

# THE TIMES

## Concert BCMG/Knussen King's College, Cambridge ★★★★☆

Nowhere has Harrison Birtwistle's 80th birthday been celebrated more than at Cambridge. The composer has been the focus of a three-day festival called *Secret Theatres*, a title evoking not just one of his most famous instrumental works, but also the feeling — commonly experienced when hearing his music — of a mysterious ritual in progress, thrilling the ear even as it defies comprehension.

Organised by Richard Causton, the festival featured not only Birtwistle's pieces but also some by associates and students. It was a heady mix, as the final concert by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group under the indefatigable Oliver Knussen showed. Causton's own Chamber Symphony was eventful: plangent brass fanfares and fierce percussion contrasted with desultory episodes and a wonderfully tranquil end to the first movement. Causton says the piece contrasts "the vitality of live music-making and the disembodiment of reproduced sound"; that certainly came across.

Much shorter was *Polly Roe* by Patrick Brennan, a Cambridge PhD

student. The title sounds folky but it is two musical puns (think polyphonic and tone-rows) and Brennan's programme note alludes alluringly to "the abstraction of spectral sonorities". Yet *Polly Roe* turned out to be a vivacious instrumental whirlwind. It eclipsed the UK premiere of Alexander Goehr's chamber symphony, *between the Lines*. In a different acoustic Goehr's detailed contrapuntal writing might make more impact, but in King's College Chapel it was all a blur dominated by a hyperactive tuba.

Happily, the two Birtwistle classics that framed the concert, *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum* and *Silbury Air*, sounded fantastic in that resonant space, with Knussen ensuring that the composer's masterly use of foreground and background came across clearly, those sour, jagged brass refrains crashing like rock-falls. It was great, too, to have an example of Birtwistle's more lyrical, recent style: the 2011 work *Fantasia upon All the Notes*, which rises from nothing to a rich, Arabic-tinged mesh of instrumental lines, then floats towards silence again.

**Richard Morrison**

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