



Silbury Air - Harrison Birtwistle

In this resource, the children will work in groups of three to create their own musical object – three unison 8 note melodies using given pitches across a small register. Once this is created they will apply different techniques and colourations to the musical object in order to present it as if seen from different angles and perspectives. Secondly, the children will work in large groups to create rhythmic planes of different speeds, dynamics and articulations. These two ideas will be combined to create a larger composition.

Page 1 – Programme Note

Silbury Air is named after Silbury Hill, a prehistoric mound in Wiltshire, the biggest artificial mound in Europe, being 125 feet high and covering more than five acres. Its use and purpose, after centuries of speculation, still remain a mystery. The music of the Air is not in any way meant to be a romantic reflection of the hill's enigmatic location – nor a parallel with any of its evident geometry. Seen from a distance the hill presents itself as an artificial but organic intruder on the landscape. I have often alluded to my music of landscape presenting musical ideas through the juxtaposition and repetition of “static blocks” or, preferable for my terminology, objects. These objects themselves being subjected to a vigorous invented logic via modes of juxtaposition, modes of repetition, modes of change. The sum total of these processes is a compound artificial landscape or “imaginary” landscape, to use Paul Klee's title.

Harrison Birtwistle

Page 2 – Description

Birtwistle often describes his musical ideas as ‘objects’ which the listener can ‘view’ from different view points and angles. This is just one of many visual analogies he has used to describe his music. From the visual artist Paul Klee Birtwistle borrows the metaphor ‘taking a line for a walk’ as way to describe his melodies and, the phrase ‘imaginary landscape’ to describe his music. Another favourite image Birtwistle uses for explaining how his pieces work is to use the metaphor of taking a walk around a town. These simple, visual analogies are useful for children unused to thinking musically/aurally and offer simple ways to generate and transform musical ideas.

Learning Objectives

- To be able to organise blocks of musical material into larger musical structures
- To understand, to some extent, Birtwistle’s composing strategies and processes



- To be able to apply some of Birtwistle’s composing techniques and strategies – in particular ideas of:
 - musical blocks that can be viewed from different directions and from different perspectives
 - melodies created from a limited set of close pitches
 - Juxtaposing contrasting material – e.g. extremes of dynamics

Resources Needed

- Own instruments
- Tuned and untuned percussion
- Photocopies of note grids
- Pieces of A4 paper
- Strips of paper

Page 3 – Activity One: Analogy Number One – Taking a Line for a Walk

Composer Harrison Birtwistle has often described his melodies using the words of visual artist Paul Klee as ‘taking a line for a walk’. In this activity the children are asked to do just that. It is a lovely analogy that can support the children’s imagination. You could even start the activity by asking the children to draw a line then plot it on the grid rather than by choosing notes to create a line.

Birtwistle’s melodies often use a narrow defined pitch range. Working in groups of three, ask the children to each devise an 8 note melody (could be shorter) using notes in the same pitch area (e.g. D-G). It should move up and down like a line going for a walk, not necessarily just by step. They should plot it on the paper grid using one line for each melody. It is better to stay in the same register and important that the children’s notes line up vertically (see photo). Ask the children to look at the different ups and downs of their lines and to try and have a mixture going on at the same time i.e. when one line is going up the other is going down. (see an example on next page)

Give the children time to practice playing their melodies together in rhythmic unison. i.e. each plays their own line but moves in time with the other two children at a constant tempo, one beat per note. These three lines played together are their musical object.

You could also ask them to practice playing their ‘musical object’ at different speeds, dynamics and articulations – this will be helpful for the next activity



Page 4 - Activity Two: Analogy Number Two – Thinking About Silbury Hill

In *Silbury Air*, Birtwistle is not setting out to create a musical depiction of the hill. It is useful instead to think of Birtwistle viewing it as curious and mysterious object that can be seen from many different perspectives: from afar as a strange unnatural protrusion in the landscape or from close too marvelling at its overwhelming size, shape and symmetry. His biographer Jonathan Cross offers this description,

‘As the clouds move across the Wiltshire Plains, the light on the hill always changing; one sees it from ever new perspectives.’

A technique Birtwistle uses time and time again in his music is to repeat a musical object (think hill) note for note but create different versions of it that, sometimes are heard alone and sometimes simultaneously. Another useful analogy is the cubist paintings of Picasso. Here objects are broken up and instead of depicting the object from one viewpoint, offer multiple viewpoints simultaneously. Ask the children to imagine how their ‘musical object’ would sound, and create a new version of it, if:

1. It was viewed (a) very close up and (b) in the distance
2. It was (c) a very bright sunny day and (d) a dark/evening or foggy day

The children will end up with four new ways to ‘colour’ their ‘musical object’. As they do this activity ask them to think about tempo, dynamics, articulations and instrumental techniques (muted, plucked, bowed etc.). What is important is that the children must not add anything new to their musical objects. This is not programmatic music.

Page 5 – Activity Three: Analogy Number Three – Walking Around a Small Town

Birtwistle also uses the analogy of ‘walking around a small town’ to describe what he does with a musical idea.

‘Taking a walk through a town—especially the sort of small town more common in continental Europe than Britain. Such a walk might start in the town square. Having explored its main features, we would set off down one of the side streets. As the walk continues, we might glimpse the town square down different streets, sometime a long way off, other times quite close. We may never return to the square in the rest of the walk or we may visit a new part of it that was not explored initially.’

His image conveys the way that a core musical idea is altered, varied and distorted as the piece of music progresses. The children have already thought about and created versions

that describe different times of day and different weather conditions. Taking Birtwistle's analogy of walking around a small town, this next activity asks the children to think about how their musical object would sound if:

1. Viewed through a doorway or between two building
2. Parts of the object were obscured by other objects (in our version we use lampposts!)
3. Using two pieces of paper (see photograph) ask the children to create a doorway which leaves just 3 or 4 notes revealed – this is a new version of the musical object – ask them to practice playing it – repeating it over and over as an ostinato.
4. Ask the children to imagine that some of their musical object is being obscured by lampposts. Using strips of paper (see photograph) put 2 or 3 strips over the notes across the whole grid. Where there is now a 'lamppost' the children should treat this as a rest to create another new version of their musical object.

You could also ask the children to think about viewing it:

1. As a reflection (optional) – distorted?? backwards??
2. As a shadow (optional) – longer or shorter notes??

Page 6 – Activity Three continued

The children will now have three versions of their musical object:

1. The original
2. The 'doorway' version
3. The 'lamppost' version

And four ways of 'colouring' their object:

1. In the distance
2. Close up
3. Bright and sunny
4. Dark/night/foggy etc.

Ask each group to choose their three favourite versions, each with its own colouration. Encourage them to choose contrasting ideas. E.g. (a) the doorway version in the distance, (b) the lamppost version close up, (c) the original version.

Don't worry if not all of these have been achieved and with older or more experienced children you may give them more opportunity to think of other versions and colourations.

Page 7 – Activity Four: Pulses and Rhythmic Planes

Another feature of Birtwistle's music is repeated pulses of the same pitch with groups of instruments frequently playing a different speeds and different pitches simultaneously. The effect is that of rhythmic planes moving at different speeds. Often the rhythmic planes are



orchestrated by type (brass, woodwind, strings, percussion). In *Silbury Air* the speeds at which the pulses are played are governed and related by careful logic through what Birtwistle call a 'pulse labyrinth' which is set out at the beginning of the score. This activity will explore the idea of rhythmic planes moving at different speeds simultaneously. Birtwistle also gives precise articulations and dynamics which range from pppp (very quiet) con sord (with mute) to ffff staccato accented.

Organise the children into instrumental groups (not the threes they have been previously working in) and nominate a conductor for each group. Ask each group to choose a note they can all play from the original pitch range you choose. Firstly ask them to practice holding a steady pulse, on the chosen pitch, given by the conductor. They should then try this at different tempos. The conductor should count them in at the desired tempo and keep indicating the tempo until they stop the group. Once they feel confident with this they could then decide to, and practice different articulations and dynamics, changing each time they stop and start. Ask the groups to develop signals so that the group knows what articulation and dynamic to play each time.

Create a whole group piece with groups starting and stopping in their own time, coming in at their own tempo and with their own dynamics and articulations.

Page 8 – Activity Five: Putting it Together

As a group you now have:

1. The three favourite version of the musical objects created by each group of three.
2. The whole group rhythmic planes piece/section.

Ask the children as individuals or in their original groups of threes to plan a complete composition structuring all of this material. Remember different musical objects can repeat, form ostinatos and overlap with each. However the rhythmic planes section is always heard on its own. As they do this, ask the children to:

- Making sure that at any given moment all the musical material can be heard.
- Think about what makes a good start and what will make a good ending.
- Consider how Birtwistle likes to juxtapose contrasting material – contrasting in dynamics and speeds.

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Try out the different ideas. Try to choose contrasting ideas if you don't have time to hear all the different versions. Ask them to think about and discuss what works and what doesn't.

Ask the children to refine their ideas based on what they have heard. You could also record all the individual sections and ask the children to plan their composition using Garage band.