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Harrison Birtwistle's Operas and Music Theatre

David Beard presents the first definitive survey of Harrison Birtwistle's music for the opera house and theatre, from his smaller-scale works, such as *Down by the Greenwood Side* and *Bow Down*, to the full-length operas, such as *Punch and Judy*, *The Mask of Orpheus* and *Gawain*. Blending source study with both music analysis and cultural criticism, the book focuses on the sometimes tense but always revealing relationship between abstract musical processes and the practical demands of narrative drama, while touching on theories of parody, narrative, pastoral, film, the body and community. Each stage work is considered in terms of its own specific musico-dramatic themes, revealing how compositional scheme and dramatic conception are intertwined from the earliest stages of a project's genesis. The study draws on a substantial body of previously undocumented primary sources, and goes beyond previous studies of the composer's output to include works unveiled from 2000 onwards.

DAVID BEARD is Senior Lecturer in Music at Cardiff University, where he is Director of the MA programme in Musicology. He has published widely on the music of Harrison Birtwistle in academic journals, including *Music Analysis*, *Cambridge Opera Journal* and *twentieth-century music*, and in notes for concerts and opera festivals. He has contributed to *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies*, *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage* and *Dichotomies: Gender and Music*, and he is the co-author of *Musicology: The Key Concepts*.

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*To my wife Danijela, my parents, grandfather,
and in memory of my grandmother
Marjorie Grace Merrett*

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The cover image, from rehearsals for *Bow Down* at the National Theatre, London, in 1977, has been reproduced with kind permission of the photographer Nobby Clark.

Versions of Chapters 5 and 6 were previously published as follows: ‘The Shadow of Opera: Dramatic Narrative and Musical Discourse in *Gawain*’, *twentieth-century music*, 2/2 (September 2005), 159–95 (republished in Margaret Notley (ed.), *Opera After 1900*, vol. VI of The Ashgate Library of Essays in Opera Studies (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 319–55); and “‘A Face Like Music’: Shaping Images into Sound in *The Second Mrs Kong*”, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 18/3 (November 2006), 273–300.



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A note on the text

Many of the works discussed in this book employ different internal referencing systems. The systems I adopt vary according to the one used in the work in question. In *Yan Tan Tethera*, for example, there are no rehearsal figures or even bar numbers, therefore I refer to page numbers. Elsewhere, as in *Gawain* and *The Second Mrs Kong*, I use the term ‘Fig.’, often with suffixes to designate a particular bar either after the rehearsal figure (e.g. Fig. 1⁺², which means the second bar after Figure 1, including the bar in which the figure itself appears), or before a figure (e.g. Fig. 1⁻², which means two bars before Figure 1). For *Down by the Greenwood Side* I employ the same system but with Letters (e.g. A⁺²). In works with more than one act, figures begin from ‘1’ at the start of each act. For this reason I refer mostly to page numbers in *The Mask of Orpheus* as these run continuously from the start of Act I to the end of Act III. In *The Minotaur* the barring begins from ‘1’ in each scene, whereas *The Last Supper* and *The Io Passion* (both in one act) are barred continuously from start to end, but with no figures.

Page numbers in the main text refer to pages in a score not a libretto; page references for libretti and all other texts appear in the footnotes. In nearly all cases I refer to the full score. However, I make a distinction in Chapter 2 between pages and bars in the full score (FS) and in the vocal score (VS) of *Punch and Judy*. Scores published by Boosey & Hawkes are available to order, whereas many of those published by Universal Edition are mostly photocopies of handwritten fair copies used in performances; such scores may be available on request but are more expensive as they need to be specially prepared.

When referring to pitches in specific registers, this book uses the Helmholtz notation system, as follows:

The diagram illustrates the Helmholtz notation system for musical pitches across different registers. It features a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. Notes are placed on the staves to represent various pitches. Below the staves, the corresponding Helmholtz notation is listed: C'', B'', C', B', C, B, c, b, c', b', c'', b'', c''', b''', c'''' b'''' c'''''. Above the treble staff, a dashed line indicates the 8^{va} register, and below the bass staff, a dashed line indicates the 8^{vb} register.

Number series appear throughout this book. The text will explain the function of these numbers, which may refer to: ordering systems in the sketches; durations; unordered pitch intervals (treated the same whether ascending or descending), where 1 = a semitone, 2 = a tone, and so on; or contour patterns. The latter are indicated by the use of arrowheads, which indicate an ordered sequence, for example: <1, 4, 2, 3>, where 1 is the lowest position and 4 the highest.

A note on spelling. In the score and libretto for *Orpheus*, and in the score of *Mrs Kong*, Euridice is given in the Italian form. In the libretto for *Mrs Kong* and in the score and libretto of *The Corridor*, however, her name is spelled Eurydice. Unless quoting from Peter Zinovieff's libretto for *Orpheus*, all references in this book use the more common form: Eurydice.

A number of abbreviations are used for books, as listed below:

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Hall, <i>HB</i> | Michael Hall, <i>Harrison Birtwistle</i> (London: Robson Books, 1984) |
| Hall, <i>HBIRY</i> | Michael Hall, <i>Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years</i> (London: Robson Books, 1998) |
| Cross, <i>HB: MMM</i> | Jonathan Cross, <i>Harrison Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music</i> (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) |
| Adlington, <i>MHB</i> | Robert Adlington, <i>The Music of Harrison Birtwistle</i> (Cambridge University Press, 2000) |

Two institutions are abbreviated, as follows:

| | |
|-----|--|
| NTA | [Royal] National Theatre Archive, London |
| PSS | Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basle |

All extracts from unpublished sketches, drafts and fair copies have been transcribed by the author after consulting the original manuscripts. When editorial changes or annotations have been made by the author these are given in square brackets. All microfilm references relate to the Sammlung Harrison Birtwistle of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basle. When microfilm numbers are given it indicates that the sketches referred to belong to the collection for the work that is the subject of that particular chapter or subsection. Otherwise, further information is provided to indicate which part of the Sammlung Harrison Birtwistle the sketch is from. For example:

PSS 0540-0431; Musikbeispiele für Kurse.

This indicates the roll of film (0540), the specific page (-0431) and the title of the work or folder in the Sammlung Harrison Birtwistle (Musikbeispiele für Kurse).

Although I am aware that the convention in sketch studies is to cite the title of the collection that a sketch page belongs to and possibly a page number – if there is one, or if the page belongs to a sketchbook – and also, in certain instances, to give the dimensions of a page, I have decided to identify pages by microfilm numbers. However, in a few instances, notably in Chapter 5, the sketch material was consulted before it went to microfilm. Here the reference system lists the folder number, followed by the page number (although the page itself may not be numbered). There is a possibility that the sketches and drafts will be re-filmed. It is therefore important to note that the microfilms referred to here are from the first set of films, which were made before 2009. Given the volume and size of Birtwistle's sketch materials (he mostly works with A2-size manuscript paper with sixteen staves), visitors to the Paul Sacher Stiftung will find working from microfilm considerably easier, although this is no substitute for working from the originals. Much work has been undertaken by Robert Piencikowski and Michael Taylor to identify pages in works up to *The Second Mrs Kong*. This information is provided within the manuscript folders but not always in the microfilms.

Finally, when I began this project it was not my intention to seek answers to questions directly from the composer or others. Since the period of writing coincided with the premiere of *The Minotaur* and the composition and premiere of *The Corridor*, however, opportunities arose to speak with Birtwistle and David Harsent, the librettist for both works. This inevitably shaped Chapters 7 and 8, in which these pieces are discussed. As these conversations shaped my thought on the other works discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, I decided to approach Patrick Wright and Peter Quartermain, who assisted Robin Blaser in his work on *The Last Supper* (Blaser sadly passed away in 2009), and Stephen Plaice, Stephen Langridge and Alison Chitty, who collaborated with Birtwistle on *The Io Passion*. While these chapters are therefore inconsistent with approaches adopted in earlier chapters, they are not inconsistent with the underlying premise of this book, which is to adopt different strategies in each chapter. That said, information gleaned from my conversations with Birtwistle is distributed throughout the book.