



The Daily Telegraph

Secret Theatres: the Music of Harrison Birtwistle, King's College Cambridge, review: 'admirable'

★★★★★

By Ivan Hewett



Who would have thought it? Harrison Birtwistle, our famously uncompromising modernist, yesterday humbly took his place among the psalms and hymns of an Anglican Evensong, in King's College Chapel in Cambridge. If the tourists sitting in the gloom were puzzled by Birtwistle's anthem *Pange Lingua*, they didn't show it. And in truth it was hardly more puzzling

than the *Magnificat* by Robert Fayrfax, born in 1464, which the choir also sang.

This was one of many clever and revealing juxtapositions offered by *Secret Theatres*, a three-day survey of Harrison Birtwistle's music which celebrated his 80th birthday year. Organised by the composer Richard Causton, it ranged across solo, choral and chamber music, and featured top-rank performers. It mingled Birtwistle's own music with the fascinatingly strange medieval pieces that he loves, and with music by his contemporaries such as Alexander Goehr (his ingenious, sharply coloured between the lines...*Chamber Symphony*) as well as student composers from Cambridge.

In all it was admirable, but placing the last day's events in King's Chapel was a mixed blessing. From my back seat much of the detail of the lunchtime concert from cellist Anssi Karttunen and pianist Nicholas Hodges was swallowed up by the vast acoustic. Of the two new pieces, Jae-Moon Lee's *Tangram* for piano exploded into being with promising energy, but insisted on its main idea (shapes shifting around a fixed note) a bit too much. The logic of Richard Causton's new piece *De Profundis* was more subtle, and as the title suggests led the ear down by degrees to a depth that was profound in both senses.

Causton, who conceived the series, is a serious man who feels art should assert spiritual values against the empty consumerism of modern life. That was the message of his brand-new *Chamber Symphony*, played in the evening concert from the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. At one point Causton conjured an aural image of banality, just so he could vanquish it with radiant, brass-drenched inventions of his own. Which was admirable, but the short, brilliantly conceived *Polly Roe* by Patrick Brennan soared higher, just because it wasn't weighed down by a moral message.

As for Birtwistle's *Silbury Air*, *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum*, and *Fantasia upon All the Notes* – all brilliantly played by the Group – they soared too, for much the same reason. And they also pointed beyond themselves to an unspoken mystery, something only a composer of genius can do.

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