Sir Harrison Birtwistle

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (2010)

HARRISON BIRTWISTLE was born in Accrington, Lancashire, England, on July 15, 1934, and now lives in Mere, Wiltshire, about 100 miles west of London. In 2005 the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine, Music Director, commissioned from Birtwistle an orchestral work of unspecified genre, and the composer, during a period in which he completed and saw to the production of his opera "The Minotaur" (among other works), decided to write a piece for violin and orchestra, a genre heretofore unrepresented in his large catalog. The commission was extended by the BSO through the generous support of the New Works Fund established by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency. Birtwistle completed most of the actual work of composition on the Violin Concerto in 2010, completing it in the fall. The score is dedicated to his longtime friend and manager Andrew Rosner. These are the world premiere performances.

THE SCORE OF BIRTWISTLE'S VIOLIN CONCERTO calls for solo violin and an orchestra of two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets in B-flat (second doubling A, E-flat, and bass clarinets), bass clarinet (doubling contrabass clarinet), two bassoons (second doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (three players: glockenspiel, xylophone, crotales, vibraphone, marimba, five temple blocks, long [ca. 40 cm] bamboo guiro, claves, castanet machine, tambourine, four bongos, large bass drum, suspended cymbal, low nipple gong, tam-tam), two harps, and strings. The piece is in one movement of approximately twenty-five minutes' duration.

Harrison Birtwistle was born in Accrington in Lancashire, in the northwest of England. In the course of his life he has spent long periods in Manchester, in the United States, in London, and in France. When he returned for good to England, he settled in Mere, in the south-central English county of Wiltshire, not too distant from Wardour Castle where in the early 1960s he taught at the Cranborne Chase School and started the Wardour Castle Summer School.

In a country of many remarkable landscapes and dramatic historical artifacts (the Roman Wall, the Uffington White Horse), Wiltshire stands out for its pastoral beauty as well as for the presence of numerous prehistoric sites, including Stonehenge and Silbury Hill, both close enough to Mere to consider as picnic destinations. English history and mystery, then, is embedded in the very ground beneath Harrison Birtwistle's feet.

Birtwistle's outlook on culture grows from fundamentals, from sources with roots deep in the Western psyche. From the beginnings of his career, his work has explicitly drawn on English legend and classical Greek theater and myth. His pieces, including concert works with no specific theatrical component, are often formally ritualistic or processional. The details of his music, in spite of its apparent intricacy both in terms of the immediately audible surface and deeper formal connections, are indebted essentially to old archetypes—the monody of chant and folksong, the rhythmic ground of ostinato. His work relies on an awareness of continuity, recurrence, and symmetry necessary as points of reference, but these are never used in a "pure" form. Continuity is established to obviate disruption; cycles return corrupted, incomplete, or transformed. Birtwistle's symmetry of phrase and harmony is analogous to symmetry in nature, an unequal correspondence like the two halves of an apple or a face, suggesting the inherent energy of imbalance. His music strives for the natural, but "natural" is not, after all, a simple thing.

Playing clarinet in a local military band and later in his military service, Birtwistle early on experienced the solid, functional directness of public music. An encounter with Olivier Messiaen's then very recent *Turangalîla* and studies at the Royal Manchester College of Music exploded his musical boundaries. At the RMCM he formed the New Music Manchester Group with several future leaders of English music: Elgar Howarth, Peter Maxwell Davies, Alexander Goehr, and John Ogdon. Birtwistle composed, but was less confident than Davies or Goehr in putting his music forward. It wasn't until 1957 that he wrote the woodwind quintet *Refrains and Choruses*, his first acknowledged work, which gave him a significant boost upon its being selected to the Cheltenham Festival. In the mid-1960s he traveled to the United States, where he came into contact with a range of American composers. He attended the lectures of Milton Babbitt at Princeton University, later saying that learning about the then-current mode of serialism and set theory allowed him to reject pre-established systems and find his own way (although the methods were nonetheless influential for him).

Birtwistle stopped performing as a clarinetist after his school years in order to concentrate on composition. His experience with the nuts and bolts of music production includes the founding of the Pierrot Players and his work, for

many years, as music director and subsequently assistant director of England's National Theatre (1975-1982), where he provided music for numerous plays including several of Shakespeare's and, most significantly, a spare, ritualistic production of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy. (He also wrote music for a major film—typically a challenge of pragmatism—for Sidney Lumet's *The Offence*, starring Sean Connery.)

An inclination toward the archetypal narratives of collective consciousness has quite apparently been the basis of all of Birtwistle's musical theater works, and, though more abstractly, much of his instrumental music. Greek drama underlies his major instrumental works *Trageodia* and *Theseus Games* as much as it does his operas *The Mask of Orpheus*, the chamber opera *The Io Passion*, and *The Minotaur*, his largest work of the past decade, written for the Royal Opera.

English narrative archetypes have their place as well. Birtwistle's first opera, *Punch and Judy*, treats the ancient and traditional puppet-show characters; his *Gawain* the Arthurian tale; and *Down by the Greenwood Side* and *Yan Tan Tethera* both spring from folk stories. A hybrid work touching on popular culture and its connections to various mythological types is his collaboration with the novelist Russell Hoban for the opera *The Second Mrs. Kong*. Unusual for its subject matter is his "dramatic tableaux" *The Last Supper*, premiered by Daniel Barenboim at the Deutsche Staatsoper in 2000. He has also based several works on the music of the iconic English lutenist-composer John Dowland, and the visual arts remain a longstanding source of inspiration. (One of the composer's three sons, Adam, is a noted artist.)

The significance and success of Birtwistle's theater works have led many to consider him the most important dramatic composer of our time. He was knighted in 1988, confirming a stature in British music that has only continued to grow worldwide. He is a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres of the French government, was awarded the prestigious Siemens Music Prize (other recipients of which have included Benjamin Britten, Olivier Messiaen, and Elliott Carter), and was the recipient of the first Roche Commission in 2004. The latter resulted in his *Night's Black Bird* for the Cleveland Orchestra. Birtwistle had also written *The Shadow of Night* for the Cleveland Orchestra, which was premiered under the baton of Christoph von Dohnányi; this was the only previous Birtwistle piece to be performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, under Dohnányi in spring 2005. (The composer taught at Harvard University during that year, and was then able to attend several BSO concerts.)

When James Levine was making plans for his upcoming seasons after committing in 2002 to take on the music directorship of the Boston Symphony, the Englishman Birtwistle stood out among a group mostly of American composers on his wish-list for newly commissioned works. Discussions began in spring 2003, but since he was in the midst of composing *The Minotaur*, the thirty-minute string quartet *The Tree of Strings*, and *Semper Dowland, semper dolens*, among other pieces, work on the new project had to be put off. He stays very busy: a new piano trio for violinist Lisa Batiashvili, cellist Adrian Brendel, and pianist Till Fellner will be premiered next month in Germany. Other current projects are a twenty-minute *Moth Requiem* for female chorus, three harps, and flute, and an antiphonal work celebrating the anniversary of the reunification of Italy, tentatively called *Divisions*.

In the interim during his completion of other projects, the purely orchestral work originally proposed morphed into a cello concerto and finally a violin concerto. It was BSO Artistic Administrator Anthony Fogg who suggested Christian Tetzlaff as the violinist, since he and Levine had collaborated so fruitfully together with the BSO in recent years. Birtwistle wrote the concerto mostly over the course of 2010, completing it in the fall. Virtually uniquely among Birtwistle's works to date, the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra reveals no extramusical clues in its title. His several earlier concerted works received such titles as *Melencolia I* (inspired by a Dürer painting) for clarinet and strings; *Endless Parade* for trumpet; *The Cry of Anubis* for tuba, and *Panic* (referring to rites of Pan) for saxophone. The Violin Concerto's prosaic title, by contrast, allows for the possibility of any interpretation: it is a blank canvas. The use of such a title suggests comparison with the great line of the "violin concerto," much as the provocatively generic titles of Stravinsky, such as *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* and Symphony in C, underline those works' deviations from convention as much as their place within a tradition.

Although the concerto lacks a specific narrative armature, it is indebted to classical Greek drama: the violin soloist as protagonist and the orchestra as chorus. For Birtwistle each musical instrument has a constant personality regardless of context, beyond its technical and idiomatic capabilities, retaining that personality even from one piece to the next. The solo violin role here is thus a consistent character, not precisely opposed to but different from the collective personality of the chorus. The solo plays almost without pause throughout, and although flashy difficulty and virtuosity are not the point, the piece is nonetheless a brilliant and exciting workout. The ensemble-chorus is a

malleable body; only when its material is very clear can the whole chorus “speak” at once, while more complex material or layers of material are given to sub-groups within this accompaniment.

Musically, the ensemble establishes the ongoing, but irregular and sometimes conflicting, foundation of ostinatos, which the composer calls the “continuum,” beneath the foreground music of the soloist, called the “cantus.” During the course of the piece, which is primarily fast and very difficult for the violinist, there are five true duets, in which a “chorus” member emerges in conversation with the violin solo: first flute, followed by piccolo, cello, oboe, and bassoon. Birtwistle describes these duets as “a way of focusing the dialog,” and they also may suggest the cyclic effect of similar verses within the larger form. The drama is in the intertwining of the primary voice with the orchestra’s individuated and joined opinions, and the clarifying of these relationships. Far from the decisive conclusion of the traditional concerto’s final cadence, Birtwistle’s concerto courts ambiguity in the gradual lessening of the orchestra’s presence until, on the very last page, a completely new world of sound suggests both a new beginning and an unexpected finality.

Robert Kirzinger