

## Birtwistle's first *Triumph of Time*

by Michael Taylor

The existence of an abandoned first attempt at the orchestral work *The Triumph of Time* has been known of for some years. Michael Hall in his book on the composer describes it as “a cross between *An Imaginary Landscape* and *Grimethorpe Aria*. The opening consisted of a long floating aria for soprano saxophone accompanied by choirs of wind and percussion. As it approached the first climax a trumpet took over. This was interesting in itself, but could hardly be extended much further ...”<sup>1</sup> However, as the provenance is not identified, we do not know whether the information was gleaned from an examination of the score, or from Birtwistle himself. The extent of the material is surprising, as is the stage to which the piece had progressed, and the internal evidence throws new light on some of Birtwistle's compositional procedures of the early 1970s. His statement that “musical ideas had already crystallised”<sup>2</sup> before he saw the etching by Breughel from which the work takes its title, also requires re-examination.

The Inventory of the Birtwistle Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation<sup>3</sup> lists approximately fifty pages of sketches for the torso of this work, together with two draft scores (the later, incorporating the first, ran to forty pages), and two sequences of fair copy, written in ink on transparencies, which cover a little more than half of the larger draft. The meticulous care with which the score is written makes it clear that the first sixteen pages had reached their definitive form, while a second sequence of five pages was far enough advanced to be written out, even though its position relative to the first remained uncertain. The table below shows the correspondences between the longer draft and the fair copy:

Draft pp. 1–15 = Fair Copy pp. 1–7 (1st sequence)  
pp. 29–36 = pp. 15–19 (2nd sequence)

Two things are apparent from this: i. that pp. 16–28 of the draft had not satisfied the composer, as he had copied material from later in the draft; and ii. that he interpolated a passage (absent from the draft but fully sketched on separate sheets) into the final copy (pp. 8–16) which he was unable to bring back to the sequence of the draft. The problem is pointedly remarked in the numbering of the two fair copy sequences, the first from 1–16, while the second begins at 15 and runs to 19.





Although the principal draft lacks pages 16 and 18, it is the main source for the work. The fair copy (with the exception of the interpolation) adds layers of detail but does not fundamentally change the continuity draft. However, as it progresses, this source becomes less complete in detail – giving only indications of where the saxophone cantus firmus was to appear, for example. At page 40, everything stops, with no suggestion of any continuation. The only possible hint of what might have come appears on a page of sketches for ad libitum figures found on pages 14 and 16 of the fair copy. *Pizzicato* and *arco* markings perhaps signal the intention to deploy strings for the first time later in the work. Also lacking is any formal plan such as the one for the second half of *An Imaginary Landscape*, found in the sketches for that work. Given the size and complexity of *The Triumph of Time*, and the fact that Birtwistle continued to use such form plans at least until *Carmen Arcadiae* (1977), it is strange that none has survived.

The earliest sketches are to be found in a manuscript book on the cover of which Birtwistle has written the title of the work – *The Triumph of Time* – and, in the top right hand corner, “Modual Book, April 2 1970”. The contents of the book show that it was used sporadically over a period of about one year, as it contains sketches for *Prologue* and *An Imaginary Landscape* (both completed in 1971), in addition to the first version of *The Triumph of Time*. “Modual” apparently refers to the elaborate investigation of the possible permutations of a four-note shape, arranged in combinations of prime, retrograde, inversion and retrograde inversion, with which the book begins. (Mode is Birtwistle’s preferred term as these shapes are treated as contours which can be realised in a variety of ways, using differing repertoires of pitch.) The connection between this abstract working out – which includes a large circular “map” showing the interrelationships of modal groups – and the abandoned work is not clear, but subsequent pages refer to the score explicitly. The chronology of the middle portion of the book is difficult to establish as material relating to *Prologue* and *An Imaginary Landscape* is interrupted by a single page headed “Chorale ground harmony” which returns to *The Triumph of Time*, after which the remaining pages are concerned exclusively with *An Imaginary Landscape*. The prosaic explanation that Birtwistle reused the pages at a later date cannot be discounted.

The rest of the sketches (on loose sheets of manuscript paper) deal with specific sections of the draft. The saxophone aria referred to by Hall (see above) was composed independently, as it is written out, complete with migrations to horn and trumpet, on seven pages. The family likeness between this line and that in the earlier orchestral work *Nomos* (1967–1968) is obvious, both act as a type of cantus firmus constructed from five note sets. While no sketches survive for the *Nomos* line, there are two pages showing the derivation of the saxophone pitches, though those relating to the durations have not been located.

The expanding wedge is one of Birtwistle's principal sources of pitch generation in his early music, subjected to all manner of manipulation and permutation.<sup>4</sup> Here the notes on the top line are alternately lowered and raised by a semitone to create new wedges, with a gradually flattening contour; the continuation of this process (not shown here) yields the retrograde of the original. Ordering is achieved by the allocation of groups of five numbers (probably drawn from the composer's random number tables) to each line,



starting in the bottom right hand corner and proceeding spirally upwards. The pitches are then read according to the numerical sequence, beginning from the same point.



The two years between the “Modual Book” and the completion of the definitive version of *The Triumph of Time* in the spring of 1972 also saw the composition of three other major works – *Nenia*, *Meridian*, and *An Imaginary Landscape* – and a number of smaller pieces, but Birtwistle apparently found no use for the abandoned material. The skirling oboes and clarinets at the climax of *Meridian* (pp. 68–70 of the printed score) use a similar articulation to that found on pages 21–24 of the draft, but the pitches are different. The fact that he did not cannibalise this rejected score in the way he did parts of the percussion music from *Monodrama* (1967, subsequently withdrawn) in *An Imaginary Landscape*, seems to indicate that Birtwistle regarded this first attempt as a dead end. This begs a final question: if “musical ideas had already crystallised” before he saw the etching – that is, prior to 2nd April, 1970, by which time the work had its title – what was the nature of those musical ideas, and how did the first version of *The Triumph of Time* so signally fail to realise them?

- 1 Michael Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle*, London 1984, p. 83.
- 2 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 175.
- 3 *Harrison Birtwistle. Musikmanuskripte* (= Inventare der Paul Sacher Stiftung), Winterthur, forthcoming.
- 4 See, for example, Michael Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–92 on its use in *La Plage*.