

1 The roots of Birtwistle's theatrical expression: from *Pantomime* to *Down by the Greenwood Side*

With six major operas, around eight music dramas, and a body of incidental music to his name, Harrison Birtwistle has made a significant contribution to contemporary opera and music theatre during a period that spans more than forty years. This study is concerned not only to reflect the importance of these stage works by examining them in some detail but also to convey their varied musical and intellectual worlds. Previous studies have rightly focused on Birtwistle's perennial concerns, such as myth, ritual, cyclical journeys, varied repetition, verse–refrain structures, instrumental role-play, layers and lines.¹ These characteristics highlight consistency throughout Birtwistle's oeuvre and are a mark of his formalist stance. By contrast, this book is motivated by a belief that the stage works – in which instrumental and physical drama, song and narrative are combined – demand interpretation from multiple, inter-disciplinary perspectives. While not denying obvious or important relations between works, what follows is rather more focused on differences: Birtwistle's choice of contrasting narrative subjects, his collaborations with nine librettists, his varied pre-compositional ideas and working methods, his experience with different directors, producers and others, all distinguish one stage work from another. A recurring theme is therefore a consideration of ways in which Birtwistle's initial concepts are informed, altered or conveyed differently in each case. Moreover, as ideas evolve, from the composer's musical sketches to the final production, multiple meanings accrue that are particular to each drama. Original intentions and priorities change, become compromised or are jettisoned altogether, leading to tensions and contradictions that are instructive and distinctive to each work.

Despite the focus on differences, each chapter is guided by a central question: what is the relationship between the genesis and abstract musical processes of Birtwistle's operas and music theatre works, on the one hand,

¹ See Michael Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle* (London: Robson Books, 1984) and *Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years* (London: Robson Books, 1998) – hereafter Hall, *HB* and *HBIRY*, respectively; Jonathan Cross, *Harrison Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) – henceforth Cross, *HB*: *MMM*; and Robert Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) – subsequently Adlington, *MHB*. For an analytical review of these monographs see David Beard, 'The endless parade: competing narratives in recent Birtwistle studies', *Music Analysis*, 23/1 (2004), 89–127.

and the representational demands and 'real world' concerns of his libretti, narratives and plots, on the other? To consider this question, emphasis is given to close readings of sketches and scores as and when they intersect with broader aesthetic and cultural themes.²

Birtwistle is a prolific sketch writer. While researching this book I have studied well over 4,000 sides of sketches and drafts, and around 2,500 sides of unpublished drafts and annotated typescripts of libretti by different authors. The musical manuscripts vary from verbal jottings, through tables of pitches, charts with numbers or graphs, to skeleton and continuity drafts. This study is the first sustained consideration of all of the unpublished manuscripts associated with the stage works, the vast majority of which have not been discussed previously.³ Such creative processes may appear to be entirely independent of the 'work' itself – that is to say, from the piece as it is staged, with costume, lighting, direction, singers, mime artists, and action. However, a key contention here is that the dialectical relationship between musical sketch and performance is central to an interpretation of Birtwistle's operas. When placed in context and interpreted as an intellectual concept or visual metaphor, even the most abstract sketch page may provide a clue to a work's governing rationale or dramatic narrative.

This opening chapter provides a context for the detailed examinations of stage works that follow. The chapter's first half deals with methodological issues and other questions relevant to the study as a whole. These include questions of genre, the notion of an avant-garde dilemma, Birtwistle's idea of the theatre, and the concepts of metaphor and presence. Drawing on unpublished sources and interviews, the second half explores Birtwistle's formative experiences, an unpublished piece of juvenilia titled *Pantomime*, stage works for schoolchildren, and a previously undocumented score for a music drama titled *Lorca*. The chapter concludes with a brief examination of *Down by the Greenwood Side* (1968–9) as a case study in the composer's attitude to the relationship between music, mime and drama.

² This approach follows the notion that 'texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted'. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1991), 4.

³ The majority of the sketches consulted are stored at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basle, Switzerland (henceforth abbreviated to PSS). However, I am extremely grateful to the composer for allowing me to study manuscripts that had not been sent to Basle at the time of writing, and also to the composer's son Silas for permitting me to examine an extensive collection of manuscripts that were given to him by his father prior to the composer's agreement with Paul Sacher in 1989. The research in this book also builds on my unpublished 'An analysis and sketch study of the early instrumental music of Sir Harrison Birtwistle, c. 1957–77', D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford (2000).

Genre

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Genre

I remember people saying *Punch and Judy* is not an opera. So what? It is what it is.⁴

Distinguishing between music theatre and opera is not always easy, and in Birtwistle's stage music such categories are continually blurred and contested.⁵ Moreover, as the above quotation suggests, generic distinctions are not necessarily important to Birtwistle. During this book, I often adopt the term 'stage work' as the most convenient catch-all phrase for a variety of pieces, nearly all of which resist their putative labels. Birtwistle's first major stage work, *Punch and Judy* (1966–7) is described in the score as an 'Opera in One Act'. However, its demotic subject and subtitle ('a tragical comedy or a comical tragedy'), chamber scale, baroque-titled subsections (including Aria and Passion Chorale) and fragmented form suggest a range of generic affiliations. One of *Punch's* possible allegiances is to early twentieth-century music theatre works by Schoenberg and Stravinsky, which, like the stage works of Brecht and Weill, drew on popular entertainment, including cabaret, melodrama and dance. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, the irresolvable ambiguity of *Punch's* generic identity – which mirrors *Punch's* own capricious nature – is fundamental to its meaning.

Birtwistle's first unambiguous use of the term 'opera' was applied to *Gawain* (1989–91; rev. 1994 and 1999); it was subsequently applied to *The Second Mrs Kong* (1993–4) and *The Minotaur* (2005–7), works that, to some extent, reveal an interest in operas by Wagner, Mussorgsky and Debussy. Yet *Gawain* followed a series of self-styled stage works, including 'dramatic cantata' *The Mark of the Goat* (1966), 'dramatic pastoral' *Down by the Greenwood Side* (1968–9), 'lyric tragedy in three acts' *The Mask of Orpheus* (1973–83) and 'mechanical pastoral' *Yan Tan Tethera* (1984). Nor did the apparent turn to opera in 1991 mark a clear break from self-styled forms: *The Last Supper* (1998–9) is described as a series of 'dramatic tableaux', and *The Corridor* (2008) as a 'scena for soprano, tenor and six instruments'; *The Io Passion* (2003–4) bears no descriptor but is styled as a chamber opera by its publishers. Birtwistle's stage works are not easily defined, either, by considering the institutions that commissioned them: *The Last Supper*

⁴ Birtwistle in conversation with Beard at the composer's home in Mere, Wiltshire, on 18 November 2008.

⁵ The reference to 'music theatre' in the title of this book is shorthand for 'experimental' or 'new' music theatre. However, British examples of this genre are often more closely bound to textual meaning than their continental European contemporaries. For more on generic definitions see Björn Heile, 'Recent approaches to experimental music theatre and contemporary opera', *Music & Letters*, 87/1 (2006), 72–81.

was premiered at the Deutsche Oper, Berlin. Nor, as Robert Adlington has pointed out, is scale a reliable indicator of genre.⁶ *Orpheus* remains the most large-scale and ambitiously complex of the stage works. Opera is 'present' in this work, in the form of arias and recitative-like sections, and in the association of Orpheus with the birth of opera. Yet *Orpheus* is the composer's most experimental piece, with electronics, mime artists, puppets and non-linear narrative. *Gawain*, *Mrs Kong* and *The Minotaur*, by contrast, are more obviously indebted to operatic convention in terms of clearer narratives, greater characterisation and expressive devices. Yet here, too, an experimental approach is evident in the relationship between orchestra and text. Questions of genre are therefore useful, but only to the extent that Birtwistle's stage works may be compared to earlier models: to insist on a neat fit is potentially misleading.

What does exist in the composer's mind is a distinction between the kinds of detail possible in Grand Opera, on the one hand, and 'something that is more intimate and small' that explores an idea in 'close-up', on the other.⁷ To this may be added a common distinction between emphasis on a libretto in opera and resistance or avoidance of textual meaning in music theatre. Yet even within these terms Birtwistle conspires against easy classification. *Io*, for example, mixes mime with speech, half-song and aria. Moreover, *Io* establishes a tension between stylised, artificial drama and a more natural sense of realism. As such, this work exploits and questions the possibility of distinguishing between opera as realism and music theatre as anti-realism.⁸ Conscious that the characters in his 'kind of theatre' might become cardboard cutouts, Birtwistle has commented that such a thing 'is to be avoided at all costs, because more than anything else I want my characters to have blood in their veins and sex in their loins'.⁹ Tensions between artifice and naturalism are fundamental to Birtwistle's concept of theatre. Brechtian distancing, Stravinskian formalism, a focus on the *techniques* of theatre and a belief that 'the story can never be separated from the way it is told' *do* often have the upper hand.¹⁰ But they do not rule outright. This is most clearly

⁶ Robert Adlington, 'Music theatre since the 1960s', in Mervyn Cooke, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 228.

⁷ David Beard, 'Beauty and the beast: a conversation with Sir Harrison Birtwistle', *Musical Times*, 149 (Spring 2008), 24.

⁸ The distinction is suggested by Adlington, 'Music theatre', 229.

⁹ Birtwistle in 'Behind the mask: perspectives on the music of Harrison Birtwistle', a television documentary broadcast on Channel 4 in 1987. It is possible that this remark reflects Birtwistle's shift towards more conventional opera, but even in workshops during the 1970s he wished to avoid what he termed 'the Dalek effect' (a reference to a breed of remorseless mutated robots in the BBC television series *Dr Who*), in which stylised declamation is stripped of natural inflection; see Chapter 7.

¹⁰ Adlington, *MHB*, 15.

The avant-garde dilemma

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exemplified by a duality in *Down by the Greenwood Side* between stylised pantomime, on the one hand, and an expressionist setting of the Ballad of the Cruel Mother, on the other, as will be discussed at the end of this chapter. In this and other stage works the Stravinskyan and the Schoenbergian jostle and vie with one another.

The avant-garde dilemma

In the 1950s and 1960s opposition grew towards opera and other forms of musical representation, particularly among high-modernist circles in Darmstadt. Most notably, Theodor Adorno and Pierre Boulez spoke out against opera, considering it to be costly, outmoded, irrelevant and bourgeois.¹¹ A dilemma therefore arose for those who pursued autonomous musical forms and abstract compositional techniques but were interested in theatre or opera. Given such opposition, how was a concern for abstract structures and experimental processes to be reconciled with an 'urge to engage with drama'?¹² This is a question that applies to many composers besides Birtwistle, and it is an issue that lies at the centre of this book. In certain instances, such as instrumental pieces by Karlheinz Stockhausen, theatricality was a by-product of an exploration of new notational devices, sounds and performance techniques: the virtuosic skills required to perform certain works ultimately drew attention to the idea that 'all music is by nature theatre, that all performance is drama'.¹³ But many composers, such as Luigi Nono, Luciano Berio, Mauricio Kagel, György Ligeti, Henri Pousseur and George Aperghis, consciously developed new forms of experimental music theatre as a means of distinguishing themselves from prevailing formalist trends.¹⁴ Birtwistle's parallel development is highlighted by a work such

¹¹ See Pierre Boulez, 'Opera Houses? Blow them Up!' *Opera*, 19/6 (1968), 440–50, and Theodor Adorno, 'Bourgeois opera', in David J. Levin, ed., *Opera through Other Eyes* (Stanford University Press, 1994), 25–44 (Adorno's article was originally published in 1955). It would be misleading to suggest that Boulez was unambiguously opposed to opera or music theatre, however, given his experience as an opera conductor, his involvement with the theatre company Renaud-Barrault (see Peter O'Hagan, 'Pierre Boulez and the project of "L'Orestie"', *Tempo*, 241 (2007), 34–52), and evidence that throughout the 1960s he had an operatic project, or 'scénographie musicale', in mind, which influenced his purely instrumental music (see Luisa Bassetto, 'Marginalia, ou *L'opéra-fantôme* de Pierre Boulez', in Jean-Louis Leleu and Pascal Decroupet, eds., *Pierre Boulez: Techniques d'écriture et enjeux esthétiques* (Geneva: Contrechamps Editions, 2006), 255–98).

¹² Adlington, *MHB*, 5. The dilemma stems from the problem that 'musical theatre is in many ways intrinsically at odds with the aesthetics of the avant-garde. The referentiality of staged enactions compromises the autonomy that avant-garde composers like to claim for their music'; Adlington, 'Music theatre', 233.

¹³ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 191.

¹⁴ Adlington has observed that music theatre was attractive to certain avant-garde composers because it allowed 'a re-engagement with dramatic enaction in a form that explicitly refuted bourgeois theatrical conventions'. Following such 'subtle critiques', other composers, notably

as *Verses for Ensembles* (1969), with its spatial separation of instrumental groups, choreographed movements for instrumentalists across the stage, and forms of instrumental role-play.

To align Birtwistle too directly with the continental avant-garde would be incorrect: his models were predominantly pre-war modernists, particularly Stravinsky. Moreover, the cultural context in post-war Britain differed from that in continental Europe: Britain actually witnessed a resurgence of interest in opera in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet within this context Birtwistle approached opera obliquely. As discussed in Chapter 2, *Punch* is a complex, ambiguous work that is not clearly positioned pro or contra opera. Moreover, in Britain at the time, *Punch*'s musical language was considered radical enough to be dubbed 'avant-garde', despite the fact that Birtwistle's direct experience of the European avant-garde was limited.

That said, Birtwistle did attend Darmstadt briefly in 1956, and his close contemporaries Peter Maxwell Davies, Alexander Goehr and John Ogdon kept him informed of developments there in the mid to late 1950s, when abstract, autonomous compositional systems were encouraged.¹⁵ Birtwistle's use of expanding chromatic wedges – an especially important compositional tool from his first published work *Refrains and Choruses* (1957) until the early 1970s – dates from this time. In fact, evidence suggests that Birtwistle derived this technique from his study of Nono's *Canti per tredici*, which was premiered in Darmstadt the year Birtwistle attended.¹⁶

More recently, commentators have begun to appreciate the diversity of approaches adopted by composers at Darmstadt.¹⁷ Similarly, Birtwistle has spoken of the importance of John Cage's arrival there in 1958 and of his own sense that serialism represented a dead end.¹⁸ Another important

Hans Werner Henze and Louis Andriessen, developed forms of music theatre in opposition to the avant-garde; Adlington, 'Music theatre', 231 and 234.

¹⁵ According to an undated letter stored in Darmstadt, Birtwistle attended the Internationale Ferienkurse für neue Musik from 11 to 15 July 1956. Goehr's *Fantasia* Op. 4, for orchestra, and Richard Rodney Bennett's *Four Pieces for Orchestra* were premiered on 12 and 13 July, respectively. In 1957, Wolfgang Steinecke, the founding director of the summer course, invited Birtwistle to perform clarinet in Berg's *Chamber Concerto* for piano, strings and wind ensemble, but there is no record of Birtwistle's attendance.

¹⁶ A handwritten piano reduction of Nono's piece with pencil annotations indicating the use of an expanding chromatic wedge on A and mirror forms was in Birtwistle's possession and is currently owned by Silas Birtwistle.

¹⁷ See: Paul Attinello, Christopher Fox and Martin Iddon, eds., 'Other Darmstadts', *Contemporary Music Review* 26/1 (2007); Martin Iddon, 'Darmstadt schools: Darmstadt as a plural phenomenon', *Tempo*, 256 (2011), 2–8; Björn Heile, 'Darmstadt as other: British and American responses to musical modernism', *twentieth-century music*, 1/2 (2004), 161–78.

¹⁸ Birtwistle in conversation with David Beard at the composer's home in Mere, Wiltshire on 29 October 2008. For a broader perspective on British modernism and responses to Darmstadt in the 1950s, see Philip Rupprecht, '"Something slightly indecent": British composers, the European avant-garde, and national stereotypes in the 1950s', *Musical Quarterly*, 91/3–4 (2008), 278–325.

Birtwistle's concept of theatre

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factor to consider is Birtwistle's experience while he was a Harkness Fellow at Princeton University in 1966–7: it seems likely, for example, that his awareness of Milton Babbitt's *Philomel*, for soprano and electronics, informed the opening of *Orpheus*, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Birtwistle's concept of theatre

Birtwistle's re-thinking of the medium of opera is . . . radical. He doesn't "set" an opera libretto in the usual sense; he looks for a subject and for a way of handling it which together mirror the processes inherently at work in his own music.¹⁹

This quotation perfectly captures an idea handed down by Birtwistle himself, which seems to offer a way out of the avant-garde dilemma. If it can be argued that the drama is an expression of purely musical processes, then abstract, formalist principles remain paramount and aspects such as text, characterisation and narrative are secondary. Birtwistle has also often stressed the notion that he prefers to work with familiar narratives because the story will then not detract from what *he* wants to say.²⁰ A possible consequence of this approach is that the narrative and textual demands of a libretto may contradict the abstract concerns of the score.²¹ Yet to reach a verdict on this question it is necessary to consider the level of interaction between composer and librettist. What I seek to explore throughout this book is evidence that Birtwistle is not a slave to his preconceived musical ideas – that, on the contrary, there is a reflexive relationship between text and music.

The notion that Birtwistle's musical ideas take priority also runs up against a problem when it is considered that numerous commentators have insisted on the theatrical nature of all Birtwistle's music. Witness Jonathan Cross's reference to 'the inherently dramatic nature of Birtwistle's musical thought' and Nicholas Snowman's remark that 'a sense of theatre pervades all his scores'.²² Birtwistle himself has expressed a desire to get to the 'roots

¹⁹ Malcolm Hayes, 'Pandas mate at last', *Sunday Telegraph*, 26 May 1991. This idea clearly informed David Freeman's direction of the original production of *Orpheus*, as revealed by his remark: 'The way that the theatre speaks has to match the way that the music speaks'; David Freeman, 'Composer and producer speak', in programme booklet for the English National Opera production of *Orpheus*, May–June 1986.

²⁰ Hall, *HB*, 148.

²¹ Irene Morra, *Twentieth-Century British Authors and the Rise of Opera in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 53.

²² Cross, *HB: MMM*, 79, and Nicholas Snowman, 'Birtwistle the dramatist: some reflections', in programme booklet for the first production of *Gawain*, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, May–June 1991 [n.p.].

of theatrical expression', a sentiment that mirrors experiments by theatrical groups in the 1960s, such as Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre and Peter Brook's Theatre of Cruelty.²³ According to this logic, dramatic ideas inform the music, which then determines the structure of the stage works. Yet it has also been argued that 'the theatrical credentials of Birtwistle's music overall are sometimes more presumed than proven':

We arguably sell it short by unthinkingly insisting on the affinity. A willingness to negotiate with comprehensibility remains an important part of Birtwistle's make-up, one that doesn't sit altogether comfortably with the idea that his music presents an arena wherein to behold a spectacle.²⁴

As mentioned above, Birtwistle's tendency to think in visual and spatial terms is highlighted in certain works, particularly by the choreographed movement and spatial arrangement of players in *Verses for Ensembles* and *Secret Theatre* (1984). 'The reason I did [this]', Birtwistle has commented, 'was to make it seem that *that* music happens here, in *this place*, and it doesn't happen in another place. It's a sort of visual clarification . . . That's what happens in *Punch and Judy*: the murders all happen in one place; Choregos only sings in one place and so on.'²⁵ Such spatial consciousness recalls Antonin Artaud's dictum that 'the stage is a concrete physical space which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak', the thoughts of which 'are beyond the reach of the spoken language'.²⁶ In other words, such movements draw attention to the physical and aural *presence* of the performers in a manner that need not imply a specific meaning (a more detailed consideration of Artaud and the body is presented in Chapter 7).

To insist on the formalist aspects of Birtwistle's stage works also misses the importance of his references to older theatrical traditions. Recognising this leads Cross to observe an apparent contradiction 'at the heart of . . . Birtwistle's theatre':

On the one hand, an examination of the historical contexts for Birtwistle's experiments with different kinds of theatre emphasizes both the contemporaneity and originality of his achievements. This is a process in which the composer himself has attempted to participate, aligning himself

²³ Birtwistle in an interview with John Drummond, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 13 January 1988. During this interview Birtwistle also discussed his interest in David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet*, describing its 'strange world' and 'terrifying violence,' its images of unrealistic flowers and stuffed birds, combined with a concentration on 'very basic emotions.'

²⁴ Robert Adlington, 'Summary justice' [review of Harrison Birtwistle festival, Southbank Centre], *Musical Times*, 137 (July 1996), 34.

²⁵ Andrew Ford, *Composer to Composer: Conversations about Contemporary Music* (London: Quartet Books, 1993), 58.

²⁶ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 37.

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with the high modernist enterprise of the post-war years in which the likes of Boulez were arguing for an abandonment of the past, for the destruction of all opera houses and so on . . . On the other hand, his ongoing interest not only in classical subject-matter but in the very forms and techniques of Attic tragedy, of baroque opera, even of Wagnerian music drama, shows a composer acutely aware of and responding to past traditions. In practice, Birtwistle's theatres seem to strike a fascinating balance between these two tendencies . . . Herein lies [their] originality and expressive power.²⁷

One such past tradition is pastoral, a genre that Birtwistle explores most obviously in *Yan Tan Tethera*. It is frequently argued that, following Stravinsky, Birtwistle downplays subjectivity in his stage works, reducing individuals to archetypes that deflect attention away from character on to the dramatic situations in which they operate. Following William Empson, Cross has compared this flattening of subjectivity to similar effects in pastoral.²⁸ Chapter 4, however, explores *Yan Tan Tethera* in the context of other pastoral theories and reveals a more equal relationship between scene and agent, which arguably highlights subjectivity.

A representative sample of the critical reception of Birtwistle's stage works reveals a fair amount of consensus regarding his effective handling of music and drama. On attending performances of *Punch* and *The Minotaur* in 2008, Arnold Whittall remarked that the experience 'confirms that Birtwistle is the most creatively post-Wagnerian, post-Stravinskyan (that is: post-Verdian) dramatic composer of our time'.²⁹ The conductor Elgar Howarth has noted Birtwistle's 'superb sense of timing and proportion', which is 'essential to a composer working [. . .] in theatre time'.³⁰ The critic Andrew Clements has observed that Birtwistle 'has consistently demonstrated his understanding of the roots of drama'.³¹ David Harsent, the librettist for *Gawain*, *The Minotaur* and *Corridor*, has spoken of his admiration for Birtwistle's 'colossal sense of theatre', stating that 'he understands theatricality – what it should do, and how it works'.³² Arguably, what moved Harsent to make these comments is Birtwistle's ability to recognise key moments in a narrative and to enact responses that maximise dramatic effect.

Set against this conventional sense of dramatic timing, pace and climax, however, is Birtwistle's interest in what he terms 'emblematic theatre'.³³ It is

²⁷ Cross, *HB: MMM*, 83–4.

²⁸ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Penguin, 1995).

²⁹ Whittall, 'First performances. London, Royal Opera, Covent Garden: Birtwistle's *The Minotaur*', *Tempo*, 246 (2008), 50.

³⁰ Howarth, 'The Mask of Orpheus', *Opera*, 37/5 (1986), 492.

³¹ Andrew Clements, 'Birtwistle unmasked', *Financial Times*, 17 May 1986.

³² David Harsent in conversation with Beard, 21 January 2008.

³³ Birtwistle in conversation with Beard, 18 November 2008.

unclear precisely what Birtwistle means by this term, although it suggests an oblique approach to narrative in which more abstract concepts take precedence over the literal depiction of events in real time. Moreover, this idea resonates with what Michael Hall describes as an 'appositional way of thinking' that has inevitably drawn Birtwistle 'to a form of theatre where holistic presentation takes precedence over linear plot'.³⁴ Hall cites Martin Esslin on the Theatre of the Absurd: 'it is a theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence, and therefore it uses a language based on patterns of concrete images rather than argument and discursive speech . . . The formal structure of such a play is, therefore, merely a device to express a total image by unfolding it in a sequence of interacting elements'.³⁵ However, although relevant to the more experimental stage works, such as *Punch*, *Orpheus* and *Bow Down* (1977), this observation is by no means universally applicable. As Cross notes, there is nearly always a sense of movement in Birtwistle's stage works towards a moment of recognition and reversal.³⁶

Hall's observations, however, *do* explain a general avoidance of dialogue and of attention to subtle emotional detail. This tendency has drawn criticism from some who view opera as a means to explore human nature in more realist terms.³⁷ Yet such criticism represents a somewhat restricted view of opera: is realism the only way to examine human emotion and communication? Moreover, realism itself is a problematic category, since it is *constructed* – and in very different ways by, for example, Mozart, Verdi, Janáček, Britten or Berg. Clearly, Birtwistle finds realist approaches too restrictive, since he is attracted to a form of theatre in which 'everything is possible'.³⁸ Ultimately, the incorporation of elements of realism into Birtwistle's emblematic or appositional concept of theatre results in fascinating tensions between artifice and realism, which become its *raison d'être*.

Metaphor

Birtwistle often thinks of his music in visual terms. As he has remarked: 'There's no actual separation to me between the things that I make and the things that I see'.³⁹ This sounds remarkably like the conclusion of

³⁴ Hall, *HB*, 119. ³⁵ Hall, *HB*, 119–20. ³⁶ See Cross, *HB: MMM*, 76–8.

³⁷ For example, Rupert Christiansen argued in a review of *The Minotaur* that Birtwistle 'can't do real people or subtle feeling' ('Enthralling, hypnotising – and unloveable', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 April 2008), while Alex Ross, reviewing *Mrs Kong*, suggests Birtwistle 'is not a man of quick dramatic instincts'; http://www.thereisnoise.com/2006/08/london_1995.html (accessed 22 August 2011). However, it is interesting to consider the extent to which opera as a genre is conducive to subtle emotions or (whatever this term means) quick dramatic instincts.

³⁸ Birtwistle in Beard, 'Beauty and the beast', 20.

³⁹ From 'A couple of things about Harry', a BBC2 *Art on Two* television documentary broadcast on 4 April 1971. The programme was directed by William Fitzwater.