

TheObserver

Fiona
Maddocks



Secret Theatres

King's College Chapel, Cambridge

An equally luminous bunch of composers turned up to hear music by Harrison Birtwistle and others in a four-day festival, **Secret Theatres**, in Cambridge. The event was organised by Richard Causton, a university lecturer but first and foremost a composer who has admired Birtwistle for three of his four decades. To mark his older colleague's 80th birthday, Causton gathered some of Birtwistle's favourite musicians, such as the Arditti Quartet and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, and programmed music from the medieval period to the present with – honouring Birtwistle's taste – not too much in between.

At a lunchtime concert in King's College Chapel, the pianist Nicolas Hodges and cellist Anssi Karttunen played duo and solo works, anchored around three "songs without words" by

Birtwistle which he calls *Bogenstrich*: tiny, taut and elegiac pieces inspired by Rilke. In warm-hearted gesture, Causton included a work by his own doctoral pupil, the Seoul-born Jae-Moon Lee, alongside one of his own, both world premieres.

Whereas Jae-Moon's piano solo, *Tangram*, exhilaratingly executed by Hodges, was too burdened by its subtle pattern of knots, puzzles and shapes, Causton's piece was immediately clear and powerful. The two-part *De Profundis* for solo cello, played with control and feeling by Karttunen, explored the lyrical qualities of the instrument from bottom register up, as if encountering its aural riches and possibilities for the first time. Then the duo played Beethoven's Cello Sonata in C, Op 102 No 1 which, particularly through the prism of these contemporary pieces, sounded as if written yesterday. "He never does what you think," Birtwistle was heard to say, one composer explaining, in simplest terms, the genius of another.

16 November 2014