



Alexander Goehr
and Sir Harrison
Birtwistle.
Photo: Samuel
Mather

The event was named *Secret Theatres* after Birtwistle's colourful 30-year-old chamber piece which even has the musicians moving about during the playing of the 28-minute piece. "It conveys the drama that seems to be central to so much that Birtwistle does, and it's rubbed off on my own thinking as a composer" Causton says. "This way of thinking in which theatre and drama and the idea of a pure instrumentality is mysterious and has to be decoded: it's a thoroughgoing concern of Birtwistle's, and the title seemed a useful sort of motto for contemporary music".

Birtwistle has composed over 80 pieces of music over his long career, and the weekend featured a range of

his work from his *Hoquetus David* of 1969 (a "hocket" is a medieval musical form) to *Fantasia upon all the notes* of 2011.

The festival also included a the world premiere of Causton's own tribute to Birtwistle, *In Profundis*, in which he explores the extraordinary range of the cello, from the highest note which sounds almost human to its deepest primordial rumble, played by Karttunen.

He is not a cellist but it was written with reference to a player's experience, and Karttunen's advice was essential. "I sometimes think that composition is like writing a recipe, you don't often get to taste the dish. Something new and unfamiliar can make a dish

difficult to taste. It's frustrating never hearing a piece until it's come to fruition".

What the students will have learned from the great man and Causton's other guests is that, perhaps surprisingly from his standpoint, you can't actually teach composition. "There are no instructions you can give" he says. "What you can do that's very important is try to understand what it is a student wants to do with their music then help them to realise what they're trying to do. So I think composition when it's worthwhile is always a personal excitement or energy to want to do this, and to want to write this kind of piece; the teacher's job is to understand what the 'this' might be and to help the student to get there."

It was a rare event that the students will never forget, but Richard Causton hopes it will not be unique. He would like to find funding – this one has been supported by the Arts Council, the university, King's College and private contributions – to make it happen every three years or so, but subsequent *Secret Theatres* will be at a disadvantage: there is only one Harrison Birtwistle.

"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"