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_ (Senior Lecturer in Music at Cardiff University; author of _Harrison Birtwistle’s Operas and Music Theatre_ [Cambridge University Press, 2012]; co-author of _Musicology: the Key Concepts_ [Routledge, 2005].)