

Hilary Finch
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Euridice! The anguished cry of Orpheus has haunted Harrison Birtwistle all his composing life. This summer he wrote a new Orpheus piece; and, while we wait for a long-overdue new production of his great opera *The Mask of Orpheus* (premiered in 1986), the Proms has boldly presented a semi-staging of its central act.

This focuses on Orpheus' journey to the Underworld to retrieve Euridice, except that this time he never gets there. It's all a dream — with some of Birtwistle's most sensuously lyrical and light-dappled music turning to a nightmare of rhythmic distortion, layering, and electronic sampling — and with a strangely potent awakening. Thanks to the superb playing of the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Martyn Brabbins, the skilful sound design of Ian Dearden and thoughtful stage direction by Tim Hopkins — including a glittering of hand mirrors — this was unforgettable.

Paul Driver
Sunday Times 23 August 2009

Orpheus made an overt connection with a work by Harrison Birtwistle in that BBCSO concert: his prodigious electro-acoustic opera, *The Mask of Orpheus*, whose relentlessly dissonant, hour-long central act (*The Arches*) was given a stunning concert rendering with the help of the BBC Singers.

Andrew Clements
Guardian

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The Mask of Orpheus is Harrison Birtwistle's masterpiece and the finest British opera of the last half-century, but the score's scale and complexity have conspired to limit its opportunities — there has been just one complete performance in concert since the premiere at ENO in 1986. Even as part of its celebration of Birtwistle's 75th birthday, the resources of the Proms couldn't run to programming the whole work, so Martyn Brabbins and Ryan Wigglesworth conducted just the hour-long second act, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and BBC Singers, and a cast led by Alan Oke as Orpheus the Man.

Encountering even a part of Birtwistle's dark, compelling score live was immensely thrilling. With Peter Zinovieff's multilayered libretto contained within an intricate mosaic of musical forms, *The Mask of Orpheus* takes the idea of the number opera to an extreme; but, as this exceptional performance showed, that high level of formalism doesn't limit the dramatic power of the score. What emerged vividly here was its physical impact and writhing intensity, as well as the beguiling sensuousness of the electronic signals and interludes.

With its triple representations of each of the protagonists as human, hero and myth, Birtwistle's work is more a commentary on the Orpheus myths than a straight retelling of them. The second act portrays the journey to the underworld as a dream, in which Orpheus

crosses a vast aqueduct of 17 arches, representing different aspects of his world. It's dominated by Orpheus the Man's huge song of magic, and Oke's performance of the taxing part was immense and wonderfully articulate. **In fact, every performance was excellent** – as good a birthday present as any composer could possibly want.

George Hall

Independent on Sunday, 23 August 2009

Even though he's reached the venerable age of 75, Sir Harrison Birtwistle's music still sounds to some listeners like a military band playing at full pelt while falling down the side of a quarry. For others, maybe a little more sophisticated, it's more like several simultaneous performances of Strauss's Elektra, but all starting at different points and each trying to outdo all the others. Yet, to judge from the reaction of the audience at the BBC Symphony Orchestra's performance (Prom 39) of the second act of *The Mask of Orpheus* – the Proms' major celebration of the composer's birthday – a sea-change has occurred. Audiences are not merely getting used to Birtwistle's rich and strange sound-world, but are beginning to regard it with a certain affection, mingled with the undeniable shock and awe.

Shock and awe, in the context of this vast chunk of his major opera, premiered by English National Opera in 1986 and rarely revived since, is quite understandable. Using an enormous agglomeration of woodwind, brass and percussion, plus the BBC Singers, and a dozen principals representing Orpheus, Euridice, Hecate and other denizens of the underworld, the piece charts Orpheus's dream journey through 17 arches, each of them with its own striking musical character, attaining a fierce sense of momentum as it hurtles the listener along its hour-long *via dolorosa*, with Barry Anderson's electronic interludes adding to the blistering sonic mix.

With the BBCSO on top form under Martyn Brabbins and Ryan Wigglesworth, startling interventions from Alan Oke and Thomas Walker, doubling as Orpheus, Christine Rice and Anna Stephany partitioning Euridice, and Claron McFadden screaming venom as Hecate, the sense of some sinister ancient ritual, endlessly renewed in Birtwistle's balefully bracing score, was thrillingly achieved.