

“You have to rely on your creativity”

Harrison Birtwistle in an interview with Sarah Laila Standke on “Gawain”



Harrison Birtwistle

How did you discover the story of “Gawain”?

Birtwistle: I have tended to only write operas about subjects that were already in my head from my childhood, my youth. I have a whole list of subjects that I could write about. So I remember reading it. For me, the problem and at the same time the fascination was how you make a myth like this dramatic. How do you activate the drama?

I read in a text by Norman Lebrecht, published before the world premiere of

“Gawain”, that you simply called up David Harsent one day to ask him whether he wanted to do an opera with you. Why did you think of Harsent in particular and how did working with him proceed?

Birtwistle: Oh, that was simple: I wrote an opera called *Punch and Judy* which was premiered in 1968 and later read David Harsent’s cycle of poems *Mister Punch*. I had interviewed people about writing, and realised that it’s all a question of personality, about whether you feel you can actually deal or have a relationship with them – and it’s a difficult relationship.

With opera you need a very special language. There are certain things you can’t deal with, certain words you can’t use – they have to be very direct. With David I felt that he’s somebody that I can work with and over the years we have developed a method of working. I would never tell him what to do directly. I would talk about a lot of things, but I wouldn’t say: “This is what I want”. It’s a collaboration, like a game of tennis. I find the best way is to just say: “This is opera. Are you interested in doing it?” Then I’ve already done the first serve and wait for the ball to come back. I can only deal with it when I start it, then I start having ideas about a certain input, about how the thing is going to progress – or can’t progress. But I can’t do it unless I have some music. That’s happened all the time. Once I have a situation or a certain detail, then I can contribute to this game of tennis, then there is a ball to actually hit back. I couldn’t have a fait accompli.

There are two worlds in “Gawain” which you described as the essence of the piece and where parallel events happen: the inside world, Christian, chivalric and supposedly chaste, represented by King Arthur’s court in the first act and by Bertilak de Hautdesert’s castle in the second, and the outside world, pagan, wild, untamed and full of dangers. Both worlds are separated by a door on stage. Furthermore, the element of journey plays an important role, not only in a physical, but also in a metaphorical way: it’s Gawain’s journey, his development from one of Arthur’s seemingly heroic, flawless knights to a human, separate and wise person. There is a cyclical nature to the structure of the whole piece: words, music and action are often repeated three times in a row and the end of the first act shows the passing of a year, the turning of the five seasons from winter to winter and the transition from night to day during which Gawain is prepared for his journey in search of the Green Knight and the Green Chapel.

Birtwistle: The idea of journeys in theatre, in a confined space interests me. I remember, I drew out the description of *The Passing of a Year* in my field in France and paced it myself to know how long it would take to get around to the music I was writing. And time in general, how you emblematised time. I

made a sort of masque for *The Passing of a Year* where a female and a male choir sing Latin motets, one for each season – it's like cinema, it's wonderful. You don't know whether Gawain has been waiting a year to go or not, because you arrive at the same point again one year later, back where it started. But it's such a fairy story; you don't have to answer these questions, because in fairy stories you can get away with anything.

Do you think in music as soon as you have a story like the one of "Gawain" in your head? Where does your music come from?

Birtwistle: Where does my music come from? My imagination. I imagine a music that doesn't exist. I don't know – an impossible question. I never know what I'm going to write whenever I do until I sit down and do it. It's very difficult to describe music and why you do things. The time which you have with a piece of music is quite slow in one way – you have to write all these crotchets and quavers, but then it's gone and what you hope for is that by having done this bit here, you're already thinking into that bit there. I can never do pre-compositional things, because I always find it's more productive and more interesting when there's a context, and I can arrive at situations where if I had thought about it in the first place, I would never have done it.

There was a time when composers were sort of architects, they would write the whole scheme of the thing and then paint in the colours. I could never do that. I feel you have to rely on your creativity, know or at least hope that in a particular situation something will happen. It has to come out of an absolute necessity and the context of something, and then it becomes real. I can't answer for other composers, but I'm not sure I know what I'm doing. When I'm composing, every day I suddenly think: "Oh, that would be an interesting way of beginning, I'll do that". By the end of the day it's not a particularly good idea anymore, and then I have another one and it won't be any of the things that have kept me awake at night. In some sense all ideas are as good as one another – it's what you do with them when you have them. Like the first notes in the first movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*. Is that a good idea? A pretty crazy idea, really.

Gawain was just something that had been in my head for so long, and it dealt with certain narrative and dramatic situations. I remember asking Alison Chitty, the designer whom I used to work with for the opera's premiere at the Royal Opera House, if it was possible to have a pantomime horse – a horse of comedians with somebody at the front and somebody at the back, but which is noble and not a figure of fun. The idea of this horse and somebody riding it really set me off. Then I said: "Could we cut the Green Knight's head off?" These were the things that interested me, that gave me the opportunity and all

the ingredients I wanted to deal with, that sort of childish fantasy, but for grown-ups. It's music that actually allows you to deal with all these things that I'm talking about. That's my fascination.

HARRISON BIRTWISTLE

Gawain

Opera in 2 acts (1990–1991/1994/1999)

Libretto by David Harsent (*1942)

Ingo Metzmacher, Conductor Alvis Harmanis, Director and Sets

Christopher Maltman, Gawain

John Tomlinson, The Green Knight/Bertilak de Hautdesert

Laura Aikin, Morgan le Fay

Jennifer Johnston, Lady de Hautdesert

Jeffrey Lloyd-Roberts, King Arthur

prem. 26.07.2013 Salzburg Festival, Felsenreitschule; ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, Salzburg Bach Choir