

Robin Blaser and Harrison Birtwistle

In 1998-1999, Sir Harrison Birtwistle and Robin Blaser collaborated on an opera, *The Last Supper*, commissioned jointly by Glyndebourne Opera, Deutsche Staatsoper, Berlin, and the Royal Festival Hall, London. Described as a series of “dramatic tableaux for 14 soloists, small female chorus and chamber orchestra,” *The Last Supper* received its world premiere at the Deutsche Staatsoper on April 18th, 2000, directed by Martin Duncan and conducted by Daniel Barenboim. Alison Chitty designed the production; the principle roles were sung by Thomas Randle and William Dazeley with mezzo-soprano Susan Bickley as Ghost.

The Last Supper was subsequently performed by the Glyndebourne Touring Opera in fall 2000, at the South Bank Centre in London in January 2001, and at the Glyndebourne Festival in the summer of 2001. It was recently performed in Vienna by Neue Oper Wien in co-production with Osterklang Wien 09 at the Atelierhaus der Akademie der bildenden Künste. Opening night was April 4th, 2009.

Of the original production, the reviewer for *The Observer* wrote that it was “...a magnificent and enthralling work... Birtwistle has created a powerfully melancholic sound-world, at once richly lyrical and hieratic.” Robin Blaser’s libretto, written in both Latin and English, was praised for being “rich in allusion and magpie borrowing from Christian liturgy, the metaphysical poets and other sources ancient and modern... in the theatre it worked with astonishing clarity and good sense, a model libretto with barely a word in excess and most of it audible, especially when it mattered most.” The reviewer from *Die Welt* was enthralled: “What hardly seems like musico-dramatic material is transformed into an utterly gripping uninterrupted two hours of music theatre thanks to a compelling libretto by Blaser and the unyieldingly riveting music of Birtwistle. *The Last Supper* is a natural musical and theatrical heir to the greatest works of the century which explore major Judaeo-Christian themes... A premiere of enormous stature; a complete triumph for all concerned.”

Sir Harrison Birtwistle’s *Pulse Shadows*, a meditation for soprano, string quartet and chamber ensemble on poetry by Paul Celan, won the 2002 Gramophone Award for best contemporary recording. *Theseus Game* was premiered in 2003. Productions of *The Io Passion* and *Night’s Black Bird* in 2004 were followed by the premiere of his opera *The Minotaur* at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in April 2008. Two new chamber operas, *The Corridor* and *Semper Dowland semper dolens*, opened the 2009 Aldeburgh Festival. Birtwistle was made a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1986,

awarded a British knighthood in 1988 and made a Companion of Honour in 2001. He was Henry Purcell Professor of Music at King's College, University of London (1995-2001) and is currently Director of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

Poet, librettist, and teacher Robin Blaser died on May 7th, 2009. The following telephone interview was broadcast on CBC's *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera* on May 9th, 2009. We acknowledge and thank the composer, Sir Harrison Birtwistle, author and broadcaster Bill Richardson, and CBC producer Rosemary Allenbach for their assistance and for their kind permission to reproduce this brief interview, which was preceded by the voice of Robin Blaser reading his poem "Suddenly" in Berkeley in 2008.

Bill Richardson: Robin Blaser came to Vancouver from the US in 1966. That was a rich time in this city's history, a time that saw the arrival of people from the States and from Europe and from Asia who would shape this city's artistic and cultural life. Robin Blaser taught for many years at Simon Fraser University, and he was very well regarded as a teacher and as a writer. He was an extremely elegant presence, always with his beautiful white hair and perpetual cigarette. Smoking is said to cause wrinkles, but not in his case, I have to say; he kept his boyish mien, as you'll see if you take a look at the YouTube recording of the reading he gave last year in Berkeley (that's where the poem you just heard came from). Last year (2008) Robin Blaser won the Griffin Poetry Prize for *The Holy Forest: Collected Poems of Robin Blaser*, and in 2006 he received a Lifetime Achievement prize from the Griffin Poetry Foundation. There have been some marvellous and moving tributes since his death, by Stan Persky and Judith Fitzgerald among others, but perhaps not enough mention has been made of the work Robin Blaser did with the English composer Sir Harrison Birtwistle. They collaborated on an opera that was given its premiere in Berlin in 2000—*The Last Supper*, it's called—and it's written both in Latin and in English. Robin Blaser was a skilled and devoted classicist.

The meeting between Robin Blaser and Sir Harrison was brokered by a former student of each of them, and when I spoke to Sir Harrison earlier this week (he kindly took my call), I asked if there was something in Robin Blaser's poetry that had made him think that here was an ideal collaborator for the project he had in mind, the opera *The Last Supper*.

Harrison Birtwistle: Well, I don't know, because what it turned out to be—as opposed to what... with a libretto, with a text for a piece of theatre—is very different from his poetry. In the beginning I wasn't sure... because the whole game of collaboration is a very difficult one. But it worked out really terrific in the end.

BR: Was it clear from the beginning that *The Last Supper* would be in Latin and in English?

HB: Well, the Latin was his idea, because they become meditations, the Latin, and in a sense the Latin is like a meditation. It's like *aria* in music. My understanding of *aria* is a place where music takes the stage as opposed to the narrative action. And that was his thing. He also contributed something else which is wonderful—there's a person in it called Ghost, who's like a sort of angel character, who speaks on behalf of us now. And he's in a sense like a sort of chorus, like a Greek chorus, but in the singular though. That was his; that just sort of happened from him.

BR: When you began thinking of the idea for *The Last Supper*, did it proceed from a place of faith or from a place of dramatic investigation?

HB: Oh, dramatic investigation. I wanted to see and find a way of doing this... and also it is connected with the turn of the millennium; that was the other thing. The idea was that these people were introduced to, came back to the place of the Last Supper—they'd been invited to come back, not knowing who else was coming. And you see then that becomes a dramatic situation. So Peter is the first to arrive....

BR: Can you talk to me a little bit about the evolution of your collaboration with Robin Blaser as it progressed? Did you often meet face-to-face over it?

HB: No, not a lot. It was in the days of, what do you call it...?

BR: Fax.

HB: Fax, yeah! I've still got it all—miles of it. And my system of doing it is to condense it and then ask them to elaborate it and then make it more like itself. So, you know, the essential moment doesn't change, but the way that the shadow is cast on it or the way that the light is cast on it tends to change. But in the end it's got to be a text for music. And that certainly turns out to be that.

BR: How important is it, do you think, in the choice of a librettist, that it be somebody who is, if not a practicing musician, then at least musical—does it make a difference?

HB: No, I don't think it does at all. The person that I've collaborated with a lot is not a musician, he's just a very good poet. I think the music side of it—that's the ingredient that I try to put into it. I mean, there are certain words that give you imagery, musical imagery, and there are some things which simply don't. Robin had a wonderful sort of innocence, an endearing innocence, particularly to do with Europe, and specifically England. And I remember him in the rehearsals being somewhat emotional where the realization of the words becomes something else through music. I don't think he'd had any experience at all about that; in all of his life I don't think he'd had anything to do with the theatre. You know, the presence of the people on the set and the set itself—I think he was amazed by it. I introduced him to a lot of things; I remember I took him to Wells Cathedral, I took him to Stonehenge. And I live in a limestone country and there's a lot of flint—he got very interested in flint and the idea of, you know, what prehistory did with flint in order to make it into tools. I remember him being very fascinated by that.

BR: Did you stay in reasonably close touch once the project was done?

HB: No, alas, alas. No, I used to call him from time to time. One thing I remember is that when I called him in Canada, there was always an answer phone and I used to call out, "Robin, are you there? Are you there?" Because I think he had a setup where he didn't particularly answer the phone, and I used to have to think that I had to shout loud enough and then he usually came. We became very close in a funny sort of way. But the distance... he just sort of disappeared from my life.