1 'Let it drift': Birtwistle's late-modernist music dramas

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A single, sustained clarinet note, unmeasured, that swells and subsides, echoed and underpinned by the harp's movement from the same note, A, to G. The clarinet A then starts to repeat as a three-beat unit, underpinned now by a fractured ostinato in the lower strings that interprets the A/G dyad as A♯/G♯, while the harp launches a continuous and primarily stepwise chromatic line within a flow of quintuplet semiquavers (see Example 1.1(a)). At the work's conclusion (Example 1.1(b)) the clarinet and harp are left alone: the clarinet asserts a stable, sustained G, growing 'from nothing' to *fffff*, then contradicting that centricity with a soft, five-pitch figure (including a G) whose rhythmic configurations change, and could conceivably drift on – *senza rallentando, senza diminuendo* – forever but are cut off after seven statements by the four peremptory four-note chords in the harp.
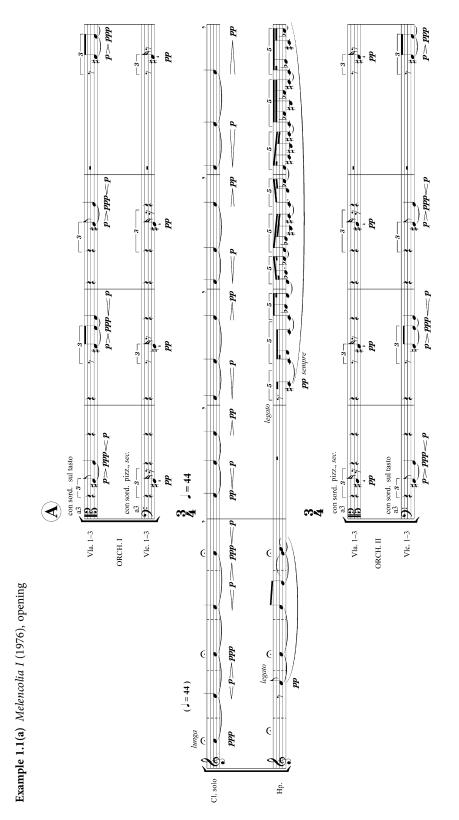
Such detailed verbal description of the beginning and ending of Birtwistle's *Melencolia I* (1976) inevitably states the obvious. The music's character is, by definition, latent – hidden within musical notation which does not look like a dramatic dialogue between decisive and indecisive personae, but sounds like it. The critical assumption, for those who actually admire the music, is that the composer is affecting indecision, lack of certainty as to what to do next, as a device to encapsulate the dramatic essence of the tension that propels the music forwards as a dialogue between resistance to motion – dragging, drifting – and the impatient, gruff rejection of such a feckless mode of expression. The reference to dialogue suggests degrees of interaction and interconnection, of one state responding to the other, rather than the juxtaposition or superimposition of completely separate entities. Basic differences of pitch and rhythm, as well as of expressive character, fuel the contrapuntal drama, for although shared pitches or common rhythmic units may emerge, the space occupied tends in pitch class terms towards the total chromatic and in rhythmic terms towards the sustained irregularities of 'musical prose'.[1]

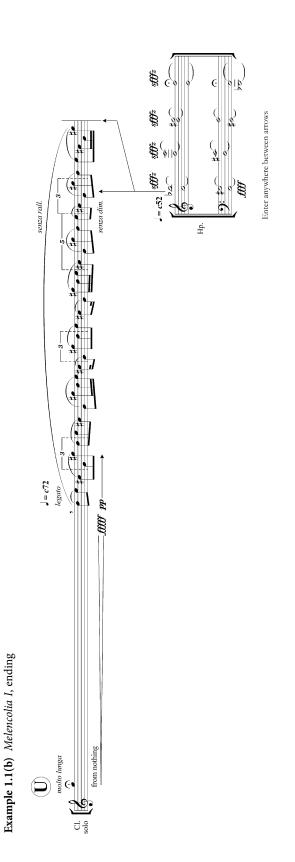[1] For an introduction to this Schoenbergian concept, see Carl Dahlhaus, 'Musical Prose', *Schoenberg and the New Music*, trans. Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 105–19.

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Example 1.1(a) *Melencolia I* (1976), opening

Example 1.1(b) *Melencolia I*, ending

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Moving from something to something different as a marker of ending can also be seen and heard in another major non-vocal work, *Earth Dances* (1986; see Example 1.2). Here the motion from a sustained and asserted D to a quietly sustained and reiterated C that drifts irregularly into silence might be felt to reverse *Melencolia I*'s 'drift-to-drive' scenario, but the music still focuses on one thing at a time. Jump forwards twenty-seven years to what, in the score, Birtwistle calls *Earth Dances*' 'mirror image', *The Shadow of Night* (2001), and the 'something' and the 'something different' are superimposed rather than placed in succession, to the extent that drifting yet grounded ostinato patterns underpin fiercely driven melodic outbursts, the last of which is a single trumpet note (Example 1.3). (A variant of this concluding superimposition is also to be found in *The Shadow of Night*'s Cleveland Orchestra companion piece, *Night's Black Bird* (2004).)

Commentators on Birtwistle's musical development who deal in such schematic analyses tend to agree about the nature of its most basic stylistic and structural components: for Michael Hall, 'it is no wonder that when he eventually found himself as a composer his style was strongly biased towards modes, and also towards that form of music Vaughan Williams so often favoured, the processional'.[2] Later, Jonathan Cross claimed that 'central to Birtwistle's modernist aesthetic are such features as anti-narrative, ritual and ceremony, ostinato, drone, the processional, new kinds of (timeless or non-directed) time'.[3] It is safe to presume that processional music – though not of the kind that countered decisiveness with drifting – would have featured prominently in the repertory of the Accrington military band, in which the young Birtwistle played the clarinet. All the more reason, no doubt, for the degree to which the archetypal Birtwistle processional avoids the brisk rhythmic regularity and monolithic goal-directed harmony of the traditional Sousa-style march: such elementary sources can be acknowledged only to be subverted, the better to establish a significant distance between the vernacular and the aesthetic, the mundane and the mythic, as with the ending of *Melencolia I*, where – to quote a poem by John Danyel deeply implicated, as discussed below, in *The Shadow of Night* – 'uncertain certain turns'.

'Drifting' suggests instability, impermanence, though both 'drive' and 'drift' are more restless than static. In 'Weiss und Leicht', the first of Birtwistle's settings of Paul Celan ('White and Light' (1989)), the poet uses *wandern*, a word which for musicians can have very specific associations with Romanticism, as in Schubert's blithe setting of Wilhelm Müller's

[2] Michael Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle* (London: Robson Books, 1984), 5.

[3] Jonathan Cross, *Harrison Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 11.

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Example 1.2 *Earth Dances* (1986), ending

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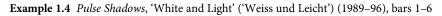**Example 1.3** *The Shadow of Night* (2001), ending

'Das Wandern' (No. 1 of *Die schöne Müllerin*), poignant simply because
it shows no signs of the sorrows to come. There is also Wagner's restless
and rootless Wanderer, seeking in a resigned and sometimes almost playful
manner to bring about an ending for himself and the old order based
in Valhalla. Schubert's young protagonist and Wagner's ageing god are
certainly not aimless; nor are Celan's images meaningless. 'Weiss und Leicht'
is a portrait in words of a surreal landscape or seascape, with enough in the
way of recognizable, even mundane features – dunes, cliffs, foam – to make
the uncanny contexts in which they are placed – and coupled with very
subjective references to 'I', 'you' and 'us' – the more unsettling. It might be
that the moonlight or the waves of the sea are drifting: advancing and
retreating, without consistent progress or regress. Though the natural world
remains salient, it is as if normality is suspended. The landscape might
rather be a dreamscape: as Celan asks near the poem's end, 'Are you asleep?'

From Celan to Dowland – and Danyel

Birtwistle's setting of Celan's 'Weiss und Leicht' sustains a dream-like mood
throughout, the drift of long-breathed, rhythmically irregular vocal and
instrumental lines offset by the drive of persistently active, relatively rapid
and more centred, though very quiet, motion in the viola (Example 1.4).
When the line 'Are you asleep?' is reached (bar 52), the viola part congeals
into a firmly defined cadence-figure which is repeated asynchronously
across seven bars while the voice is silent and the other instruments continue
their melodic meditations. Then for the final twelve bars of the vocal setting
Birtwistle provides the viola with a repertory of four variants of the cadence-
figure, to be used and repeated 'in any order' as if in conscious resistance to
the coordinated lyrical flow around them. This resistance to uniformity
parallels the text's resistance to 'normality', and therefore enhances the
musical realization of the poem's linguistic character: Michael Hamburger,
whose translations Birtwistle used, referred to a 'process of condensation
and dislocation' in Celan's later work as 'the available resources of language
and prosody become inadequate', and Birtwistle certainly avoids thinking of
music, classically, as a language whose statements and phrases are equivalent
to verbal clauses and sentences.[4] Nevertheless, words in general and poetry
in particular have remained rich sources of fascination, and Orphic song
takes many different forms, promoting the kind of extremes highlighted

[4] Michael Hamburger, introduction to *Paul Celan: Selected Poems*, trans. Michael   Hamburger (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 25.

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Example 1.4 *Pulse Shadows*, 'White and Light' ('Weiss und Leicht') (1989–96), bars 1–6

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when setting Harsent, Rilke or Celan alongside allusions to John Dowland and other lute song composers of the Tudor period.

Birtwistle did not actually ignore pre-classical music – Machaut, Heinrich Isaac, J. S. Bach – in his early years: and later on the ritual element in *Gawain* (1991, rev. 1994 and 1999) and *The Last Supper* (1998–9) prompted motet-like choral writing. Despite the archaic aura of such elements, it might be thought that it was important for him to put distance between himself and Peter Maxwell Davies by avoiding comparable degrees of associative allusion, and comparable confrontations between parody and transformation of materials from early music. But by the year 2000 the likelihood of invidious comparisons had long gone, and Davies did not himself engage directly with Dowland (as instrumental composer) until the Naxos Quartet No. 8 in 2005. Birtwistle's own response to this music reached its climax with 2009's *Semper Dowland, semper dolens: Theatre of Melancholy*, whose 'music by Harrison Birtwistle after Dowland' – juxtaposed with the scena for soprano, tenor and ensemble, *The Corridor* – is more a matter of transcription than free composition. But Birtwistle's involvement with Dowland began in a very different way, with *The Shadow of Night*.

In an unusually expansive note in the score, Birtwistle describes *The Shadow of Night* as 'a slow and reflective nocturne, exploring the world of melancholy as understood and celebrated by Elizabethan poets and composers':

> The title is drawn from a long poem by George Chapman (1559–1634) which is one of the fullest explorations of this theme, where melancholy is no longer an inert and depressive move, but a humour of the night, an inspired spiritual condition. I took inspiration from two dark sources – the expressions of melancholy in Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) [Birtwistle does not remind his readers of his composition with that title from 1976] and John Dowland's lute song 'In Darkness Let Me Dwell', the first three notes of which are quoted in the piccolo's solo soon after the opening of the piece [see Example 1.5].[5]

A third 'dark source' for *The Shadow of Night* is included by way of the insertion into the score itself (at bars 190–1) of the central four lines from the eight-line text for 'Can doleful notes', a song by a contemporary of Dowland and Chapman, John Danyel:

> Can doleful notes to measured accents set,
> Express unmeasured griefs which Time forget?
> No, let chromatic tunes, harsh without ground,
> Be sullen music for a timeless heart.

[5] Harrison Birtwistle, composer's note, *The Shadow of Night* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2003).

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Example 1.5 *The Shadow of Night*, bars 21–4