining of myths; or *mythographia*, the writing down of myths....

Sir Harrison Birtwistle, celebrating his 80th birthday on 15 July this year, is perhaps the great musical mythologist of our time and his works embrace all these definitions of myth making. Many are inspired by the poetic imagination of ancient worlds – the Green Man of medieval England or the fearsome Minotaur of ancient Crete. Such mystical, larger-than-life figures clearly attract the composer's attention when he goes in search of operatic themes. Ancient Greece has been a particularly fertile source: 'I feel the archetypal aspect of it, I like the sort of primitive background to it,' Birtwistle says, 'the psychological world, the bareness of the characters. All that gives you more space to work in.'

Most of those who have worked with him describe Harry (as he's known to friends and in the trade) as a 'man of the theatre': someone who exudes dramatic craft; who has the word 'stage' imprinted on his inner being. Indeed from 1975 to 1983, Birtwistle served as musical director to Peter Hall's National Theatre Company (where he first met Alison Chitty, who went on to design many of his operas, including *Gawain* and *The Minotaur*).

Writing music for the theatre has two distinct aspects, Birtwistle explains, drawing a distinction between music *about* the play, and music *of* the play: 'Music about the play is where you set atmosphere – like film music. The music *of* the play is quite different. In *Hamlet*, for example, Ophelia's songs represent her madness, her state of mind and her psychology – a kind of scattiness. It's music prescribed by the writer, things that emanate from within the narrative and its characters.'

As for the challenges of moving from theatre to opera, Birtwistle is clear in making the distinction: 'In spoken theatre, a composer is more of an artisan than a true creator: there are more possibilities – different sorts of production, different attitudes to the spacing of the piece. All that comes from decisions made by the actors and the director. Whereas when you write an opera, there are certain things within the timing of the words and action that are fixed – you can't alter them.'

Birtwistle is more interested than many composers in text, and so I wondered how much input he has in the libretti to his

operas – especially those shaped by the fine poet David Harsent (librettist of *Gawain* and *The Minotaur*, and also of his latest two ‘chamber’ operas *The Corridor* and the forthcoming *The Cure*). ‘You know what Auden said? A good libretto should be like a dumb show. In the music, you’re expressing a lot of things within the text that can’t be spoken or said. David and I are used to batting things to and fro, a bit like a game of tennis: we have a really good rapport, we’re singing from the same hymn-sheet as it were, and that can be very productive.’

‘Just one example: I remember, there’s a bit in *The Minotaur* where I said to David, “It’s not dark enough: I need more there, make it darker.” And he did, he came up with significant changes, and it turned out the best bit in the whole opera – Antonio Pappano, who was conducting, thought the same!’

In his epic, often dense and descriptive musical response to poetic texts, Birtwistle is sometimes compared to Richard Wagner. Has Wagner exerted a conscious influence on him? ‘Well I’ve never consciously thought I’m taking over the mantle of Wagner. That would be stupid!’ admits the composer. ‘But the answer’s yes: the use of a long musical line is part of it; there’s also the myth ingredient; and of course the other remarkable thing Wagner invented, or mastered, was the *Leitmotif*. It never occurs to most people that the main underlying motif in the *Ring* is the only melodic invention in the entire piece. There is nothing in that work *apart* from the *Leitmotif*. I really couldn’t do that, but one’s aware of it.’

When the great English Wagnerian conductor Reginald Goodall heard Birtwistle’s *The Mask of Orpheus*, he made the same comparison with Wagner. ‘That was an important judgment,’ says Birtwistle, ‘because he above all should know. But for me it’s not a conscious thing.’

A more significant force in Birtwistle’s output has been mediaeval music. ‘There are certain pieces, particularly a motet of Machaut (*Hoquetus David*), which have been with me a long time. The thing about mediaeval music in the 1950s and ‘60s was that you were discovering something unfamiliar: nobody really knew it, or knew what it was.’

‘What fascinates me about Early Music is the arcane aspect of it: like a game of *Snakes and Ladders* where you’ve lost the rules or instructions. You don’t initially perceive what the choices are, the rationale, why



Christopher Maltman as Gawain at the Salzburg Festival

RUTH WALZ



Tapping into primitive urges: *The Minotaur* at Covent Garden

BILL COOPER

BIRTWISTLE'S OPERAS

Birtwistle's first forays into opera began in 1968 with the knockout *Punch and Judy*, to a searing, sneering libretto by the Pierrot Players' Stephen Pruslin. Full of musical and narrative violence, the work terrified its first-night audience at the Aldeburgh Festival – Benjamin Britten was said to have walked out of the world premiere after the interval.

In his next three works, the composer latched on to and furthered an English tradition of mummers' plays – ballad and pastoral and eclogue. *Down by the Greenwood Side* (1969, with libretto by Michael Nyman) is based on an English ballad, *The Cruel Mother* along with other folk plays; *Bow Down* (1977) tells the sinister tale of a murderous love triangle, incorporating improvisation and extended theatre techniques; *Yan Tan Tethera* (1986), is a tale of the supernatural based on a Welsh folk story, has a text by Tony Harrison and was first staged by David Freeman for The Opera Factory.

The Mask of Orpheus (English National Opera, 1986) provided his first sortie into Greek myth and the Orpheus legend. The latter also features prominently in *The Second Mrs Kong*, a surreal quasi-modern myth, commissioned for Glyndebourne Touring Opera's 1994 tour. (The mythical character resurfaces in *The Orpheus Elegies*, a 26-part song cycle for countertenor, oboe and harp, based on Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*.)

These two strands, folkloric and mythical, are explored and expanded upon in Birtwistle's large-scale operas commissioned by the Royal Opera House: *Gawain* (1991), with its theme of the English pastoral tradition of the Green Man; and *The Minotaur* (2008), taken from Greco-Cretan mythology. With his librettist, David Harsent, Birtwistle has since revisited the Orpheus-Eurydice story in his 2009 chamber opera *The Corridor*.

◀ one thing follows another, or follows the next. If you listen to a piece of Beethoven, or indeed any 18th- or 19th-century music, you know almost by rule what's contrasting with this, or echoing that, or what section introduces new material.'

Unlike the earlier operas (though more like *The Io Passion*, which was for four singers, two actors and a clarinet quintet), Birtwistle's latest operatic explorations are for distinctly smaller forces. '*The Corridor*'s for a mixed sextet. Elsewhere, I'm working with a string quartet [the Arditti Quartet, on a new work to be premiered at the Barbican – see below]. It's the intimacy that appeals, the intricacy of the detail. And that's why I'm very interested in writing theatrical pieces that are chamber works, more about specific dramatic moments, as here, in the fatal instant where Orpheus looks back at Eurydice.'

The Corridor (Aldeburgh, 2009) is for just two singers (Elizabeth Atherton and Mark Padmore). 'Now I'm writing another piece for the Royal Opera House which features exactly the same two people: It's called *The Cure*: same performers, same group of instruments. It's the second half of *The Corridor*, about Medea bringing someone back to life.'

Opera composers need ardent advocates to bring their works to life on the stage. Birtwistle likes to have his regular gang of actors and musicians around him, who understand him and his work. Among his long-term collaborators are director

Stephen Langridge and designer Alison Chitty; and his scores are often written for specific people – above all the bass John Tomlinson who, like Birtwistle, was born and raised near Accrington in the northwest of England. (Harry, by the way, still has the same attractive Lancashire mill-town 'burr', and a surprisingly amiable temperament.)

It was seeing Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*, with Omar Ebrahim as a raving Punch, that clinched Stephen Langridge's desire to be a stage director. Inspired, above all, by ENO's 1986 production of *The Mask of Orpheus* (in which his father, the renowned tenor Philip Langridge, sang the central role), he went on ten years after its premiere to direct his own version at the Royal Festival Hall. The young Langridge soaked himself avidly in Birtwistle's music and then, making his opera directing debut, assisted David Freeman on *Yan Tan Tethera* (1986), Birtwistle's supernatural tale of Welsh sheep farmers. Langridge went on to launch *The Io Passion* at Aldeburgh, and more recently staged, to vast acclaim, *The Minotaur* for Covent Garden.

'I love Harry's music absolutely,' says Langridge, unequivocally. 'It moves me, and it has given me some of my most exciting moments in the theatre. It was thrilling – and a little daunting as a novice young assistant to realise one was working with the composer actually there in the room.'

'Harry has a theatrical aesthetic. He has a kind of Cubist approach to narrative. It's not about flat storytelling, not merely

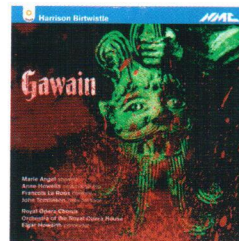
illustrative: time and again, many layers are going on at the same time. His music allows and aims for the story to be seen from many different angles and perspectives.'

Is there ever any friction between the composer and his creative team? 'Harry's marvellous in rehearsal,' Langridge emphasises, 'because he challenges you: "Why are you doing that?" There's a fabulous comic sense too. In *Io Passion*, the god Zeus, disguised as a bull about to tup Io, turns to the audience and moans "moo". There's comedy in *The Second Mrs Kong* too – lots of it. And endless variety: hectically fast bits, lullingly slow, daringly complex and blaringly loud bits... As for the idea that Birtwistle is "hard work" for

the listener: I don't believe it! And anyway, his operas always seem to sell out!'

To mark Sir Harrison Birtwistle's 80th birthday Faber & Faber will publish a new book entitled *Harrison Birtwistle: Wild Tracks*, a series of new interviews between the composer and Fiona Maddocks.

www.faber.co.uk



The NMC recording of Birtwistle's *Gawain*, conducted by the composer's old friend Elgar Howarth, will be reissued in May 2014.

www.nmrec.co.uk

FOR THE DIARY

16-30 May: The Barbican will be staging a fortnight-long celebration of Sir Harrison Birtwistle's music and achievements, entitled *Birtwistle at 80: music's master of legend and landscape*. The programme includes stagings by John Lloyd Davies of *Gawain* (Friday 16 May, with Martyn Brabbins conducting and Leigh Melrose as Gawain, John Graham Hall as the Fool and Sir John Tomlinson as the Green Knight); and *Yan Tan Tethera* (Thursday 30 May, with Roderick Williams, Claire Booth, Omar Ebrahim and Daniel Norman).

Other events include *Earth Dances* (Tuesday 20 May), with Daniel Harding conducting the LSO. Sunday 25 May features a seven-work, all-Birtwistle concert by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, including *Tragedia* and *Silbury Air*. A new chamber work for the Arditti Quartet will be premiered on Monday 26 May.

www.barbican.org.uk

9-11 May: *Down by the Greenwood Side* will be staged in Lewes by Susannah Waters as part of this year's 2014 Brighton Festival.

www.brightonfestival.org

16-21 May: *Punch and Judy* can be seen at Berlin's Staatsoper im Schillertheater (Unter den Linden), with Richard Suart as the irrepressible Punch (www.staatsoper-berlin.de).

22 May-5 June: The Wiener Kammeroper production of *Punch and Judy* will be staged at Vienna's Theater am Fleischmarkt from (www.theatre-wien.at).



Modern myth-maker:
Harrison Birtwistle

HANNA CHILAL/ARENA PUL