

The yes-no-maybe world of Harrison Birtwistle

A review of **Harrison Birtwistle: Wild Tracks**, a conversation diary with Fiona Maddocks. In search of a composer

BOOKS [Stephen Walsh](#) 31 May 2014



Composer Sir Harrison Birtwistle Photo: Redferns

Harrison Birtwistle: Wild Tracks *Fiona Maddocks*

Faber, pp.318, £22.50, ISBN: 9780571308118

For better or worse, we live in the age of the talking composer. Some talk well, some badly, a few — the strong, silent types — keep their mouths shut, or have to have them prised open. Harrison Birtwistle belongs, by nature, to this last category. I once, a very long time ago, interviewed him for a radio programme, mercifully pre-recorded. Each tedious enquiry would be greeted by a long silence ending with a yes or a no or an ‘I don’t understand the question.’ Nothing would persuade him to contribute to my attempts at fitting him into some preconceived image of British music in the late 1960s. Fitting them in is of course precisely what talking to composers is supposed to do. Harry quietly — very quietly — declined to cooperate.

Has anything changed in the 40 or so years since that failure? In Birtwistle, probably not much. But the questions have got better and the questioners more sympathetic. Fiona Maddocks turns up at Harry's kitchen table, or occasionally tracks him down to Salzburg or Dartington, like a friend dropping in to chat about his work among other things. They talk about gardens and cooking, family and landscape, people and places; and music. The story of his life emerges, in bits and pieces, as it has to some extent elsewhere, but with a new texture that threads all these associations into the fabric of the music itself. Perhaps all artists, when you get close to them, are of a piece in this way. Perhaps we all are. The problem is to get close. I think these conversations succeed.

For a start, it's clear that Maddocks loves her self-imposed task. She loves the music and she adores its composer. Better still, she obliquely lets you know why. In the 79-year-old Birtwistle there are a genuineness and honesty, and a disarming, almost childlike candour that infect everything he says and does, whether he is talking about his music or his breadmaking. His modesty is not forced but real. Brought up in an environment (Accrington bakery and smallholding) that guaranteed nothing in the brilliant musical world in which he found himself, as a no more than competent clarinettist, at the Royal Manchester College, he has never tried to paint over his lack of conventional expertise in the theoretical musical disciplines. Self-doubt pursues him, like the Furies in his favourite myth, *Orpheus*. Performances of his work fill him with trepidation, even with the terror that 'my life's a total waste of time, a failure.'

For his own music, there have never been easy answers. The standard mechanisms of modern music — serialism, minimalism, neo-tonalism and the rest — meant nothing to him. Everything was struggle and discovery. At the time of these conversations he is composing his new piano concerto and we live its troubles with him. One morning, he tells Maddocks, he gets as far as his studio, puts his hand on the door handle, but has to turn back: 'I couldn't face it...I just couldn't face it.' Another time, he confesses himself 'lost, trying to find a logical join'. At such times, or when teasing out information about his school days, Maddocks becomes a therapist, tracing causes, dispelling doubts, offering reassurance. She is the most soothing, understanding, knowledgeable of interviewers. She has no future on *Newsnight*.

Yet out of this emerges the image of a composer of supreme artistic conviction, a sworn enemy of compromise or facile solutions. He has wonderful ways of describing how he works. Obsessed with process rather than preconceived form, he sees composition as like walking down a road behind somebody whose next move you can never quite predict, and who when you see their face it's never what you expected. Yet this is not a random procedure. It's a question of responding to the needs of your material from one minute to

the next. He compares himself to a drystone waller, who always finds a place for whatever stone he picks up. It's an empirical but controlled process, a kind of selective walk through chaos by an artist who loathes disorder but cannot work with other people's formulae.

Birtwistle's spatial view of composition — to call it that — comes out in his interest in landscape, not, he insists, in the sense of 'rolling hills or a green and pleasant land or northern gruffness,' but as a source of mystery and magic, and what he calls an arcane formalisation. Silbury Hill inspires him because its exact purpose is unknown. Similarly, his preoccupation with theatre is a matter of forms and procedures, much less of narratives. As a child he made miniature stage sets, not connected to particular stories; he has composed many theatre abstracts — *Monodrama* (a work he withdrew), *Secret Theatre, Io Passion*, which he calls an installation: 'I just had an idea of an area in two halves — the inside and outside of a room.' His earliest masterpiece, *Tragoedia*, uses the form of a Greek play without plot.

We can probably never find out exactly what makes a composer of Birtwistle's blend of hesitancy and originality tick. Even why one loves his music — as Fiona Maddocks and I both do, among many others — is quite hard to explain. But there are plenty of clues in this enchanting book, and a great deal of food for thought.

Available from the [Spectator Bookshop](#), £18. Tel: 08430 600033

This article first appeared in the print edition of The Spectator magazine, dated [31 May 2014](#)