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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Potter, Keith. 1976. 'Review of *Birtwistle: The Triumph of Time*'. *Contact*, 14. pp. 31-32. ISSN 0308-5066.

Reviews and Reports

BIRTWISTLE: THE TRIUMPH OF TIME
 Universal Edition 15518, 1974 (£4.50)

KEITH POTTER

This is one of Birtwistle's rare works for full orchestra, the first since *Nomos*, his Prom commission of 1968 (UE 14671), which was broadcast again by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Boulez last November. And it is, I am sure, the finest flowering so far of the composer's 'new' style: new, that is, since the beginning of the present decade when pieces off the chopping-block of the forthcoming opera, such as *Nenia — The Death of Orpheus* (1970) and *The Fields of Sorrow* (1971) began to appear.

Commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and first performed in 1972 under Lawrence Foster, *The Triumph of Time* is inspired by Brueghel's famous painting of the same name. This depicts the allegorical figure of Time riding in a cart, surrounded by marauding bands of skeletons in a ravaged landscape filled with images of death: a grotesque funeral cortege, in fact. Drawing an analogy between space and time the listener could well imagine himself standing motionless while a funeral procession passes slowly by him.

Birtwistle's style has been described as 'processional', which indicates how apt this analogy is for appreciating the nature of his music in general and of this work in particular. Here we have the block structuring, the 'knotty' sounds of wind and brass in extreme registers playing short, fast passages in rhythmic unison, the solo use of high trumpets, the delight in sudden bursts of percussion, the low rasping of the bass instruments or the (here amplified) squeaking of high wind in unison shortly before the end, which are

familiar from his earlier instrumental works. The overall form, too, is reassuringly simple: essentially three loud climaxes, the first halfway through, after a long build-up, the others roughly equally spaced in the second half, which winds down to a quiet close.

What is new is, first of all, the speed: extremely slow for the most part, almost as though the composer were asking the listener to share with him the actual experience of composing the piece as it goes along. Birtwistle says with reference to the idea of the procession that 'the position of the spectator is identical with the composer's during the process of composition'. To follow an analogy which, again, the composer has himself drawn and which will be familiar to those who know anything of his musical processes, time is here slowed down to the speed of a slow-motion film sequence. We are suspended in time and yet involved with it. Variation of listening focus is thus allowed by the processing of ideas (in both senses) at a slow tempo, and by maintaining simple foreground/background procedures that allow a clear and instant appreciation of perspective.

This reflective quality — formalised and archetypal like the Greek texts or tombstone inscriptions which the composer has set in the past, also indicative of his preoccupation with the physical world and death — leads naturally to a return to the more melodic style of Birtwistle's earliest works, such as the *Monody for Corpus Christi* (1959). Yet, just as in some of the recent works of Maxwell Davies (where a parallel development seems to be taking place), the lines are simpler, smoother, calmer and less 'expressionistic' than before. They are also allowed clearly audible repetitions: indeed, the essential structural device omitted from my description of the work as a series of climaxes is that of the twice repeated cor anglais melody which is first heard just over two minutes into the piece. On its first appearance this is followed immediately by a three-note figure (major third up, perfect fourth down) on soprano saxophone, which is repeated at frequent intervals at the same pitch throughout the work until, as the composer says, 'it explodes at the end of the piece, blossoming into a gigantic unison'. In addition the soft beds of string sound, on which lies, for instance, the cor anglais melody for the first two of its three appearances, have not been readily associated with Birtwistle's music in the past.

All this is to say that *The Triumph of Time* is both strikingly new and at the same time typical of its composer. I believe that this work will come to be recognised as a masterpiece and one of the greatest works by the leading British composer of his generation. The full score is fairly neatly laid out in a facsimile copy of the composer's handwriting. It is in parts a little too small to read easily (particularly by a conductor, I would have thought, though the work has now been played all over the world), but at least it should be accurate,

which was not always the case with the earlier printed scores of Birtwistle's music. The work is available in an apparently good performance but an incomprehensibly indistinct recording by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Boulez, coupled with the same composer's tape piece, *Chronometer*, on ZRG 790.

Anne Boyd

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