



BBC MUSIC Online

Richard Causton

The composer and lecturer on Cambridge University's upcoming Birtwistle festival



Composer and lecturer Richard Causton is running a three-day festival at Cambridge University to celebrate the music of Harrison Birtwistle this weekend (from 6-8 November). 'Secret Theatres: the music of Harrison Birtwistle' will also feature works from current Cambridge University students. We find out why the university is a natural setting for new music.

Cambridge University awarded the world's first BMus degree in 1464, and alumni include John Dowland, Orlando Gibbons and Robert Fayrfax – how are you bringing that heritage into this festival?

The fact that there is this old and venerable tradition of composition at Cambridge makes it feel natural to propose new work – it can be seen as a continuation of what has been done for centuries and this virtually unbroken lineage makes it much easier to convince people that new music and composition really belong to the place; that it's part of the DNA.

Robert Fayrfax was awarded the first ever DMus conferred on a composer and his Magnificat Regale is believed to have been written for King's College Chapel. This work will be featured in Evensong on Saturday 8 November along with a motet by Harrison Birtwistle. This will be followed immediately by a Birmingham Contemporary Music Group concert conducted by Oliver Knussen, which includes another piece written for especially the chapel by Patrick Brennan, a composer who has just started on Cambridge's new Doctoral programme in Composition.

How would you describe Harrison Birtwistle's place in British music right now, and why is it so important for younger composers to engage with his music?

At 80, Birtwistle's position in British music is unassailable and yet his new work seems as fresh and unpredictable as ever. Each piece covers new ground, and finds new forms, while still being unmistakably Birtwistle. I remember discovering his work as a teenager and realising that music could be more, and do more, than I had previously imagined. It was as if a door had been blown open and it was quite an important factor in determining my own interest in composition. I think his music can still have that effect for the generation of younger composers who will meet it – and him – in Cambridge on the weekend.

You've woven a highly original programme – what were the must-have Birtwistle works, and why?

There are three extraordinarily vivid ensemble pieces – Secret Theatre, Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum, and Silbury Air – that I got to know years ago, and I'm pleased that we are able to include all three of them in this festival. Silbury Air is concerned with landscape and pulse, Secret Theatre is highly linear and unfolds a hidden drama between the instrumentalists, and Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum is concerned with musical mechanisms which coexist without explicitly relating to one another. Between them, they embody in an elegant way some of Birtwistle's overriding obsessions and have now become classics in their own right. The Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Oliver Knussen will be performing Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum and Silbury Air, and Secret Theatre will be performed by the Cambridge University New Music Ensemble conducted by Patrick Bailey.

How do the new works by Alex Tay and David Roche fit into the programme (on Friday 7 Nov)? Are there any special connections?

Alex Tay's piece was composed as part of his position as Cambridge University Music Society Composer in Residence. On Skipton Moor is teeming with invention – calls of wild birds are heard against lush harmony in a rich tapestry which the composer associates with freedom, joy and elation. It promises to be a real feast for the senses.

On the other hand, David Roche describes his work Chapters as evoking 'a sense of bleak isolation, control, and concentration' – even though the actual textures of the piece are often almost orchestral in character. This is no mean feat in view of the relatively small numbers of instruments he uses.

The tradition of new music at the university has been incredibly impressive in the last quarter century – what role do you see it fulfilling beside the conservatoires and other active university departments?

The University benefits enormously from the fact that many of its most talented musicians are not music students – you can find prodigiously gifted violinists who are astrophysicists and bassoonists who are medieval linguists. At a time when contemporary music is sometimes thought of as a specialist, niche activity, it is extremely heartening that people of so many disciplines come together to make music and that they are not necessarily oriented towards becoming professional musicians.

Outside of conservatoires, there are relatively few educational establishments that can perform contemporary music at such a level, and once learned at university, the habit of making newly-composed music can stay with people for the rest of their lives.

To balance composing with your other work, have you been forced to become a 'summer' composer, like Fauré?

I have to at least keep in touch with the compositional ideas I'm working on. At the moment I have in my head ideas for the Piano Quintet I'm writing for the Nash Ensemble, and working on that gives me the energy to do all the other things I need to do as part of my day job.

Secret Theatres: the Music of Harrison Birtwistle takes place from 6-8 November 2014 at Cambridge University. Visit mus.cam.ac.uk for further information