Back to the future

Harrison Birtwistle's "Gawain"

"Where does my music come from? My imagination. I imagine a music that doesn't exist." Harrison Birtwistle

"The premiere of an opera by Harrison Birtwistle is now a national event which even makes it into the weekend supplement." This subtly ironic comment was written in 1991 by a British journalist when Birtwistle's Gawain opened in Covent Garden. It was to become one of the greatest triumphs in Birtwistle's career. In 2000 it returned to the schedule at the same opera house – a rare occurrence with new operas. Gawain is now to be performed outside of England for the first time. It will open the opera programme at Salzburg Festival this year, honouring Birtwistle a year before his 80th birthday.

A harmonious balance between humankind and nature.

Gawain is based on the Middle English romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, an anonymous alliterative epic from the 14th century and a Middle English masterpiece that united heathen rituals and early Christian imagery.

The text is part of the Arthurian legend and tells the story of the Green Knight who comes to King Arthur's court at Christmas time in order to propose a strange challenge to those present: the person who dares to cut off the Green Knight's head with an axe should come to the Green Chapel in the far north after a year and a day to face the same fate, this time carried out by the Green Knight. Gawain, Arthur's nephew and a Knight of the Round Table, accepts this ostensibly absurd challenge, and lo and behold: after the blow has been dealt, the headless knight stands up and Gawain is forced to keep his side of the bargain, setting out on an adventurous journey which will make him a different person.

The libretto for Gawain was written by the English poet David Harsent; Birtwistle would later work with him on other operas. However "modern" and comprehensible the text may be, negating Birtwistle's tendency towards fragmented action in earlier operas, the power and energy in the score are unrivalled even in Birtwistle's own compositions, although he still considers it important to differentiate specifically between the organised world on the inside and the wild, lawless world on the outside. They ultimately symbolise two sides of the same idea: Gawain himself.

The Homeric immediacy of the original poem and the unmistakable influence on it of north-west England (where Birtwistle comes from) were depicted by the composer, for instance, with the use of three tubas and a euphonium. David Beard wrote: "Birtwistle reached for the future by falling back on a mythical, Wagneresque past." This statement also describes one of the opera's key scenes: the scene which represents the changing seasons at the end of the first act and shows how the year passes before Gawain sets out to meet his fate. His journey at the beginning of the second act also shows Birtwistle's propensity to observe musical and dramatic situations from several perspectives: while Gawain is being ceremonially armed, he is surrounded by

varying events that illustrate the seasons. It sounds like something that people today crave more than ever: a harmonious balance between humankind and nature.