

COMPOSER: BIRTWISTLE

PERFORMER: TETZLAFF

The modernist composer and the versatile violinist discuss their perspectives on the genesis of a new concerto with DAVID KETTLE

HARRISON BIRTWISTLE MIGHT NOT be the first composer you'd associate with music for strings. After all, he famously excluded strings entirely from his breakthrough opera *The Mask of Orpheus* (1984), and replaced the violins in his later stage work *The Last Supper* (1999) with a plaintive accordion. He's written concertos for trumpet, tuba,

saxophone and piano, but never a stringed instrument.

Until now, that is. For his new Violin Concerto is premiered in Boston this month by Christian Tetzlaff and the Boston Symphony Orchestra under James Levine. It might come as something of a surprise that the senior British composer, famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) for his tough, gritty music that often veers into extremes of register and borders on chaos and violence, has embarked on writing a concerto for what can be the most lyrical of instruments. 'I suppose if you look down the years of my career, I think I avoided it for a while,' he admits. 'I might once have been more associated with wind and brass instruments, but I like to think that's not true any more. This is a kind of tentative look into the violin.'

Tentative might be a bit too modest, for Birtwistle is actually no stranger to string music. He has written solo parts in other pieces, and his *Pulse Shadows*, written in 1996, is a major work

including nine movements for string quartet. He even had a few violin lessons as a youngster: 'I know what it's like to feel the fingerboard, and the whole question of instruments where you feel a vibration. The instrument is nothing without you and your body – your whole being is the sounding board.'

The origins of the new concerto lie in a commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra. 'I think a violin concerto was my suggestion,' says Birtwistle, 'but I can't be certain – it was a long time ago. In any case, I saw it as a sort of challenge.'

AT THE TIME OF WRITING, soloist Christian Tetzlaff has seen the score but is yet to start serious work on learning the piece. 'I saw Birtwistle about six months ago and he showed me some of the music,' he says. 'It all looks very interesting and very playable.'

Playability has always been a thorny issue for performers tackling new music. Does Tetzlaff really have no concerns about new pieces by composers who are not themselves string players? 'I find that the beauty in some new violin concertos comes specifically from the fact that the composers are not violin players – because they have ideas about new sounds that make us go somewhere where we have maybe not been before.'

And conversely, has Birtwistle consciously tried to make the solo part very violinistic? 'Well, I don't know what that is, you



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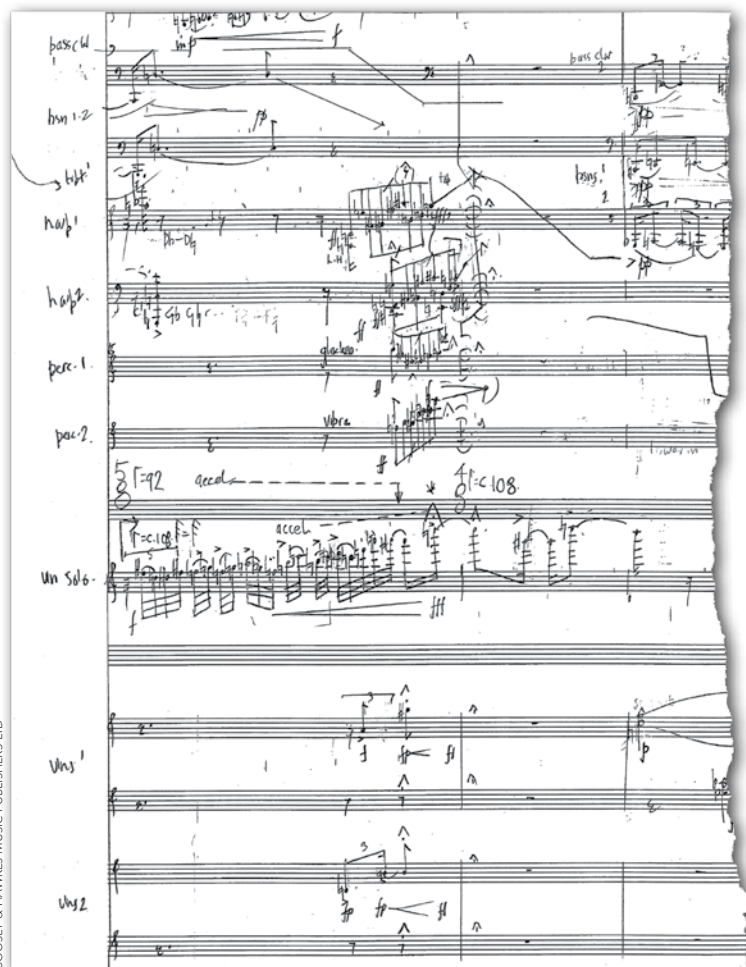
'Composers are my heroes. Their vision is the only guideline you should have'

CHRISTIAN TETZLAFF

see,' he admits. He's open about some of his specific concerns: 'I get a bit worried about double-stops – I know the ones you can play, but it's more a question of the speed that can be achieved. And there's also the question of harmonics.' Has he compromised any of his notoriously aggressive sound world to ensure that the violin is heard? He accepts that this is an issue: 'The one thing that scares me is the question of audibility. It's very difficult. But if you look at the score carefully, you'll see that the attacks of the other instruments when the violin is playing never correspond. It's like the medieval hocket technique. If you take the registers of the instruments, I've tried to be very careful that nothing is sitting on anybody else's territory.'

But Tetzlaff shouldn't be too concerned about any particularly strange demands, as the composer explains: 'I find it very hard if people show me different techniques, or things you can do to the instrument to change the sound. It all has to come from the music – if the context doesn't come in order to use it, then I don't use it. I don't like funny noises too much!'

How will Tetzlaff go about learning such a challenging new piece? 'Technically, I'll read the Birtwistle Concerto again and again, but without the violin. Then I work in a really concentrated way in the weeks before the performance so that I know the piece really well.' It seems that the practicalities of a professional musician's life dictate this way of working: 'The difference with ▶



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▲ A continuous, organic journey: Birtwistle's Violin Concerto

the Beethoven or Brahms concertos is that many of us learnt them when we were younger, and spent weeks and weeks just learning and practising them. In my situation, with a family and plenty of performances, it's just not possible to work in that way.'

Tetzlaff shouldn't feel that he has too much of a fight on his hands in Birtwistle's Concerto, since the composer's view on the relationship between soloist and orchestra is a far cry from the Romantic notion of an individual battling against the orchestra. 'The relationship is more like a dialogue – like a conversation, which can take many turns,' explains Birtwistle. 'It's sort of a continuous, organic journey.'

The composer has had a long-standing connection with theatre – he was music director at London's National Theatre from 1975 to 1983, and has written extensively for the stage. Even his non-narrative instrumental works often hint at a theatrical inspiration. The same is true of the new Violin Concerto, at least in the composer's conception of his ensemble. 'I see the orchestra as a chorus, in the Greek sense. But within it are individual voices. I devised a way to fracture the "chorus" so that it's a crowd of people – all with a single purpose, but with individual voices.'

These individual voices emerge from the orchestra throughout the concerto in a series of duets with the solo violin for flute, piccolo, cello, oboe and bassoon – thus taking the ideas of conversation and theatricality even further.

Birtwistle couldn't help but be aware of his illustrious forebears when writing the new concerto. 'Gosh, there are a lot of great violin concertos, written by people who really knew the

instrument, who could really play it well.' Did he look to any for inspiration? 'Not really – I tried not to look at any particular pieces. But there are some great concertos – even Tchaikovsky managed to write a good piece!'

FROM HIS PERSPECTIVE AS A PERFORMER, Tetzlaff also draws comparisons with earlier concertos in explaining his approach to the new concerto. 'I have never so far collaborated with a composer. I can't consult Beethoven or Brahms or any of the other great composers about their concertos. Instead, I try to read carefully what they are about, and this is what I want to give to every piece.' But surely there's a difference with a new concerto in that the composer can be contacted, involved, asked questions. What, for instance, if there are things that Tetzlaff would like to change? For the violinist, that question simply doesn't arise. 'Sometimes I find that too much is made of the influence of players. Even in a piece like the Brahms Concerto, the conception of Brahms is utterly violinistic, beautiful and perfect. Okay, Joachim made some suggestions as to how some arpeggios should be played, but it didn't change anything about the piece.'

Tetzlaff is at pains to stress his faithfulness to the score, however technically difficult it is. 'The vision is the composer's vision. The composers are my heroes. Their vision is the only guideline you should have. If something is awkward, they probably knew it would be awkward, and it was probably part of the plan to be like that.'

So there's never been a time when Tetzlaff has had to make changes to a solo part? 'Maybe a note here or there, but very minor details. I would never want to change anything so that it suits me better, because I find that beside the point.' For the violinist, not involving a composer in the practice and performance process is less about keeping them at arm's length, and more about preserving the authenticity of their original thoughts.

For his part, Birtwistle seems content to accept that once a piece is completed, it's out of his hands and the responsibility lies with the performers. When asked whether his perspective on the new concerto differs from that of the performers, he replies simply, 'I don't know what perspective the performers are going to have. I've no idea what they're going to do.' How does it feel to hear a piece he's written for the first time? 'I can't wait for the first rehearsal. Particularly with something that's virtuosic, like this, you always get something you didn't put in. But to be honest I'm not really surprised by performers' interpretations. I'm more surprised by how the piece works as a piece, how time works, how the argument flows. The aspects of time, duration and scale – they're the things that are the most difficult to calculate as a composer.'

Tetzlaff too is looking forward to playing the piece with an orchestra. 'When I'm preparing my violin part it really helps me to see the full score, but with this piece I have difficulty in imagining what it will sound like. For me the first rehearsal will be a huge surprise!' ■

Read about Christian Tetzlaff's return to the Bach solo works in the July 2005 issue of *The Strad* by subscribing to The Strad Archive at www.thestrad.com/StradArchive.asp