



Setting the scene: Harrison Birtwistle in West Hampstead, London, in April 1986 holding his score to *The Mask of Orpheus*

CULT FOLLOWING

Harrison Birtwistle's *Earth Dances* triggered a series of fresh, inventive works from a new wave of British composers. Thirty years after the groundbreaking premiere, Philip Clark explores how the compositional landscape shifted dramatically beyond 1986

Gilbert & George were favourites to win that year's Turner Prize as Kingsley Amis's *The Old Devils* scored at the Booker Prize, while *The Sun* was reporting on the gastronomic liberties that Freddie Starr had taken with a hamster. In the world of modern composition, though, one name was being discussed beyond all others. On March 14, 1986,

Harrison Birtwistle's 40-minute slab of pure orchestral muscle, *Earth Dances*, was premiered at the Royal Festival Hall as Peter Eötvös flexed the BBC Symphony Orchestra – a performance that became a turning point in British music.

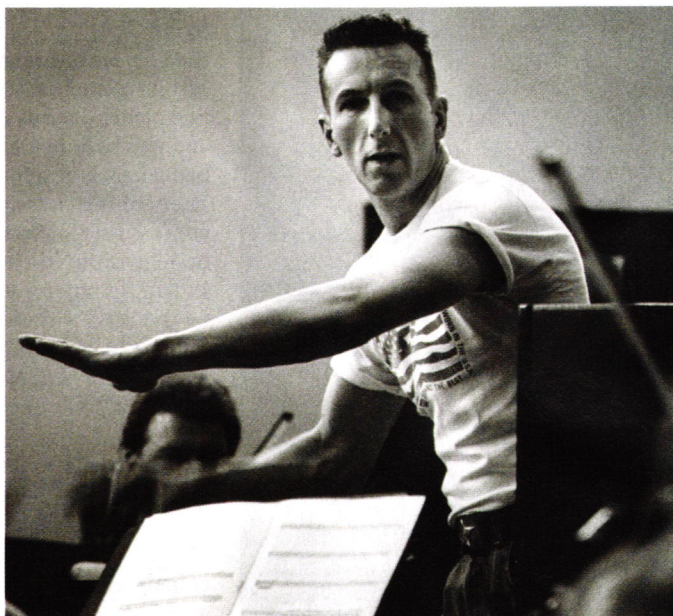
The inner-structural engine of Birtwistle's composition – a procession of instrumental layers rotating around one other rather warily, each displaying characteristic melodic hooks

and carefully delineated orchestration – feels like an apt metaphor for the body-politic of British modern composition of the time. Birtwistle was no stranger to success.

Earth Dances' canonical antecedent, *The Triumph of Time* (premiered in 1972) had already developed a cult following, and its psychogeographic vistas would subsequently be taken up by Pierre Boulez. Then, two months after *Earth Dances*, with its ley lines still reverberating, Birtwistle ensured continued visibility when his opera, *The Mask of Orpheus*, received its first performance at English National Opera. And in the wake of this Birtwistlian double whammy, an endless parade of fresh, inventive and durable orchestral pieces by British composers emerged including Jonathan Harvey's *Madonna of Winter and Spring*, James Dillon's *Helle Nacht*, Michael Finnissy's *Red Earth* and the first two instalments of Peter Maxwell Davies's *Strathclyde Concertos*.

But, with this ritual of premiere performances of work by composers in varying stages of middle age playing itself out, another narrative layer was being composed. A new breed of British composer – born to the rock'n'roll generation as opposed to post-war baby boomers – had arrived on the scene riding on a different set of cultural reference points to Birtwistle, Finnissy and Harvey, and also other composers like Brian Ferneyhough, Judith Weir and Nigel Osborne, whose collective heads had been turned by formative encounters with Modernist icons such as Schoenberg, Varèse, Stockhausen, Cage and Ives. In interviews, Mark-Anthony Turnage was more likely to cite Charles Mingus or Marvin Gaye than the music of Webern, while the roots of Steve Martland's work lay in the politicised Dutch-power minimalism of Louis Andriessen, music that relished waving V-signs towards Euro-Modernism. James MacMillan, meanwhile, was drawing on the folk music of his native Scotland. All the talk was of a new wave of British composers interested more in Stravinsky than Schoenberg, who had rediscovered tonality and could embrace popular culture without resorting to compositional dad-dancing.

Three decades on, how accurate does that historical snapshot feel? Although not wanting to sound overly Billy Elliott about it, as a 14-year-old in 1986, growing up in the north-east of England and removed from any hub of new music, my burgeoning interest in modern music was filtered through BBC Radio 3; but even my adolescent musical brain appreciated that a grand debate was brewing – that certainties were being questioned. I don't know if that March premiere of *Earth Dances* was broadcast, but the subsequent performance at that year's Proms, where ballsy Proms director John Drummond had paired Birtwistle with the first performance of Harvey's *Madonna of Winter and Spring* – and then threw in music by Messiaen for good measure – left a deep impression.



Provocative: Steve Martland embraced grooves and tonality in his compositions

In the wake of Birtwistle's double whammy, an endless parade of durable orchestral pieces by British composers emerged

Michael Finnissy's music-theatre piece *The Undivine Comedy* appeared around that same time and its visceral spank terrified me – but nor could I stop listening. And circling all this activity was the inescapable presence of Harrison Birtwistle, whose new piece *Endless Parade* for trumpeter Håkan Hardenberger, with vibraphone and strings, was earnestly discussed on BBC 2 arts slot *The Late Show* under the tag 'Could this be the piece that finds a new audience for classical music?' – a programme I watched repeatedly until my mother accidentally recorded *Dallas* over the top.

All this music appealed to me as *sound*, but the awareness of a naysaying backlash kept coming. Steve Martland appeared on television to deliver an unmistakably Boulezian polemic against

Boulez, his punky leathers and skinhead haircut contrasting noticeably against Boulez's beige jackets and orderly comb-over. During an edition of *The South Bank Show*, John Adams discussed his choral and orchestral piece *Harmonium*, making it clear that he had no truck with post-Schoenbergian schools of composition. And the debate continued to rage on via sleepy, apparently, Radio 3. A feature about younger British composers had the presenter spit out Steve Martland's name venomously, the explicit message being that grooves and tonality ought to remain off piste, and that no serious composer should ever use a diminutive form of their name. And as I grappled with the debate, I engaged with the musical results – Turnage's *Three Screaming Popes*, MacMillan's *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* and an LP of Martland's orchestral *Babi Yar* paired with his two-piano *Drill*.

The great learning of Birtwistle scores like *Earth Dances* and *Endless Parade* is the value of shifting perspective. The instrumental latticework that sits between the prevailing markers is important too and only by viewing (and hearing) a landmark beacon from numerous perspectives can you begin to grasp the essential wholeness of its being. Likewise, the culture clash being crudely categorised as a tribal war between Modernism verses a post-modern counter-attack was blinkered and self-limiting. Finnissy and Tippett relished drawing on the vernacular and popular culture; Turnage had studied with Hans Werner Henze, and music tends to be more subtle and nuanced than any argument surrounding it.

And the latticework between landmarks gets overlooked when debate becomes simplistically polarised. Discussing ideas surrounding music can become a way of ducking out of considering how that music itself might be operating, technically and in terms of its cultural backstory. Birtwistle's *Earth Dances*, at every turn almost, throws up incidental, and you suspect, serendipitous detail – inflections and overtones of instrumental combinations sounding beyond the authorial



Birtwistle, Joanna McGregor and Pierre Boulez working on Birtwistle's *Antiphonies* in Paris in 1992

control of the composer. And the rich weave of British music also depends on those 'unbelongers' who slip between the cracks, who cut across false boundaries placed around composers for ease of orientation: John White, Christopher Fox, Hugh Davies, Richard Emsley, Tim Hodgkinson, Gavin Bryars and Christopher Hobbs, whose work variously responded to the experimental seeds sown by Cornelius Cardew and other strains of the European avant-garde, counterpointed against composers whose work feels like an aesthetic footnote to RVW and Britten: David Matthews, Hugh Wood, Robin Holloway. Britten died in 1976; Cardew in 1981.

The mainstream emergence of the internet a decade later – not christened 'the information superhighway' without reason – has helped pathological 'unbelonger' composers to become masters of, if not their own fortune, then at least their destiny; but online proliferation has also contributed to the fragmentation of British new music. The analogue, pre-internet era was the last hurrah for that holy trinity of new music promotion, when music publishers, performers and a record industry prepared to chance its arm could actively change hearts and minds – a model that had its final flourish with EMI Classics' support of Thomas Adès in the late '90s.

Collins Classics recorded Peter Maxwell Davies obsessively and also issued a set of CD singles of music by Birtwistle, John Tavener and Benedict Mason under the banner '20th Century Plus'; Nimbus was where you went if you wanted to hear the latest piece by George Benjamin; Robert Saxton and Turnage found a home at EMI Classics; and the Manchester-based Factory Records, the label founded by rock honcho Tony Wilson to issue music by post-punk groups like Joy Division and Happy Mondays, launched its own classical division where Martland and a disc of pianist Rolf Hind playing MacMillan, Finnissey and Bartók rubbed shoulders with other releases of music by Mozart, Handel and Shostakovich. Rock journalist Stuart Maconie reviewed Hind's disc in pop-music bible *NME*, and classical music – as the late-1980s jazz revival that had been headlined by the likes of Courtney Pine and big-band Loose Tubes began to flatline – apparently became marketable and sexy.

Nourishing the media-feeding frenzy were figureheads with real cultural clout. By the time *Earth Dances* appeared,

Simon Rattle was six years into his stint with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and instrumentalists with a zeal for new music like pianist Joanna MacGregor (Collins Classics) and percussionist Evelyn Glennie (RCA Victor) had a knack of stepping out from behind the safety of the classical barrier and into mainstream consciousness. New music remained visible on television. Michael Tippett's extended *Indian Summer* was documented in great detail by the BBC with documentaries marking his big birthdays and the making of his final opera *New Year*. Channel 4, that cultural dust-bowl of reality TV and property programmes today, broadcast *Leaving Home*, Rattle's landmark series on new music, and a series of meaty lectures by Boulez on Stockhausen, Cage, Berio et al.

All of which, just like the formal engineering of *Earth Dances*, brings us full circle. The coincidence of Birtwistle managing to unveil a major orchestral score and such a starkly original opera like *The Mask of Orpheus* at the same time – an achievement backed up by weighty analysis

in the press and on broadcast media – elevated him to an unassailable position of prominence; the last 'great' recognised British composer in a lineage that includes Elgar, Walton, Vaughan Williams, Britten and Tippett. But listening to British orchestral music written after *Earth Dances* confirms that this was no hype – Birtwistle's triumph was rooted in the music itself. Composers like David Sawer, Simon Holt and Diana Burrell clearly needed to think, and hard, about where to position their own music post-*Earth Dances*. Birtwistle's orchestral palette – strings backgrounded as skeuomorphic woodwind and brass writing, punctuated by percussion counting the apparently uncountable – offered an alluring alternative to the conventional orchestral tempera. His music orbited the pulse-labyrinth of time like no other. This sound world was compulsively addictive – it was easy for a composer to lose their own identity inside the Birtwistlian terrain.

Finnissey, Harvey and Dillon certainly had no need to lean against Birtwistle's piece as their new works made their way into the world, but the sense of British music walking with a newly found confidence was palpable. In his *Madonna* piece, Harvey pulled off his old trick of fusing timbres and orchestration techniques culled from Stockhausen and the French spectralists with a clarity of soaring line that could indeed make larks ascend, while Finnissey's *Red Earth* invoked the parched, roaring hot Australian outback with a carefully configured, microtonal-harmonic marinade that was seeping inside every melodic pore as you listened. Dillon's *Helle Nacht* certainly owed something to Finnissey and to Brian Ferneyhough, but spoke with its own ripe, off-tonal harmonic language.

Turnage's *Three Screaming Popes* impressed me deeply at the time. Here was a composer, I felt, who understood how to embed the spontaneity and roughed-up timbres of jazz into orchestral music. I've just listened to the piece again, probably for the first time since the late 1980s, and time has not been kind to it. That tradition of British composers – hello Constant Lambert and Richard Rodney Bennett – tinting what amounts to low-grade harmonic invention with jazz inflections had found a new voice. Meanwhile Steve Martland's project fell down because, for all his verbal provocations, the actual notes on the page felt alarmingly prosaic and conservative:

Poulenc or Milhaud with a rock backbeat. As things turned out, the idea of a radical alternative to the Modernist mainstream rooted in popular culture failed to take wing largely, I think, because composers born in the 1980s and '90s were saturated in pop culture, and what had seemed provocative in Tippett had become another settled ingredient rather than an active catalyst.

Two years after *Earth Dances*, the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Oliver Knussen premiered *Lighthouses of England and Wales* by Benedict Mason, the very definition of an 'unbelonger' composer. The sense Birtwistle engenders of a slow, deliberate meander through a landscape is upended. In Mason's piece the orchestra gets physically *dragged* through a landscape that is unfolding around it like time-lapse photography, with the listener watching from a discreet distance. Vaughan Williams's *Sea Symphony* and Debussy's *La mer* hover in the background as Mason uses the metaphor of lighthouses as a conduit for harmonic beams of light, the concert hall, he said, 'representing the model of this island's coastline'.

Sitting two years ago at the 2014 Proms listening to Mason's *Meld*, with instruments spatially secreted inside every box and passageway the Royal Albert Hall had to offer, I thought about the distance British music has travelled since 1986 and *Earth Dances*. Younger composers doing interesting and innovative work (Edward Henderson, Jennifer Walshe, Tim Parkinson, Richard Skelton and Claudia Molitor) are too often hived off to the cultural margins, while the broad mainstream, epitomised by those Last Night of the Proms concert openers regularly doled out to younger British composers, can too often feel lacklustre. Mason is one composer whose reconfiguration of the time-space continuum in music ought to be as celebrated as Birtwistle's innovations were 30 years ago, but our culture today, obsessed with soundbites and the ephemeral, is too quick to place in a box ideas it would rather label 'maverick' or 'eccentric'. I didn't like everything I heard in 1986, but I *liked* the 'not liking'; the debates felt urgent and worth having – a sign, I think, of a healthy cultural environment. **G**

To hear excerpts from some of the works mentioned, and to download a free sampler from record label NMC, visit gramophone.co.uk

RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS

Birtwistle and beyond: the changing terrain of British music



Harrison Birtwistle

Earth Dances

Ensemble Modern /
Pierre Boulez

DG (A/O4)

Peter Eötvös's original recording, fine though it is, has long since been superseded by the likes of Dohnányi and this powerhouse performance from Pierre Boulez.



Michael Finnissy

Red Earth

BBC SO /
Martyn Brabbins
NMC

The earth dances here, too, as Finnissy's taut orchestral score, played by an on-form BBC SO, invokes the imposing, ancient beauty of the Australian desert.



Steve Martland

Martland Anthology

Steve Martland Band
NMC (11/15)

This memorial

anthology includes some of Martland's most notable 1980s scores, including *Crossing the Border* – his paraphrase of Bach's Chaconne in D minor.



Benedict Mason

String Quartet.

Double Concerto, etc
Arditti Qt et al
Bridge (10/94)

Mason's *Lighthouses of England and Wales* is deleted; but these orchestral and chamber works are a weighty introduction to his inscrutable music.

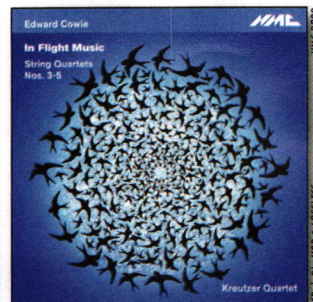
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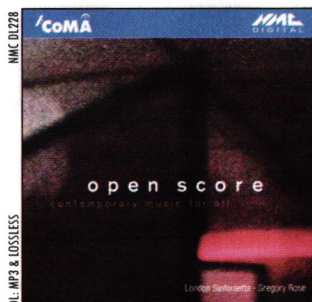
New Releases



James Wood MDR Leipzig Radio Choir
Tongues of Fire for symphonic chorus and percussion quartet, and *Cloud-Polyphonies* for percussion sextet.



Edward Cowie Kreutzer Quartet
The natural world is inspiration for much of Cowie's music and these String Quartets focus on flight; mainly of birds and insects.



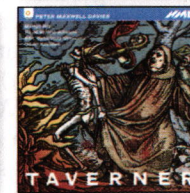
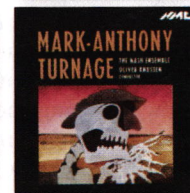
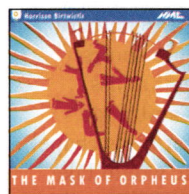
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11 pieces by Philip Cashian, Michael Nyman, Tansy Davies, Roxanna Panufnik and others, written for amateur players and commissioned for the CoMA (Contemporary Music For All) Open Score project.



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