The Music of Harrison Birtwistle

Robert Adlington

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA http://www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Adobe Minion 10.5/13.5 pt in QuarkXPress® [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Adlington, Robert.
The music of Harrison Birtwistle / Robert Adlington.
p. cm. – (Music in the twentieth century)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 63082 7 – (hardback)
1. Birtwistle, Harrison–Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.
II. Series.
ML410.B605A35 2000
780′.92–DC21 00-22678 CIP

ISBN 0 521 63082 7 hardback

Contents

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

altered: 'It was fascinating to find that what one had naively felt as primitive, harsh "Greek tragedy" in *Tragœdia* becomes transmuted into comedy under the influence of the subject.'[30]

In his *Poetics* Aristotle drew a clear distinction between tragedy and comedy, asserting succinctly that 'comedy aims at representing men as worse than they are nowadays, tragedy as better'.[31] Under this definition the traditional Punch and Judy story, with all its unredeemed amorality, unquestionably comprises comedy. Birtwistle's music responds to this in important respects, resembling Greek comedy as much as Greek tragedy. Comic poets in ancient Greece were, according to Andrew Brown, 'much less concerned than tragedians with coherence and consistency of plot, and several of Aristophanes' plays degenerate by the end into a series of slapstick routines'.[32] Birtwistle's music, likewise, is exceedingly sectional and adopts a variety of guises. Michael Nyman identifies three alternating idioms, corresponding respectively to the violent, the lyrical and the banal.[33] The first expressive mode appears objective, purely descriptive of the violent proceedings. The second and third, on the other hand, go further in assessing the various characters. The lyrical moments – and there are many – attribute them with a degree of moral substance; crucially, though, they are as often given to the perpetrator (in Punch's lamenting 'Morals', for instance) as to the victims (Judy's beautiful 'Passion Aria II' being a prominent example). This is consistent with the morally neutral stance that prevails throughout the work.[34] The banal, nursery rhyme style has the opposite effect, stressing the characters' (and especially Punch's) mindless sadism. In addition to the alternation of these diverse idioms, Birtwistle fashions many of the opera's numbers into miniexercises parodying historical styles or forms (a strategy that itself is ironically referential to Berg's *Wozzeck*[35]). *Punch and Judy* includes imitations of plainsong (b. 1068), Webern (b. 313), and Stravinsky (b. 383); and a carefully assembled canonic prelude (b. 925), sinfonia (b. 594), and gigue (b. 354). The resulting score comes close at times to a succession of comedy turns.

It is not just the stylistic diversity of the music of *Punch and Judy* that gives it its distinctive, 'comic' tone, but also its compulsive short-windedness. The opera comprises over a hundred short sections, clearly identified in the score and mostly separated by silence or a marked musical discontinuity. For all that *Punch and Judy* was conceived as 'an opera about opera . . . the collective generalization of known operas into a "source-opera" which, though written after them, would give the illusion of having been written before them',[36] the work remains innocent of the larger continuities central to operatic tragedy from the middle of the nineteenth century

to well into the twentieth. It even forsakes earlier opera's principal agency of continuity: namely, recitative. Only a single, short section is actually called 'Recitative' (preceding Judy's Passion Aria at b. 187); all the other sections of the piece are more readily seen as arias, ensembles or choruses. So Michael Nyman's description of the work as 'the number opera *par excellence*'[37] is correct in the fullest sense: it comprises *nothing but* 'number'.

This denial of the musical continuity essential to operatic 'realism' is entirely in keeping with Pruslin's highly stylised text (although it is an element of the work undermined when productions fail to achieve a comparable artificiality, a failure that Birtwistle has commented upon on a number of occasions[38]). It also perhaps contributes to a certain undifferentiatedness of succession, in that the work's various numbers are never set in relief by the contrasting delivery of recitative.[39] Most significantly, though, the omission of recitative represents a further diminishing of the work's 'tragic' component, for it dismantles the conventional operatic parallel to classical tragedy's opposition of choral song (aria) and dramatic speech (recitative).[40] In Birtwistle's later stage works the contrasting functions of aria and recitative play a greater role, as will be seen in the next part of this chapter. In *Punch and Judy* the absence of recitative only emphasises the extent to which this is indeed a 'toy opera'.[41] The 'characters' – puppets, after all – in being denied recitative are thereby largely denied opportunities for character development or the exercising of volition. Instead they are deployed in a succession of static situations, just as a child deploys toys in play. The motivation for the deployment is not apparent to the toys, but exists only in the child's imagination. Their violent interactions, similarly, are best seen not as representative of some potentially cathartic, archetypal conflict, but as reflective of the more quotidian brutality of motiveless, childlike play.

Myth

The Mark of the Goat (16) • *The Visions of Francesco Petrarca* (17) • *Down by the Greenwood Side* (27) • *The Mask of Orpheus* (60)

Puppets are again a prominent feature in *The Mask of Orpheus*. In the later work, though, actual puppets are used, rather than singers pretending to be puppets: their 'voices' are sung from a different part of the stage by singers not directly involved in the dramatic representation. And the puppets account for only one layer of the work's complex, multi-layered theatre, appearing alongside mimes and singing actors. In these as in many other respects, this massive 'lyric tragedy' (as the librettist Peter Zinovieff

calls it) is considerably removed from the earlier work, with its relatively simple methods of representation and shrill high spirits.

Still, the title of *The Mask of Orpheus* hints at a broader, if more subtle, kinship. Masks were an important element of the original productions of Greek tragedy, worn by both actors and chorus. And such masked enactment gives all participants something of the depersonalised artificiality of the puppet. Zinovieff's libretto requests that all the singers should be masked, and the resulting stylisation is central to *The Mask of Orpheus* – as it was in a different way to *Punch and Judy*. As Birtwistle has commented, 'A mask allows you to be still . . . It's a move towards stillness, a move towards stylisation. As a piece, *The Mask of Orpheus* is totally non-naturalistic.'[42] Birtwistle's thinking may have been influenced in this respect by the experience of collaborating with the director Peter Hall and the playwright Tony Harrison on the National Theatre production of *The Oresteia*. For Harrison, masks are no mere historical convention but are intrinsic to tragedy:

> A Greek theatrical mask is part of the existential survival gear. It gives the bearing of survival to the actor wearing it. It represents a commitment to seeing everything through the eyes that never close. It represents a commitment to going on speaking when the always open eyes have witnessed something unspeakable. The masks must witness the unendurable. That is why they are created with their eyes open. The mouth must continue to speak in situations where the human being would be speechless or screaming and unable to articulate its agony.[43]

Masks act as a counterbalance to the size of the emotions expressed in tragedy; as Peter Hall says about these plays, 'They are so violent, hysterical, horrific, they could not be expressed without masks'.[44] The masks used in the *Oresteia* production, designed by Jocelyn Herbert, reflected these dramatic imperatives, and Herbert used similar designs for the first performances of *The Mask of Orpheus*. Where *Punch and Judy*'s puppets are oblivious to the atrocities to which they are submitted, the characters in *The Mask of Orpheus* must experience the full horror of their terrible fates.

For Birtwistle, however, the attraction of masks lies as much in their emphasis of the artificiality of theatre as in their reflection of the violence of tragedy. In this connection, the title of *The Mask of Orpheus* has a double meaning, referring not just to the facial visor of ancient Greek theatre but also to the more recent theatrical genre of masque.[45] Masque flourished in the courts of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe, and it put little emphasis on drama; instead, 'the main interest centred on the costumes, scenery, songs and dances . . . [The masque] has practically no

story, no action, no crisis, and no inevitable ending'.[46] It is the *technique* of theatre that is brought to the fore in the masque; and it is this technique that is also foregrounded not just in *The Mask of Orpheus*, with its multi-layered story-telling and complex musical paraphernalia,[47] but in Birtwistle's stage works generally. In the earlier stage works, this focus on technique was manifested in the desire to dismantle any illusion of realism, to create a wholly artificial impression. This artificiality could be achieved by highly stylised costumes and acting styles, as in *Down by the Greenwood Side*, or by the almost total absence of prop, costume or any other form of stage-wizardry, as in the austere *Bow Down*. In either case, the aim was to adhere to a basic principle of post-war music theatre, namely 'the disintegration of the stage illusion'.[48] Accordingly, while the size and scale of *The Mask of Orpheus* are suggestive of grand opera, Birtwistle prefers to call it, too, 'a piece of music theatre'.[49] More recently, however, Birtwistle's interest has perceptibly shifted away from this focus on artificiality, back to the more traditional deployment of theatrical device in order to create and sustain believable stage illusions. *Gawain* presents fabulous challenges to any producer in this respect, requiring a stage horse for the Green Knight's appearance in Act I (clip-clops are written into the music), and setting such store by a realistic beheading that a large verbatim repeat is included in the score to allow it to be achieved. *The Second Mrs Kong* provides further evidence of the importance of theatrical presentation, for the director and designer Tom Cairns was closely involved in the work's very conception.[50] In this work, in the eyes of one commentator, 'the spectacle had been largely anticipated in the score'.[51]

The means of theatrical representation are not just an important element of *The Mask of Orpheus*, though: they are its central theme. As early as 1969, shortly after Birtwistle first received a commission from Peter Hall to write an opera for Covent Garden,[52] he was planning a work that, according to Michael Nyman, 'would play up the "discrepancy" between action and the description of action'.[53] In the work finally completed fourteen years later, it is indeed 'the telling rather than the tale which is the principal focus'.[54] Birtwistle's decision to draw upon Greek mythology for his subject-matter is, therefore, rather more than a naïve concession to an operatic tradition that stretches back through Stravinsky to Wagner and Monteverdi. In myth, tale and telling are inextricably intermingled, the existence of many distinct variants of mythic tales reminding us that none can be assumed faithful to the actual course of events. Birtwistle turns to myth, not, as in the case of both the Greek tragedians and many earlier composers, to invoke eternal certainties or verities – 'paradigms of human fortunes', as it were[55] – but rather to emphasise a fact

about any form of narrative representation: namely, that the story can never be separated from the way it is told.

The Mask of Orpheus conducts a thorough exploration of this assertion. It incorporates a number of different versions of the Orpheus myth, and employs a variety of different ways of relating them. In so doing, it draws on elements of earlier works. In *Down by the Greenwood Side*, the traditional ballad of the Cruel Mother appears three times in slightly different forms, filmically interspersed between episodes of the traditional mummers' play. A similar examination of variants of a traditional ballad forms the basis for *Bow Down* (though this work was written well after the conception of *The Mask of Orpheus*). More unexpected, perhaps, are parallels with the two early theatre pieces for children, *The Mark of the Goat* and *The Visions of Francesco Petrarca*. Each of these anticipates *The Mask of Orpheus*' use of different modes of dramatic presentation – singing, mime, and puppetry – in its retelling of events. These early works raise the startling possibility that what appears as a highly sophisticated dramatic device in *The Mask of Orpheus* had its origins in the more pragmatic requirement to provide sufficiently varied roles for school children of different talents and abilities. In *The Mark of the Goat*, for instance, the story (a grim tale of individuals' defiance in the face of state oppression) 'is presented at two levels: first, the narrative which is told for the most part in rather stylised speech, and second, the actual drama, which is also stylised, and is enacted in both speech and music'.[56] *The Visions of Francesco Petrarca*, now withdrawn by the composer, similarly presents a 'polarity between a "musical-verbal" and a "dramatic" presentation of the same set of images . . . presenting [first] musical-verbal content and then actually embodying this content in mimed action'.[57] The final section of the work eventually combines sung and mimed versions of the story.

In effect, *The Mask of Orpheus* combines all these earlier devices. The various concurrent modes of presentation found in the pieces for children now relate not a single story line but, after the manner of *Down by the Greenwood Side*, different variants. The result is a multi-layered dramatic structure of great complexity where a number of different things may be going on at any one time. These are articulated on stage by multiple representations of the three main characters. Each of the principal roles of Orpheus, Euridice and Aristaeus appears as a singer, a mime and a puppet. These different impersonations sometimes inhabit separate acting areas on the stage. They may relate variants of the Orpheus myth in parallel, as in the second scene of Act I, where Euridice is shown both to reject Aristaeus' advances and to succumb to them (by Euridice Singer and Euridice Mime respectively). But they may also combine events drawn

from *different parts* of the story. For instance, the start of Orpheus Singer's journey to the underworld is accompanied by a further representation of Euridice's death, this time by Euridice Puppet. 'Time Shifts' and 'Echoes' are introduced into the libretto to allow such juxtapositions, and freezes and interruptions further disrupt the narrative sequence. These complexities are introduced gradually during Act I: in the first scene, according to Zinovieff, 'the dissociation of words from the music and both from the action is established' and 'duality of roles is hinted at by the offstage voices of Orpheus Puppet and Euridice Puppet'; the second scene sees the introduction of 'simple synchrony: similar events happening at the same time' and 'duality of visible roles'; and Scene III 'introduces complex simultaneity (contrasted events seen at the same time)' and time distortion.[58]

The story-telling as a whole is rendered extremely artificial by formal structuring at both the local and large scales. As in *Punch and Judy* the action is partitioned into over a hundred tiny self-contained units, which Zinovieff describes as 'one long set of poems'.[59] The poems are organised into groups of three, reflecting the prevailing tripartitions of 'the Orphic symbological method',[60] although, in contrast to the literal symmetries of Pruslin's libretto to *Punch*, the connection between the three poems of a group is not always apparent. More prominent are the 'gross structures' of each Act.[61] These are based on the central events of the myth: in Act I, Euridice's wedding and funeral; in Act II, Orpheus' journey; in Act III, the sacrifice of Orpheus. The magnification of these events to span whole Acts gives the larger-scale narrative a stylised, statuesque quality.

An extra layer of complexity is provided by six brief, self-contained episodes depicting stories from Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. These interrupt the main drama at unexpected moments, occurring mid-scene rather than at the end or beginning. Zinovieff calls the three more violent episodes 'Passing Clouds of Abandon' and the three lyrical ones 'Allegorical Flowers of Reason', and they are inserted at moments of low and high tension respectively, so further emphasising their narrative incongruity. Once again, *Down by the Greenwood Side* represents something of a prototype for *The Mask of Orpheus* in this respect. This work, which is subtitled 'a dramatic pastoral', involves a soprano, four actors, a mime and a nine-instrument band based on that used for the Cornish Floral Dance.[62] It interleaves the pantomime of the traditional mummers' play, which tells of the death and restoration to life of St George as an allegory for the passing of the year, with the tragedy of the Cruel Mother, who felt compelled to kill her illegitimate children. Rather than emphasise their common concern with matters of death and rebirth the two stories are left to 'grate against each other in uneasy co-existence'.[63] Michael Nyman, the

librettist for *Down by the Greenwood Side*, says that this brusque juxtaposition 'was suggested to me by a Rumanian peasant ikon I have in which Virgin and Child and St George and the Dragon are placed side by side, seemingly nonsensically, out of proportion with each other and in two different planes'.[64] The jolt between the two stories is heightened by the contrast between their musical settings, the Cruel Mother's ballads being entirely sung while the mummers' play is spoken to an instrumental accompaniment. A similarly contrasted treatment is given to the Clouds and Flowers in *The Mask of Orpheus*, their silent mime and wholly electronic music setting them apart from the vocal and instrumental storytelling that surrounds them. The narrative simplicity of the Clouds and Flowers also makes for a contrast with the multi-layered account of the Orpheus myth, just as the banal linearity of the mummers' play contrasts with the subtly altered perspectives of the different ballads of the Cruel Mother.

The fascination with variants – variants of stories, variants of ways of telling – may be understood as a manifestation of Birtwistle's obsession with complexity, and more specifically the idea of the complex multi-dimensional object, to be perceived from a number of different perspectives but never grasped in its totality. This obsession finds many forms of expression in Birtwistle's music, from the generation of material at the note-to-note level to issues of large-scale structure.[65] In *The Mask of Orpheus* it manifests itself most obviously in the fact that 'the audience is given the opportunity of witnessing the same event from a number of perspectives not only in sequence but also simultaneously'.[66] This aspect of the work led David Freeman to refer to it as 'cubist theatre'. But *The Mask of Orpheus* goes beyond the mere celebration of complexity. It not only places a number of different types of theatrical representation in juxtaposition but additionally sets out to analyse the different ways in which each of them signify. Song, mime or puppetry cannot be treated as equivalent forms of dramatic presentation, for each carries its own representational burden which unavoidably taints the 'content' it conveys. Zinovieff's libretto specifically identifies the singing personification of each of the three main characters with their human form, the mime with their heroic form and the puppet with their mythic or god-like form,[67] and these allocations are not a matter of accident. Of the three different personifications the singer is the only one to retain his or her *own* voice: song thus becomes representative of speech, thought and emotion, recognisably *human* qualities that are denied to the mime and the puppet. The mime is confined to the movement of the body. Such movement can be used to express feelings, but it is arguably more suited to the representation of action: a mime thus

aptly represents the somewhat depersonalised 'doer of deeds' that constitutes the archetypal hero. The puppet is more dehumanised still: it acquires movement and speech only by virtue of some external agency. Puppets have no thinking or doing existence independently of that which is attributed to them from outside; accordingly, they are the ideal theatrical form for conveying myth, whose reality is constructed rather than actual, 'recounted not seen'.[68] In *The Mask of Orpheus*, Birtwistle's customary concern with the 'perspectival' nature of his material is thus transformed into a more ambitious statement about the semiotic potential of different forms of theatrical representation and, by extension, of the illusory neutrality of any form of telling.

The combination, in *The Mask of Orpheus*, of a number of different modes of dramatic presentation is in many ways simply a continuation of classical tragedy's disparate constituents, whose origins lie in the contrasting genres of spoken poetry and ceremonial choral song. According to Andrew Brown, 'tragedy as we know it was born when these two traditions were combined together, verse spoken by the poet (who was at first the sole actor) being interspersed with songs sung by the Chorus'.[69] As we have seen, recitative and aria have historically been viewed as the operatic analogy to this particular combination of forms in tragedy, and (in sharp contrast to *Punch and Judy*) this distinction remains prominent in Zinovieff's libretto. Most of the 126 individual numbers in *The Mask of Orpheus* are designated as either 'aria', 'recitative', 'music' (meaning no song or speech) or 'mime'. These distinctions are used to structure the internal progression of Zinovieff's poems in each scene. For instance, the three danced 'Ceremonies' that form the basis of one of Zinovieff's 'gross structures' are each preceded by a recitative and major aria. A similarly systematic treatment of recitative and aria is found in Act II, where each of the seventeen 'Arches' includes an aria and a recitative, representing fact and fantasy respectively.[70]

Despite these provisions in the libretto, at the time of the first performances Birtwistle seemed more concerned to emphasise how the work represented a *departure* from the concepts of aria and recitative:

> In writing the piece, I wanted to invent a formalism which does not rely on tradition . . . I wanted to create a formal world which was utterly new. The basic formal device of opera . . . is recitative and aria. Recitative concerns itself with the dramatic situation, aria with the poetics of the moment. In aria, there is a flowering of the moment as if time were standing still and you were singing around it. *The Mask of Orpheus* attempts to replace this formalism . . .[71]

Birtwistle goes on to argue that the tripartite representation of the three main characters substitutes for the dramatic contrast that aria and recita-

tive usually provide. Birtwistle's setting does not completely ignore the distinction, however. On the whole, recitatives are delivered in speech or speech-song, while arias are sung more melismatically. The contrast is perceptible shortly after the start of the third scene of Act III, where the '3rd Recitative of Teaching' (erroneously labelled '3rd Sentence of Teaching' in both the score and the booklet to the 1997 recording) is followed by the '3rd Aria of Prophecy'. Birtwistle sets the first in a 'clipped' speech-song, each word separated by rests, while the second is tenuto and sustained, with a little melisma. Zinovieff's distinctions are not always so clearly projected, however, and are sometimes contradicted. Numbers described in the libretto as recitative may be thoroughly aria-like in character, as in Orpheus Singer's '3rd Scream of Passion' that closes the culminatory Fifteenth Arch in Act II; or, alternatively, speech may encroach into the arias, as in the '1st Duet of Love' in the first scene of Act I. The orchestra, meanwhile, appears not to acknowledge the distinction between recitative and aria at all.

As this suggests, in *The Mask of Orpheus* Birtwistle adheres only fitfully to the formal niceties of his libretto. Admittedly, rarely can a composer have been presented with such a prescriptive statement as Zinovieff's sixty-page text, down to split-second timings for the entire course of Act II. Nevertheless it would be difficult to infer much of Zinovieff's multi-dimensional, modular conception from the music alone, a fact that suggests intriguing limits to Birtwistle's oft-stated insistence on the mutual integration of music and drama (a subject to be considered further in the next section of this chapter). Birtwistle's justification for this state of affairs runs as follows:

> Throughout the piece, I've made a distinction between a series of closed forms which define the stage action, and a much more organic, through-composed substructure belonging exclusively to the orchestra. As in the Noh plays of Japan, the orchestra, even though it responds to the events on stage, has a life of its own. But the music it plays moves towards the most extreme representation of formalism: the moment in the last act when the principal characters appear only as puppets. At this point, the formal structure of the stage music and the organic structure of the orchestral music coincide.[72]

Birtwistle here acknowledges that the patterned modules of the libretto are only directly reflected in the music in Act III.

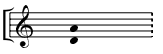
A more general correlation with the librettist's conception may nevertheless be discerned in the earlier acts. Zinovieff describes the piece as tracing Orpheus' 'transformation and transition from a man into a god', later adding that 'it is with this rather than with the plot itself, that the opera is most concerned'.[73] The three acts accordingly focus on, respectively,

Orpheus as man, hero, and god. In broad terms, Birtwistle's musical designs in each act map out this transition – indeed, they do so arguably more clearly than the libretto itself. In the context of the other two acts, Act I is an awkward, sprawling construction; at times its crude juxtapositions and mannered dramatic presentation can seem merely dated, a reflection of transient fads in music theatre. Whether intentionally or not, however, these qualities aptly symbolise the relative mundanity of Orpheus the man. Act II, in contrast, uses Orpheus' methodical description of the seventeen arches spanning the valley to the world of the dead as an opportunity for an unapologetically linear musical structure, unremittingly building in intensity. Such assured purposefulness is of course entirely suited for the representation of the heroic Orpheus. Likewise, as Orpheus is elevated to the status of mythic god in Act III the music assumes an appropriate tone of meditative reflectiveness – its short, clearly distinguishable formal elements almost ikon-like in their imperviousness to change and context.

By fighting shy of the extreme sectionality of the libretto, the music must also be seen as rather less *self-reflexive* than the libretto – rather less focused on the act of telling. Instead, it frequently takes a stake in the raw drama of the narrative, in just the manner that the rigorous formalism of Zinovieff's text denies. The music's very continuousness does much to maintain the unbroken theatrical spell – the tinge of realism – that was so consistently disrupted in *Punch and Judy*. This aspect of Birtwistle's music is symbolised by the electronic 'auras' (created, as was the rest of the work's electronic component, in collaboration with Barry Anderson) that underpin so much of the score. These ensure that moments of complete silence are unusual, the music instead setting about creating an uninterrupted, magical evocation of an alternative reality. Similarly, conventionalised forms of musical expressivity are more evident in the score than the composer's descriptions, with their emphasis upon ironic detachment, would lead one to believe. The languorous polyphony of Act I's love music, or the chorale-like religiosity of Act III's '3rd Song of Magic', in which Orpheus Singer acquires Apollo's language, are products of an unashamed focus on the tale rather than the telling.

Of all the acts, Act II best exemplifies these characteristics. Admittedly, here Birtwistle is helped by Zinovieff's libretto. Orpheus Singer's methodical description of the seventeen arches that he has to cross to reach the underworld stretches over most of the act, giving it a unity of purpose not apparent in the other two acts. This impression is enhanced by the process of gradual change that takes place with successive Arches. Each Arch comprises four subsections, two representing dream and two nightmare. The First Arch is weighted heavily towards the dream components, but each

Ex. 1.1. *The Mask of Orpheus*: perfect fifth dominating the end of Act II



successive Arch sees these diminish and the nightmare components grow, up to the Fifteenth Arch at the end of the second scene, which marks the climax of the act. The consequent, relentless darkening of mood traces a highly orthodox dramatic curve that helps mark out Orpheus Singer's aria as dramatic foreground – and that effectively relegates the other layers of mostly mimed activity taking place around him. Birtwistle's cumulative musical structure faithfully reflects this larger dramatic shape, while riding roughshod over the more incidental dramatic detail. Even Zinovieff's Orphic-inspired tripartite division of the act is largely ignored – acknowledged only by brief, tense electronic interludes, after which the music resumes its terrible course. The three scenes sound as a complete span. Integration is a particular feature of the act's close, the soft perfect fifth that forms the basis of the orchestral epilogue accompanying Orpheus' suicide having emerged subtly but decisively during the last verses of his aria (Ex. 1.1). This beautiful and moving concluding device is characteristic of an act that manages to amalgamate the pivotal moments of earlier Orphic operas – the graphic representation of hell, the lyrical urgency of Orpheus' song to win back Euridice, and his mournful lament at losing her – into a single statement of surprisingly conventional expressivity.

Music and drama

The Oresteia (59a) • *Bow Down* (52)

The previous discussion of *The Mask of Orpheus* noted a certain disparity between libretto and music. While the libretto appears artificial and excessively formalised, the music engages – at least in parts – in a powerful and straightforward narration. This is a simplistic reduction of a complex situation, but it was nevertheless striking at the work's 1996 revival how the dramatic sweep of Birtwistle's score came as something of a surprise to listeners whose knowledge of the work had hitherto been confined to the fastidious complexities of the libretto. Only the third act, with its clearly distinguishable and frequently recurring formal elements in both text and music, fully corresponds to the assertion in the libretto that 'all aspects are connected'.[74]

Whatever the divergences in practice, Birtwistle has made it clear on a

number of occasions that the close co-operation of all elements of a music theatre piece is a matter of central concern. The music emerges as part of a wider theatrical conception, not separately from it; as Birtwistle says, 'when I write for the theatre I have very specific ideas about how they [the theatre pieces] should be done'.[75] This attitude was undoubtedly cemented during Birtwistle's period as music director at the National Theatre, an experience that, according to Michael Hall, convinced Birtwistle that 'music in the theatre was more effective when it was not incidental but integral'.[76] Two works written during this time exemplify this conviction. *Bow Down*, written in collaboration with Tony Harrison and first performed at the National Theatre, requires four musicians and five actors; but *all* the performers work together on stage, and all also contribute to its musical component. Andrew Clements describes the work as 'an unclassifiable fusion of music, text and gesture that was perhaps closer to the music-theatre ideal than anything produced during the movement's heyday ten years earlier'.[77] This attempt to blur distinctions between actor and musician is paralleled in the ballet piece *Pulse Field*, which, as the preface to the score puts it, 'is an attempt to reformulate and thereby to expand the relationships between music and the dance'. Again, the musicians appear on stage rather than playing from a pit, while conversely the movements of the dancers determine aspects of the music. Such 'reformulations' were not wholly new to Birtwistle's music, though no earlier piece went to the same extent of questioning the traditional roles of each individual performer. The music theatre of *Punch and Judy* and *Down by the Greenwood Side* is in part defined by the disintegration of the distinction between music and drama, a disintegration symbolised in both works by the placing of instrumentalists on stage. Numerous purely instrumental works, conversely, have involved an element of 'staging' and choreographed movement. Less novel, but equally indicative of Birtwistle's inclusive conception of theatre, are the important roles for mimes and dancers in *The Visions of Francesco Petrarca*, *Punch and Judy* and *The Mask of Orpheus*.

Jonathan Cross has described *The Mask of Orpheus* as 'a modern day *Gesamtkunstwerk*',[78] reflecting the shared interest of Wagner and Birtwistle in forging a novel art form from an amalgam of different theatrical practices. Like Birtwistle, Wagner was absorbed in the world of ancient Greek theatre. He conceived of his music dramas as modern recreations of the 'total art work' of Greek theatre, which for him represented a 'successful combination of the arts – poetry, drama, costumes, mime, instrumental music, dance, song – and as such had greater scope and expressive powers than any of the arts alone'.[79] The massive scale of Wagner's works could

hardly seem more distant from the intimacies of *Bow Down* and *Pulse Field*. Yet a specific connection does exist, in the form of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*. Birtwistle claims that he joined the National Theatre in 1975 specifically because of Peter Hall's intention to mount Aeschylus' trilogy in new translations by Tony Harrison,[80] but in taking six years to reach the stage, the project became a rather protracted obsession whose influence may be felt on the smaller theatre pieces written in the meantime. A letter written by Tony Harrison indicates that Wagner was a specific model for the eventual form of the Aeschylus production, and thus, indirectly, for *Bow Down* and *Pulse Field* as well:

> I'm convinced that the *leitmotiv* notion which Wagner is said to have come upon through his reading of the *Oresteia* is one we can press further I mean musically, poetically, spatially, visually, so that we are hooked by eye, ear, and mind at the same time.[81]

In order to achieve this integrated effect, composer, writer, director and designer (Jocelyn Herbert) each took comparably important roles, forming what Harrison called 'a "dramatic collaborative"'.[82] No aspect of the production was to be treated as self-contained or independent of any other aspect.

Harrison's translations of the three plays that make up *The Oresteia* themselves reflect this. His concern was as much with the text's musical qualities – specifically, its rhythmic profile – as with its strictly semantic meaning. The metric form of Aeschylus' verse was far more than a mere matter of poetic convention: 'We must never in the whole piece be let off the rhythmical hook, *never* . . . Regular rhythm, form in poetry is like the mask[:] it enables you to go beyond the scream as a reaction to events that in the normal course of life would make you do just that.'[83] The rhythm of the text, according to Harrison, both maintains the momentum and tension of the drama and stylises the dramatic representation, thus making bearable the terrible acts portrayed therein. Birtwistle's simple rhythmic setting of the choruses respects this priority: regular metric patterns are played by three percussionists, whose function is to 'govern the way in which the drama is paced, and . . . to keep the rhythm going'.[84] Changes of speed and metre help vary the delivery of Aeschylus' exceptionally long choruses. Aside from this percussive rhythmic underpinning, Birtwistle provides a harp and clarinettists: according to Birtwistle, 'the harp has another punctuating role, which is to span the silences, while the wind instruments have sustained notes, and they play in unison in the bursts of incidental music that cover entrances and exits'.[85] Selected verses of the choruses are additionally given simple diatonic settings.

At the time of the production most critical attention was focused upon Harrison's translation, with its relentless neologisms and flat northern English vowels. It was generally felt that both music and stage direction 'faultlessly subordinated themselves to [Harrison's] text. Nothing in the performance directed attention away from the words.'[86] If the non-verbal elements of the production did take an essentially supporting role, it was nevertheless a thoroughly integrated one. This is true in a pragmatic as well as a poetic sense. While masks were important to Hall's and Harrison's initial conceptions, they became indispensable once the importance of rhythm had been decided upon. Built into each mask was a metronome, heard only by the actor, intended to provide rhythmic stability and the possibility of precise tempo changes.[87] The masks were thus *made necessary* by the 'music' of the words. In turn, the masks dictated a certain approach to movement, for, as Jocelyn Herbert has commented, the effect of a mask is to throw emphasis onto a performer's body: 'Through the concentration on the text demanded by the mask and the power of the simplest movement when wearing a mask, [actors] could learn to work with their bodies instead of just their faces.'[88] In this way, a musical conception of the text enforced a costume design which then implied a certain acting style and use of the stage.

The complex, dense richness of Aeschylus' language as rendered by Harrison perhaps meant that, despite this unusual integration of different aspects of the production, a privileging of the text was inevitable. *Bow Down*, Birtwistle's first collaboration with Tony Harrison, by comparison renders musical and verbal theatre in a state of mutually responsive equilibrium – more so than in any other of Birtwistle's stage works.[89] The work is based on numerous different versions of the traditional ballad of the 'Two Sisters'. This tells the story of how one sister drowns the other in order to take her lover. The murdered sister's body is discovered and plundered by a rapacious miller, but later a blind musician uses her bones and hair to build a harp. This is brought to her sister's wedding, where, of its own accord, it denounces the murderess, who is then put to death. The piece juxtaposes sung and spoken versions of the ballad with purely instrumental music, and, as mentioned above, all the performers contribute to both the acting and the music. This integration of dramatic elements was in part the result of the work's origin in a workshop process that involved the original performers working alongside composer and poet; the published score was assembled only retrospectively.

In important respects *Bow Down* goes considerably beyond the Greek's limited combination of the arts. For instance, while it does appear that the actors of the ancient Greek theatre chanted their verse rhythmically,