

Harrison Birtwistle



Harrison Birtwistle Photo: © Hanya Chlala / A

An introduction to Harrison Birtwistle's music by David Beard

Harrison Birtwistle's music reflects an intensely personal vision of the world in which degrees of musical complexity may be related to our experience of the world by metaphors of journeying, ritual, or multiple perspectives of the same object. Although influenced to varying degrees by Stravinsky, Messiaen, Boulez and Cage, his distinctive characteristics include wind- and percussion-led antiphony, extended melodies freeflowing over a mechanical ground, and shifting pulses that question our ability to count clock time. Textures may become densely layered, but from such soundscapes individual voices speak with fanfare- or dance-like gestures. Birtwistle's music, in other words, is always firmly grounded in the body. This should come as no surprise given his early experience of musical theatre in Accrington, where he played clarinet and saxophone in the pit, and his role as Director of Music at London's National Theatre from 1975 to 1983. Breakthrough works from the 1960s including *Tragoedia*, *Verses for Ensembles* and his first opera *Punch and Judy*, together with the orchestral *Earth Dances* – Birtwistle's *Rite of Spring* – are muscular and extrovert, guided by Stravinsky. Yet there is also an introspective side to Birtwistle that turns inwards to technical experiment, restrained lyricism, or dark melancholy. Examples include *The Corridor*, an exercise in experimental theatre that examines Orpheus's loss of Eurydice through a series of increasingly urgent laments, the darkly evocative, brooding orchestral processions *The Shadow of Night* and *Night's Black Bird*, the ethereal *Three Latin Motets* for a cappella choir from the opera *The Last Supper*, the intricately mechanical yet nuanced, jazz-like dialogue between piano and percussion in *The Axe Manual*, the crisp, finely-etched *Crowd* for solo harp, and the perfectly-timed build in tension to the Minotaur's first appearance in his recent opera *The Minotaur*.

While Birtwistle is remarkable for the consistency of his musical vision there are fascinating signs of a 'late' style in his recent music. Most obvious is a turn to string writing following an earlier preference for winds and percussion. Recalling *The Minotaur* and the saxophone solo in *Panic*, the soloist in the *Violin Concerto* has a frenetic energy that is balanced by moments of dreamy introspection; the *Fantasias and Friezes* for string quartet in *Pulse Shadows* – a key work that sets Holocaust-related poems by Paul Celan – are intricately crafted; *Bogenstrich* and *Trio* explore fugue and surprisingly Romantic string timbres, albeit on Birtwistle's own terms; arrangements of Bach fugues for string quartet also suggest a re-examination of technique. *String Quartet: The Tree of Strings* is masterful:

earthy and poignant, it reveals Birtwistle's deep relationship with landscape, which echoes earlier British composers. And while themes are carried forward, such as the inseparability of the human or the material from the divine explored in Robin Blaser's libretto for *The Last Supper*, which is revisited in *Angel Fighter* and *The Moth Requiem*, Birtwistle has been casting his eye back over earlier accomplishments, as in the stunning ensemble work *In Broken Images*, inspired by the antiphonal music of Giovanni Gabrieli. Here glimpses from Birtwistle's own past are viewed in a light that is provocative yet stimulating, fractured yet eternally regenerative.

David Beard, 2012

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