



Arts

Distinctive: Simon Holt, left, has written some of modern music's most vivid works, including 'The Nightingale's to Blame', put on by Opera North in 1998, right



'If something is in today, it will be out by tomorrow'

Ahead of a summer of his music, Simon Holt talks to *Ivan Hewett* about angst, creativity and the dangers of being 'terminally trendy'

The world is full of composers who can fashion a slick, exciting piece that is modern in a fashionable way, slips down easily, and leaves nothing behind it. Much fewer in number are the composers whose pieces unveil a vivid and utterly personal expressive world, but which for that reason do not slip down easily. The music of these composers embodies an enticing mystery that makes us want to go back to the piece, to see whether the mystery can be unlocked.

Simon Holt, who turns 60 this year, is definitely one of the latter sort. He is one of this country's most distinguished living composers, and

ranks high among composers worldwide. His music has been commissioned by the London Sinfonietta, the BBC Proms and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, among others. The work list is now long, and includes two operas, several concertos and some big-scale orchestral pieces of an utterly distinct, moonlit mystery, though the heart of his music may lie in the small chamber works like "a book of colours", a collection of piano pieces that are as brilliant and sharply etched as diamonds. He has won numerous awards, been the subject of *The South Bank Show* on ITV, and is a professor at the Royal College of Music.

This summer there's a flurry of performances of his music, at the

Aldeburgh Festival, in Birmingham, and also at the Proms.

And yet, despite all that, Holt is less well-known than his two celebrated near-contemporaries George Benjamin and Mark-Anthony Turnage. "Yes, I am definitely the third Tenor, the one whose name no one ever remembers," he says with that self-mocking quality I see a lot of during our conversation. Part of the problem is that Holt is so vehemently un-media-friendly. He has no website, doesn't go to the right parties or cultivate the powerful and influential.

"It's all to do with confidence," he says. "I never really had any when I was young, and I'm only starting to develop some now. I always hated parties or any kind of noisy gathering. When I'm in a gathering of composers all swapping gossip about who is conducting this orchestra, or who's won that commission, I just want to walk away. That's not what it's about for me. Writing the music is all that's ever really mattered."

That lack of confidence may perhaps be traced back to two key moments in his Bolton childhood. One was the death of his father, a scrap metal merchant, which occurred when Holt was only 17 years old. "I remember him as this dark, very intense presence," says Holt. "We never really communicated much... and so it's always felt like there was this very important formative relationship missing." By that time he was already playing the piano and improvising. "My parents bought a piano when I was probably about five, and I became obsessed with it, improvising for hours and hours. I used to Sellotape pan lids to the strings to make it sound more interesting. Soon I was writing little pieces, all very short, with titles like *Prelude to Autumn*. They were always prompted by images or poetry," he says, pointing to a feature of his musical creativity that has remained constant ever since.

At the same time, Holt was taking piano lessons, and has fond memories

of his first teacher. "He was an extraordinary man, a tremendous enthusiast called Vincent Furniss Partington, who never put his teeth in." That detail reveals Holt's Alan Bennett-ish love of the eccentric and grotesque, a trait that occasionally emerges in the music. His percussion concerto *A Table of Noises* was inspired by memories of his taxidermist great-uncle Ash and his stuffed animals, and Ash's neighbour "Skennin' Mary", "whose glass eye would spin when she got angry".

The other key moment was Holt's discovery that he was gay, at the age of about five. "It's strange, up to the age of about 13 I could be relatively open about the fact I was attracted to boys, but then it became taboo. I was bullied quite a lot for some years. So I turned very much into myself. I went from being ebullient to being silent and daydreaming. Music and art were a lifeline for me. I think without them I would have gone mad."

Soon Holt found a new musical enthusiasm. "I took up the organ in the sixth form and for a while was obsessed with it," he says. "But, as with the piano, I knew I wasn't cut out to be a performer. I didn't have the confidence. I was more interested in the instrument as a way to explore music and inspire ideas about how to put music together."

Because Holt was drawn equally to art in his teens, his route into music was slow and unorthodox. He did eventually make it to the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, but before that he spent a year at Bolton College of Art, where he learnt an important lesson about creativity.

"I was doing a foundation course that involved painting, and I thought I had been very clever in covering a piece of paper with a collage, using every bit of stuff I could lay my hands on. I was so proud. The teacher came over, took one look and said, 'Chaos!'. He lifted it so everything fell on the floor, put the naked paper back on the table, laid two thin pieces of fabric across the middle, and said 'Now, see how much more powerful that is! It was so obvious he didn't actually have to say it. The thought that went through my mind was, 'How do I achieve that in music?'"

Not long after arriving at the Royal Northern College in 1978, Holt had a personal breakthrough. "After a bad first term when I didn't really write anything, I thought to myself, 'I'm supposed to be a composer, I need to sit down and actually get on with it! So I did, and wrote in one evening the piece I consider my first real piece; it's still in my catalogue. It's called *Lunas Zauberschein*, for mezzo-soprano and bass flute. I'm still very fond of it, the

piece feels like a real beginning." He's right; the music has a dark, liquid menace that is echt Holt.

A few years later came the public breakthrough, with a piece of turbulent expressive power named *Kites*, premiered by the London Sinfonietta. His first 20 years were difficult and strenuous, but full of powerful achievement, culminating in his Lorca-based opera *The Nightingale's to Blame*. The second 20 years were marked by a turn to a more stark, elemental style, and personally by a new calm, achieved partly by spending part of the year in a house deep in the southern Spanish countryside near Granada.

Now, with a new partner in his life, Holt feels a new "third period" may be around the corner. "I am full of ideas," he says. "I have plans for 15 new pieces, including four operas, but God knows how they will see the light of day. It's so hard to get commissions these days." Calmer he may be, but Holt insists that creativity never gets easier. "In the end, I think creativity is

One of his concertos was inspired by a neighbour 'whose glass eye would spin when she got angry'

rooted in the instinct for survival. It's that moment when the tiger is rushing towards you and you grab a stick by instinct and use it like a spear. It's about answering the question, 'How the hell do I meet this challenge?'"

It may seem odd to compare fending off a tiger with composing a piece of music, but that's what makes Holt's music so intense. Each piece is a fresh response to a challenge that demands the maximum effort, and to him is life-or-death. "I don't think creativity can ever be tied to a political or social agenda," he says. "Following that line brings on the problem of the terminally trendy, where composers try desperately to tune into the zeitgeist, whatever that is. That's dangerous because whatever is 'in' today will definitely be 'out' tomorrow. I'm always saying to my students that their music should be properly inhabited, not just note-spinning to pad out a concept. It has to fire something in the imagination of the player and the listener. Without that, there's no real music."

Simon Holt's music is featured in Birmingham performed by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra tonight (0121 780 3333), at the Aldeburgh Festival on June 22 (01728 687110), and at the BBC Proms on August 13 (020 7070 4410)