

# Challenging the system

Chaos actual, or chaos virtual? DAVID BRUCE puts Birtwistle's *Last Night Panic* into its proper perspective

Oh what is he doing, the great god Pan  
Down by the reeds by the river  
Spreading ruin and scattering ban

THIS IS inscribed the score of *Panic*,<sup>1</sup> Sir Harrison Birtwistle's now almost legendary piece for the last night of the 1995 Proms season. Whilst not exactly a 'programme', this poetic fragment, as with that by Robert Graves heading the score of *Secret theatre*, seems at least to provide some kind of extra-musical context in which to place the work. *Secret theatre* has been described as a 'geometry of comedy',<sup>2</sup> and whilst the term 'geometry of chaos' hardly makes sense, *Panic* certainly depicts a wild and at times chaotic expressive force whose appeal to the senses is not entirely abstract. For the tabloids, it was chaos, an increasingly rare opportunity to open the dusty old 'contemporary/squeaky-gate so-called music' file, last used, I believe, to ridicule Stockhausen's string quartet, in which each player sits in a different helicopter (I caught a glimpse of this on 'And finally...' on *News at Ten* recently). Stockhausen tends these days to be ridiculed from within the New Music scene as well as without; Birtwistle is, on the contrary, now one of our most highly respected composers. Yet whilst many cognoscenti felt duty bound to support *Panic* on the night itself, as an act of solidarity, I have rarely heard colleagues coming out in support in the months since. The view tends to be that Birtwistle has gone off the boil since the great days of the 1980s (to any who retain this view, despite what follows, I would commend the forthcoming premiere of the complete Celan settings and string quartets, *Pulse shadows* – the songs in particular show how Birtwistle's facility in capturing a beautiful melancholic lyricism has far from disappeared) and that *Panic* really was chaos actual rather than virtual. Gavin Thomas, for example, has suggested that the 'intricately conceived polyphonies collapse, in the heat of the moment, into what sounds like an improvised free-for-all'.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, there is no doubt that on first hearing little can be easily absorbed beyond the extraordinary sensation of wild energy emitted from the saxophone and drum-kit soloists. But I will argue that whilst there are indeed a few sections in which true harmonic and rhythmic chaos is allowed to reign (principally those areas with two, independently playing musical textures), these are actually carefully planned 'attacks' on a system of clearly defined and audible musical signals. Most of the music may be wild and unruly in character, and may

even come under such anarchic 'attacks', but balance and context are still the primary organisational concerns.

The idea of a musical structure being attacked from within has previously been discussed in relation to Birtwistle's *Earth dances*. In one of the most cogent papers to have been written on Birtwistle in recent times Arnold Whittall identifies musical modernists as those who 'challenge synthesis and integration even as they allude to it',<sup>4</sup> a notion developed by Whittall over a long period of time and applied by him to numerous modernist figures, including Maxwell Davies, Webern and Stravinsky.<sup>5</sup> Although this notion is perhaps less applicable to, say, Boulez, Carter or Schoenberg, all of whom attempt to create a new and real kind of integration (even if Hans Keller argued convincingly that Schoenberg belongs to the noble breed of the 'stylistically impure', suggesting that 'absolute purity of style seems possible only if you are prepared to say nothing whatsoever',<sup>6</sup>), it nonetheless applies well to earlier 'modernists' like Berg and Mahler. What these two composers share with Birtwistle and others is an acceptance that musical unity is essentially an illusion. (Even as supposed to exist in the masterpieces of the 19th century, unity only exists with reference to what Anthony Pople calls a 'common practice... which provides the models of harmonic progression, linear motion and so forth',<sup>7</sup> and whilst unity is possible in terms of thematic relationships alone, whether this is actually a necessity for its success is highly questionable.) For there is no doubt that the ear attempts to impose unity on almost any consecutive series of musical sounds and is therefore open to being 'tricked' into finding connections between ideas which are barely, if at all, related. For what we now call the postmodernist this opens the gate to any number of different styles within the same piece; for the 'modernist', however, there is still the need for some kind of overall integration of style, whose authority can then be 'challenged' through such 'trickery': In many cases the 'integrated' system which is being 'challenged' is in fact tonality itself. In Berg's Violin Concerto, for example, as Pople has shown, there is a continuous flux between sections which are audibly tonal and more 'floating', atonal sections. The former, combined with other 'tonally aligned' elements encourages a 'tonalistic perception of the detailed musical fabric'. But, as Pople continues, 'the continuity of the musical perception thus achieved is an illusion – just as the continual correlation of the musical gestures with the well-known

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1. Birtwistle writes the following alongside this fragment: 'something I remember from school but can't remember by whom (A. Noyes maybe?!)

2. See Arnold Whittall's article on *Secret theatre* in *MT* (January 1993), pp.17–19.

3. *MT* (November 1995), p.616.

4. 'Comparatively complex: Birtwistle, Maxwell Davies and modernist analysis', in *Music Analysis* vol.13 nos.2–3 (October 1994), p.140.

5. See, for example, Jonathan Dunsby & Arnold Whittall: *Music analysis in theory and practice* (London, 1988) and Arnold Whittall: 'The bottom line', in *MT* (September 1994), pp.

6. Hans Keller: *Essays on music*, ed. Christopher Wintle (Cambridge, 1994), p.218.

7. Anthony Pople: *Berg: Violin Concerto* (Cambridge, 1991), pp.88–89.

Ex.1: Alto saxophone, 6 bars after O

8. Op.cit.

9. See, for example, Rhian Samuel: 'Gawain', in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol.4 no.2 (1992), pp.163–78.

dramatic programme of the work gives the false impression of a continuous musical narrative. The music is not organically, self-referentially coherent, but “makes sense” because at every point *something* in it is always recognisable through an active cognitive framework<sup>8</sup>.

Birtwistle's music, however, does not deal in dialogues with tonality, nor (apart from in the very general way outlined at the beginning of this article) with 'dramatic programmes', so what exactly is the system being 'challenged'? In *Earth dances*, for instance it is, as Whittall has argued the authority of the tonal centre D as a source of gravity throughout the movement. The music returns to D at a number of important points in the piece, but its tenacity is challenged, partly by a C# at one point, but also simply by its absence in intervening sections. Whittall also talks of the dialogue between 'stillness' and 'movement'. The combination of these two elements is, he maintains (as with the Berg), enough to provide Pople's 'active cognitive framework' for understanding the piece. In *Panic* these ideas become increasingly important. The two separate frameworks suggested by Whittall – one of movement, the other of harmony – are vital listening tools without which the listener might easily become lost in the complex mesh of sounds.

I would like first to concentrate for a moment on the properties of driving forward motion which so clearly aid the impression of the *Panic's* over-the-top frenzy (although the feeling of forward motion is of course aided by the harmony, as we shall see). This kind of momentum has become increasingly important in Birtwistle's music in recent times: it was present to an extent in the Sinfonietta pieces of the 1980s (the new interest in linearity in the recent operas, as noticed by some commentators, is part of the same general trend<sup>9</sup>) and more overtly, despite some conflicting tensions, in *Earth dances*, a work of which, in many ways, particularly in terms of its powerful dynamic and dramatic energy, *Panic* is a direct descendant. *Panic* is indeed the most extreme

example of this kind of 'dramatic flow' in Birtwistle's output and is perhaps the only one of his pieces to end with an affirmative 'bang' – to reach some kind of goal rather than dissolving away.

**T**HE PRINCIPAL process of achieving momentum is by simple repetition, apotheosised most famously in *The rite of spring*. Birtwistle plays with this inherent property of repetition, affecting an increasingly menacing tension. The solo line in *Panic*, for example, repeats no less than 14 times in succession a rhythmic pattern first heard at letter O (ex.1 shows a few of these, marked 'x'; notice the incremental dynamics, which, when combined with the ever closer repetitions create a strongly cumulative effect); but it is in the orchestral accompaniment where repetition really comes to the fore, with barely a texture in which it is not significantly involved. This is, of course, an area in which Birtwistle has been operating for some time – even the opening of the 1965 piece, *Tragoedia*, despite the work's sectional, apparently non-progressive form, uses short repetitive fragments to drive the music on; it is only when used continually over a longer time span, as has happened more often in recent years, that the music really builds up an overall driving momentum.

The forward momentum in *Panic* can, however, be undermined from time to time, through what Whittall calls the dialogue between 'stillness' and 'movement'. The music moves between its clearly defined sections by a variety of means: sometimes it stops temporarily on a simple orchestral chord or tremolo, as at letter B; some sections are linked by a flurry of saxophone writing, as at I; others still flow straight into one another, as at P, or simply collapse, as at D1. The latter are the most straightforward – the flow simply continuing in one direction or another, whereas the stop-start nature of the first two approaches gives Birtwistle the leeway to change pace by sleight of hand. Put simply, we think the music is again momentarily pausing whereas it has

Ex.2 An example of the writing for drum-kit

Ex.3: Alto saxophone 4 bars after C1

actually arrived at a slower section; conversely we sometimes think we have arrived at a slower section, whereas it is actually only a momentary pause. For example, on paper the section from S until U is all calmer music, with a brief interruption near the beginning from two bars of fortissimo, staccato brass, just before T. However, the effect of these two bars in performance is to make us think that the fast music is continuing and that the previous eight bars of calm were only temporary. We are then further surprised when this assumption also turns out to be false and we are, after all, back in the calmer section. The jolting effect of these two surprises takes our attention away from the fact that what has actually happened is simply the arrival of a slow section. In the same way, we are twice jolted by the two bars, four after J1, first as the slow music suddenly interrupts the frenetic action and appears to continue with the arrival of the flute solo; then again, when the faster music after all continues on its way. By contrast, in sections such as that three bars after G1, a more sustained interrupting section of slow music is given the impression of continuing momentum by a nervously ticking drum-kit (very similar in effect to a moment in *Earth dances*, when a sizzling hi-hat sustains the energy) – here we enjoy the feeling of paradox that the music seems to have slowed down, but is evidently still pressing on. In this case, there is therefore no surprise when the music does once again burst into life (two before H1). With these kind of effects, Birtwistle clearly wants to undermine our knowledge of our position in the piece, so that any other sudden changes of pace are heard in light of them. Nevertheless, this process of ‘active listening’ must be finely balanced, so that we are never unsure for more than a few moments where we are in the ‘dramatic plot’. By losing track of the plot, such games would become meaningless, the music

apparently changing direction without cause; it says much for Birtwistle’s mastery of long-range timing that this never happens, despite moments when it is challenged almost to the limit.

ONE OF the primary conveyors of the both the forward energy, its stop-start nature, as well as, of course, contributing to some of the general feeling of abandon, is the drum-kit. Functioning outside the harmony, in rhythmic patterns which only occasionally interlock with other members of the group, its prominence in much of the piece inevitably but intentionally adds a layer of confusion to the proceedings. The kit-player is not usually told precisely which instruments to use. Instead he is given two, or occasionally three layers, within each of which he may choose any instrument he likes (ex.2). There are also frequent further written instructions, such as ‘only high sounds, mainly metal’. Sometimes there is the instruction to repeat a pattern using the same instruments each time, allowing a more defined repetitive texture to emerge (this happens particularly involving the hi-hat). At other times, as in the closing pages, the instruction is simply ‘freely improvise, using all instruments’, accompanied by a graphic ‘squiggle’ to suggest speed. The freedom thus granted to the kit-player makes for one of the few examples in contemporary music of a piece in which the drum-kit does not sound out of place, politely tapping out a few simple rhythms at the back of the ensemble: this is up-front, unashamed writing. Yet despite being, in itself, one of the textural joys of *Panic*, the kit is essentially used as an accompanimental instrument, highlighting changes in texture, qualities of greater or lesser tension, or joining in with other instruments’ rhythmic figures.

On a number of occasions the kit is joined by a

Ex.4 (selected lines only)

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Oboe, Alto Sax., 2 Tpts (Trumpets), and Timps (Timpani). The score is in 3/4 time and has a tempo marking of c. 192/216. The Oboe part starts with a box labeled 'A1' and contains a melodic line with various accidentals and dynamic markings, including 'f' and 'fff'. The Alto Sax. part has a rhythmic line with many triplets. The 2 Tpts part has a rhythmic line with many sixteenth notes. The Timps part has a rhythmic line with many sixteenth notes and some triplets. The score is enclosed in a dashed box.

second percussionist and a timpanist, sometimes operating independently – at letter C, for example the timpanist and percussionist begin at quaver equals 102 and accelerate, while the drum-kit plays a steady quaver equals 168. The saxophone and the drum-kit together also play in rhythmic independence quite frequently, usually brought back together with the rest of the orchestra after a few bars, either by pauses or visual cues, resulting, inevitably, in periods of rhythmic chaos. It is perhaps this feature above all which creates such a shocking effect for the first-time listener. We will now move on to look at the harmony of *Panic*, which, whilst providing no all-encompassing system, does, I believe, go a long way to providing a clear framework, within which, such ‘unruly’ elements can be allowed to exist.

The most important harmonic material in *Panic* is adumbrated in the saxophone line itself, in the form of centres of gravity of the kind Whittall describes in relation to *Earth dances*. Most prominent amongst these are the recurring pitches in the bottom register of the saxophone, such as the E of the opening, the  $D_b$  at letter T, or the D at C1 (ex.3). These invariably mark the beginning or the end of a phrase; the saxophone moving away in chromatic zig-zags or scales, only to be sucked back to one of these gravitational centres. Unlike *Earth dances*, with its long-term emphasis on the pitch D, *Panic* does not suggest any overall binding centre. Instead it offers a choice of gravitational centres –  $D_b$ , D,  $E_b$  and E, any of which, it seems are possible alternatives at any given time. The only real rule that seems to operate is that none should be present for too long and so establish itself as more permanent. Rather, each is used as the centre of a particular section, without there being any overall Schenkerian movement between those sections. Incidentally, the presence of four different but adjacent pitch centres demonstrates an important feature of Birtwistle’s approach to composition – it is often register and timbre which control movement more than pitch itself. As such, this could suggest that the  $C\#$  which Whittall sees as an opposing force to the D in *Earth dances* is,

by virtue of its similarity in register and timbre (low sustained violins) to some of the appearances of the D, part of a return to a similar area of quiet, temporary stasis rather than the arrival of an opposing force.

Paradoxically, the multiple tonal centres in *Panic* are more stable than the single centre in *Earth dances* by virtue of their greater frequency. They control and harmonically define many of the sections of the piece. At the same time, on top of the anarchic, percussive ‘attacks’ mentioned above, the stability of these ‘centres’ is also harmonically ‘challenged’, not only by several sections in *Panic* which are not grounded by the pitch centres, but also within sections when the saxophone line becomes long and chromatic (e.g. from two bars after letter U up to the returning  $D_b$  three bars after V). Indeed it could be argued that this ‘challenge’ occurs in the majority of cases, in that the ability of one note, albeit in a prominent bass register and at important points in the phrase or section, to be a controlling force over all intermediate notes (often copious in number) is somewhat questionable (making all the more important a balance in performance in favour of the saxophone, a feature which did not seem to exist in the recent second performance in the Queen Elizabeth Hall). Whether or not this is the case, the use of these tonal centres is the first and, I believe, the most important of a series of frameworks within which the piece begins to make sense. Furthermore, compared with *Earth dances* for example, the challenge to the comprehensibility of the harmony as evinced by the stability of these tonal centres is much reduced, in that the gap between their successive reappearances is significantly shorter.

Sections without any of the saxophone’s four bass pitches also often have their own centres: at five bars before E1, for example, when the low tonal centres are replaced by a recurring D an octave above middle C, and at six after J1 by an E a tone higher. In those sections where there are no real pitch centres, our attention is usually directed to repeated rhythmic figures, either in the saxophone, or the rest of the orchestra. Ex.4 shows a typical pattern which

continues throughout the section from A1 up to ten before B1. Saxophone and percussion interlock every 18 semiquavers (three bars); two trumpets combined provide a stream of semiquavers; whilst the rest of the orchestra (here only oboe is shown) play an overlapping pattern (marked 'z') which repeats every 17 semiquavers (the slight mismatch is highly characteristic of Birtwistle). Pitch here is controlled by register – the saxophone phrase repeats the same basic shape, in the same register, whilst varying the pitch contour; the rest of the orchestra as with the oboe in the example, confined to three or four adjacent notes. This use of register provides an alternative 'cognitive framework' to that of pitch centres. We follow the variation that occurs within each strand, rather than their overall combination.

There are therefore essentially two types of material which are not concerned with tonal centres – repeated rhythmic patterns, not really 'thematic' in that they hover between neighbouring notes; and the use of shapes or contours, more recognisable in themselves as musical ideas. The whole piece is indeed full of the combinations of these two elements, the shapes often being twisted into repeating fragments and vice versa. Most recur throughout the work and although they are not intended as musical signals, actively carrying the work's meaning, they do bind together the character and flavour of the piece. One such recurring shape takes the form of three rising/falling notes which generally either outline a seventh or ninth, or consist of either of those two intervals consecutively. Although they do sometimes appear alone, they tend to form sequences, with each of the three pitches moving to an adjacent pitch in the next figure (though not necessarily all in the same direction). They can be found in varying forms in the woodwind at numerous places, also permeating the saxophone writing from time to time (see ex.5). The saxophone part itself also has numerous trademarks, such as fast runs alternating minor seconds with other intervals (see the last bar of ex.7).

We can add to the above a further framework for understanding the harmony in *Panic* – that of forward motion. As we have seen, the repetitive elements themselves contribute a great deal to this process (at A1, for example, the repeating saxophone phrase mentioned earlier (ex.4) is given the instruction 'always pressing forward'). The harmony often adds to this, but again it is harmony as register which plays the crucial role, the feeling of moving on being achieved by the expansion of register. A

Ex.5: some details omitted where parts overlap

very clear example occurs at 10 before B1. The saxophone leaves behind its repeated figure and becomes wilder, throwing off flurries of scales ending in a screaming top E (marked 'growl'). Whilst the upper winds settle onto sustained high notes, the brass begin to 'take off'. The piccolo trumpet, for example, still playing a similar staccato pattern to the trumpets shown in ex.4, a few bars earlier, moves gradually upwards from a chromatic movement between D $\flat$  and G $\flat$  to one between C and A, finally arriving at a high D (ex.6). The effect of the entire brass section shifting gradually higher in a stuttering motion is quite tremendous in the power of its forward energy. There are many similar examples, not always involving simple chromatic movement, such as the trumpets and horns in the lead-up to U, whose repeating top note of B $\flat$  moves up to D and then A. Here again what is clearly most important is the registral shift of increasing instrumental tension more than the precise notes themselves. Finally, movement between neighbouring notes in the solo line itself often suggests forward motion, for

Ex.6: Piccolo trumpet, 6 bars before B1

Ex.7: Alto saxophone, 1 bar before X



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*Panic* receives its third performance during the South Bank Centre's Birtwistle retrospective, 'Secret theatres' on 1 May. *Pulse shadows* receives its world premiere on 29 April.

example the two chromatic notes before both V and X (ex.7). One could also argue that the movement between the four 'tonal centres' themselves in the saxophone part constitutes a kind of onward motion rather than a static meandering between four equal alternatives.

With the combination of the above elements – the return to tonic centres; repeating rhythmic patterns and motivic shapes which are harmonically defined by register; and the impression of driving forward motion – we can begin to come to terms with much of the harmonic activity of *Panic*. As was mentioned earlier, there are also a number of moments, some very brief, others more extended, in which the saxophone and parts of the brass section play independently of the conductor. These sections are not written for the effect of a particular cross-rhythm, but rather for the general impression of abandon which is such a strong feature of the piece. Moments such as three bars after Y onwards are the real challenges

to our understanding of *Panic*. We are aware of some kind of rhythmic structure in the trumpets and trombones but are unable to place it in any kind of context relative to the independently playing orchestra, which itself consists of several different elements layered on top of one another. At these moments, despite the registral layout which so assists less rhythmically complex sections, the detail of the polyphony really does become lost, and we are aware only of the 'great god Pan... spreading ruin and scattering ban'. They are, however, only moments – another important one is three after K up to M; there are a few shorter ones, such as at Q – whose chaotic violence only temporarily threatens the work's structure. The array of techniques outlined above creates an edifice which is strong enough to allow Birtwistle to experiment so boldly with the sovereignty of logic; at the same time, this experimentation makes explicit the properties of chaos which are elsewhere only depicted.

## Sir Harrison Birtwistle

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