

**Jonathan Cross.** *Harrison Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music.* Cornell University Press, 2000. xiii, 295 pp.

**Robert Adlington.** *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle.* Cambridge University Press, 2000. xiv, 242 pp.

*Reviewed by Stephen Walsh*

The more or less simultaneous appearance of these two substantial books on the music of Harrison Birtwistle by a pair of British academics is clinching evidence—if such a thing were required—of Birtwistle's standing as a major world figure, at least in the eyes of his British admirers. All the same, something needs to be said about that qualification. Birtwistle also enjoys a certain reputation on the European mainland, but it is of much more recent date and by no means universal. His manuscripts are housed in the archive set up in Basle by the late Paul Sacher, who commissioned his trumpet concerto *Endless Parade* in 1986; but the distinguished Franco-Swiss-German musicologists who now run the Sacher Stiftung are by no means unanimous in their admiration. As for the United States, my impression from across the pond is that Birtwistle's music, like his person, is a very intermittent presence. Prestigious commissions like *Exody* (for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra) can be traced to influential admirers—in this case, Daniel Barenboim, who was also midwife to the Berlin premiere of Birtwistle's latest opera, *The Last Supper*. Otherwise, in the States most of Birtwistle's stage works, and much else of note, remain little known.

Though the music itself is typically harsh, violent, and uncompromising, there is something curiously homely—or at least home-based—about the underlying personality. As Jonathan Cross insists early in his monograph, “a sense of place” is fundamental to Birtwistle, and “his preference for British folk subject matter, his predilection for the pastoral, his exploration of the linear and the lyrical, locate him clearly within an English tradition” (5). This is an essentially romantic tradition of rooted Englishness—Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst—which was at first very slow to travel and can still seem, from abroad, like the musical equivalent of a thatched Somerset cottage or a cool breeze on the Malvern Hills. The first challenge of any serious study of Birtwistle must be to investigate how a composer who has retained these roots can write music of such apparently remorseless cruelty and ferocity. What follows, then, is an attempt to locate this most disconcerting of modern British composers on the basis of these two in many ways comparable, even somewhat similar, studies of his work.

Birtwistle, who was born in 1934, studied composition at the Royal Manchester College of Music in the early fifties, at a time when British music and music teaching were still largely innocent of modernism, whether that of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, or Messiaen. It so happened, though, that the RCM composition teacher, Richard Hall, knew and taught serial method (of a kind) and encouraged modernist tendencies in his pupils (who included Peter Maxwell Davies and Alexander Goehr, son of an émigré Schoenberg pupil, the conductor Walter Goehr). It seems, from both his music and his account of himself,<sup>1</sup> that Birtwistle was never much interested in serial method as such, but recognised subconsciously that the encounter liberated him from conventional preconceptions about the limits of musical expression. From the start, he selected models or procedures that suited him, regardless of orthodoxy, and almost from the start (his earliest published work was written when he was 23) adopted a manner which, *mutatis mutandis*, has remained with him ever since.

A Lancastrian from the mill town of Accrington, Birtwistle embodied from early on what the English tend to regard as North Country virtues: independence of mind, abruptness, honesty, and a sort of bloody-minded generosity. Jonathan Cross calls Accrington *rus in urbe*, a characteristic blend of “industry and countryside, of factory chimneys and sheep, of workers’ terraces and farmhouses” (7), and usefully suggests the novels of D. H. Lawrence as a good and accessible encapsulation of a similar atmosphere (that of the Nottinghamshire coalfield).<sup>2</sup> These are subtly different locales from the pastoral England of Vaughan Williams’s *Norfolk Rhapsody* or Elgar’s *Falstaff*. The rhapsodic, anecdotal, “folksy” air of travel-poster Englishry is miles from the clanking and bleating of those regions where the rough moorland comes almost to the factory gate and the workers’ chief recreations are fishing, rabbit-lamping, and hare-coursing. Against such a background, Cross sees no contradiction in Birtwistle’s idea of a “mechanical pastoral” (the subtitle of his theater piece *Yan Tan Tethera*). More especially, one can without undue glibness refer the recurrent harshness of Birtwistle’s response to pastoral subject-matter back to the drastic juxtapositions and often unlovely specifics of life in so unyielding an environment.

Nevertheless, it helps one understand this rebarbative brand of pastoralism to look coolly for a moment at its ancestry. In England, the rural revival—from William Morris onward—was always essentially a rejection of urban life and its conditions, even though, paradoxically, it was done in the name of that most urban of political philosophies, socialism. As an idea, it may have been utopian, but it was never sentimental, and its escapism was practical, not make-believe. At bottom, the intention was individualist. Only by escaping from the mass production and deadening

conformity of the city could a man hope to find himself through work and leisure, materially, and spiritually. In the same way, one could argue that the composer Vaughan Williams saw pastoralism not only as an escape but as an assertion, even if his genius was not consistently equal to the creative challenge it presented. His best work embodied a kind of quest for spiritual identity, even if it meant ignoring the standard postulates of sound craftsmanship. His *Pastoral Symphony* may suffer (as Constant Lambert thought) from "monotony of texture and lack of form" (Lambert 1945:103-4), but it remains a marvelous essay in mystical self-absorption. *Obiter dicta* of Vaughan Williams that have come down to us show that his public persona bore out this independence of normal "urbane" manners. "It looks wrong and it sounds wrong," he is supposed to have said about his violent Fourth Symphony, "but it's right." Perhaps he did also say of the same work: "I don't know if I like it, but it's what I meant."

Not a note of Birtwistle's music could ever be mistaken for Vaughan Williams even at his most awkward, but I believe all the same that it enshrines a kindred spirit. For some unknown reason, the young Lancastrian sensed a connection between landscape and myth: between, say, the amateur music-making of *rus in urbe* and the complex roots of rural storytelling as embodied in the old Mysteries and Mummers' plays. His early music-theater piece about the resurrection of St. George and the legend of the Cruel Mother (*Down by the Greenwood Side*, 1969) characteristically uses the "band with the curious tone" from the Helston Floral Dance, and cultivates a raucous, galumphing texture and cacophonous harmony that make it quite plain that the composer's interest in such subject-matter had nothing to do with rural escapism, cows looking over gates, or any of the other clichés of the pastoral movement, but rather that he was deeply embroiled with the mystical tragedy of human existence, its bloodthirstiness, its relentless cycle of death and rebirth.

The obvious musical source for these ideas is not, of course, anything English, but Stravinsky, and in particular *The Rite of Spring*. Birtwistle seems to have been riveted by the violence of Stravinsky's Russian springtime and fascinated by his obsession with seasonal rotation as an image of spiritual renewal. He has continued to trace this theme in the context of Anglo-Celtic myth through a long series of major dramatic works culminating (so far) in the opera *Gawain*. But like Stravinsky, he has also sought to delocalize the metaphor through subject matter and formalisms taken from Greek mythology and theater. In fact it seems that the formalisms preceded the mythology, in the sense that he made fragmentary settings of Sappho and composed abstract Greek "tragedies" (*Tragoedia and Monodrama*) long before confronting an actual Greek myth in the form of the Virgilian Orpheus, the subject of his opera *The Mask of Orpheus*. His

partial model for such procedures may have been Stravinsky's *Agon*, a plotless classical ballet which, moreover, employs a hybrid repertoire of up-to-date compositional techniques in an entirely personal manner. But there is hardly anything of the actual style of *Agon* and little of its specific method in even the earliest of Birtwistle's published music.

It is utterly typical of the aura of this unusual composer that one should talk about his work largely in terms of myth-making and broad cultural contexts, and rarely in terms of the usual analytical-theoretical paraphernalia—serial structures, pitch-class sets, harmonic abstracts, tree diagrams, and the rest. "Anyone hoping," says Robert Adlington, "for a comprehensive dissection of musical structure or Birtwistle's methods of working should look elsewhere" (4). But that "elsewhere" will not include Jonathan Cross's book, whose general approach is rather similar to Adlington's. In fact a survey of their respective chapter headings and subheadings reveals an affinity that would look suspiciously like collusion to anyone unfamiliar with either the music or its extensive but on the whole rather repetitive, non-technical critical literature. Both books open their accounts of the music with chapters called "Theatres," and both have either chapters or sections on myth, ritual, verse form, and pulse. As may by now be apparent, these things are the stock-in-trade of writing on Birtwistle, whose musical language has generally been regarded as impenetrable but whose contexts and terms of reference have always been overt, interesting, and eminently discussable.

Birtwistle has himself rather encouraged this trend. From the start, seemingly uninterested in "system," and certainly in the kind of respectable, dialectical methodology which formed the basis of most published music analysis in the sixties and seventies, Birtwistle presented the image of a "natural," an artist who made things—he knew not how or why. Pointedly, he has later been inclined to draw attention to the influence of painters like Klee and Cézanne on his musical thinking, and his acknowledged musical models (Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, Varèse, Satie) have often seemed rather carefully chosen to reflect a modishly anti-intellectual, anti-Darmstadt tendency in his own work—though Cross reveals some covert orthodox influences and even suggests that Birtwistle was capable of withdrawing a piece like *Three Sonatas for Nine Instruments* (1958) because "it sounded too modish, too much like the Webern pastiche which was everywhere in Europe at that time" (49).

Adlington has a somewhat different, more trusting line on this intellectual exogamy. For him, "it reflects an awareness that contemporary classical music guarantees itself increasing isolation and distrust so long as its discussion remains confined to questions of technique and internal structure" (2). One naturally asks, "isolation from and distrust by whom?" since

Birtwistle certainly has never gone out of his way to court general popularity, and even made himself (obviously quite consciously) into a hate figure with the anti-avant garde, middle-brow set by composing one of his most noisily disagreeable works, *Panic*, for the populist, flag-waving Last Night of the London Proms in 1995, an incident on which both Cross and Adlington dwell with some relish. Of course, it may well be that Birtwistle also enjoys discountenancing the professional musicologist, whom Sir Thomas Beecham famously defined as "a man who can read music but can't hear it." "Over the years," says Cross, "we have seen Birtwistle invent for himself a distinctive public persona which makes full play of his northern roots and tries gruffly to understate the fact that he is engaged in an intellectual activity, that he could be seen as part of some sort of cultural élite" (157).

Invented it may be, but it also reflects something genuine about Birtwistle's work—something with which it seems to have taken his unquestioned public acceptance as an artistic grandee to make him altogether at ease (rather as Stravinsky took time to admit that he composed at the piano). For the analytical and sketch studies which have begun, rather fitfully, to flow from Birtwistle's sale of his materials to Sacher in 1991 have tended to support the idea that while number systems, formal patterns, and even pitch sets are as important for him as for most modern composers, they have always performed a very qualified and unorthodox function. Random numbers, for instance, "constitute his prime method of messing things up" (Hall [1984] 1998:x), a method, that is, for disrupting what might otherwise become too systematic. In the same way, while symmetry is important to him, in the nature of his general approach to form, his real interest lies in fractured, not fulfilled symmetry, and the question of method resolves itself, ultimately, into a question of how to disrupt—a somewhat strange, and, in Darmstadt terms, far from respectable, approach to system.

Since his early years of gruff inarticulacy, Birtwistle has in fact talked a lot about his work, and his ideas are strongly reflected and much quoted in the pages of both these books. (On the whole, I look forward—without much optimism—to the day when composers stop telling us what to think about their music and instead either write more of it or, in certain cases—definitely not including Birtwistle—give up altogether and go into bee-keeping or charcoal-burning, trades in which there is a serious shortage.) Cross and Adlington offer two on the whole good and valuable studies from a broadly orthodox position. Both, as already hinted, are topic based. In neither case is there any attempt at a chronological survey, though Cross provides an excellent opening background chapter, partly biographical, partly contextual. Instead, the music is treated as exemplify-

ing a series of well-established tendencies in Birtwistle's work as a whole. Thus, both begin by using Birtwistle's obsession with "theater" as the starting point for an investigation of the role of myth, narrative and ritual, before passing on to broad discussions of musical elements, types of form (verse and refrain, etc.), the treatment of pulse and time, and eventually studies of melody, line, texture, and to some extent tonality (or rather pitch-centricity).

As so often with topic-based work, however, problems arise from the need to reduce unruly reality to a set of simple categories. For instance, Cross's fourth chapter, on "pastoral" (a genre which, as we saw earlier, links Attic Greece with the North Country of Birtwistle's youth), is undermined by a certain reluctance to define the term with any precision, so that it turns out to include not only Blow's suitably Theocritan *Venus and Adonis*, but also Purcell's *Dido*; not only *Down by the Greenwood Side* but also *Punch and Judy*; not only *The Rite of Spring* but also Birtwistle's opera *The Second Mrs. Kong* (a fantasy love story about King Kong and Vermeer's "Girl with Pearl Earrings"); and yet to exclude—by implication at least—such obvious pastorals (in the broad sense) as *Der Freischütz* and *Tannhäuser*, presumably because they are nineteenth-century and not—or mainly not—classical in subject-matter.

Another difficult term that needs sharper definition here is "time," a medium widely but absurdly supposed to be of greater interest to Birtwistle and certain of his source composers (Stravinsky, Messiaen) than to Bach or Beethoven. It does actually seem that musical aestheticians, from Jonathan Kramer onwards, have tended to take composers' word for it that time has become a new issue in modern music, without paying enough attention to the extent to which all music acts as (among other things) a way of modifying our sense of time's passage. Adlington, though, is aware of this problem. Discussing Birtwistle's most famous time-piece, he points out that "if it is simply by virtue of their successive presentation in time, then there would no longer be any grounds to mark out *The Triumph of Time* as more 'goal-directed' than any other music, for in these terms *all* music may be understood to 'pass' a listener, unidirectionally" (102, italics in the original). This, of course, is to make the point from the other side, since *The Triumph of Time* is being thought of as standing out against a "static" tendency in Birtwistle's previous work. But the question remains, what is the actual nature of the stasis in, say, *Punch and Judy*, and how, if at all, does it differ from the arrested movement of the "Arietta" in Beethoven's op. 111, or the inertia of so much Vivaldi?

Finally, those old (or, rather, newish) chestnuts "ritual" and "myth," terms bandied about in recent musicology with all the enthusiasm of an age which has got rid of most of its own rituals and forgotten most of its

myths. In a strong chapter which deals with these two concepts in tandem, Jonathan Cross still manages to leave one in doubt about their exact signification in relation to work such as Birtwistle's. On myth, he quotes, but partially disputes, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (92). He implies, apparently with approval, that for depth psychology "one head is the same as another; one myth is the same as another. Faust becomes Orpheus. The power of a myth lies not in its subject matter but in what it points to beyond itself, what it points to in us" (95). But the whole point of operative myth is that it relates one story rather than another. Whatever the "meaning" of, say, the tale of Balder the Beautiful, it appeals precisely because it is a good story, and to hell with its symbolism. And the whole problem of myth in a work like Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus* is that the story vanishes into a hermeneutic cauldron, from which it has to be re-extracted with the help of program notes which, in practically the same breath, tell us—the humble audience—what the story we are unable to follow signifies to our unperceiving minds.

And there is a further, related problem with ritual, which Adlington highlights in quoting T. S. Eliot. Drama, Eliot said, "can never coincide with ritual, for in the theatre we are spectators, not participants" (quoted in Adlington, 31). One notes in passing that in those relatively few cases (e.g., *Parsifal* and Birtwistle's own magnificent *Last Supper*) where the ritual action overlaps with our own observances, one is conscious of an ambiguity, perhaps a certain unease or even an urge to laugh (which may be why weddings and funerals are good subjects for comedy). But Adlington suggests that Birtwistle's rituals "have more in common with the unfamiliar rituals of alien or ancient cultures than with those prominent in modern Western society" and that his "concept of ritual is essentially an exotic one." This is true in the sense that Birtwistle plunders distant epochs for his ritual forms, but untrue in the suggestion that they are culturally alien. On the contrary these stories and formulae are ancestral to us (medieval England, classical Greece); and this is exactly the point, because they embody ideas which still lurk somewhere in our psyche. There is nothing "colonial" about them, as Adlington claims (32), and certainly nothing "culturally offensive." We have simply lost direct contact with them.

Taken as a whole, Adlington's book is nevertheless an impressive debut. It is concentrated and well organized, and if it occasionally swallows the composer's ideas without quite enough chewing, it certainly does not treat his music as beyond reproach. One of the difficulties of criticism (in the neutral sense) of an original of Birtwistle's stature is that criteria are lacking for fair evaluation. But Adlington is not afraid to go back to old-fashioned ideas of good practice, a willingness which I think does both him and his subject credit. For instance, he is critical of Birtwistle's word-

setting, claiming that in his many non-operatic vocal works he shows a “slavish adherence to the original textual form” (71) and a proclivity for “literal renderings . . . with verses intact and well separated, [which] appear absurdly innocent of their bizarre musical surroundings” (73)—a criticism which recalls Birtwistle’s own insistence, much cited in both these books, on the “sanctity of the context.” In general, what emerges about Birtwistle’s response to words tends to enhance the picture of an extraordinarily independent, at times willful, creative artist whose apparent defects may be merely the outward sign of an unwavering inner force. Adlington is amusing on the whole subject of Birtwistle’s relationship with his librettists, and makes gentle fun of the way in which they have tended to cater to what they perceived as his idiosyncrasies, only to find that, having moved on artistically, he no longer saw things that way—like Stravinsky, who in an October 1913 letter told Alexandre Benois: “I’ll repeat anything you like but not myself” (quoted in Walsh 1999:218).

The picture that emerges from Cross is by implication more indulgent, and in an obvious sense closer to its subject than Adlington. This is perhaps no more than one should expect from a book subtitled “Man, Mind, Music” by an author who already has a significant track record on the subject. Yet it is perhaps also the case that Cross tells us more about the actual music—the dots on the page—than Adlington. The latter’s music examples are relatively few and, on occasion, exiguous (his very first example shows simply a perfect fifth, D–A, solemnly captioned “The Mask of Orpheus: perfect fifth dominating the end of Act II”), though they do include a brilliantly graphic double page from a work called *Signals*, which as good as proves that Birtwistle was influenced in his score lay-outs by Edward T. Cone’s famous chart of the Symphonies of Wind Instruments—a discovery that should give us all hope. Cross, on the other hand, is at his most lucid when describing musical processes, apt to drift (as we saw in the case of pastoral) when addressing generalities or the kinds of glib parallels—between, for example, music and painting—that fall so readily from the pen but seldom withstand the closest scrutiny. His book is also rather carelessly proofread. Or should we perhaps see this as a natural response to the music of a composer who has always respected error as a creative mechanism and used random number to throw spanners in works. It would be nice to think so, but I am not confident.

#### Notes

1. For instance in Michael Hall’s brilliant early monograph ([1984] 1998).
2. Another might be Richard Llewellyn’s novel *How Green Was My Valley* (1939), about a mining community in South Wales.



*References*

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