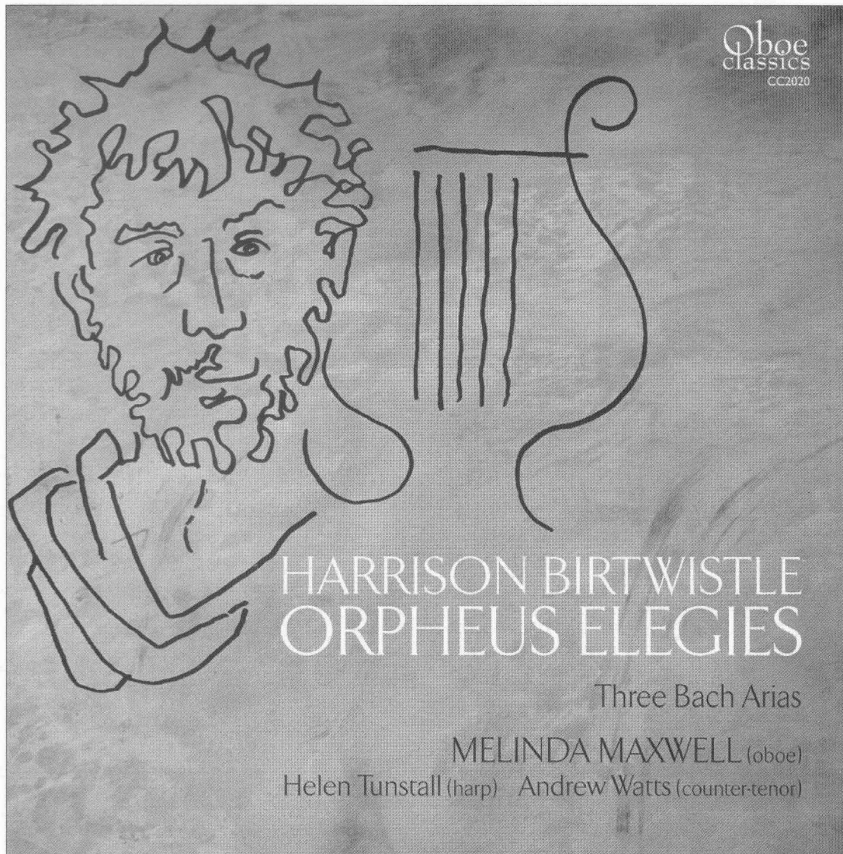


Orpheus Elegies by Harrison Birtwistle

In *Orpheus Elegies*, Sir Harrison Birtwistle revisits the theme of his opera, *The Masque of Orpheus*, with a different perspective. Begun as a review of the new CD from Oboe Classics, **Edwin Roxburgh's** article makes informative reading.



Jeremy Polmeār's Oboe Classics label is now remarkably comprehensive, having produced recordings of baroque, romantic and contemporary music, with a wide range of performers. Sir Harrison Birtwistle is the latest composer to receive the privilege of inclusion in the catalogue, and this is another gem.

As with Barry Anderson's technical contribution to the electronics in the last act of the opera, Birtwistle wisely consulted the oboist Melinda Maxwell regarding the use of double harmonics in the oboe part of *Orpheus Elegies*. As always, when the use of multiphonics is deployed by a composer on good advice and played by a performer as sensitive and artistic as Melinda, the result is beautiful. Her contribution to the creation and recording of the work is a major achievement and her introduction shows

great insight into the composition process and the artistic perception of the composer. The accompanying booklet also contains an informative discussion between soloist and composer in which the relationship between the chosen twenty-six of Rilke's *Orpheus Sonnets* and the music is explained. We discover that all these miniatures are conceived as contrasting elements in a continuous whole. Some are simply fragments which have 'neither a beginning nor an end', while others are through-composed. Paul Klee is a declared influence on this kind of conception. While there is a consistency of style in the substance, contrast is always sought, not only in the material deployed, but in the occasional presence of a voice (exquisitely performed by counter-tenor Andrew Watts).

Three of the movements (4, 8 and 14) are

settings of whole sonnets, while others belong to the fragments which act as transitional links to the longer movements. The harp, played with great imagination and subtlety by Helen Tunstall, is deployed in all the movements, ranging from the simple repeated E of number 1, via the weeping tears of number 14, to the virtuoso figurations of number 16, in which the instrument takes the role of the Greek lyre.

“ A metronome ticks away like the ‘ticking clocks’ of everyday life... ”

To illustrate the structure of the whole work the following observations attempt to evoke the concentrated character throughout. The intensely quiet opening establishes the dark, intimate world of sorrow which pervades the legend and Birtwistle's music. The oboe's double harmonics create a misty texture which develop into a rapturous melody against harp pedal glissandi in number 2. In number 3 the harp takes on a punctuating role against flourishing cascades from the oboe. This characteristic in the role of the harp is widely used throughout the work, perhaps representing the function of the Greek Chorus commenting to the audience. The voice enters in number 4 and a complete sonnet evokes 'the primal age'. In number 5 the harp imitates the lyre for the first time, while number 6 returns to the atmosphere of number 1.

Number 7 is the first of the mechanistic movements with magic atmosphere in the oboe and harp writing. The vocal elements in numbers 8, 10 and 17 are constantly sustained and elegiac, while the desolation is emphasised in the harp punctuations and oboe embellishments. In number 11 we find Rilke asking 'why the "singing god" created her (Euridice) not wanting to wake'. The oboe travels with wide, undulating intervals. Number 12 is one of the fragments – a stunning dance.

“ The solemnity of the oboe and harp writing evokes the metaphoric significance of the great musician, Orpheus... ”

One of Birtwistle's persistent characteristics is to spring a surprise. This he does in number 13. A metronome ticks away like the 'ticking clocks' of everyday life which, like people, the oboe and harp try to defy! The oboe is played *senza vibrato* in this. It is an interesting reflection on a perception of vibrato as only one aspect of tone production. Melinda demonstrates superbly that *senza vibrato* should not imply any lack of vibrancy in the tone.

Most of the work limits the oboe's writing to legato phasing, presumably as a reflection of the primitive Greek aulos. In number 19, however, fast tonguing is introduced for the first time in *roulades* against the punctuating harp, brilliantly performed by Helen. Then the second surprise is introduced in number 20 when two metronomes are used at differing settings. Rilke asks: 'Does time, the wrecker, really exist?' Birtwistle 'wrecks' time with the opposing metronomes while the oboe and harp pursue independent material from the despairing vocal line. Number 25 provides a more dramatic role for the voice in which the complete sonnet describes the destruction of Orpheus while his song continues. The solemnity of the oboe and harp writing evokes the metaphoric significance of the great musician, Orpheus, who was destroyed 'only because hatred tore you apart', as Rilke puts it.

As with Britain's *Six Metamorphoses*, the programmatic relationship of the myths to the music is an essential aspect of the interpretation and presentation of the music. With the three artists on this recording Birtwistle has the good fortune to have his music presented with all the intellect, sensitivity and passionate artistry he could wish for. It is a lengthy piece which might be too long to include in a conventional recital programme. The

composer and the publisher might be willing to recommend various combinations of the twenty-six movements to create a 15-20 minutes

these arrangements (similar to Peter Maxwell Davies's arrangement of Bach's *C# minor Prelude and Fugue*) identify a characteristically bold Birtwistle stamp. Bach could be described as the most adaptable composer of all time, from Schoenberg's orchestrations to the Swingle Singers. For me there is a fine line between such adaptations and the point at



Harrison Birtwistle and Melinda Maxwell, c1980

Photo: Richard H. Smith

version of the cycle. There are plenty of successful precedents for such a construct which might well encourage a greater number of performances of this finely-wrought work than in its complete version.

After all, Birtwistle himself has extracted single movements from three Bach cantatas which he has arranged and sanctioned for this CD. The addition of clarinets, cor anglais and marimba in

which angels fear to tread. Having played the original obbligati in these arias I find it difficult to step over that line. This said, there is wonderful playing from all the instrumentalists together with the ecstatic performances of the singers, Claire Seaton and Andrew Watts. Jeremy Polmear's research is, as always in *Oboe Classics*, eloquently stated and intriguingly informative. This is a CD (CC2020 from www.oboeclassics.com) which all wind players should own and cherish.