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Left: Richard Causton and Sir Harrison Birtwistle. Photo: Samuel Mather. Above: Arditti. Photo: Helen Daniels. Below: Knussen. Photo Helen Daniels.



The profundity of Harry

In honour of perhaps our greatest living composer, Cambridge's lecturer in composition **Richard Causton** has taken students to the feet of the master to learn their craft with Secret Theatres

Sir Harrison Birtwistle is 80 and with his Royal Manchester College of Music contemporaries Peter Maxwell Davies and Alexander Goehr stands as one of the object models for our young composers. His adventurousness with

the palette of music creation, his profundity and very unexpectedness of each work has been exciting music lovers over six decades.

Richard Causton, at 43 a composer of the following generation, discovered Birtwistle at his public library

in Swiss Cottage. "I would haunt the library in my mid-teens, waiting for the next LP to find out what happened next" he says now. "I don't think it's possible to discover contemporary music in the way I did any more, the cuts have been so bad".

Causton learned his music – he was a flute player to start with – through the legendary ILEA Centre for Young Musicians (now part of Morley College) where he graduated to piano and singing, and to composing. "I was taught about musical notation, the tools of composition, and it gave me a

key to everything. It was a bit like being given building blocks with which you could create your own construction – it's terribly important that this tool is offered to people, it's like Mecano, really".

Now Causton is offering the tools to composition students himself, as the University of Cambridge's first designated lecturer in composition – Cambridge has long had a much admired music department with a long line of composers emerging, including Goehr, Robin Holloway and Hugh Wood, having offered its first BMus as

long ago as 1464. But until 2012 and Causton's appointment the university had no designated composition lecturer.

Two weekends ago, in honour of his hero Birtwistle on whom he has modelled his own work practice, Causton mounted a small festival with some of the greatest exponents of new music in the country, to give students the chance to build their music in the Birtwistle way. There were one-to-one tutorials, workshops, lectures and performances, all before enthusiastic audiences.

"It all depended on whether he was prepared to be involved, and to my great relief he was very enthusiastic" Causton says, and not only was he present but he gave a keynote lecture and had one-to-one sessions with student composers.

The Arditti String Quartet was there, along with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, the cellist Anssi Kerttunen, composers Oliver Knussen, Gerry Cornelius and Nicolas Hodges, as well as the university's own New Music Ensemble, the Choir of King's College and the King's Men.