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Birtwistle in Good Measure

Harrison Birtwistle
Hoquetus David (Machaut) (Universal Edition 15368, 1981), £4.50
Prologue (UE 15491, 1981), £5.35
Dinah and Nick's Love Song (UE 16040, 1981), £4.00
Silbury Air (UE 16141, 1979) £15.00
Carmen Arcadiae mechanicae perpetuum (UE 16166, 1981), £10.50

These scores of Birtwistle's works are particularly welcome because some of them are long overdue: the arrangement of Machaut's motet was made for a tour undertaken by the Pierrot Players in 1969; the setting of the watchman's prologue to Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* was commissioned for the 1971 English Bach Festival; and the wedding of Dinah and Nick Wood took place in 1972. Only *Silbury Air* of 1977 and *Carmen Arcadiae mechanicae perpetuum*, which was written to celebrate the tenth birthday of the London Sinfonietta in 1978, have arrived in good time. In fairness to Universal Edition, however, I should point out that these publications are not recent. One has been available for four years. Publishing houses are not the only ones who are tardy.

Hoquetus David may be an arrangement, but if anyone wants a clue as to how Birtwistle goes about his business, it is the piece to consider first. Birtwistle had difficulty making a start as a composer. He was never attracted to serialism, even though pieces such as *Zeitmasze* influenced him deeply; nor was he interested in what he calls 'goal-orientated' tonal methods. It was only when Maxwell Davies introduced him to medieval techniques that he discovered how to proceed. Since then all his music has been based on single melodic lines, or monody, which he structures isorhythmically: the essence of his method is to take a repeating pitch pattern (the equivalent of the medieval *color*) and project onto it a repeating durational pattern of different length (*talea*). He thus creates a cyclic rather than a goal-orientated form. There are various means by which he varies these patterns sequentially, but in order to thicken the line, as it were, he always uses a very idiosyncratic species of free organum in which the voices perpetually cross. Other lines are created by hocketing procedures.

Using these techniques it was inevitable that Birtwistle would want to arrange the Machaut motet, which is not only isorhythmic and a fine example of hocketing, but quite remarkable harmonically because of the bold and unexpected way the parts cross. Birtwistle wanted the arrangement to have a bell-like quality so he scored it for flute doubling piccolo, clarinet in C, glockenspiel, bells, violin, and cello. Throughout, each of the three voices—triplum, hoquetus and tenor—is supplied with a 'quint', the name given to the fourth partial tone of a bell, which sounds a fifth above the strike note. This makes the harmony even more remarkable.

Birtwistle often uses bells or bell-like sonorities. If those in *Hoquetus David* sound like a medieval French carillon, that in *Prologue* resembles the one tolled by the ground swell in Eliot's *The Dry Salvages*: a bell that 'measures time not our time . . . a time older than the time of chronometers'. It warns of dark things

under the surface, in this case of immanent catastrophe in Argos; as the watchman awaits news from Troy its haphazard sound becomes increasingly ominous until, at the words 'a man's will nurses hope', it clangs with terrifying menace. The work is scored for tenor, bassoon, horn, two trumpets, trombone, violin, and double bass, and the monody is given to horn and bassoon alternatively. The tenor takes the role of triplum in the texture; the two trumpets hocket, while the rest produce the complex sound of the wayward bell ringing on its buoy out at sea.

The bells in *Dinah and Nick's Love Song*, as might be expected, are wedding bells; while three identical melody instruments play the tune, a harp provides a short, repeated 'change'. It is a simple piece in lied form (ABCA), each section punctuated by two harp chords which bend the organum intervals of fourth, fifth and octave to produce characteristic Birtwistle harmonies. Within each section the players are given a certain amount of freedom: the melody instruments are permitted to enter in their own time, to slow down independently, and, in the third section, to take one of a number of possible 'courses' the composer offers. The choice of melody instruments is also free, and the interesting thing here is that, whether they transpose or not, they are to play the music as written; this means that the harmonic relation between the harp and melody instruments will vary according to the choice made. The reason for the inclusion of these free elements again lies in Birtwistle's hatred of goal-orientating procedures; he prefers to go over the same ground again and again but always in a different way. In his introduction to *Silbury Air*, the most substantial score in the present batch, he talks about his musical ideas being 'static blocks' or 'objects', which he looks at from a variety of angles. Not only may he cover the same area taking different routes, as it were, he may also present various versions of the material simultaneously.

'*Silbury Air*', he says, 'is named after Silbury Hill, a prehistoric mound in Wiltshire, the biggest artificial mound in Europe.' Seen from a distance it 'presents itself as an artificial but organic intruder of [*sic*] the landscape'. This is also how he views the music he composes. It may seem to be organic in that, as often as not, it grows from a seed consisting of a semitone shift and a trochee, but essentially it is an artefact put together by a combination of logic and chance. Basically he is an inventor; he does not compose intuitively. In his opinion, to compose intuitively would only lead to clichés, and what he wants is magic.

The score is prefaced with a 'pulse labyrinth', a table or map of possible routes that the process of going through the same event might take. Birtwistle's attitude to pulse is unique. In his early music he organised his rhythms additively in the main, but when he embarked on his opera *Punch and Judy* in 1964 he felt that, without reference to a regular pulse, he would not be able to time the dramatic action effectively. He therefore began a series of experiments with pulse, sometimes, as in *Ring a Dumb Carillon* and *Tragoedia* (both 1965), combining it with additive rhythms, sometimes laying one velocity on another or presenting them in sequence, as later he did in *Chronometer* (1971), a tape piece that deals exclusively with the mechanisms of clocks—ticks, the whirring of clockwork, the chiming of bells. The pulse labyrinth merely co-ordinates the velocities. It was the experimenting with pulse that led him to bells, for a bell may be rung regularly like a pulse or be set in motion by wind, sea, or ground swell and toll as haphazardly as an additive rhythm might sound.

Birtwistle calls *Silbury Air* 'a compound artificial landscape or "imaginary landscape" to use Paul Klee's title'. *Carmen Arcadiae mechanicae perpetuum* is also a Klee title, for it is none other than an ironic translation of the title of the picture depicting a clockwork singing bird, *The Twittering Machine*. Like *Silbury Air* it is scored for a group of seven wind instruments, a group of five strings and a group of punctuating instruments (piano, harp, percussion) here reduced from four to two. Birtwistle is deeply influenced by Klee: the *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, diaries and notebooks, as well as the paintings, constantly provide him with ideas. Klee, he claims, creates magic. He does so by devising an extremely coherent design then disrupting it with something irrational, a flight of whimsy perhaps. Birtwistle proceeds likewise, except that he avoids whimsy. He invents patterns that conform to what he calls 'a vigorous invented logic', but within each pattern he includes an element of pure chance, an element which, as often as not, comes from a set of random numbers generated by a computer. Intuition could never arrive at the results achieved—they appear as if by magic. It is for this reason that Birtwistle's music is impossible to analyse in precise detail. One can never trace his processes back to source, and so his scores will always remain something of an enigma.

Carmen Arcadiae mechanicae perpetuum (one must resist the temptation to abbreviate the title) 'consists of six musical mechanisms which are juxtaposed many times without any form of transition'. Dynamics and registration exist on a time scale independent of the mechanisms and consequently have 'a life of their own'. To produce fortuitous elements Birtwistle does not depend solely on a computer. There are essential as well as operational uncertainties. Essential uncertainties occur when two totally independent chains of events coincide, which is what happens not only here but also in *Silbury Air* and many another piece by Birtwistle. Patterns of pitch, durations, attacks, dynamics, and register are invented, each perfectly logically, but when they intersect they produce 'absolute coincidences'. This is what occurs when *talea* and *color* intersect in isorhythm.

Of particular interest, however, is the fact that Birtwistle juxtaposes these mechanisms 'without any form of transition'. One is reminded of what William Empson had to say in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* about the poetic use of language. When a reader encounters a short poem consisting of two seemingly unrelated statements it is he who must supply the connection. 'He will invent a variety of reasons and order them in his own mind.' In other words, the reader must bridge the semantic gap, but without the gap there would be no poetry. This is the essential ambiguity and it is the nub of Birtwistle. He makes the listener work. Music, for him, is an activity.

We have been given Birtwistle in such good measure that it may seem greedy to ask for more. What is wanted, however, is not another new publication but corrections to old ones. I am thinking, in particular, of the misprints in *Précis* (1960). The question of accuracy, whether it be of text or performance, is a difficult one in Birtwistle's case, for as well as building into his system essential and operational uncertainties, he also includes mistakes. A copying error, a misprint, or a mistake in performance could well delight him—doubtless the odd mistake in the present batch of scores is acceptable. But there are limits; there are always limits in Birtwistle. In *Précis* there are far too many wrong notes. The logic is not merely bent, it is destroyed.

Were they to be corrected in a new edition (and this means recovering the original manuscript from wherever it is), pianists might play the piece. Lack of performances is not, however, a fate likely to overcome the works reviewed here. In every way they are too authoritative.