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# The Shadow of Opera: Dramatic Narrative and Musical Discourse in *Gawain*

DAVID BEARD

## Abstract

The opera *Gawain* (1991; revised 1994 and 1999) brought together Harrison Birtwistle and the poet David Harsent in a reworking of the late fourteenth-century narrative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. That Birtwistle asked Harsent to make a large number of alterations to his original libretto has already been documented. The present article, which draws on the sketching processes of both librettist and composer, reveals the nature and the ramifications of those changes. The discussion is particularly concerned with the contradictions and multiple narrative layers that resulted from the Harsent–Birtwistle collaboration, and with the composer's suggestion that there is both a secret drama in the orchestra, and instruments that function like unheard voices. A consideration of Birtwistle's sketches also reveals a preoccupation with line, in particular with finding different ways of shadowing vocal and instrumental parts, and ambiguously shrouding ordinary lines in layers of varied reflection. These musical devices represent Birtwistle's response to Harsent's interest in divided subjectivity, and to the idea that *Gawain* should develop a sense of his own identity.

## Introduction

'*Gawain* is about story-telling and, in some aspects, it's quite naïve.'<sup>1</sup> Despite this remark by Birtwistle, the ideological implications of story telling are inescapable, since, in Ricœur's terms, 'emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession'.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the nature of an operatic project requires that this configuration be drawn from more than one perspective, generating multiple, often conflicting, interpretations. In *Gawain* it is true that the composer and librettist offer differing perspectives, but the topic of narrative becomes even more absorbing if the innately theatrical nature of Birtwistle's purely instrumental music is also taken into account. Much attention has already been given to this aspect of the composer's instrumental works, especially with regard to the influence of Aristotle's analysis of formal archetypes in Greek tragedy, the physical movements of players, and the implication that soloists and groups of instruments have either clearly defined roles or enter into an exchange or negotiation of identities.<sup>3</sup> One implication is that hidden rules

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Examination of the collaboration between Harsent and Birtwistle has been made possible by the existence of Harsent's handwritten sketches and annotated typescripts of early drafts of the libretto, made following conversations with the composer, stored at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basle. My gratitude goes to the Foundation, to Cardiff University for generous financial support, and to Danijela Špirić-Beard for assistance with the music examples.

1 Birtwistle, in an interview with Mark Pappenheim, *The Independent*, 8 April 1994, p. 21.

2 Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 65.

3 For a more detailed discussion of these topics see Cross, *Harrison Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music*; and Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*. An indication of the currency of these ideas is reflected in the title of the London South

determine the events, as in a game or ceremony. But what happens to Birtwistle's concept of instrumental theatre when he composes an opera? In particular, how is the need for a narrative and dramatic framework in *Gawain* reconciled with Birtwistle's interest in instrumental theatre?

Birtwistle is obviously predisposed towards myth and legend, and his stage works often generate archetypal situations and characters, as well as themes of universal significance. But it is widely held that *Gawain* – the first stage work Birtwistle explicitly described as opera – denotes a shift away from the dramatic emphases of earlier stage works such as *Punch and Judy* (1967), with its inflated Baroque conventions, and from the artificially stylized, non-linear treatment of myth in *The Mask of Orpheus* (1983). The gesture towards simpler narrative devices in *Gawain* is to some extent anticipated in *Yan Tan Tethera* (1984), although characters in the latter remain archetypal. By comparison, narrative in *Gawain* is allowed to develop with less alteration or time reversal, although these elements remain important.<sup>4</sup> There are moments of clear identification between the orchestra and the characters, reflected in the pairing of strident horns with Arthur and gruff bassoons with the Green Knight, while Jonathan Cross has noted the presence of 'conventionally expressive' vocal lines, a strong musical characterization for Gawain, and a moment of self-recognition and reversal in Act II when Gawain declares he is not the hero of the drama.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, signs of character development are extremely restricted in the libretto.<sup>6</sup> True emotions are often disguised through formulaic utterances,<sup>7</sup> while detailed notes concerning character relations, sketched by Harsent, are mysteriously absent from the final text. While there appears to be a shift in emphasis, all of Birtwistle's central musico-dramatic preoccupations hold. To a large extent, *Gawain* and *The Mask of Orpheus* are two very different operatic manifestations of the same concern, namely, the formalizing of narratives through clearly defined musical and dramatic frameworks.

### Principal Narrative Themes

David Harsent was invited to write the libretto for *Gawain* after publishing his series of poems entitled *Mr Punch* (1984), a work that is remarkably close in conception to Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*, despite the fact that Harsent was unaware of its existence.<sup>8</sup> An important precursor of the libretto is Harsent's poem *The Windhound*, published in 1989. The poem

Bank Centre's 1996 concert series 'Secret Theatres: the Harrison Birtwistle Retrospective' and its 2004 series 'Birtwistle Games'. In addition, Jürg Stenzl recently commented that 'Birtwistle's music is always dramatic, a theatre of sculptural sound' ('A "More Secret World"', 35).

4 For a comprehensive plot summary see Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years*, 53–60.

5 See Cross, *Harrison Birtwistle*, 218, 139, and 77, respectively.

6 Robert Adlington comments that something of the original poem's 'psychological two-dimensionality', stemming from its evocation of 'an idealised world, in which Gawain is a stylised representation of chivalric gallantry and courtesy, rather than a character in the modern sense [...] is carried through into the opera' (*The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*, 28).

7 In his sketches for the first draft of the libretto Harsent refers to Bertilak 'masking [his] aggression [towards Gawain] by using the terms of their bargain'. See Paul Sacher Foundation, Birtwistle Collection, *Gawain* Libretto (henceforth *Gaw/Lib*), 9, 34.

8 Harsent's collaborations with Birtwistle have extended beyond *Gawain* to include *The Woman and the Hare* (1999), *Ring Dance of the Nazarene* (2003), and *The Minotaur*, scheduled for performance at Covent Garden in 2007.

explores two subjects, an anonymous woman and a windhound, as contrasting expressions of the same idea, personified by the composite pronoun 'she'. This double-voiced subject is placed in a shifting landscape of outer and inner worlds – by the sea, in a bar-room, on a hillside, in city back streets – where the separate, instinctive desires of the woman and the hound collapse into one.<sup>9</sup>

Similar themes of divided identity, shape shifting,<sup>10</sup> self-interest, and the conflict between inner and outer worlds pervade the opera. Act I opens in the ordered but sullen world of Arthur's court. Morgan Le Fay, the opera's magical conspirator, who is invisible to the members of the court, plots Arthur's downfall. The mood changes when the Green Knight enters, goading the court, defying its customs, and challenging Arthur's knights to cut off his head. To the court's amazement, after his beheading by Gawain, the Green Knight picks up his head and reminds Gawain that he awaits the same fate one year later. A year passes (depicted at the end of Act I) and Gawain's journey to meet the Green Knight a second time begins (at the opening of Act II). On his way he rests at a castle, where he is tested once again, this time by the castle's keeper Sir Bertilak de Hautdesert. The two agree to an unusual game: Bertilak will hunt while Gawain rests, after which they will exchange whatever they 'might have gained'.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, Gawain believes he has nothing to lose and everything to gain. Acting under the influence of Morgan Le Fay, Lady de Hautdesert attempts to seduce Gawain while her husband is away. Twice Gawain resists, but on the third occasion he accepts from her a life-preserving sash, which he fails to declare to Bertilak. Gawain rides out to meet the Green Knight and receives three axe blows. The worst of these results in a nick to his neck, which is punishment for his failure to admit to possessing the sash. This leads to a sense of shame and self-doubt when Gawain returns to Arthur's court. His self-interest not only upsets the balance of values in Arthur's court but it also exposes the dual nature of the Green Knight, who, having played the role of Sir Bertilak, admonishes Gawain for his failure. Despite the Green Knight's association with the Green Man of folklore, and thus with nature and concepts of rebirth and renewal, and his apparent embodiment of the wild, untamed outdoors (Birtwistle describes his entrance into Arthur's court as positively anarchic),<sup>12</sup> he also upholds the court's moral values. When he is beheaded, the forceful articulation of his amplified offstage voice by his severed onstage head has clear parallels with other operatic voices of paternal and civic authority, such as Mozart's Commendatore and Wagner's Titurel.<sup>13</sup> In this sense the Green Knight portrays a form of the dualities evoked by the *Windhound* poem and employs the kind of modernist trope of an 'unresolved tension between difference and similarity, with which Birtwistle is very much at home'.<sup>14</sup>

9 The danger is that this device, which neatly expresses the slippery nature of identity, 'teeters on the brink of confirming the deep but also careless misogyny of our culture' (see Rees-Jones, 'The Politics of Seeing').

10 Two characters in the opera, Sir Bertilak de Hautdesert and the Green Knight, are incarnations of the same character, and for this reason are performed by one singer.

11 Harsent, *Gawain*, 53.

12 This comment was made during an interview for the BBC's televised broadcast of *Gawain* in April 1992.

13 The amplified voice is marked in the score as 'menacing, awesome and mysterious'.

14 Whittall, 'The Mechanisms of Lament', 97.

Birtwistle was also attracted to the Gawain story because of its resonances with the music dramas of Wagner, in particular *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal*,<sup>15</sup> and a consideration of the opera in light of this interest reveals differences of intention between composer and librettist. At the time of *Gawain*'s premiere there was much reference to the influence of Wagner.<sup>16</sup> Many critics cited the continuity of the music, including its use of extended line, as an example of Wagner's influence, but this concern in Birtwistle's music may be traced back at least to *Deowa* (1983), which pre-dates the composer's interest in Wagner.<sup>17</sup> Other musical links are apparent in the use of leitmotifs and the scale of the orchestral music, which situates the work squarely in the realm of grand opera, but there are also parallels in terms of subject matter and narrative sources. Both *Parsifal* and *Gawain* depict isolated, closed communities, bound by unwritten social codes that compel Gawain to ask Arthur to 'release me from my place' when he wishes to take up the Green Knight's challenge. However, Harsent has little respect for Arthur's court, describing its members as ignorant and pompous boys – 'beardless boys', in the words of the Green Knight. Harsent's unpublished early sketches for the libretto contain a more detailed illustration of his views:

Arthur's court, and Arthur himself, are content with (almost dependent on) their rituals and lore: a means of Proscribing [*sic*] the vagaries of the 'life outside'. The poet hints – I shall more than hint – at a notion of the emotional defensiveness that derives from ritual courtliness and (by the same token) the pressures opposing that ritual – a raw, unstructured 'life outside': not just a life bereft of the comfort of rules, but one delineated by risk and the pain of self-discovery. In a Jungian sense, Arthur and the court represent a blindness of the psyche. Of Arthur, the poet says[:]

He was so joly of his joyfnes and somewhat childgered;  
His lif liked him lyght, he loved the lasse  
Auther to longe lye or to longe sitte,  
So busied him his yonge blode and his brayn wilde.<sup>18</sup>

This callowness appears almost smug and self-congratulatory to a modern ear: a boorish unworldliness which again emerges when Gawain returns wearing the symbol of his sin, only to have members of the court adopt it – lightly, unthinkingly – as an emblem which they immediately trivialise.<sup>19</sup>

15 See Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years*, 78, 80, and 89.

16 For example, Michael Kennedy ('Birtwistle Rides into King Arthur's Court') reported: 'It is not only Arthur's court, its knights, magic, transformation scenes and journey of self-discovery that make the comparison [to *Parsifal*] feasible, but also the music's Wagnerian scale'.

17 In *Deowa* the soprano and clarinet form extended counterpoint in an attempt to capture what Birtwistle, in the sketches, refers to as 'seamless pastoral' and 'seamless song'; the voices of the 'fugue' in *Yan Tan Tethera* (1984), too, are marked 'seamlessly flowing'.

18 Translated by Brian Stone as 'He was charming and cheerful, child-like and gay | And loving active life, little did he favour | Lying down for long or lolling on a seat, | So robust his young blood and his beating brain' (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 24).

19 *Gaw*/Lib 1, typescript, p. 9.

These thoughts are expanded in some of Harsent's more recent comments on the opera:

[One aspect] that particularly interested me was what I saw as the extended metaphor of the indoors/outdoors division between culture and nature, between society's rules and a self-governing wilderness, between the trappings of a spurious decency and unignorable appetites, between the mendacity inherent in 'civilised' behaviour and the unfakeable bare bones of landscape and weather.<sup>20</sup>

Harsent's project is revisionist in nature, standing in critical opposition to Wagner's nostalgic, nineteenth-century longing for *Gemeinschaft*, a society based on notions of kinship, shared mythological language, belief in the supernatural, and the resistance of internal threats to 'the utopian order [...] from the potentially disruptive force of human passion and sexuality'.<sup>21</sup> However, it reinforces a set of culturally specific mythical associations that would have appealed to Birtwistle, who was particularly attracted to the Gawain story because of its setting in the north of England and its use of local dialect. Further parallels emerge from *Gawain's* and *Parsifal's* concern to rework mythology. Slavoj Žižek notes that as soon as Parsifal takes over the Grail community he changes its rules, announcing that the Grail will remain openly displayed to the public. Prior to Parsifal's reign 'the Grail community was effectively a self-enclosed male circle, whereas he opens it toward the feminine'.<sup>22</sup> When Kundry 'falls lifeless' Amfortas is healed and the Grail revealed, suggesting that the feminine passes from the body of Kundry to the body of the Grail community; in Žižek's terms the community is healed by the 'pacifying eternal feminine'.<sup>23</sup> Similar, if more modest, notions inform *Gawain*. Harsent transformed the role of Morgan Le Fay from her marginal status in the original poem to the 'principal driving-force' of the opera, although both she and her accomplice Lady de Hautdesert are invisible to the court.<sup>24</sup> He describes Morgan as 'the winner', since, owing to her actions, Gawain begins to question the values of Arthur's court.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to the original *Gawain* poet, who 'viewed Morgan's motive as evil', Harsent sees Morgan's role as 'essentially virtuous, no matter what her motive'.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the opera shares *Parsifal's* dialectical view of women as wounders and healers, exemplified by Harsent's depiction of the two onstage narrators, Morgan and Lady de Hautdesert, as 'invisible manipulators'.<sup>27</sup> However, Harsent's views were not as one-sided as

20 Harsent, in the interview with Lydia Vianu, 'Poetry is a Way of Life'.

21 Bokina, 'The Utopian Vision of Romantic Anticapitalism', 93.

22 Žižek, 'The Everlasting Irony of the Community', 173. The idea of Parsifal being feminized by Kundry is also discussed by Jean-Jacques Nattiez in *Wagner Androgyne*, 163–72. For a summary of theories concerning the concept of the feminine in *Parsifal* see Abbate, 'Metempsychotic Wagner', 109–12.

23 Žižek, 'The Everlasting Irony of the Community', 169. On this subject Christopher Morris notes that 'Wagner's construction of the maternal [...] reinforces the notion of woman as the figure who nurtures and sustains, sacrificing to enable the realisation of man's goals' (*Reading Opera between the Lines*, 199).

24 Harsent, 'Morgan Le Fay', 38.

25 See P. Porter, 'Inner and Outer Worlds', 36.

26 See P. Porter, 'Inner and Outer Worlds', 35.

27 *Gaw/Lib* 1, typescript, p. 10. A page from the first draft of the libretto contains some further revealing text concerning the portrayal of women in *Gawain*. An exchange between Lady de Hautdesert and Gawain, later excised, reads: 'Lady de H: But if she changed the rules, as women do – if she changed her mind – the man would lose. [...] A woman so fickle would have to take her chances', *Gaw/Lib* 9, 37. Harsent then observes that Lady de Hautdesert is 'suggesting

these statements may imply. Although his three female characters conform to archetypes, he conceives Guinevere as the only person in the opera to see Arthur's court for what it really is:

Guinevere, as she sings the lines [to Gawain: 'Now you are more yourself, | let's speak again'], is taken aback by her own sudden apprehension of the falsity of Arthur's and the court's fiercely defended idea of chivalry. She understands that it's Arthur's blindness – his refusal to admit a real world in which sin is committed – that forces him to deny Gawain's true experience and to make a heroic token of the green sash.<sup>28</sup>

This qualifies Rhian Samuel's impression of the opera as wholly lacking in sympathy towards women.<sup>29</sup> She directly criticizes Birtwistle in this regard, citing his quip that he would like to see the misogyny of the original poem fully exposed,<sup>30</sup> a view that could be seen to be illustrated by the fact that Guinevere's lines are not musically distinct from those around her. But while Samuel's view may justly apply to Birtwistle's vision of the opera, it does not adequately reflect Harsent's perspective.

A more significant divergence from Harsent's ideas, however, is reflected in an interview Birtwistle gave the year *Gawain* was completed, in which he drew attention to his desire to 'make a separate drama for the orchestra, so the instruments are like voices, but you can't hear what they're singing; there's another drama which is "secret"'.<sup>31</sup> This is a variation on remarks Birtwistle made concerning *The Mask of Orpheus* (1983), where he suggested that the orchestra contains a through-composed, organic substructure of its own, independent of more strophic music that supports the action on the stage.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to this, the emphasis in Birtwistle's comments on *Gawain* regarding the idea of a secret drama and instruments being 'like voices' suggests the presence of two simultaneous but contrasting processes. On the one hand, it hints at the presence of an alternative plot that is encoded in purely musical terms;<sup>33</sup> on the other hand, the reference to 'voices' implies a form of discourse or rhetorical process. Although Birtwistle's statement implies that these ideas are combined, they are actually separate devices operating on different narrative levels.

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a game of rape'. And later, Harsent's libretto has Gawain sing to the Green Knight, 'When you go back, give your wife a message – Morgan too . . . say I think of them as all men think of women', *Gaw/Lib* 9, 47.

28 *Gaw/Lib* 14 a, 74. An early version of the end of Act II also contains the following instructions: 'Guinevere senses the malevolence [of Morgan Le Fay] and registers a feeling of deep unease. She's fearful for Gawain, and scornful of the pact of chivalry that forces him to go in search of the Green Knight' (*Gaw/Lib* 9, 21). For the 1994 revision some important lines of Guinevere's were cut, although Harsent, in an undated letter to Birtwistle (*Gaw/Lib* 2nd version, 2–8), claimed to have made some attempt to retain a sense of her 'prescience' in the revised version of the Turning of the Seasons.

29 In the interview with Vianu ('Poetry is a Way of Life'), Harsent even states that 'The women in the piece – Morgan, Bertilak's wife, Guinevere – interested me much more than the self-regarding, callow boys of the Arthurian court'.

30 Samuel, 'Birtwistle's *Gawain*', 176.

31 A. Porter, 'Knight's Progress'.

32 Cited in Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*, 19. However, Birtwistle drew a distinction between this artificial, pre-composed device and a more intuitive substructure in *Yan Tan Tethera* (1984), in which 'situations occur when the music creates a counterpoint to the drama in ways I have not predicted' (Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle*, 145).

33 Birtwistle's comments regarding 'another drama which is secret' resonate with the concept of 'invisible theatre' that Stephen Pruslin has argued is expressed in the structure and layout of *Punch and Judy*, which was modelled on Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. See the liner notes to the London Sinfonietta recording of *Punch and Judy*, LP, Decca HEAD 24/25 (1980); reissued on CD, Etcetera KTC2014 (1989).



### Libretto and Dramatic Structure

Two published versions of Harsent's libretto for *Gawain* exist. The first, used in the 1991 performances, contains an extended scene at the end of Act I titled 'The Turning of the Seasons', which includes Marian antiphons and sections of the *Dies irae*.<sup>34</sup> A shorter and revised version, prepared for performances at Covent Garden in 1994, was subsequently the basis for a recording released in 1996.<sup>35</sup> The principal alteration in the revised version was the reduction of the Turning of the Seasons section from forty minutes to a little over ten.<sup>36</sup>

Harsent's libretto is written in a stylized form of poetic verse that occasionally incorporates more naturalistic dialogue. It therefore retains faith with the spirit of the original poem while incorporating contemporary idioms in a manner comparable to T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). Stylized features include the frequent repetition of phrases, as well as repetitions of single words such as 'voice' and 'choice', which mirror the alliterative devices of the original poem. However, Birtwistle is not consistent in his musical treatment of these textual repetitions, leading Robert Adlington to comment that throughout *Gawain* 'the music flirts moodily with both libretto and drama, at times haughtily indifferent, elsewhere responsive, even pictorial'.<sup>37</sup> An example of this occurs when Gawain arrives at Castle Hautdesert. There are four repetitions of the phrase 'help us to learn' in Lady de Hautdesert's words to Gawain. Although Birtwistle employs a similar downward contour in the voice with each repetition, recurring woodwind and brass chords run counter to the text's scheme. It is all the more surprising, therefore, to discover that the composer requested the textual repetitions himself (see Figure 1).<sup>38</sup> According to Rhian Samuel, Birtwistle claimed that his own role in structuring the libretto had been a crucial one:

I had asked Harry about the role he played in creating the structure of the libretto. (He had told me several times before that the original libretto lacked many of the repetitive sequences of the final version and that he had instructed David Harsent as to its form.) [...] Harry admitted that he'd distributed the text amongst the seasons and that the significant organisation of the libretto was an aspect more fundamental to *Gawain* than to many operas. It was vital therefore that critics and writers should realise the extent to which this was part of the *musical* creation.<sup>39</sup>

Adlington sees the music's tendency to 'flirt moodily' with the repetitions in the text as indicative of a 'tug and pull' between the opera's ritualistic and narrative tendencies, as well as Birtwistle's more general desire to respond to a libretto as a series of dramatic situations rather than words.<sup>40</sup> This conflict may additionally be seen as an extension of the purely

34 This was subsequently published by Universal Edition.

35 This was a live recording of the Royal Opera House performance, conducted by Elgar Howarth, made for BBC Radio3 on 20 April 1994 and released in 1996 on CD, Collins Classics, COLL70412.

36 Revisions started at least as early as Dec. 1992.

37 Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*, 87.

38 *Gaw/Lib* 13: 1, 32–3. Here the phrase is actually worded 'help us learn'.

39 Samuel, 'Birtwistle's *Gawain*', 175.

40 Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*, 29, 36.



**Early draft (dated 1989)**Lady de Hautdesert:

Now we shall learn [. . .]  
 Everyone knows  
 Of Gawain's skills in love:  
 His gentleness, his honour, his soft speech.  
 You must be our teacher – **help us learn**  
 The proper place of passion, how to step  
 Lightly between objection and desire;  
 How to take love's scent,  
 How to draw the quarry, how to guess  
 Its line of flight, how to run it down  
 And then . . . bring it to hand.

**Published libretto (1991), p. 50**Lady de Hautdesert:

**Help us to learn**  
 The proper place of passion,  
**Help us to learn**  
 The distance between objection and desire;  
**Help us to learn**  
 How to take love's scent,  
 How to draw the quarry, how to guess  
 Its line of flight; **help us to learn**  
 How to run it down and then –  
 Bring it to hand.

**Figure 1** Revision, at the composer's request, of Lady de Hautdesert's lines, Act II, scene 2.

instrumental works, in which repetitive schemes such as verse and refrain forms counterpoint more linear devices, as well as reflecting the composer's belief in the 'sanctity of the context',<sup>41</sup> which ensures that the music's progress cannot be overdetermined in advance. When it is realized that Birtwistle requested many of the repetitions in the text, the libretto may be understood as a form of pre-compositional design that the composer was at liberty to contravene, much in the way that he has superseded predetermined schemes in the past.<sup>42</sup> Such inconsistencies might then be interpreted in a more positive light, leading to a fruitful tension rather than a 'damaging rift of compositional intention'.<sup>43</sup> If there is a compositional

41 See Hall, 'The Sanctity of the Context'.

42 For a specific example see Beard, "'From the Mechanical to the Magical'", 29–33.

43 Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*, 30. Adlington does, however, offer the explanation that 'This apparent disregard for the structure of the text could conceivably be explained in terms of one of the opera's principal themes: the unreined natural world that Harsent depicts as a persistent threat to human certainties is symbolised by a "wild" music that fails to respect the text's cosy repetitiousness' (29).

challenge in this work, it lies in balancing the needs of the libretto with the desire for a purely instrumental theatre.

An outline of the principal dramatic elements as they appear in the final version of the opera is presented in Figure 2. Some of the most palpable contrasts between Harsent's first completed draft and the final version can be identified at the opening of the work.<sup>44</sup> Harsent had initially envisaged a chorus of servants performing the opening lines (later given to Morgan), and intervening refrains of 'Noel' sung by a chorus of knights (subsequently removed). Originally, the riddles were to be sung by Arthur; and there was no Fool, or the Morgan and Lady de Hautdesert pairing at the very opening. Additionally, Birtwistle had requested that Harsent alter or introduce many of the opera's most important musico-dramatic elements: the three door knocks delaying the entrance of the Green Knight; a development of the Green Knight's monologue following his beheading (from eight to thirty lines); an expansion of Morgan's lullaby; and the lengthening of Gawain's final soliloquy. (An aria that Harsent conceived for Arthur near the end of the opera, expressing his empathy for Gawain, was completely removed.) The Turning of the Seasons, originally conceived as the opening of the second act, is not an important feature of the first draft,<sup>45</sup> and neither is the text for the journey very extensive, whereas Harsent's notes and text relating to the scenes in Bertilak's castle are easily the most substantial.<sup>46</sup>

These observations would suggest that what mattered most to Harsent often mattered least to Birtwistle. Even Harsent's final word on the narrative was eventually excised. His original libretto ended with a riddle from the Fool: 'I'm an answer without a question. I'm the colour of water, a gift from an empty hand. I'm blind, I'm blameless, I'm bliss. What am I?'. The answer, indicated elsewhere in Harsent's sketches, is 'ignorance',<sup>47</sup> and the final sound was to have been the Fool's laughter, ending Harsent's version with a jibe at Arthur's court. Ultimately, Birtwistle preferred a circular ending that recycles Morgan's line 'Now, with a single step' from the end of Act I and the beginning of Act II.

That said, there are certain indications of Harsent's influence on Birtwistle. The idea of intercutting music and mime in the hunt scenes, and the notion of 'recitative' during the journey, to which Gawain contributes a 'counterpoint', are present in Harsent's first sketches.<sup>48</sup> His idea that the journey represents a 'journey of the mind'<sup>49</sup> can be distinguished clearly in the highly fragmented musical structure of this section, with its premonitions of the hunt scenes and the harrowing images of the beheading still to come. It is also worth considering the extent to which Birtwistle was influenced by Harsent's frequent references in the early sketches to 'leitmotifs', by which he means recurring ideas in the text that will relate

44 Hall suggests this version was complete in 1986 following its commission in 1984 (*Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years*, 50, 52).

45 The text representing the Turning of the Seasons was later distributed among the verses detailing Gawain's arming, as well as additional texts and Latin verses relating to the Christian calendar.

46 Harsent has commented that 'What happens at Castle Hautdesert interested me more than anything else in the poem' (P. Porter, 'Inner and Outer Worlds', 36).

47 *Gaw/Lib* 3, Act III, scene 1, 14 contains the following sketch for this passage: 'fool – Arthur riddle: ends: I'm bliss. (ignorance) I'm – , I'm blind, I'm bliss'. Another sketch for this riddle has the word 'Ignorance' circled and written at the top of the page.

48 *Gaw/Lib* 2, 2 and 2, 8, which states: 'Chanted lines from Morgan & Lady de H. to progress [the] narrative'.

49 This idea is noted in the stage directions of the first draft; *Gaw/Lib* 9, 22.

**Act I**

Arthur's court

Door knocks (x3)

Green Knight enters after 2nd and 3rd door knocks

Gawain beheads Green Knight

Green Knight issues challenge

Gawain's arming

The Turning of the Seasons

**Act II**

Gawain's journey

Castle de Hautdesert

Seduction & hunt scenes (x3)

Green Chapel

Green Knight admonishes Gawain

Arthur's court – Gawain's return

**Figure 2** Outline of the dramatic structure in the opera's definitive version.

the various episodes. For example, Harsent's sketches bring to light a series of jealousies between Gawain and Arthur, Bertilak and Gawain, and Morgan and Arthur. At one point he considers:

Bertilak poss. to echo Lady de Hs remarks about chivalry & good manners etc., but with menace underlying the notion.

NB Some leit-motif [*sic*] that can be used for beheading moment to underline fact that motive has to do with earlier jealousy . . .<sup>50</sup>

Harsent's ideas concerning this moment appear to have a direct musical representation. Bertilak's statement to Gawain 'Now we shall learn something of courtly love' is followed by an ostinato dance rhythm that is later recast in more menacing form in the cimbalom and

50 *Gaw/Lib* 3, 24<sup>r</sup>. After the second axe blow Harsent considers the Green Knight, saying 'Surely you know love's rules', but this is altered to 'Remember the rules we made when I stood in Arthur's court', uttered after the first axe blow.

marimba during the beheading scene, when Bertilak, transformed into the Green Knight, raises the axe a second time (Fig. 122).<sup>51</sup>

Both Harsent's division between inner and outer worlds and the concept of a double for Gawain were of significance to Birtwistle's vision of the opera. The latter underwent a series of adaptations and greatly preoccupied Harsent, although the eventual representations of Gawain's double in the first production were restricted to mime artists at the back of the stage during the journeys to and away from the castle in Act II. This severely compromised Harsent's original desire for an interactive relationship between Gawain and his double that would culminate in a confrontation between the two. Gawain was to remove his double's tunic and mask, revealing physical wounds in order that 'we see (Dorian Gray-like) the effect that Gawain's adventures have had on him spiritually. I still like the idea of the double having a mask of the Gawain singer/actor's own face'.<sup>52</sup> A musical response to this dramatic gesture can be found through a sketch study of Birtwistle's concern with developing various means of shadowing a musical line (the central focus of the next part of this discussion).<sup>53</sup> More broadly, this compositional preoccupation suggests a possible musical analogy for Harsent's interest in divided identity as expressed in his poem *The Windhound* as well as the *Gawain* libretto. As we shall see, in certain instances varied replication (shadowing) of a vocal line may saturate the orchestral texture, a process that results in the subject (the vocal line) being literally reflected and dispersed throughout the musical fabric.<sup>54</sup>

## Line

Birtwistle has suggested that *Gawain* is based on a single line.<sup>55</sup> This may offer not only a musical analogy for Harsent's interest in identity and subjectivity, but also be evidence for the existence of a secret drama in the orchestra. There are numerous examples of slower-moving lines in the orchestral texture (for instance in the first violin between Figs 39 and 40 in Act I), but the profusion of orchestral lines makes identifying a 'source' problematic. The sketches neither confirm nor deny the existence of a fundamental line. Both the 'wildly' disjunctive linear motion of brass and violins at the Green Knight's entrance (Figs 41–3) and the fragments of a line for instrumental parts around Figs 18 and 23 are written out independently, but there is no information to explain how these were generated.<sup>56</sup> More detailed evidence does exist in relation to *The Second Mrs Kong* (1994) and the Celan setting

51 'Fig.' references are to the 1999 Universal Edition score (UE 21014). ('Fig.' is abbreviated to avoid confusion with illustrative 'Figures' in the present text.)

52 Taken from a letter from Harsent to Birtwistle dated 2 June 1989.

53 Birtwistle's sketches for Act I are dated spring/summer and autumn 1989, and those for Act II winter 1991–2.

54 Alastair Williams has observed a similar dispersal in the musical treatment of Montezuma's subjectivity in Wolfgang Rihm's music drama *Die Eroberung von Mexico* (see 'Voices of the Other', 263–4).

55 See Samuel, 'Birtwistle's *Gawain*', 167, 173. To illustrate this idea, Birtwistle drew for Samuel 'a line on a brown paper envelope – it spiralled around a circle. [...] [a]nd he drew the repeated sections as rectangles on the circle' (173). However, in a BBC TV broadcast of the opera in April 1992 Elgar Howarth reported the composer as saying that *Gawain* is based on a single chord.

56 These fragments exist on sketch pages 1/10, 49 and 60, and 2/10, 36.

‘Todtnauberg’ (1995), which suggests that the vocal lines were composed first and derived from small groups of pitches, most probably drawn from tables that are not extant.<sup>57</sup>

Equally problematic is Birtwistle’s remark that the orchestra at times ‘may relate more closely than the voice part to the fundamental line’.<sup>58</sup> Vocal melodies are initially sketched without accompaniment before they appear clearly legible with more roughly assembled orchestral parts that embellish, simplify, or directly mirror the progress of the voice. If simultaneous vocal melodies are required, either a single line is distributed among the parts, or a line is composed first and counterpoint is generated from it, as in Morgan’s part at the opening of Act I, which was clearly conceived before that of Lady de Hautdesert.<sup>59</sup>

A more detailed consideration of the instrumental counterpoint against Lady de Hautdesert’s opening of the first act (Fig. 3<sup>+4</sup>) will further elucidate these working methods (see Example 1). The first violins and flutes provide a counter-melody that often moves in contrary motion to the voice and only occasionally intersects with its pitch material, while a much simpler line – in the clarinets, violas, and cello – filters the voice’s pitch material, reducing it to a rocking line beginning D–C–D–E–E $\flat$ . The sketches imply that this simpler line was conceived afterwards but in relation to the vocal melody,<sup>60</sup> while the higher melody, despite its degree of independence, embellishes both the voice and the slower moving counter-line. Although the instrumental lines are two different manifestations of the same idea (the vocal part), the simpler line is redolent of a ‘source’: it shadows the voice closely, emphasizing a rocking contour and narrow register.<sup>61</sup> Observing a similar effect in Birtwistle’s song ‘White and Light’ (1989), Arnold Whittall has remarked that ‘there is the most essential and productive ambiguity between lines which were conceived as a consequence of vocal melody and yet which sound as if they are prior, creating a context for that melody’.<sup>62</sup> Harsent’s dramatic concern for the slippage of identity, which is central to both *The Windhound* and the *Gawain* libretto, is mirrored in this musical process that proliferates a single idea throughout the orchestral fabric.

57 Michael Taylor has demonstrated that the practice of beginning with the vocal lines constitutes a break with earlier working methods. In *The Mask of Orpheus* the vocal line was grafted on to the pre-composed instrumental textures. The example of *Yan Tan Tethera*, however, strongly suggests that a fund of pitch collections was used, if not for the vocal lines then certainly for the ‘fugue’ texture in the orchestra (see Taylor, ‘Narrative and Musical Structure’). An indication of a collection being used to determine a vocal line in *Gawain* is Baldwin’s chant-like intervention at Fig. 54, based on a six-note set also in the percussion, and there are signs of five-note collections being used for Lady de Hautdesert’s line at Fig. 41<sup>+4</sup>, Act II, on 5/10, 24.

58 Samuel, ‘Birtwistle’s *Gawain*’, 167.

59 Hall comments that in the opening duet ‘the vocal lines for Morgan le Fay and her companion [on 1/10, 9] are written out neatly as if they had been composed previously and simply copied’ (*Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years*, 52). However, this is not the case: the orchestral parts contain very few alterations, whereas Lady de Hautdesert’s part is roughly written, with numerous corrections.

60 Sketch p. 1/10, 14. This page also contains workings for a supporting ostinato texture in the strings and marimba. Overall, the scenario resembles the cantus/continuum distinction familiar from *Secret Theatre*, although the melodic (cantus) element is more complex in this instance. For more on this device see Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years*, 26–35.

61 This pitch area later gives rise to a four-note motif (D–F–D $\flat$ –E), first stated in Act I (Fig. 81), labelled the ‘axe motif’ by Samuel (‘Birtwistle’s *Gawain*’).

62 Whittall, ‘The Mechanisms of Lament’, 89.

The musical score for Example 1 is divided into two systems. The first system includes staves for Flute 1+2, Violin 1, Lady de Hautdesert (soprano), Clarinet 2 + Viola, and Violoncello. The second system continues the vocal line and includes staves for the vocal line and the Violoncello. The score is in 4/4 time and features various musical notations including triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

**First System:**

- Flute 1+2:** *molto legato*, starting with a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a half note and a quarter note. Dynamics: *mf* to *p*.
- Violin 1:** *molto legato*, starting with a half note, followed by a quarter note and a half note. Dynamics: *mf* to *p*.
- Lady de Hautdesert:** *poco f*, starting with a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a half note and a quarter note. Lyrics: "Mor-gan! Your pur-pose chills me and ex - cites me: blood feud, —". Dynamics: *mf* to *p*.
- Clarinet 2 + Viola:** *p*, starting with a half note, followed by a quarter note and a half note. Dynamics: *mf* to *p*.
- Violoncello:** *p*, starting with a half note, followed by a quarter note and a half note. Dynamics: *mf* to *p*.

**Second System:**

- Vocal Line:** Continues the vocal line with lyrics: "blood pact, the bonds of trea-cher-y and kin-ship". Dynamics: *mp* to *f*.
- Violoncello:** Continues the instrumental line with dynamics: *f*.

**Example 1** *Gawain*, Act I, Fig. 3<sup>+4</sup>, Lady de Hautdesert's line shadowed by winds and strings.

A number of techniques are used to produce such textures. To create instrumental counter-lines, numbers are often associated with specific vertical intervals and applied randomly. In some instances this leads to approximately parallel movement. Example 2

Flute

Voices:  
Guinevere  
+ Arthur

3 2 1 3 1 2 1 3 2 1 2 3 2 1 3 2

[ ★ ★ ★ ★ ]

$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} 3 = \text{interval class } 5 \\ 2 = \text{interval class } 6 \\ 1 = \text{interval class } 7 \end{array} \right]$$

**Example 2** *Gawain*, sketch 9/10, 34 (for Act II, Fig. 146<sup>+1</sup>, flute and vocal parts); from the Birtwistle collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basle. Transcription by the author.

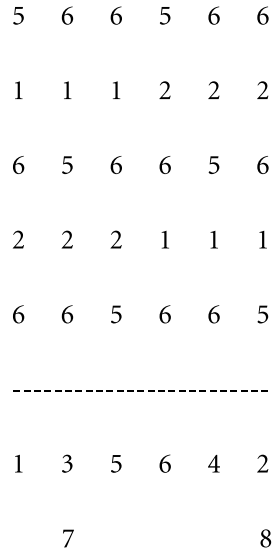
illustrates this in relation to the flute and the vocal parts of Guinevere and Arthur in Act II (Fig. 146<sup>+1</sup>). Characteristically, there are slips or deliberate alterations in Birtwistle's application of his system (the asterisks mark where the 'wrong' interval has been applied) as well as further embellishments (see the added F<sup>#</sup>/G<sup>b</sup> in the flute). Another method involves the application of a generic chord above or below an instrumental line. For example, in Act II (Fig. 112<sup>-2</sup>) intervals 1, 2, 5, 6, 6, applied beneath the notes of a flute line, are randomized to produce an ascending woodwind texture. The scheme realizes six different lines, with two instruments on each line. As the difference between the intervals in each row is no more than a semitone, the result is an approximately parallel movement; the order of the columns is determined by the numbers under the dotted line (see Figure 3).<sup>63</sup> A third method is to proliferate a simpler, filtered version of a vocal melody or instrumental part. This occurs alongside Arthur's melody in Act I (Fig. 14), where a number system is used to determine which instruments are assigned particular notes from the counter-line, leading to a dense web of heterophonic sound (see Plate 1).<sup>64</sup>

As a consequence of these techniques, orchestral lines frequently appear to shadow the vocal melody but avoid its pitch content altogether: in Act I (Figs 20–1) various melodic ideas

63 This is presented on sketch 7/10, 41. A similar scheme is used to produce the approximately parallel-moving woodwind parts at Figs 173–4 in Act II, although here the intervals are applied above the B flat clarinet (further workings exist on sketch 10/10, 59).

64 Sketch 1/10, 37. The counter-line appears in the horns, clarinets, bassoons, violins, and violas. When the voice is silent, additional notes are inserted in the counter-line. This technique is also used to generate the instrumental lines at Fig. 92, when Arthur's earlier text is reworked at 'now I can eat' (sketch 3/10, 54).





**Figure 3** Random number scheme to replicate flute line in approximately parallel motion.

appear in the woodwind that are essentially independent of Arthur's line but reflect its timbre and register;<sup>65</sup> either side of Fig. 71 the bassoons and tubas shadow the movement of Gawain's melody but their pitch content is quite different.<sup>66</sup> Occasionally, counter-lines were determined separately from vocal lines and simply grafted on to them, as with the flute line at Fig. 23<sup>+2</sup>.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the violin part at Fig. 84<sup>+3</sup> is an elaboration of the brass and lower woodwind material, derived from a seven-note set that is entirely independent of the voice.<sup>68</sup> As the Green Knight exits for the world outside, this sense of detachment flourishes in numerous instrumental lines derived from six-note sets that are totally independent of the voice (Figs 88–90).<sup>69</sup> Self-governing contrapuntal writing has even greater freedom in the original *Turning of the Seasons* section (exemplified by Figs 139–41). At other times, shadowing movement exhibits a more rhythmic nature and approximately mirrors the speech patterns of characters, for example in the horns and trombones when the Green Knight states his challenge (Act I, Fig. 50<sup>+1</sup>), and in the bassoons when he admonishes Gawain (Act II, Fig. 127). This declamatory device recalls the fact that originally the opera's source (the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) would have been read aloud.<sup>70</sup>

65 Sketch 1/10, 52 shows these fragments were first conceived as a single counter-line to Arthur's part and subsequently partitioned out.

66 This may reflect the fact that at this moment Gawain is squaring up to the Green Knight, the split between the lines implying a metaphor for Gawain's overinflated ego.

67 Evidence for this is contained on sketch 1/10, 60, where the flute pitches are written out along the bottom of the page prior to their insertion above the vocal line.

68 Sketch 3/10, 24. The subsequent violin line that accompanies the Green Knight at Fig. 85<sup>+4</sup> is also derived independently, from five-note sets that are mistranscribed from treble clef, to bass clef, and back to treble.

69 Sketch 3/10, 35. These sets are [012678] hexachords.

70 For more on the idea that rhythmic patterns in *Gawain* are analogous to the metric schemes of the original poem see Adlington, "Good Lodging".

Handwritten musical score for Gawain, sketch 1/10, 37. The score is written on multiple staves, including vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Some fable of bravery, then. Some travellous tale to make my mood to blee".

The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and fingerings. A large handwritten note at the top right reads: "Make do are in missing at a".

At the bottom of the page, there are three numbered musical diagrams (1, 2, 3) and a small table of numbers:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Plate 1** *Gawain*, sketch 1/10, 37 (for the instrumentation at Arthur's lines 'Some fable of bravery, then', Act I, Fig. 14); from the Birtwistle collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basle.

Handwritten musical score for "The Shadow of Opera" by Beard. The score is written on multiple staves with various musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The notation is highly stylized and includes many handwritten annotations and corrections. The score is divided into sections, with some parts marked "f" (forte) and others "p" (piano). The notation includes a variety of note values, rests, and articulation marks. The score is written in a single system, with the music continuing across the staves.

Plate 1 continued.

## Musical Plot

The prevalence of musical lines in the opera and their importance at a pre-compositional stage suggest that they might provide a clue to the existence of a hidden drama. However, given the paucity of evidence regarding the existence of a source line, an analytical approach that equates specific lines and musical figures with agents in a musical plot will prove more fruitful than a study centred exclusively on the sketches. A conceptual framework that offers both a useful vocabulary and a means of identifying the limits of plot theory in relation to *Gawain* is provided by Gregory Karl's attempt to adapt plot analysis techniques from linguistics and narratology to music. Karl's ideas in turn require modification, since his approach was devised for 'instrumental music composed in the framework of Romantic-expressive aesthetics' and focused on the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in F minor, op. 57.<sup>71</sup>

Drawing on Cone, Karl proposes a model that includes musical equivalents to literary foils, roles, and functions.<sup>72</sup> In literature a character may be understood as the foil of another if 'parallels in life circumstances, personal history, or appearance' exist that mark them as similar, but essentially they must retain contrasting outlooks (*differentia*) that provide insights into their actions.<sup>73</sup> In tonal music this amounts to 'relations between different versions of the same theme or motive'.<sup>74</sup> An analysis of *Gawain*'s music in Karl's terms necessitates distinguishing two types of musico-dramatic 'agents': first, short musical figures (including motifs, sonorities, textures, rhythms, scales, pitches), which are metaphors for events on stage at specific moments, often repeated without variation or development; and second, musical lines that are more extended and rhetorical in character, which 'speak' from the orchestra and form a network of distinct but syntactically related motives.<sup>75</sup>

In response to Vladimir Propp,<sup>76</sup> Karl defines roles as 'idealized character types, recurring from tale to tale, that may be assumed by a number of more or less interchangeable beings. The role of villain, for example, may be played equally well by a giant, a bandit, a witch, a stepmother, or some other unsavoury entity'.<sup>77</sup> In *Gawain* it may not be necessary, or indeed appropriate, to define musical objects in terms of their character type, although it is possible to make a broad distinction between musical ideas that are forthright and those that are more reticent. The latter are occasionally linked to the world of the court, while the former are frequently associated with the world outdoors. Karl maintains that functions such as villainy may assume dissimilar forms (murder, abduction, etc.), but they motivate other characters to intervene and attempt to counteract such actions. He suggests that in music these events constitute actions in the abstract, denoted by terms such as disruption, subversion,

71 Karl, 'Structuralism and Musical Plot', 15.

72 Cone, *The Composer's Voice*.

73 Karl, 'Structuralism and Musical Plot', 17. Foil is meant in the sense of 'a person or thing that enhances the qualities of another by contrast' (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

74 Karl, 'Structuralism and Musical Plot', 18.

75 I adopt the more neutral term 'agent' in preference to Karl's use of protagonist and antagonist, in order to avoid the anthropomorphic and culturally loaded connotations of such terminology; in this more relativistic context there is no reason why a descending scale should be considered the antagonist of an ascending scale.

76 Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*.

77 Karl, 'Structuralism and Musical Plot', 19.

interruption, integration, divergence, and withdrawal. In *Gawain* such functions are triggered either by specific dramatic gestures, like the door knocks and Guinevere's repeated request that Arthur take his seat, or by specific ideas in the text, such as bravery, conveyed in Arthur's repeated question 'Who's brave?'. Yet such associations are subject to change. The interruptive function of Arthur's question is expressed by an incisive rhythmic figure in the woodwind, as shown in Example 3a (Act I, Fig. 20). But at Fig. 50<sup>-3</sup> the figure withdraws slightly when the question is uttered by the Green Knight – it appears after the question, lower in register, in the harp and cimbalom; and when the Green Knight issues his challenge, a disrupted, declamatory version appears in the brass (Example 3b). When the question returns in Act II, Fig. 138<sup>+3</sup>, the figure is altered again, this time integrated with door knocks, echoed by the orchestra (Example 3c). Karl's theory will be used to identify agents such as this, which appear in direct relation to specific dramatic gestures, both to examine the schemes in which they are presented, and to reveal ways in which they are released from their original contexts.

An indication that plot theory may be applied to particular pitch centres in Birtwistle's music is suggested by the instrumental pieces *Secret Theatre* (1984) and *Earth Dances* (1986), in which the recurrent dyad D–F might be considered a dramatic agent that assumes a number of varied roles and functions. In *Gawain* the moment of the Green Knight's beheading is marked by these same pitches, where they appear within the context of the four-note 'axe motif': D–F–D♭–E. The pairing of D and F first emerged at Fig. 7, during Morgan and Lady de Hautdesert's opening duet, while the axe motif may be traced from Fig. 50 when the Green Knight issues his challenge. What follows is suggestive of a hidden narrative, a graphic summary of which is presented in Example 4. During the orchestral interpretation of Gawain's journey at the beginning of Act II, a foil to the D–F agent emerges

a. Interruptive function of the woodwind rhythmic agent associated with Arthur's 'Who's brave?', Act I, Fig. 20.

The musical score for Example 3a consists of three staves. The top staff is for Oboe, the middle for Clarinet, and the bottom for Arthur. The Oboe and Clarinet parts feature a rhythmic figure (stacc. eighth notes) that is marked 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The Arthur part shows the vocal line with the lyrics 'who's' and 'brave?' corresponding to the rhythmic figure. A box labeled '20' is placed above the 'brave?' line.

Example 3 Differing usage of rhythmic agent in Acts I and II.

b. Withdrawal of the rhythmic agent after the Green Knight's 'Who's brave?', Act I, Fig. 50<sup>-3</sup> (harp and cimbalom), followed (in the brass) by a disrupted, declamatory version of the same agent while the challenge is issued.

50

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system includes staves for Harp, Cimbalom, Lady de Hautdesert, Baldwin, Ywain, Gawain, Agravain, and the Green Knight. The Harp and Cimbalom play a rhythmic pattern marked *mp*. Lady de Hautdesert has a vocal line with a triplet. Baldwin, Ywain, Gawain, and Agravain have vocal lines with the lyrics "you dare" and a *ff* dynamic marking. The Green Knight has a vocal line with the lyrics "Who's brave? Are you Ar-thur?" and a *mp* dynamic marking. The second system includes staves for Horns (1 and 2), Trombones (1, 2, and 3), Tuba (1), and the Green Knight. The Horns, Trombones, and Tuba play a rhythmic pattern marked *mp*. The Green Knight has a vocal line with the lyrics "Here is the chal-lenge" and a *f* dynamic marking.

Harp

Cimbalom

Lady de Hautdesert

Baldwin

Ywain

Gawain

Agravain

Green Knight

Who's brave? Are you Ar-thur? \_\_\_\_

Now \_\_\_\_ he hears its voice

you dare \_\_\_\_

you dare \_\_\_\_

you dare \_\_\_\_

you dare \_\_\_\_

you dare \_\_\_\_

1

2

Horns

3

4

1

2

3

Trombones

1

Tuba

Green Knight

Here is the chal-lenge

Example 3 continued.



1  
2  
Horns  
3  
4

1  
2  
3  
Trombones

1  
Tuba

Green Knight

One of you must swing the axe at me

**Example 3** 3b continued.

in the form of C $\sharp$  and E. These two pitches have been ‘prepared’ in the context of the axe motif and appear as a significant motif for the first time at the start of Morgan’s line (Fig. 1). Subsequently, they pass to the woodwind alongside Gawain’s anguished exclamation ‘Cross of Christ, save me’, expressing fear both of his destiny and the wilderness through which he passes. The identity of the C $\sharp$ –E foil becomes more slippery as the musical representation of Gawain’s journey advances, its outline preserved in a chain of interval-class-3-related transpositions; this process is initiated at the fourth and fifth of Gawain’s ‘Cross of Christ’ interruptions, when the foil is transposed to A–C and C–E $\flat$  (Figs 9 and 9<sup>+6</sup>, respectively). The association with Gawain’s interruptions is then temporarily relinquished as the agent moves into the orchestra (presented as F $\sharp$ –A harmonics in the violins, from Fig. 12<sup>+4</sup> onwards), leading to a variant of the axe motif (Fig. 13) and two short bursts of A–C in the tubas (Figs 19<sup>+6</sup> and 20). Appearances then oscillate between C–E $\flat$  and B–D (the latter employed in a cadential function) prior to a stepwise descent in the double basses, contra-bassoon, and third tuba from Fig. 28: C–B–A $\flat$  ... G–F–E. Subsequently, E establishes a pedal that underpins a flowering trumpet motif based around C $\sharp$ –E at Fig. 31<sup>+3</sup>, which accompanies the ninth ‘Cross of Christ’ interruption and re-establishes its association with Gawain’s anguish. The journey concludes with a variant of the axe motif at Figs 33 and 34, as the action turns to the relative safety of Castle Hautdesert, and the music settles around D, F, and A.<sup>78</sup> However, the D–F agent is transformed in the closing stages of the opera, where it

78 An F pedal first heard at Fig. 36, as Gawain enters the castle, returns at Fig. 43 when Bertilak encourages Gawain to make himself at home.



c. Integration of the rhythmic agent with door knocks, echoed by the orchestra, Act II, Fig. 138<sup>+3</sup>.

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes the following parts:

- Contrabass clarinet 1
- Trombone 2
- Tuba 2
- Violoncello 3
- Contrabass 1
- Contrabass clarinet 2
- Trombone 3
- Violoncello 2
- Bassoon
- Tuba 1
- Violoncello 4
- Contrabassoon
- Tuba 3
- Contrabass 2
- Trombone 1
- Violoncello 1

The second system includes:

- Tam-tam
- Bass drum
- Timpani
- Door knock
- Guinevere
- Arthur

The key signature is 3 flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The score shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, with dynamic markings such as *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *mp* (mezzo-piano). The door knock part is marked with a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The vocal parts for Guinevere and Arthur are shown at the bottom, with Arthur's line including the lyrics "Who's brave? \_\_\_\_\_".

Example 3 continued.

Contrabass  
 clarinet 1  
 Trombone 2  
 Tuba 2  
 Violoncello 3  
 Contrabass 1

Contrabass  
 clarinet 2  
 Trombone 3  
 Violoncello 2

Bassoon  
 Tuba 1  
 Violoncello 4

Contrabassoon  
 Tuba 3  
 Contrabass 2

Trombone 1  
 Violoncello 1

Tam-tam

Bass drum

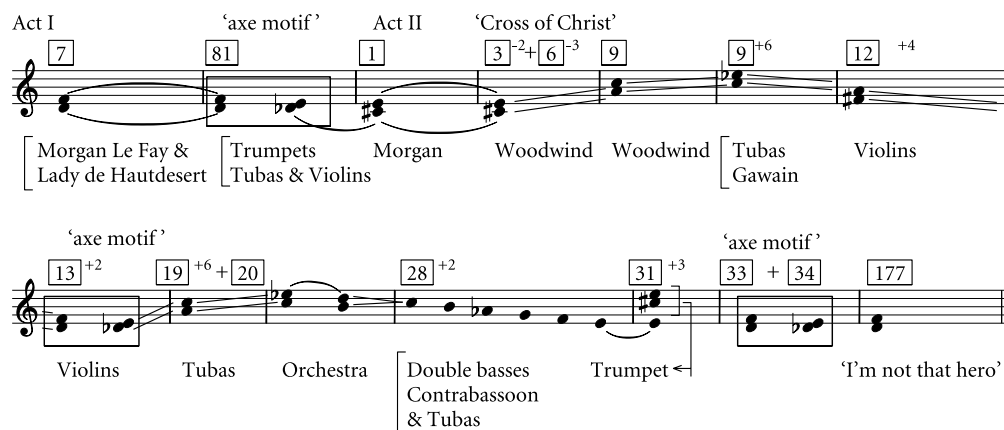
Timpani

Door knock

Guinevere  
 come \_ and take \_ your place \_\_\_\_

Arthur

**Example 3** 3c continued.



**Example 4** Summary of pitch agent plot.

too is associated with Gawain's inner conflict (his final soliloquy ends 'I'm not that hero', with D–F on the first two words). It may be concluded from this brief synopsis that musical agents in *Gawain* develop a subplot that at times suggests a direct link between events on stage and associated musical gestures, but at other times either loosens such associations or undermines them altogether. To gain a more fine-grained appreciation of this process, it is necessary to consider the role of other types of musical figures and their relation to the libretto's schemes of repetition.

## Constellations

A review of *Gawain*'s opening reveals a number of key agents that are directly associated with the stage action, acquiring refrain-like functions in relation to the libretto's strophic forms (see Example 5). The first two agents, a rapid ascending scale ending on E and a series of slower, descending scales, constitute two different versions of the same idea (see  $a^1$  and  $a^2$  in Example 5). The two are related through their inclusion of pitches specifically associated with Gawain (G and B $\flat$ ) and the Green Knight (A $\flat$  and A $\natural$ ). Their focal pitches E and A $\flat$  outline interval class 4, which assumes importance as the outline of the axe motif (D $\flat$ –F) and appears at the beginning of Act II in the form of the focal pitches D and G $\flat$ . However, as Karl's theory demands, the two have contrasting outlooks. While the former agent might be characterized as having an active role, heightening dramatic expectation, and initiating new, more urgent passages, the descending scales are more acquiescent, bringing dramatic gestures and sections to a close. These two agents therefore provide a foil for one another and carry a vital role in structuring the drama.

The first page of the score establishes two further agents: a chord and a tuba motif characterized by iambic rhythms (marked b and c in Example 5). As it appears here, the chord is strident, suggesting a link to the world outdoors. During the lullaby scenes in Act II (Fig. 50) this agent is integrated with the iambic motif, but its instrumentation (harp, cimbalom, and vibraphone) and new context considerably soften its effect (Example 6a). The

Example 5 shows the opening of Act I, featuring four staves: Cimbalom Vibraphone, Violins 1+3 Viola 1, Violins 2+4, and Viola 2. The score is in 4/4 time and features a 'fast' tempo. The Cimbalom Vibraphone staff starts with a box labeled 'a1' and 'bar 1'. The Violins 1+3 Viola 1 staff has a 'fast' tempo marking. The Violins 2+4 staff has a 'fast' tempo marking. The Viola 2 staff has a 'fast' tempo marking. The score includes dynamic markings like 'fff' and 'l.v.'. Below the staves, there are tempo markings: '♩ = c.50' and '♩ = c.60'.

**Example 5** Musical agents  $a^1$ ,  $a^2$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$ , at the opening of Act I.

iambic tuba motif has an active role associated with hunting and the world outdoors. Its foil is a cadential figure first heard at Fig. 1<sup>+5</sup>, which achieves its definitive form (F $\sharp$ –B–C) at Fig. 23 (Example 6b), followed by frequent reiterations that include Figs 24, 25, and 31<sup>+7</sup>. The version of this tuba foil at Fig. 25 acquires an association with the door closing, and it also anticipates the music immediately following the beheading scenes. In contrast, the ascending scale agent predicts the lifting of the axe and builds suspense before each of the door knocks.<sup>79</sup> Although agents  $a^1$  and  $a^2$  are sometimes deployed independently, they frequently appear in immediate succession, as in the Turning of the Seasons section at the end of Act I,<sup>80</sup> and as an accompaniment to the killings at the end of each hunt scene in Act II. However, when the door opens for the first time in Act I without revealing the Green Knight (Fig. 31), musical expectations are also frustrated because the descending agent fails to appear, replaced instead by ghostly representations of the chord and iambic motif in the horns.<sup>81</sup> Through such alterations the portrayal of the Green Knight's other-worldliness becomes a persuasive feature of the music drama.<sup>82</sup>

At Fig. 12<sup>-1</sup> a rocking idea, first heard in the orchestra during Morgan and Lady de Hautdesert's opening duet, reaches its definitive form of C–B $\flat$ –A $\flat$ –B $\flat$ –C (marked  $d$  in Example 7). This is the first agent in a new series of motivic associations that supersede those

79 Although these agents are gesturally distinct from one another, there are signs of relations that undermine such categorical distinctions. The cadential tuba figure relates to the tuba descent in bar 2 (agent  $a^2$ ), while the lower three pitches of agent  $b$  (G–A $\flat$ –B $\flat$ ) reproduce the first three notes of agent  $a^1$ , along with a slight variant (G–A–B $\flat$ ) contained in agent  $c$  (third tuba). This pattern of intersecting three-note sets anticipates the Gawain signature motif (G–B $\flat$ –G $\flat$ ), first linked to Gawain at Fig. 63 as he reveals his name to the Green Knight.

80 Their function here is similar to the 'bob and wheel' pattern of the original poem, by which a series of verses with irregular metrical schemes is rounded off by a verse in regular metre with end-rhymes.

81 When the Green Knight does finally enter, after the second door knock, all of the agents from the opening are utilized, although the orchestral placement of agents and their relative lengths and ordering are significantly changed.

82 There is also an alteration to the opening A $\flat$ –E frame, which is now skewed to A $\sharp$  in the bass and E $\flat$  in the upper texture. Similarly, at Fig. 68, when Gawain imagines the eyes and mouth on the Green Knight's fallen head, the string harmonics and static harmony move the frame to A $\flat$ –E $\flat$ .

Contrabass  
clarinet

*continued.*

of the opening. This new framework is associated with the rather mundane world of the court, and it reappears as the Green Knight departs (Fig. 91) and when the action returns to Arthur's court in Act II (Fig. 136).<sup>83</sup> The sketches indicate that Birtwistle requested that Arthur's lines in these sections be extended, suggesting that the composer saw potential at

83 This repetition of the rocking idea is anticipated slightly by a varied and transposed version in the horns and upper strings at Fig. 130, when Morgan sings 'Now you must go back'. A first sketch for this is contained on 8/10, 47.

The musical score for Example 5 continued consists of two systems. The first system, labeled 'b' in a box, shows staves for Harp, Cimbalom, and Vibraphone, all marked 'mf' and 'bar 5'. The second system, labeled 'c' in a box, shows three staves for Tubas (1, 2, and 3). Tubas 1 and 3 have a 'p' (piano) dynamic at the start of bar 5, while Tubas 2 and 3 have a 'ff' (fortissimo) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Example 5 continued.

this point for further musical invention.<sup>84</sup> As befits their association with Arthur's court, the new agents share a listless, directionless quality (they are labelled d–f in Example 7). This situation is repeated at Fig. 13 but omitting agent d, whereas at Fig. 19 each agent is restored to its original location with the addition of short lyrical ideas in the flügelhorn and cor anglais related to agent c (the iambic brass motif).

Such an approach to composition, in which quasi-dramatic situations are frequently revisited, is a hallmark of Birtwistle's style, dating back to *Tragoedia* (1965) and *Verses for Ensembles* (1969). In *Gawain* a number of different musical constellations relate to the drama on stage. When these recur, the original order of the constituent elements is not necessarily retained: some may be left out, others added. At a certain point, elements may become detached from their constellations, cropping up in ostensibly random places. These ideas may retain their original dramatic meaning or become musical objects in their own right, freeing themselves from their original context. This mirrors a process that Christopher Morris (following Dahlhaus and Abbate) has observed in Wagner's *Ring*. Morris notes how the leitmotif forges a 'forced alliance between music and stage, an alliance that music gradually relinquishes once set free to "be" music [...] [M]usic drama sets up an imaginary process of increasing musical independence that has as its conclusion an absolute

<sup>84</sup> Details of this are noted in Harsent's hand on *Gaw/Lib* 10, 3 and 5.

a. The foil of agent b, Act II, Fig. 50.

50

1  
2  
3

Trumpets

*fp* >

3

Trombones

*fp*

Harp

*f* *p*

Cimbalom

*p*

Vibraphone

*p*

Morgan

♩ = c.65 lullaby sempre delicato

*semplce cantabile* *p*

3

lu\* (lu) lla (a) (a)

\* 'u' as in 'lucy'

b. The foil of agent c, Act I, Fig. 23.

23

1  
2  
3

Tubas

*f*

Example 6 Varied use of chord and tuba motif in Acts I and II.



**d**  
Fig. 12<sup>-1</sup>

Bassoons 1, 2+3

Violoncellos 1, 2

Double bass 2

**e**  
Fig. 12

Flute 1

**f**  
Fig. 12<sup>+4</sup>

Trumpets 1, 2, 3

Horns 3, 4

**Example 7** Musical agents d, e, and f, Act I, Fig. 12<sup>-1</sup>–<sup>+6</sup>.

Music'.<sup>85</sup> However, far from representing a reactionary step in the direction of Wagner's musical procedures, Birtwistle's use of motifs corresponds to his own well-established compositional practices. With the exception of Gawain's signature motif, leitmotifs in Birtwistle's opera do not emanate from the characters, as they frequently do in Wagner's operas, but issue instead from the orchestra. In other words, the characters do not invariably appear as the source of musical ideas.

85 Morris, 'Wagner and "Invisible Theatre"', in *Reading Opera between the Lines*, 174. Of related interest is Debussy's belief 'that *Parsifal*'s music simply has not much to do with what is happening on stage' (see Abbate, 'Debussy's Phantom Sounds', 114).

From Fig. 26 the various agents outlined so far are emancipated from their ritualistic functions, so that when the Green Knight adopts Arthur's 'Who's brave?' refrain (Fig. 54), the expected elements are absent, replaced by an angular ostinato.<sup>86</sup> An example of agents being partially freed from their original contexts but still allied to the drama on stage occurs shortly before Fig. 61, when the Green Knight asserts that war cries leave him cold. Subsequently, the rhythmic agent associated with the idea of bravery (agent f) undergoes a shadowy transformation as it is merged with earlier agents – rising and falling glissando scales (agents a<sup>1</sup> and a<sup>2</sup>) and high woodwind chords, echoed by low brass chords (agent c). In contrast, a variant of the cadential brass motif in the middle of the Green Knight's vocal line (Fig. 86) appears out of place. Similarly, in sections designed to heighten suspense in anticipation of the Green Knight's arrival (Figs 26–7), a variant of the rocking figure (agent d) appears, despite its association with the mundane world of the court, while the descending scale assumes a new form in the brass freed from its cadential function (Fig. 28<sup>+5</sup>). Although initially these constellations enact their own drama or choreography and also provide a counterpoint to specific events on stage, eventually they are liberated from the demands of the libretto and achieve a genuinely independent form of instrumental theatre.

### Unheard Voices

As Birtwistle's own comments suggest, there is a second, more rhetorical category of agents that arise from the desire for instruments to be 'like voices, but you can't hear what they're singing'. This category is not so directly related to events on stage, and their appearances have the effect of rupturing the narrative. In Act I (Fig. 64), when Gawain reveals his name, a six-note melody appears in the flute (Example 8a). As Gawain raises the axe (from Fig. 72<sup>+3</sup>), this motif is extended and joined by oboes and clarinets. A dramaturgical explanation may be that this theme represents Gawain's double (the first draft of the libretto depicts the silhouette of a figure standing and watching Gawain raise the axe).<sup>87</sup> A number of apparently isolated, fragmentary melodic ideas such as these appear throughout the opera. Although some are demonstrably related (usually through contour), in general they exist outside the musical networks previously described. In doing so, they are readily associated with a sense of 'otherness'. These motifs are far more prevalent in the second act, and they can be divided into two paradigmatic types. One appears in brass instruments and serves the function of interrupting or intercutting unrelated material, recalling montage procedures in earlier works such as *Punch and Judy*. Throughout the depiction of Gawain's journey short trumpet motifs appear during two of the brief blackouts that punctuate the early stages of the journey (Figs 18 and 31);<sup>88</sup> similar, fragmented motifs in the contrabass trombone (Fig. 33<sup>+6</sup>) are inserted between Morgan's lines 'Mile after mile | day after day | week after week'.

86 The progression to this moment may be compared to a development that R. A. Shoaf observes in the original poem, from "a theory of inherent value, evinced chiefly in the pentangle, to a theory of ascribed value, evinced chiefly in the green girdle", from youthful idealism to a mature recognition that "all signs of human institution are arbitrary, relative, comparative, ascriptive" (cited in Martin, 'Allegory and Symbolism', 327).

87 *Gaw/Lib* 10, 16.

88 A similar motif is used near the end of the opera, either side of Fig. 179, in a series of intercutting sections that recall Gawain's journey.

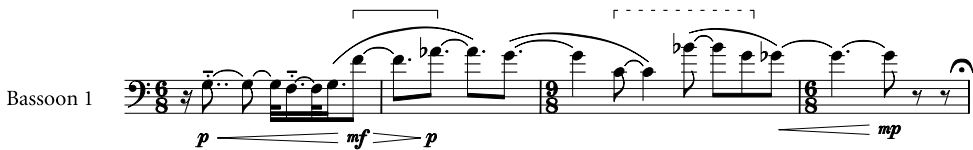
a. Act I, Fig. 64: flute 1, when Gawain has told the Green Knight his name.



b. Act II, Figs 50<sup>+6</sup>, 71<sup>+6</sup>, 85<sup>+6</sup>: flute 1, during Morgan's lullaby to calm Gawain while he rests at Castle Hautdesert.



c. Act II, Figs 51<sup>+4</sup>, 73<sup>-4</sup>, 87<sup>+4</sup>: bassoon 1, in Morgan's lullaby.



d. Act II, Figs 52<sup>-1</sup>: 73<sup>-4</sup>, 88<sup>-1</sup>: oboe 1, in Morgan's lullaby.



e. Act II, Fig. 138<sup>-7</sup>: Bb clarinet 1, at the Fool's riddle, 'Something stranger than charity'.



f. Act II, Fig. 116; violins (plus flutes, oboes, and clarinets from Fig. 116<sup>+3-5</sup>), immediately after Gawain's 'fear of death like a voice beating my brow'.



(with Flutes, Oboes and Clarinets (Bb + Eb) from ★ to †)

**Example 8** A further category of instrumental motifs ('like voices, but you can't hear what they're singing').

A second type is related to the six-note motif at Fig. 64 (Example 8a) and its extended version (Fig. 72<sup>+3</sup>) through length, instrumentation, and contour. The six-note figure accompanies Gawain's apparently fearless disclosure of his name and raising of the axe, whereas related melodies that appear in the woodwind during the three lullaby scenes in Act II (Figs 50<sup>+6</sup>–52<sup>+4</sup>, 71<sup>+6</sup>–73<sup>+4</sup>, and 85<sup>+6</sup>–88<sup>+4</sup>) accompany Morgan's attempts to calm Gawain during his nightmares to the words 'sleep without fear of the dream'. In Examples 8a–d square and dotted brackets indicate how syntactical components are varied and reordered. For instance, the initial dyad (G♯–D) in Example 8a appears in the middle of Example 8b (written A♭–D), and the rising figure in the second half of the melody (beginning C♯–D♯) is reintroduced both at the opening (altered to D♭–E♭) and at the end of the same extract (where C♯–F♯–E is altered to C–G–D). Another related melody appears in the clarinet as the Fool asks: 'Something stranger than charity | something greener than grief | something colder than justice | more secret, more stern than belief. | What is it?' (Fig. 138<sup>-7</sup>; see example 8e).<sup>89</sup> This clarinet melody embellishes the violins and replaces the accompaniment that previously supported the Fool when he delivered the same riddle in Act I (Figs 33–5).<sup>90</sup> Through its allusion to Gawain's nightmares the melody appears to have 'put on knowledge', a concept that Harsent claims was central to his version of the narrative,<sup>91</sup> now implying that the answer to the Fool's question is 'fear'. Retrospectively, this adds a layer of uncertainty to the seemingly bold musical subject position adopted during Gawain's acceptance of the challenge and his execution of the Green Knight. Unlike the fearless Gawain of the original poem and Harsent's libretto, it seems possible that Birtwistle's Gawain doubted himself even as he took up the challenge.<sup>92</sup>

Another, apparently disconnected melodic idea of a similar type appears in the flügelhorn in Act II (Fig. 164<sup>-2</sup>) in conjunction with a statement of the Gawain signature in the woodwind and brass (Example 9a).<sup>93</sup> This follows Arthur's request that Gawain tell everyone his tales of bravery. Gawain does not reply, but the melody is suggestive of his thoughts – it is a slight variation of an earlier horn and violin line that shadowed the vocal part at the moment of Gawain's self-discovery (Fig. 128; see Example 9b). A similar horn line reappears at Fig. 174<sup>+9</sup> as a shadow of Gawain's soliloquy, delivered at Arthur's court, in which he openly declares his doubts about himself. As evident in Example 9b, the second horn line is

89 The first sketch for this, on 9/10, 15, demonstrates that the clarinet line was written after the voice and its supporting violin line.

90 In Act I the Fool's question was followed by the third door knock, which revealed the Green Knight, whereas the reworking, in Act II, is followed by ghostly echoes of the door knock in the orchestra and Morgan's invisible entrance.

91 In notes prepared before the first draft of the libretto, Harsent refers to the 'putting on of knowledge' as one of the 'two strains that seem particularly important in terms of the libretto's burden'; the other is the contrast between inner and outer worlds. *Gaw/Lib 1*, typescript p. 9.

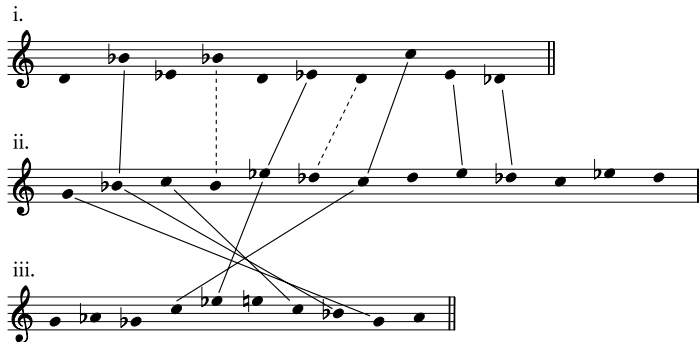
92 This dimension of the opera, especially the concept of a doppelgänger, contrasts strongly with the original poem, in which the inner Gawain is identical to the outer one. As Stone comments, 'Gawain is an undivided man' (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 20). These thoughts are amplified by Derek Pearsall, who remarks that 'There is no suggestion that [Gawain] has any fears or qualms or inner debate about the quest he has undertaken [...] we never imagine him [...] saying to himself, What am I doing here? Why am I doing this? Who am I? [...] which bespeaks a mind at ease with itself. His outer life is his inner life' (see 'Courtesy and Chivalry', 359).

93 This appears in a section of the second act that was cut for the 1994 performance but retained in the score for the 1999 performance.

a. Act II, Fig. 164<sup>-2</sup>: flügelhorn, following Arthur's request that Gawain tell the court his tales of bravery.



b. Summaries of (i) Act II, Fig. 164<sup>-2</sup>, flügelhorn; (ii) Act II, Fig. 128, horns and violins, at Gawain's 'Not greed and love? I'm guilty of both'; (iii) Act II, Fig. 174<sup>+9</sup>, horns, at Gawain's 'We expected nothing but innocence'.



**Example 9** Flügelhorn melody and summaries in Act II.

an approximate retrograde of the first.<sup>94</sup> It has already been noted that Harsent originally intended that Gawain would confront his double on stage during his soliloquy, undressing him to uncover wounds symbolic of his spiritual injuries. Although this idea was abandoned, something of its significance is retained in the retrograde musical gesture, implying a distorted mirror image.<sup>95</sup>

The invisibility of Morgan and Lady de Hautdesert is seen by Harsent as symbolic of 'aspects of the world that the court won't admit to (sin, dishonour)'. Harsent describes the inability of the other, predominantly male characters to see them – resulting from Morgan's magic – as 'more a denial – wilful blindness'.<sup>96</sup> If characters on stage are unable to see certain things, could it not also be that they are unable to *hear* the kind of enigmatic motivic 'voices' described above, which may constitute further representations of the 'blindness' of the collective psyche in the court? Notably, when Gawain begins to develop self-awareness, fear reaches him 'like a voice beating my brow'.<sup>97</sup> In the orchestra this is followed by an eleven-note melody emerging from a unison E played in the upper strings and woodwind (Example 8f). This line bears an uncanny resemblance to the eleven-note clarinet melody at

94 The sketches reveal that Birtwistle conceived both horn lines while working on the vocal parts. Sketch 8/10, 35 contains instructions to 'start slow horns', and the first three notes (G–B♭–C) are written (although the B♭ is misspelt as D♭). On 8/10, 38, the horn part, written directly above the voice, filters the voice's notes.

95 This reflects text used in the first draft of the libretto at Gawain's moment of self-discovery: 'Not greed and love? It was! As a mirror-image is loved and lusted for' (*Gaw/Lib* 9, 46).

96 *Gaw/Lib* 4, 1.

97 Harsent, *Gawain*, 68.

the end of the Fool's riddle later associated with the idea of fear (Fig. 138<sup>-7</sup>; Example 8e). Here, then, both Harsent's metaphor for Gawain's fear and Birtwistle's interest in the 'vocality' of his instruments find appropriate expression in the music's intricate network of rhetorical melodic lines – lines that are predominantly associated with dramatic ideas rather than actions.

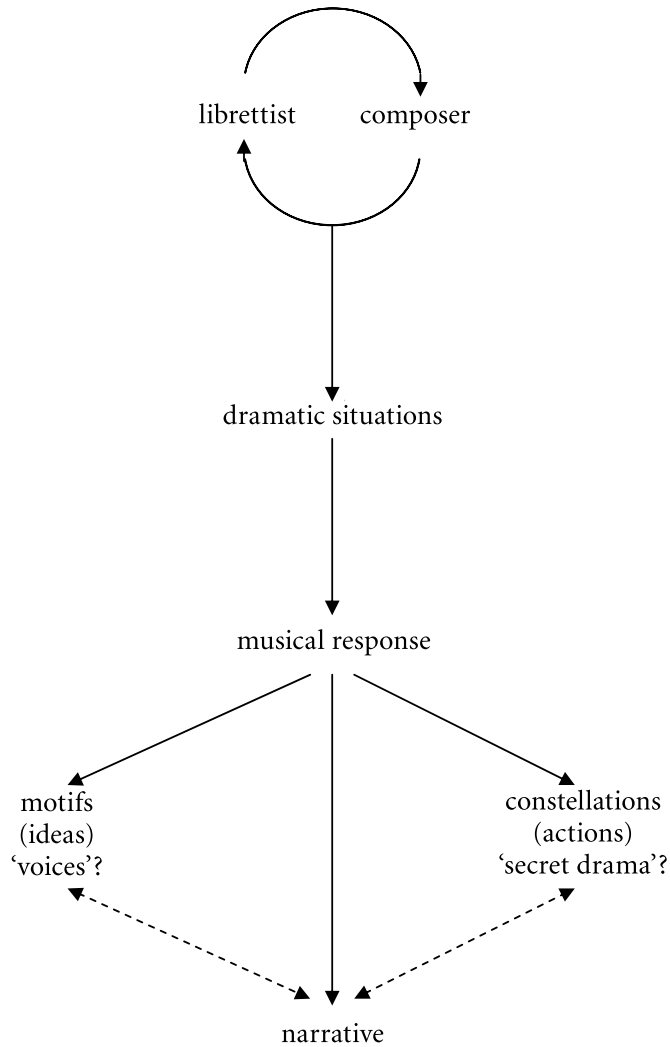
### **'There is nothing here to own, except the mechanics of immersion'**

'The example of my own work that I held in mind when I was starting *Gawain*', Harsent explains, 'was a short sequence called *The Windhound*, which only appears in my *Selected Poems*. It dealt, to some extent, with the loss of instinct, as does *Gawain*.'<sup>98</sup> The emergence of Gawain's sense of identity – his realization that he is not the hero of the opera – is a dialectical expression of his understanding that by following his instinct (the desire to preserve his life) he has broken the codes of Arthur's court, which demand the suppression of such primal responses. This moment of personal discovery also marks a universal statement about integrity and honesty. In this sense Harsent's libretto is a variant of a well-established cultural question, which Rose Rosengard Subotnik locates in various post-Enlightenment legacies, including late-Beethoven, Romanticism, and the critical theory of Adorno, namely: 'Can an individual who stands in every sense for abstract universal values, and avoids the concreteness of an explicitly cultural definition, be thought of as acting in self-interest?'.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, the prevalence of extended melodic lines in *Gawain* – a musical metaphor for subjective expression – is continually undermined by the dispersal of those linear elements throughout the orchestra. This results in a dissolution of the subject that follows instantly from its appearance. Ultimately, although it gestures towards more clearly defined narrative and musical subjects than Birtwistle's earlier music theatre works, *Gawain* offers a return of the subject while simultaneously withdrawing it – rather like the cut-out figures that Jackson Pollock, towards the end of his life, inserted into his paintings. While the opera and its characters are not quite simulacra, the poetic and musical preoccupations of the work continually bring the concepts of identity and subjectivity into question, expressed musically through the use of line and shadow. Although Birtwistle's music has always been concerned with line, *Gawain* emerges as a key work in terms of its continual blurring of distinctions between source and shadow.

In summary, two types of musical agency have been identified in *Gawain*; these are summarized in Figure 4. Following extensive collaborative changes to the libretto, principally generated by the composer, a sequence of dramatic situations was finalized. One musical response to these situations was the creation of schematic constellations that, at least initially, directly relate to actions on stage, although their subsequent rearrangement and separation from their original dramatic function promulgates a purely instrumental theatre. A second response was located in a series of syntactically related motifs that may be seen as

98 Harsent, in the interview with Vianu, 'Poetry is a Way of Life'. The title of the present section is a quotation from *The Windhound* (*Selected Poems*, 95).

99 Subotnik, 'Whose *Magic Flute*?', 29–30.



**Figure 4** Summary of the genesis of narrative processes in *Gawain*.

analogous to the ‘voices’ referred to by Birtwistle in his comments about a secret drama. Positioned outside the opera’s schemes of repetition, the free association of these motifs suggests that they reflect concepts and ideas rather than actions or agents. Inevitably, these two parallel schemes have a reflexive relationship with the opera’s central narrative themes and structure.

Despite Gawain’s psychological concerns, Birtwistle informs listeners about his character’s emotions, as well as his own empathy for their emotional states, in very different ways from, for example, Berg or Britten. As Colin Matthews has noted, central to the dramatic schemes of these earlier composers was a place for their own narrative voice: ‘the Act II passacaglia [in *Peter Grimes*] is where Britten pours out his sympathy for his characters, and, as in the great D minor interlude of *Wozzeck*, the composer occupies centre stage. Here there

is no need of interpretation, for the message of anguish and compassion is unequivocal'.<sup>100</sup> In Gawain, by comparison, Birtwistle offers a more equivocal portrait of a male character trapped by social conventions, a figure manipulated and misunderstood by those around him. Nevertheless, when aspects of the music's secret drama are taken into account, the composer's narrative position, which elucidates our sense of Gawain's psychological plight, is more clearly revealed.

## Acknowledgements

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100 Matthews, liner notes to Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 15.



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