This collection of essays celebrates the work of Sir Harrison Birtwistle, one of the key figures in European contemporary music. Representing current research on Birtwistle’s music, this book reflects the diversity of his work in terms of periods, genres, forms, techniques and related issues through a wide range of critical, theoretical and analytical interpretations and perspectives. Written by a team of international scholars, all of whom bring a deep research-based knowledge and insight to their chosen study, this collection extends the scholarly understanding of Birtwistle through new engagements with the man and the music. The contributors provide detailed studies of Birtwistle’s engagement with electronic music in the 1960s and 1970s, and develop theoretical explanations of his fascination with pulse, rhythm and time. They also explore in detail Birtwistle’s interest in poetry, instrumental drama, gesture, procession and landscape, and consider the compositional processes that underpin these issues.

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Harrison Birtwistle Studies

EDITED BY

David Beard
Kenneth Gloag
Nicholas Jones
In memory of Michael Hall (1932–2012)
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Preface

This book is being published shortly after the eightieth birthday of Sir Harrison Birtwistle (b. 1934) and we hope that it will be seen as an extension of the appreciation of his music that has been inspired by such an auspicious occasion.

The status of Birtwistle as a leading contemporary composer of international stature is widely acknowledged and most obviously reflected in his receipt of numerous awards and high profile commissions, and in the many commercial recordings that continue to be produced. In addition to this public profile, Birtwistle and his music have been well served by scholarly study in the form of six monographs by Michael Hall (1984 and 1998), Robert Adlington (2000), Jonathan Cross (2000 and 2009) and David Beard (2012). All of these books, with the notable exception of Cross’s study of The Mask of Orpheus (1973–5, 1981–3), are general overviews of Birtwistle’s output that provide insights into Birtwistle’s development as a composer, specific works and the contexts within which he has worked. However, although this is an impressive body of literature, there is still much more to be written about this music, with many works, issues, ideas and contexts still in need of explication and interpretation. All except one of the books mentioned above focus exclusively on music written prior to 1999, since when Birtwistle has been especially prolific. While these monographs are instructive contributions to Birtwistle scholarship, and there is much detail in all of them that informs the chapters of this book, there is a continuing need for further perspectives on Birtwistle’s rich musical output.

Our volume cannot begin to address all the absences in Birtwistle scholarship but it does allow for direct insight into specific works, contexts, concepts or sets of issues. Each self-contained chapter provides a focus on a clearly defined topic. These studies also reflect the diversity of Birtwistle’s music in terms of periods, genres, forms, techniques and related issues through a wide range of critical, theoretical and analytical interpretations and perspectives.

Birtwistle’s relationship to modernism, particularly in a late stage, provides the context for the first chapter, within which Arnold Whittall situates Birtwistle’s ‘music dramas’ and the notion of ‘drifting’. That Birtwistle’s music often involves a preoccupation with time is well known, but how this preoccupation is realized within the specific details of individual works demands close scrutiny. In Chapter 2 Philip Rupprecht focuses on the flow of musical time in Birtwistle’s music through a structurally precise account of rhythmic mechanisms in relation to three early works (Chorales for Orchestra (1960–3), Three Movements with Fanfares (1964) and Tragoedia (1965)) and one later piece (The Axe Manual (2000)) in which a self-evident focus on rhythm takes in wider metaphoric and dramatic meanings. The preoccupation with time is also evident in the studies contributed by Edward Venn (Chapter 7) and Aleksandra Vojčić (Chapter 8). Venn focuses on the processional in Birtwistle’s music, a focus that also involves reference to ritual and the idea of the labyrinth. The primary source of inspiration for Aleksandra Vojčić’s chapter is Birtwistle’s claim that his orchestral work Night’s Black Bird (2004) begins and ends in the same manner as the earlier work The Shadow of Night (2001).2 Birtwistle’s metaphors of sameness and of journeying through alternative yet related routes lead Vojčić to an analysis of concentric motion, varied repetition and ostinato patterns in these orchestral works and in the piano miniature Ostinato with Melody (2000).

A less familiar subject in Birtwistle scholarship is the question of his engagement with electronic music. In Chapter 3, Tom Hall creates a context for this engagement through a detailed study of Birtwistle’s friendship and collaboration with Peter Zinovieff. This chapter provides the first account of Birtwistle’s early interest in electronic music, an overview of his collaborations with Zinovieff and case studies in the multi-channel tape piece Chronometer (1971–2) and Zinovieff’s plans for the use of electronic music in the opera The Mask of Orpheus, situated in relation to the challenges of collaboration between composers and music technologists at this time.

Birtwistle’s collaborations also extend to his work at the National Theatre where, among others, he was assisted by the composer Dominic Muldowney. Reflecting on the time he spent working with Birtwistle, Muldowney has highlighted how gestural Birtwistle’s music is, ‘and how simple those gestures are’.3 This is an interesting observation and has received some attention in the literature, but here forms the starting point for Kenneth Gloag’s chapter in which the gestural in Birtwistle’s music, and how it is

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both constructed and interpreted, is contextualized through wider theoretical debates around the proposed interface between music and gesture. In contrast to these questions of interpretative response, in Chapter 5 David Beard provides an overview of Birtwistle’s compositional processes, in particular his use of random numbers and other permutational procedures, based on an intimate understanding of the mass of documents, sketches and drafts stored at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Switzerland, and the British Library. Although this chapter involves a high level of musical detail, these details are situated in relation to debates on subjectivity, authorship and chance, and the status of the work as a concept is problematized through the multiplicity of information and material that access to the sketches unleashes. As an appendix item, Beard lists and provides details of Birtwistle’s manuscripts that were acquired by the British Library in 2013.

Place and landscape are increasingly important intersecting concepts within musicology and in Chapter 6 Nicholas Jones makes reference to both in his study of the music Birtwistle composed during, or in relation to, the time he spent living on Raasay, a remote island situated between the Scottish mainland and the Isle of Skye. This chapter examines Birtwistle’s Hebridean experience and provides insights into the three compositions that are explicitly associated with Raasay: Duets for Storab (1983), String Quartet: The Tree of Strings (2007) and Roddy’s Reel (2009); it also considers the composer’s engagement with the poetry of Sorley MacLean.

Birtwistle, as stated at the outset of this preface, is a successful composer with many important commissions from international centres of culture. The spread of Birtwistle’s music across Europe and beyond is documented by Mark Delaere in Chapter 9, with a detailed discussion of Gigue Machine (2011) providing an appropriate starting point. The book concludes with Jonathan Cross’s contribution, a postlude that sheds light on some substantial works by Birtwistle but also reminds us of some recurring issues, such as melancholy and lament. This chapter also poses the question of a late period and/or style in the Birtwistle oeuvre and in so doing provides an appropriate ending.

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References to Birtwistle’s scores and note on music examples and pitch designations

In scores that use rehearsal numbers, reference to specific bar numbers are given if they occur prior to the first rehearsal number. After that point, identification takes the following form: fig. [rehearsal number]:[bar number after rehearsal number]. For example, ‘fig. 2:10’ means ‘10 bars after fig. 2’ (taking the first bar to be that in which the figure itself appears).

Unless stated otherwise, all transposing instruments in the music examples are written in C. The registral designations used in the text adopt the pitch notation system which identifies C₄ as middle C, C₃ as the pitch C an octave below middle C, C₅ as the pitch C an octave above middle C and so on.