

The Manchester School

By Andy Glover

Many musical groupings always seem to involve three names. In one of my last blogs there was Searle, Hamilton and Fricker, then the Soviet groups of Shostakovich, Khatachurian and Prokofiev, there is the Northampton trio of Alwyn, Arnold and Rubbra and the Manchester school who again has a triumvirate of names that make up its core. Harrison Birtwistle, Peter Maxwell Davies and Alexander Goehr. There were two other names that were associated with this group in its early days, those of Elgar Howarth, the conductor, and the late John Ogden who was considered possibly as the greatest pianist of his generation not only in Britain but abroad as well.



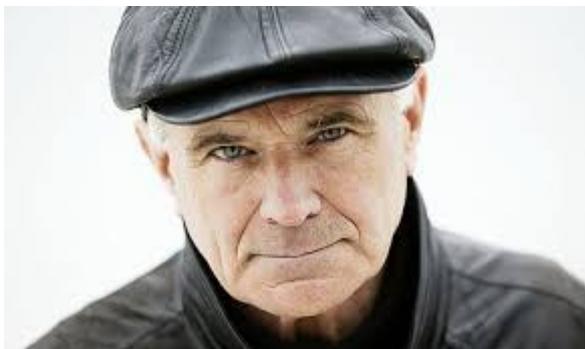
Birtwistle



Ogden



Goehr



Maxwell Davies



Howarth

The Manchester School were not so much a group of students from the same college, more a group of like-minded individuals based in Manchester who happened to be studying at the, now, Royal Northern College of Music and the Manchester University. They did not set out with the intentional purpose of being considered a school of composition or music, like say the 2nd Viennese School were around Schoenberg, more a loose group of musicians with similar ideals. They were disparate figures who were interested in the European avant-garde of the previous few years, the works of Stockhausen, Boulez, Nono, Ligeti, Maderna, Dallapiccola et al. They rejected what they considered to be the conservatism of British composition but by doing so cut out a group of composers (Fricker, Searle, Hamilton, Still) who had been making strong moves in British composition towards a more a-tonal language and technique. The Manchester group's reactionary sights were set more on Britten, Walton and Tippett and the pastoralism of the previous generations than these more advanced composers.

As a group they were known to one another and occasionally would socialise, but more than anything were individuals with something of a common goal. Birtwistle and Maxwell Davies were the enfant-terrible's of their age and their early works were seen as extreme and harsh as well as just plain difficult to perform. Goehr composed more serialistically than the other two due to his father's (Walter Goehr the conductor) influences of Vienna, and Schoenberg, which he had left as the Nazi's took over in 1936. Goehr was later to reject this mode of expression in favour of a richer almost pseudo romantic soundworld. Max and Birtwistle set up their own performing group in the late 1960's with like-minded musicians called the "Pierrot Players". This group performed Birtwistle's and Max's work as well as the famous work of Schoenberg's, "Pierrot Lunaire". When Birtwistle went his own way the group changed their name to the "Fires of London" under which they made many premier recordings of Maxwell Davies's works including his iconoclastic "Eight Songs for a Mad King" and the beautifully evocative and haunting "Ave Maris Stella".

Maxwell Davies "Eight Songs For A Mad King": <http://youtu.be/5npBnlqnRdg>

Birtwistle "Punch and Judy" Scene from: <http://youtu.be/9HbhA0jPy6M>

Goehr "Romanza for Cello and Orchestra": <http://youtu.be/Ly5F6YVdFVQ>

John Ogden had been a close ally of the loose group and had performed many new works as well as many British premieres of the classics of the new European avant-garde. He became involved with the music of the Anglo-Indian composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji as his doctoral thesis and slowly but surely became more and more mentally disturbed due to his intense studying. He eventually ended up being hospitalised and eventually a while after his

release became ill and died in 1989 of pneumonia. It was a very sad loss to music as anyone who came across him will testify. A great talent lost.

Elgar Howarth became a renowned conductor of contemporary scores, and an expert on the scores of Birtwistle and his operas and still conducts many of Sir Harry's premieres. He has also had quite a career as a Brass Band conductor and helped and suggested that the Grimethorpe Colliery band commission "Grimethorpe Aria" from Birtwistle in the early 1970's.

Maxwell Davies with age seems to have become a pillar of the society he was once the enfant terrible of, with a knighthood, and until June this year, Master of the Queens Music he has softened with age. He has gone on to compose, so far, 10 large scale and very interesting Symphonies. Birtwistle has gone on to Well, just be Harry Birtwistle. His uncompromising style has altered but little over the years and his operas have grown in number but it is works such as "The Triumph of Time", "Gawain's Journey" and "Panic" that have had the most influence on many composers. "Panic" is the only new contemporary work to have been played at "The Last Night of the Proms" cause consternation amongst the ultra-conservatives and the self-righteous pillars of the so called music establishment in equal measure.

Paul Griffiths once described trying to interview Birtwistle as being similar to "Trying to mate two Pandas,....nearly impossible." That in a way sums up what the Manchester School once was. Difficult and spikey, and most certainly intangible. A most British institution that was never actually an institution or even truly existed.