Introduction

This book is intended to perform two functions. Firstly, it comprises a handbook to Birtwistle's music. It contains descriptions of every published work (as well as a number of withdrawn and unpublished ones), thereby giving a comprehensive view of Birtwistle's large output. Many of Birtwistle's works remain little known and little discussed. It is hoped that the student, concert-goer or record-buyer will be able to reach for this book, confident in the knowledge that it contains a succinct discussion of the piece they are interested in, however obscure. Of course, there are drawbacks to attempting such a comprehensive survey. Inevitably, particularly given the size of Birtwistle's œuvre (at the time of writing there are over ninety separate works), many works do not receive the detailed attention they deserve. Any number of Birtwistle's pieces would support lengthy studies in their own right – and in due course these more detailed studies will doubtless be written and published. However, the benefits of a complete survey are not simply felt by those seeking out the more unfamiliar corners of Birtwistle's music. A little-known work often casts revealing light on a better-known one, placing it in a fruitful context or emphasising aspects of it that have hitherto gone unremarked. In the following pages, shorter, less familiar works sometimes receive more attention than longer, better-known ones, precisely in order that such connections can be effectively established.

At the same time, this book reaches beyond the specifics of individual works. Its second main purpose is to adumbrate a number of broader themes – themes of significance to Birtwistle's music, and to contemporary classical music in general. These issues form the basis of the book's structure. Birtwistle's works are discussed not chronologically but according to a number of distinct topics (though within each chapter there remains a broad progress from early works to late). In part this approach is determined by the refusal of Birtwistle's output to follow a single, smooth evolutionary path: successive works often present the most disconcerting juxtapositions. But it is also intended to emphasise the music's multifarious ways of meaning – the ways in which it establishes a handle on things outside itself, negotiating a position for itself in a wider culture. In a sense, each of the following chapters comprises an essay in what is sometimes called 'hermeneutic criticism'. Nicholas Cook says about this type of

writing on music that it 'consists of developing illuminating metaphors for particular compositions; such metaphors don't just represent something that you have already experienced, but lead you to experience the music differently. (In other words, they don't just reflect but change the way things are.)'[1]

In the case of the particular subject of this book, this sort of metaphorical, hermeneutic approach is more than simply an indulgence on the part of the author. 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. In an era where even the academic world, increasingly, no longer takes the merits of contemporary classical music for granted (recent influential scholarly writing blames musical modernism for everything from the perpetuation of sexual discrimination in musicology[2] to the death of classical music itself[3]), it becomes all the more important to assess what it represents beyond mere technical innovation; to assess how it communicates – or, not infrequently, resists communication. Sometimes this approach demands pointing up the disparity between what the music does and what the composer thinks it is doing: my discussion is mindful of Birtwistle's own views about his music, but it feels no overriding obligation to them.

My discussion also keeps in mind the controversy that has surrounded Birtwistle and his music in recent years. In the public sphere, the premiere of *Panic* at the 1995 Last Night of the Proms met with an unprecedentedly vehement public and press reception. It brought to a head the wider public notoriety that Birtwistle had gained during the revival of *Gawain* eighteen months earlier, when a posse of young, 'anti-modernist' composers mounted a campaign against the performances, and attracted a good deal of press attention in so doing. Such disapproval was not limited to enthusiasts of the Last Night and a handful of self-publicists, however, but increasingly extended into academia itself – one of the very arenas that was once accused of self-interestedly upholding the claims of avant-garde music. In recent years, academic music study has undergone a remarkable broadening to include a number of previously marginalised areas, including non-classical musics and cultural studies. This broadening has been accompanied by a growing suspicion of 'difficult' contemporary classical music, increasingly anomalous as its premises seem within the context of other contemporary musics and cultural traditions. The very public premiere of *Panic* ensured that, in Britain at least, Birtwistle came to be seen as the principal representative of musical modernism. In an introductory book about thinking about music, therefore, Nicholas Cook talked of Birtwistle's 'treatment of listeners with something bordering on

contempt',[4] and Dai Griffiths asserted, in a long article in the journal *Music Analysis*, that it was time that music analysts 'at least toyed with the notion that, say, Beck's "Devil's Haircut" is in some ways a truer and more rounded thing than the last BBC "Prom" commission of Harrison Birtwistle'.[5] That such views are representative of wider trends in academia is evinced by the paragraph of recommendation that appears on the back of Cook's book, by the distinguished American musicologist Richard Taruskin: 'This book is bound to please Sir Elton more than it will Sir Harrison; but, love it or hate it, that is the direction academic music studies are taking.'[6]

The following account of Birtwistle's music does not enter into this debate directly, although some indication as to the direction a useful counter-argument might take is given in the final chapter, which looks more specifically at Birtwistle's relation to his audiences. Instead, the frame of reference for the larger discussions in this book is principally that of the 'high culture' within which Birtwistle's music largely positions itself. So, recognition is given both to the kinship that Birtwistle's music has with the music of other twentieth-century composers, including Stravinsky, Carter, Varèse, Webern and Messiaen, and to the sustenance it receives from the other fine arts – painting, poetry, literature and theatre. Greek theatre, for instance, figures largely in the first two chapters; Chapter 3 examines, amongst other things, the degree to which Birtwistle has adopted or eschewed the innovative text-setting methods of other contemporary classical composers; and the 'classic modernism' of Igor Stravinsky and Paul Klee provides the backdrop for large parts of Chapters 5 and 6 respectively. My discussion is underpinned, however, not so much by an unswerving confidence in the merits of Birtwistle's engagement with such artistic traditions, as by an awareness of the larger cultural context within which that engagement takes place. This perspective brings into the open some of the implications of Birtwistle's practices as they might be perceived from outside the culture within which he is largely working; it thus gives a measure of recognition to the partiality of that culture's values – the element of *contestability* – that motivates Birtwistle's critics. Instances where this perspective is particularly evident are my discussions of the violent and 'ritualistic' aspects of Birtwistle's theatre pieces, and of his treatment of the voice in his songs. Happily, this wider context also occasionally intervenes to suggest ways in which Birtwistle's music, for all its alleged 'exclusivity', fruitfully intersects with more widely appreciated cultural phenomena. For instance, as I suggest in Chapter 5, its verse structures provide a basis for a closer comparison with pop song than is usually recognised. A willingness to reach out beyond the usual frame of reference was an exemplary characteristic of Michael Nyman's critical writings on

Birtwistle in the late 1960s and early 1970s. His insistence upon, rather than avoidance of, the comparison between Birtwistle's modernism and contemporary developments in pop and American experimental music produced criticism of great trenchancy and balance. Such boldness has been too little evident in more recent writings on contemporary classical music.

A definite advantage of the thematic, 'hermeneutic' approach taken in this book is that it takes the emphasis off in-depth technical analysis. This is not to imply that such analysis is in itself a bad thing, but it does undoubtedly limit the wider usefulness of a discussion. The following chapters contain technical observations, of course, but anyone hoping for a comprehensive dissection of musical structure or Birtwistle's methods of working should look elsewhere (and increasingly there are places to look, a fact I have attempted to recognise in my notes). Score references, in the form of bar numbers or rehearsal numbers (the latter contained within square brackets), are included wherever they may be useful, but by and large access to scores is not essential to following the discussion. Additionally, my discussion traces an overall progression from topics requiring relatively little attention to structural detail ('Theatres', 'Roles') to those where it is much more germane ('Sections', 'Layers').

In order to make it easier to locate discussions of individual works, I have mostly restricted assessments of each piece to a single place in the book. This has necessitated difficult decisions about which aspects of each piece to bring into consideration, and which to leave unassessed. In the case of a small number of pieces (including *Refrains and Choruses*, *Verses for Ensembles* and *Secret Theatre*) this general rule has been relaxed in order to allow their full importance better to emerge. Needless to say, this procedure does not preclude passing references to pieces of relevance to an ongoing discussion. The 'Index of works' indicates the main discussion of each piece in bold print. Conversely, the reader who chooses to follow the discussion through the course of a whole chapter can get a more precise idea of the chronological picture from the numbers following the titles of each work at every sub-heading. These refer to the 'Chronological list of works' included at the back of the book.

1 Theatres

Nicholas Snowman has observed that, 'For some composers, creating opera or music-theatre somehow requires a different, separate compositional process from the rest of their output. Harrison Birtwistle, however, like Hector Berlioz and the young Stravinsky, is a composer whose work in whatever form is "theatrical".'[1] Snowman thus encapsulates a widely held view about Harrison Birtwistle's music: namely, that theatre is central to all of it, not just that of 'the stage'.[2] This interest in theatre is manifested in a compositional output that, alongside several large-scale operas and music theatre-pieces, includes numerous vocal and instrumental works whose titles and compositional premises allude to theatre and the theatrical. It is also reflected in positions of employment Birtwistle has held over the years. The best known of these is his period as musical director at London's National Theatre from 1975 to 1983, during which time he provided music for numerous stage productions (Michael Hall lists twelve in all[3]). He also worked at this time with the National Theatre Studio, an arena for experimental theatre and the development of the skills of the National Theatre company. Yet over a decade before he joined the National Theatre – even before his first opera *Punch and Judy* – Birtwistle was meeting the demand for theatre pieces for children, at the schools where he taught music.[4] The most visible products of this experience were two published works, *The Mark of the Goat* and *The Visions of Francesco Petrarca*, which anticipate the later, better-known stage works in intriguing ways. In the period between these posts of employment, Birtwistle also wrote the score to a film, Sidney Lumet's *The Offence*. The urge to engage with drama is clearly part of his compositional make-up.

The importance of theatre to Birtwistle's music is commonly recognised, but the connection is often made in a rather generalised way, which sometimes does little to elucidate the particular concerns of individual pieces. Of course, it is not hard to see how 'theatre' might become a rather indiscriminately applied interpretative tool. Birtwistle's music is often forbiddingly abstract and resistant to easy analysis, and the idea that it is all 'essentially theatrical' is likely to be gratefully accepted by critics struggling to find some way of making new works explicable. Additionally, Birtwistle's recurrent dramatic obsessions in the stage works suggest a reassuring consistency of approach across many years.[5] Myth and legend

loom large, as do traditional or folk tales; and numerous more incidental narrative devices have acquired the status of persistent idées fixes: battles, decapitation, resurrection, nightmares, riddles, journeying, the seasons, numbers and counting, even colours, all recur in two or more of the stage works. This encourages the impression that a certain sort of theatricality is an intrinsic and unchanging feature of Birtwistle's musical idiom.

Such a view underestimates both the diversity of Birtwistle's 'theatres', and the sometimes troublesome implications, and contradictions with other aspects of Birtwistle's compositional preoccupations, to which they give rise. It is these things, as much as the consistent and familiar features, that the present chapter seeks to highlight. The first section focuses upon the violent subject-matters of Birtwistle's stage works, and the widespread impression that Birtwistle's music in general has a violent cast. The second section turns to myth, and the way in which different types of narration inflect the story being told. Birtwistle's fluctuating attitudes to the relationship of music and drama, and to their status as discrete categories, form the principal topic of the third section. And the competing tug and pull of 'narrative' and 'ritualistic' tendencies is examined at the end of the chapter. Successive sections each examine one or more of the stage works, progressing roughly chronologically through Birtwistle's output; the idea, though, is to explore themes that have resonances throughout Birtwistle's music, be it for theatre or concert hall, voice or instrument.

Violence

Punch and Judy (18)

A paradox presents itself when any composer working in an avant-garde idiom decides to combine music with some form of dramatic representation. On the one hand, post-war avant-garde musical idioms are defined in part by their refusal of conventionalised symbolic codes, a refusal that comes of the attempt to render music a purely formalist mode of articulation, expressing nothing beyond itself. On the other, it is precisely those symbolic codes that have traditionally governed the combination of music and drama, whereby certain musical configurations connote states of mind or characteristics of action or situation. The result, in the immediate post-war years, was that 'few young composers wanted to work in the theatre';[6] music and words were combined, if at all, in song rather than opera, where there was greater precedent for an indirect relationship between them.

Birtwistle's musical idiom was profoundly influenced by the European

post-war avant-garde, and that he shares some of their ambivalence about the possibility of dramatic expression is clear from these comments in an interview with Paul Griffiths:

> [PG:] *You've said that when you're composing you're concerned with the structure and not with what it's . . .*
> [HB:] . . . saying. No, because I can't control that, can I? I don't see how one can.
> *But when you're writing incidental music it must be required that you know what it's saying?*
> Yes, that's a different activity.
> *But there must be something of that too in opera?*
> Yes, but I've got a feeling that my operatic efforts are in some degree on the side. They're occasional pieces.[7]

Birtwistle here appears to be suggesting that the need to admit an element of conventionalised musical signification in the stage works renders them marginal – tangential to his main compositional pursuits. It is not difficult to find such moments of conventional expressivity in Birtwistle's stage works: the exquisite lyricism of Judy's 'Passion Aria' in *Punch and Judy* or Lady de Hautdesert's 'Lullaby' in Act II of *Gawain*; the slapstick comedy of Madame Lena's sphinx in *The Second Mrs Kong*'s second act; the desolation of Orpheus' suicide at the end of Act II of *The Mask of Orpheus*. One is bound to balk at the idea that it is moments such as these, with their powerful dramatic impact, that render the operas 'occasional pieces' in Birtwistle's eyes. His comment was doubtless unpremeditated and perhaps should not be treated too literally. Nevertheless, his embarrassment must be taken on board too, for it is indicative of a paradox that touches all the stage works. The music appears to be charged with the conventional responsibility of reflecting the drama, yet elements of the musical idiom strongly resist a representational function.

This is not to say that avant-garde musical idioms are completely devoid of expressive potential. On the contrary, the very *refusal* to communicate by conventional means is itself highly expressive. Avant-garde music is widely perceived not in terms of abstract structure but as a hostile and aggressive statement. At least, that is the impression that tends to be given to anyone who has not made a special study of the music. Here, then, is a basis for reconciling avant-garde music and dramatic representation, and it is one that Birtwistle appears to have capitalised upon. Murder, infanticide, suicide and bodily violence feature prominently in the scenarios of the stage works, and they seem all too well suited to a musical idiom 'associated with violence rather than nuance', one that has been described as

'uncompromisingly aggressive'.[8] The predilection for violent subject-matters is evident as early as *The Visions of Francesco Petrarca*, a theatre piece for children written in 1965. This work sets a succession of Petrarch sonnets, each of which 'describes an incident in which something beautiful . . . is savagely destroyed'.[9] However, it is *Punch and Judy*, completed two years later, that has become the bench-mark for this aspect of Birtwistle's music. *Punch and Judy* establishes a pattern of ritualised violence that resurfaces both in later stage works and in the purely instrumental music.

Punch and Judy is unsparing in its aggression. It utilises a traditional children's entertainment renowned for its sadistic violence, reworked, in the words of the librettist Stephen Pruslin, 'to enable an audience of adults to re-experience the vividness of their childhood reactions'.[10] In addition, trappings of another historical dramatic form to privilege violent confrontation, namely ancient Greek tragedy, are grafted onto the traditional Punch story. The character of Choregos, for instance, who acts in *Punch and Judy* as a sort of master of ceremonies and 'one-man chorus',[11] takes his name from the trainer of the chorus in the ancient Greek theatre. And the overtly Greek-inspired *Tragœdia*, which is loosely based on Aristotle's description of classical tragedy, was, according to Birtwistle, written as 'a preliminary study' for the opera.[12] Its musical material and overall structure are both reflected in *Punch*.[13] The 'strong misogynistic strain'[14] of Greek tragedy also finds a resonance in Birtwistle's opera. Punch's first ceremonial victim is his wife, whose death is the most vicious and prolonged of the whole opera; Punch's murderous spree from this point becomes a specifically masculine adventure, motivated by his rampant desire to win Pretty Polly. It is not surprising, in the face of all this, that one writer was moved to describe *Punch and Judy* as, itself, essentially 'ancient Greek drama in the guise of popular puppetry'.[15]

Birtwistle's music after *Punch* retained many of the same qualities of great rhythmic trenchancy, formal abruptness and dynamic and registral extremes, and it was therefore perhaps inevitable that it would acquire a wider reputation for violence, even in the absence of subject-matter that makes it explicit. Commentators now routinely laud this quality as a quintessential feature of Birtwistle's style. But there is of course a danger that music that evokes violence ends up celebrating it. (This fear lay behind much of Adorno's criticism of Stravinsky, whose music 'does not identify with the victim, but rather with the destructive element'.[16]) *Punch and Judy* can only strengthen this suspicion. It depicts its brutalities voyeuristically, each of Punch's killings being ceremonially conducted on an 'Altar of Murder' – in sharp contrast, incidentally, to Greek tragedy where acts of violence never occur on stage.[17] Far from 'saying' nothing, then,

Birtwistle's music is vulnerable to charges that it is whole-heartedly expressive of brutal aggression.

Birtwistle has in the past appeared uncertain as to whether his music is intrinsically violent. In an interview with Norman Lebrecht, he contradicts himself:

> [NL:] *The roughness [of the sound] can come over as violence?*
> [HB:] In my music? No, I don't think it's violent. It's to do with the nature of the material. The music I write needs a physical presence. Something like Xenakis's music can only exist because it's loud. It speaks through four *ffff*s. With my material it might come over superficially as violent, but I don't feel I'm expressing anything. [*Pause*] I could contradict that. Maybe it is violent, I don't know.[18]

Birtwistle seems, here, to be reluctant entirely to distance his musical idiom from the expression of violence. His principal concern, however, appears to be with the nature of his material, rather than any expressive function. The painter Francis Bacon, for whose works and ideas Birtwistle has in recent years expressed great admiration,[19] provides an interesting parallel. Bacon similarly denied that the distorted imagery of his paintings was expressive of violence, claiming that, 'I don't even know what half of them mean. I'm not saying anything'.[20] However, he believed that the ordered imagery of his paintings could be understood to be violent in a less literal way:

> [Great art] comes out of a desire for ordering and for returning fact onto the nervous system in a more violent way . . . When talking about the violence of paint, it's nothing to do with the violence of war. It's to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself. And the violence of reality is not only the simple violence meant when you say that a rose or something is violent, but it's the violence also of the suggestions within the image itself which can only be conveyed through paint.[21]

Bacon is interested, then, in a form of communication whose 'violence' lies not in some represented content but in its insistence upon a realignment of viewer and reality. This can only be achieved by forcefully asserting the specific qualities of the medium itself – in Bacon's case paint, in Birtwistle's sound – independently of the symbolic modes of comprehension that usually contain and restrict them. The viewer or listener needs to be shaken out of habitual forms of comprehension, rendered vulnerable to the raw sensuous stimuli of the artistic medium. This is possible only by extreme methods. Such an interpretation – acknowledging the possibility of a form of communication where coercion, far from representing an extolling of the virtues of physical violence, is intended to shake us from a

restrictive and containing state – provides a possible counter-argument to more dogmatically literal readings of this aspect of Birtwistle's idiom.

It does not explain away the specific, troubling subject-matters of the stage works, however – least of all that of *Punch and Judy*. Nor does the justification that Aristotle provided for the violent cast of Greek tragedy; namely, that it arouses fear and pity which have the effect of an emotional 'catharsis' – that is to say, 'a powerful release of emotion which has a salutary effect on our emotional (and hence our ethical) disposition'.[22] That the unpleasantness of *Punch* cannot claim this specifically 'tragic' legitimation is indicated, firstly, by its ambivalent subtitle, which describes the work not as a tragedy, but as 'a tragical comedy or a comical tragedy'.[23] And the various elements that appear to align *Punch and Judy* with classical tragedy are, on closer acquaintance, used in a way that undermines a simple connection. The figure of Choregos, for instance, corresponds to no one element of Greek tragedy. In the dramatic festivals of ancient Greece, the *choregos* was 'a wealthy citizen who volunteered, or was co-opted, to pay for the Chorus and for most other features of the production'.[24] He had particular responsibility for management and training of the chorus, but there is no evidence that the *choregos* himself participated in the drama: his role was more analogous to that of the modern director.[25] In *Punch*, the character of Choregos reflects this original function in something of a dual role. He is treated partly as a chorus-substitute, reflecting aloud on the drama's events; but more strongly evident is the sense that he is in charge of the overall production. This latter function – Choregos as 'master of ceremonies' – makes reference not only to the Greek *choregos*, but also to diverse operatic forebears, ranging from the character of Music in the Prologue to Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (Choregos himself has been interpreted as 'representing music itself'[26]), to the Reader and Speaker in, respectively, Stravinsky's *Histoire du soldat* and *Oedipus Rex*. Unlike these antecedents, however, Choregos fails to maintain an appropriate dramatic distance, and in a surrealist twist the puppet-master himself becomes victim – twice – to Punch's murderous inclinations.

The relationship of *Tragœdia* to *Punch* is also not as direct as is sometimes thought. The loose correspondences between their overall formal shapes, and their shared, theatrical opposition of groups of instruments,[27] cannot be disputed. Birtwistle's own comment, however, that the music of *Tragœdia* 'appears practically note for note in my opera *Punch and Judy*'[28] is, at the very least, misleading. Gordon Crosse was nearer the mark when, reviewing the first performance, he found that 'very little of the earlier score has in fact been used in the opera: technical parallels are legion but the notes seem different'.[29] Moreover, the tone of the music seemed to have