

**IAN PACE**, *Lancashire Rock* (2022)

The death of Harrison Birtwistle (1934-2022) seemed like the end of an era in British new music, with the loss of the primary composer who was able to pursue a radical direction informed in part by post-1945 European modernism yet at the same time occupy a major role in British musical life (amongst the generation which came afterwards, the ‘modernists’, including Brian Ferneyhough, Roger Smalley, Bill Hopkins, or Michael Finnissy, have tended to be rather more occasional or marginal presences in that same musical life).

In writing a work in memorial to Birtwistle, I was interested in trying to situate elements of his own earlier idiom in a range of particular cultural contexts to which he himself would allude in interviews (especially in the volume *Harrison Birtwistle: Wild Tracks: A Conversation with Fiona Maddocks* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014)): playing clarinet from a very early age in the North East Lancashire Military Band, sometimes playing for variety shows and pantomimes, as well as encountering plenty of popular musics (drawn to Chuck Berry, Bill Halley, Frankie Valli – whose *Sherry* was Birtwistle’s number one choice when on *Desert Island Discs*, Roy Orbison and others). One of his earliest memories of listening to the radio was hearing the ‘Donkey Serenade’, made famous as sung by Alan Jones in the 1937 film *The Firefly* (Birtwistle was very interested in John Ford’s film *Stagecoach* (1939), in particular the way in which the character of the Ringo Kid, played by John Wayne, is introduced for the first time, which the composer linked to strategies for introducing instruments). Talking about these and also memories of first hearing works of Debussy, Mahler, Sibelius, Vaughan Williams, Messiaen and Boulez, Birtwistle commented: ‘I have to keep coming back to the way all this feeds this thing, this unformed, indescribable inner self which I am trying to talk about. It’s a way of finding a way through the labyrinth, the thicket . . . They help you to open gates . . . make you see you are not so stupid.’

In *Lancashire Rock* I attempt to make explicit some of these determinants upon the self, in particular those drawn from popular culture, in dialogue with an idiom informed in part by some of Birtwistle’s early music (also in particular that of Edgard Varèse). The band in which Birtwistle played for pantomimes was gradually reduced to become just a trio of clarinet, piano and percussion, now playing for a range of northern entertainers. I elected to use this combination for *Lancashire Rock*. The work is divided into seven ‘verses’ (with Birtwistle’s own *Verses* for clarinet and piano (1965) in mind), but with all three performers only playing together in the fourth. The clarinet is clearly the melodic/linear/gestural instrument, the piano mostly chordal or accompaniment-like (sometimes taking on the role of percussion itself), while the percussion part is extensive and quasi-soloistic, sometimes about texture as well as rhythm. A free atonal idiom is set against memories of the military and popular songs. The title alludes on one hand to the ‘rocks’ that are such a major presence in Birtwistle’s home county, to the type of ‘rock’ sold at Blackpool and other seaside resorts, and to rock ‘n’ roll music (as in György Ligeti’s *Hungarian Rock*).

I owe profound thanks to Rachel Johnson for helping me locate details of some of the military music performed in the region at the time when Birtwistle was playing the band, upon which I draw obliquely in particular for the percussion part.

The work is dedicated to clarinettist David Campbell. On the occasion of the first performance, I am immensely grateful to Anthony Friend for stepping in at very short notice after David was unfortunately indisposed.

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