

Harrison Birtwistle

A detailed oil painting of an owl, likely a Great Horned Owl, shown from the chest up. The owl has dark brown and black feathers with prominent white and light brown markings on its wings and face. Its large, dark eyes are looking directly at the viewer. The background is a soft, light-colored wash.

Night's Black Bird
The Shadow of Night
The Cry of Anubis

The Hallé

Owen Slade
tuba

Ryan Wigglesworth
conductor



Harrison Birtwistle

1	Night's Black Bird	14'04
2	The Shadow of Night	28'15
3	The Cry of Anubis Owen Slade <i>tuba</i>	13'24
	Total timing	55'58

The Hallé
Owen Slade *tuba*
Ryan Wigglesworth *conductor*

This recording is made possible in part by Roche, who also commissioned the composition of *Night's Black Bird* by Sir Harrison Birtwistle in 2003.

Harrison Birtwistle: A Personal Note

by Ryan Wigglesworth

Like Birtwistle, I grew up in the industrial North, though on the opposite side of the Pennines. And like Birtwistle my earliest experience of music making came from playing in the local band (mine brass, his military). In themselves, such slight childhood parallels are of little significance, and yet, when as a thirteen-year-old budding composer I came to experience quite by chance Birtwistle's music for the first time, the world it inhabited felt immediately and strangely familiar. This was a radio broadcast of *Verses for Ensembles* (1968-9), and I can recall the visceral effect of the encounter just as vividly now. What was it about these sounds, written a decade before I was born, that imprinted themselves so indelibly on my memory? Apart from its sheer grit and energy, its opposition of violence and stark tenderness, its roughness harnessed by a severe formalism, what struck me at the time was a sense that this music had always existed. What's more, it seemed to me to be singing a peculiarly Northern song.

Much later, I had the pleasure of working closely with Harry on the premieres of two of his operas, and in the meantime I had discovered and absorbed, bit by bit, the rest of his remarkable output. Regardless of the piece and the period, what was always self-evident was the unwavering independence of his musical mind

– a fact manifestly displayed by the three works on the present disk, each recorded here for the first time. And while the gut-wrenching forcefulness of *Verses*, *Tragoedia* and *Punch and Judy*, or the monolithic grandeur of *Mask of Orpheus* and *Earth Dances* may have given way to a more subtle, perhaps more reflective discourse in *The Shadow of Night*, *Night's Black Bird*, and *The Cry of Anubis*, this is certainly not indicative of any late-period mellowing; indeed, in each of these works can be identified the same steel and absence of compromise that have remained hallmarks throughout his career. Personally, at least, there lingers the childhood sense that these three journeys were in some way waiting to be discovered by Birtwistle – that their craggy lyricism exudes a timelessness unaffected by trend or fad. It also seems to me that something of the Lancashire land – or townscape continues to inform Harry's creative consciousness. As Auden, writing of his industrial North, put it: 'Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery, /That was, and still is, my ideal scenery.'

Ryan Wigglesworth, 2011



Anatomies of Melancholy

by Bayan Northcott



On a number of occasions, Sir Harrison Birtwistle has suggested that he thinks of himself essentially as a melancholic; not so much in the sense of a person subject to glooms, more as someone constantly aware of the interplay of fate and chance and how little space this leaves for individual freedom and choice. The negative response to this awareness could of course be a sense of helplessness leading to depression. But no genuine depressive could have found the purpose and drive to create a catalogue of something like 130 works to date, many on the largest scale. Rather, Birtwistle seems to regard composition as a kind of grim game in which, by seeming to submit at once to fate in the guise of deterministic procedures, and to chance through the operation of random numbers, he is able to set up

contexts of disruption – ‘a logic that’s been fractured’, as he has put it – from which spontaneous and original inventions may yet be wrested.

Beside the theatrical scores and ensemble pieces that make up much of his output, Birtwistle’s concert works for full orchestra comprise a fairly select group – just seven scores, if one excludes the medieval recomposition *Machaut à ma Manière* (1988) and the operatic spin-off *Gawain’s Journey* (1991). Yet each exploits the tension between the formalistic and the arbitrary in a distinctive way. In *Chorales* for orchestra (1960-63) the process is essentially a stripping away of layers of disparate detail to reveal the starkly unified chorale beneath. In *Nomos* (1968), the orchestra generates elaborate heterophonies around a *cantus*

firmus unfolded by a woodwind quartet that is gradually amplified until it drowns out the orchestra, taking over the heterophony – only to retreat, with seeming indifference, into silence. In the baleful processional *The Triumph of Time* (1971-72), a more or less unrelated sequence of ideas is only just held together by superimposed repetitions of a short saxophone figure and a long, winding cor anglais melody, while *Earth Dances* (1985-86) derives its vast and unpredictable course from the simultaneous unfolding of several independent orchestral layers which grind and buckle against one another like tectonic plates.

Despite the variety of procedures in these earlier orchestral works, certain aspects emerge as constants. The most obvious of these is the predominant

harshness and bleakness of sound and imagery – tokens less of self-expression than of a view of life in general as a tragic predicament. In keeping with this, Birtwistle's orchestration is almost entirely 'functional': geared to the clear presentation of the keening monodies, block contrasts and varied ostinati that comprise his characteristic procedures, without sensuous or picturesque indulgence. And behind this lies his idiosyncratic handling of musical time: the constant disruption of forward movement, so that the listener has the recurrent sense of having to repeat the journey by a different route, or of retracing steps in a maze – never finally arriving or getting out. Ultimately, Birtwistle seems to be implying that the modern Western concept of time as progressive may be less powerful in determining our existence than

the more ancient circular time-experience, the 'eternal return' of the revolving seasons and the life cycle.

These characteristics and preoccupations have certainly not vanished from his more recent orchestral works – on the contrary, his labyrinthine *Exody* (1997-98), composed during the upswing to the millennium, comprises his definitive realization of time as circular: 'In my end is my beginning, and in my beginning is my end,' as the medieval tag has it. Yet in certain respects, his handling of sound and procedure has grown more subtle and flexible. In part this may reflect his belated engagement with aspects of Western music he ignored before. At the outset of his career he appeared to evolve by a strategy of artistic autism; simply turning his back on most

of the skills composers were traditionally supposed to acquire, and constructing a language of his own out of a few musical elements and 'source' works that seemed absolutely basic. But this has enabled him latterly to come to such composers as Beethoven and Wagner with fresh ears. Typically, his first comment on getting to grips with Beethoven's Fourth Symphony was that it discovers a whole new range of roles for the bassoon. And so it does – but how few commentators had previously noticed this.

Birtwistle's own approach to the orchestra, though fundamentally unchanging, has certainly gained in the precision of its balances and in the atmospheric, even sensuous qualities of its blendings. And the juxtapositions and reversals that characterized his earlier handling of timing

have been interspersed by a more fluctuating, wave-like handling of tempo. Indeed, a listener, knowing nothing of Birtwistle's background and coming to the darkly swirling ebbs and flows of *The Shadow of Night* (2001) for the first time, might be forgiven for mistaking it as a latter-day descendent of the late Romantic tone-poem tradition. Most saliently, perhaps, this score, together with its satellite *Night's Black Bird* (2004), moves the treatment of melancholia on from an apprehension of collective plight towards something more personal and positive. Birtwistle tells us that he took the title *The Shadow of Night* from a long poem by the Elizabethan poet George Chapman, 'where melancholy is no longer an inert and depressive mood, but a humour of the night, an inspired spiritual condition'.

Night's Black Bird (2004)

The Shadow of Night (2001)

For a composer who has often spoken of viewing 'musical objects' from different angles, or of pursuing alternative paths across the same musical landscape, it is perhaps strange that Birtwistle has rarely, if ever, taken an entire existent work of his own as such an object or landscape to re-explore differently. But with the successive appearance of *The Shadow of Night* and *Night's Black Bird*, we have something like it at last. Something like it, because, although both works are inspired by the same imaginative source, open and close with virtually the same music and contain some of the same musical imagery, their

symbiotic relationship is easier to feel than to trace in technical detail.

Commissioned by the BBC, scored for very large orchestra including six horns, four each of trumpets and trombones and five percussionists, *The Shadow of Night* was premiered under Christoph von Dohnányi in January 2002. Birtwistle tells us that his initial thought was to compose a companion piece to his earlier Cleveland commission, the turbulently constructivist *Earth Dances*. In the event, he produced something more like its opposite: 'a slow and reflective nocturne, exploring the world of melancholy as understood and celebrated by Elizabethan poets

and composers... I took inspiration', he continues, 'from two dark sources – the expressions of melancholy in Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melancholia I* (1514) and John Dowland's 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. This motif, which rises a semitone and then down again, is woven into the fabric of the work and also alluded to figuratively: lines split and later reunite, the notes of a chord move away and back again, and longer melodic lines are interrupted and resumed, like the moon shining through a series of slowly passing clouds.'

The work's circa 25-minute span falls very broadly into three parts. The first is a substantial introductory section of tenebrous and sub-lunary textures, halting

melodic fragments and anticipatory upsurges and descents. The second, launched by a magical texture of keening wind phrases over ripples and rockings for tuned percussion, harps and strings, comprises a long, central nocturne in several paragraphs, punctuated by more turbid outbursts – Birtwistle's 'passing clouds' perhaps – and eventually gathering in a sustained *accelerando* building to what proves not quite to be the work's climax. This, in the form of an almost expressionistic outburst of violence, actually occurs mid-way through the recapitulatory third part, before the music ebbs away beneath a brief skirl of nocturnal birdsong.

Commissioned by Roche for the 2004 Lucerne Festival where it was premiered by the Cleveland Orchestra under Franz Welser-Möst, *Night's Black Bird* is

prefaced with the same programme note as *The Shadow of Night*, except that the Dowland song that Birtwistle cites in this instance is *Flow My Tears*. It is also scored for similarly large forces, including, this time, a bass trumpet, but it runs to less than half the length of the previous work and is far more concise and clear-cut in structure. Where the earlier piece initially introduced its melodic material in fragments, the opening paragraph of *Night's Black Bird* already discloses a sustained long line for violins and violas, while in the second paragraph, the piccolo introduces the kind of birdsong figuration only heard near the end of *The Shadow of Night*. The central section of *Night's Black Bird* is also simpler than the earlier work:

a single paragraph in which birdsong and other nocturnal noises in the winds gradually accumulate over an intensifying background of string clusters with no *accelerando* at its climax. Nor is the climax in the final section anything like as apocalyptic. Birtwistle has often remarked that when he wants to write a repeat in his music, he relies on his memory rather than looking back – hence the varied detail that creeps in. In composing *Night's Black Bird*, one has the impression that rather than leafing through the earlier score, he put together a composite memory in his mind and composed that. Yet, on this disc, Birtwistle has requested that the later score precede the earlier, as if to suggest that, in a circular time world, a memory may also be a premonition.

The published score is prefaced with a short poem by Stephen

Pruslin, librettist of Birtwistle's first opera *Punch and Judy*.

The Cry of Anubis (1994)

For Sir Harry's Sixtieth Birthday on 15 July 1994 in anticipation of the work he was about to write.

*Tuba mirum spargens sonum,
Per sepulchra regionum.*

Trumpets,
trombones shake the throne
but both must bow before the tuba.

Plangent,
then progressively articulate,
a monody replete with malefaction
crystallizes into howl,
unearthly, elegant,
the lone cry of
Anubis.

Top brass trumpet worldly pomp
while tuba's wolf-cub
rends a torso of concerto,
renders fragments
of a pocket requiem.

by Stephen Pruslin

Concertante works are relatively few in Birtwistle's catalogue: only *Melancholia I* (1976) for clarinet, harp and strings, *Endless Parade* (1987) for trumpet, vibraphone and strings, and *Antiphonies* 1992) for piano and orchestra precede *The Cry of Anubis* (1994) for tuba and orchestra, and none of these could be described as concertos in the traditional sense.

Composed for an educational concert to be given in London's Queen Elizabeth Hall by the London Philharmonic under Elgar Howarth in January 1995, *The Cry* is scored for medium sized orchestra, with double winds and (*pace* Pruslin) no trombones, and its 13-minute unfolding is exceptionally clear-cut in articulation and structure. The solo tuba represents Anubis, the jackal-headed god of the Ancient Egyptian city of the dead, who had played an important part in

Birtwistle's surreal recent opera *The Second Mrs Kong* (1993-94). But *The Cry* is not extracted from it; rather, it develops some of the opera's material anew.

The piece opens with a stumbling march-like motion complemented by a slow descent on the tuba. There follows a sequence of measured paces and more agitated gestures, each one stated three times in varied form before passing to the next, during which the tuba climbs circuitously to its highest range before returning to mid-register. So far, so funereal. Then rather suddenly the music speeds up into the semblance of about the last thing one might expect in Birtwistle: an agitated symphonic allegro. This is soon put a stop to by one of the tuba's increasingly plangent descents, but there are further bursts of fast music, cross cut with hieratic figures for timpani,

harp and tubular bells and whirling woodwinds – the textures coming together before the climactic descent, thwacked out on the timpani and continued in an almost Tchaikovskian gesture by unison strings. The piece now unwinds in a more disparate sequence of sonorous images and a brief cadenza for tuba and timpani before finally resolving on a near-unison. Resolution in Birtwistle? For those with ears to hear there was always more harmonic focus in the way of axial pitches and modal middlegrounds than his reputation for fearsome dissonance allowed. Repeatedly throughout *The Cry of Anubis*, the tuba homes in on the note D natural, and when the work's harmony finally closes fan-like on its 'home' pitch, D it proves to be.

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Sir Harrison Birtwistle

Sir Harrison Birtwistle was born in Accrington in 1934 and studied clarinet and composition at the Royal Manchester College of Music, making contact with a highly talented group of contemporaries including Peter Maxwell Davies, Alexander Goehr, John Ogdon and Elgar Howarth. In 1965 he sold his clarinets to devote all his efforts to composition, and travelled to Princeton as a Harkness Fellow where he completed the opera *Punch and Judy*. This work, together with *Verses for Ensembles* and *The Triumph of Time*, firmly established Birtwistle as a leading voice in British music.

The decade from 1973 to 1984 was dominated by his monumental lyric tragedy *The Mask of Orpheus*, staged by English National Opera in 1986 (released on NMC D050), and by the series of remarkable ensemble scores now performed by the world's leading new music groups: *Secret Theatre*, *Silbury Air* and *Carmen*

Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum. Large-scale works in the following decade included the operas *Gawain* and *The Second Mrs Kong*, the concertos *Endless Parade* for trumpet and *Antiphonies* for piano, and the orchestral score *Earth Dances*.

Birtwistle's works of recent decades include *Exody*, premiered by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Daniel Barenboim, *Panic* which received a high profile premiere at the Last Night of the 1995 BBC Proms with an estimated worldwide audience of 100 million, and *The Shadow of Night* commissioned by the Cleveland Orchestra and Christoph von Dohnányi. *The Last Supper* received its first performances at the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin and at Glyndebourne in 2000. *Theseus Game*, co-commissioned by RUHRtriennale, Ensemble Modern and the London Sinfonietta, was premiered in 2003. The following year brought first performances of *The lo*

Passion for Aldeburgh Almeida Opera and *Night's Black Bird* commissioned by Roche for the Lucerne Festival. His opera *The Minotaur* received its premiere at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in 2008, while *The Corridor* was staged at the 2009 Aldeburgh Festival.

Birtwistle's music has attracted international conductors including Pierre Boulez, Daniel Barenboim, Elgar Howarth, Christoph von Dohnányi, Oliver Knussen, Sir Simon Rattle, Peter Eötvös and Franz Welser-Möst. He has received commissions from leading performing organizations, and his music has been featured in major festivals and concert series including the BBC Proms, Salzburg Festival, Glyndebourne, Holland Festival,

Lucerne Festival and Wien Modern.

Birtwistle has received many honours, including the Grawemeyer Award in 1986 and the Siemens Prize in 1995; he was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1986, awarded a British knighthood in 1988 and made a Companion of Honour in 2001. He was Henry Purcell Professor of Music at King's College, University of London (1995-2001) and is currently Director of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Recordings of Birtwistle's music are available on labels including Decca, Philips, Deutsche Grammophon and Teldec as well as NMC.

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Producer **ANDREW KEENER**

Recording Engineer **SIMON EADON**

Assistant Sound Engineer **DAVE ROWELL**

Digital Editing & Mastering **DAVID LEFEBER**

Executive Producer **COLIN MATTHEWS**

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The Cry of Anubis © 1994 Stephen Prusin

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Tel. +44 (0)20 7759 1827/8 • Fax. +44 (0)20 7759 1829

E-mail: nmc@nmcrec.co.uk • Website: www.nmcrec.co.uk

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