

EDITORIAL: HARRY'S CLOCKS

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Harrison Birtwistle died on 18 April 2022. His life as a composer began in a period when English music was quite conservative; it ended in an era in which conservatism still flourishes, now disguised as an all-accepting pluralism. Within this evolving environment Birtwistle was able to create works that spoke with a consistent and uncompromising modernity, although his version of modernism also embraced elements of much older cultures, from England itself, from the early European Renaissance and from classical antiquity. His death has already been marked by many perceptive tributes and the shape of his life is well known; here I want to reflect on just a few aspects of the work of this remarkable artist.

Birtwistle conceived his music in two quite different ways, either as a single inexorable unfolding or as a patchwork. So, like the image in the etching by Pieter Bruegel the Elder that inspired it, *The Triumph of Time* (1970–72) slowly passes before us. *Pulse Shadows* (1989–96), on the other hand, flickers back and forth between two interlocking cycles of short pieces, the *Nine Movements* for string quartet (four 'Frieze' and five 'Fantasia' movements) and the *Nine Settings of Celan* for soprano, two clarinets, viola, cello and double bass. Birtwistle himself suggested that Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître* was his formal model for *Pulse Shadows*, but the interrelationships in Birtwistle's work are much more complicated. As each string quartet movement is succeeded by vocal music, to be followed in turn by the string quartet, our ears search for correspondences, contradictions, our memories ranging back across the music, across time.

Time was his abiding preoccupation, and his titles – *The Triumph of Time*, *Harrison's Clocks*, *Deep Time* – make sure we know this. In Birtwistle some time flows, some time is marked, but mostly both sorts of time happen together. *Linoi* (1968) was written around the spectacular clarinet playing of Alan Hacker, its melodic line traversing every register of the instrument, and to hear just the clarinet part is an entirely satisfactory experience. But Birtwistle adds a part for piano, mostly passive, the sustaining pedal held down to capture the resonance of the clarinet; sometimes he also requires the pianist to play, directly on the strings, a series of plucked notes and glissandi. The clarinet music moves through time, outlining a musical discourse with its own compelling formal logic; the piano part frames that discourse like a clock, ticking and chiming.

There's also a sort of theatre in *Linoi* – in the awkwardness of the pianist's stance, present, waiting, a sacerdotal bending, then straightening, each time the strings have to be touched – and Birtwistle's sense of theatre was as assured as his sense of time and timing. In retrospect, he was the obvious choice to be appointed as the National Theatre's director of music in 1975, ready for the company's move into its permanent home on London's South Bank the following year; however, one might also argue that regular involvement in the making of new productions led to his later stage-works becoming more conventional. *Punch and Judy* (1966–67), *Down by the*

Greenwood Side (1968–69) and *The Mask of Orpheus* (1973–84) are far bolder in their approach to music-theatre than any of his later operas, perhaps because none of Birtwistle's collaborators for these works – respectively Stephen Pruslin, Michael Nyman and Peter Zinovieff – was a writer by profession. But, as Birtwistle often asserted in interviews, the original conception for each new stage-work was always his.

Birtwistle might also have added that these works were not only original but also very successful, widely performed, acclaimed and revived. Some English music journalists liked to characterise him as an outlier, but few English composers have been so acutely conscious of the relationship between their work and the contemporary culture within which they made that work. To begin with it was straightforward: Birtwistle didn't want to be an 'English' composer, as that had come to be understood in the first half of the twentieth century, yet over time his revoicing of Englishness, replacing the mystic exaltation of Vaughan Williams and Tippett with something more abrasive, even brutal, became attractive to audiences across the world.

Or, as in *Harrison's Clocks* (1997–98), he would mix his own preoccupations with current ideas. For Birtwistle, the title was a gift from history, but it was a gift wrapped by Dava Sobel, whose bestseller *Longitude* (1995) had recently reminded the world of the great eighteenth-century clockmaker John Harrison's achievements. Why make this a multi-movement work for piano? Because in the mid-1990s Joanna MacGregor was making a reputation as one of the most exciting pianists of her generation, and György Ligeti's two books of études – six in Book 1 (1985), eight in Book 2 (1988–94) – had demonstrated that new collections of virtuoso studies could have a place in pianists' repertoire. Nonetheless, as Birtwistle would remark to students keen to discover the secrets of success as a composer, 'in the end you are going to have to write some music'; it was something he did formidably well.

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In an interview with Kate Molleson in 2017, Birtwistle said that he 'would hate to be a 25-year-old composer now. I wouldn't know what to do, I wouldn't know where I was.'¹ In this issue of *TEMPO* explorations of the work of Ann Cleare and Richard Elmsley, two composers who very evidently know exactly where they are, is followed by a consideration of how composition teaching in higher education might help younger composers to achieve this too. I am grateful to Martin Iddon, Scott McLaughlin and Mic Spencer for making available these fascinating insights into the interaction between composition curricula and students, five articles that developed from a symposium that was part of the Teaching Composition in the Twenty-First Century project at Leeds University, funded by the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence. The articles draw on their authors' experience of teaching in universities in the UK, Ireland and the USA; what makes them especially interesting for *TEMPO* readers is the way in which they address questions that go to the heart of music-making today: what sort of music can and should we make; is it appropriate to privilege some sorts of music in deciding what should be studied; what effects do these choices have on the sorts of people who might become music students?

¹ Kate Molleson, 'A Composer's Tale', *Gramophone*, March (2017), www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/i-know-that-originally-i-had-some-crazy-ideas-but-i-didn-t-know-they-were-crazy-when-i-was-doing-them-classic-interview-with-sir-harrison-birtwistle (accessed 11 June 2022).