

Simon Holt

Arnold Whittall champions this British composer whose unique sound embraces art, literature, the sinister – even the ghoulish

Simon Holt, who turned 60 last month, belongs to a generation of British composers as celebrated for its distinction as for its diversity. With George Benjamin, Jonathan Dove, James MacMillan and Mark-Anthony Turnage all born between 1958 and 1960, neither avant-garde experimentalism nor wholeheartedly nostalgic conservatism are to be expected. Rather, varying degrees of edginess and incisiveness speak of distinctively contemporary expressive concerns and technical possibilities. Holt's music, too, has a dramatic immediacy and colouristic appeal indicating a healthy scepticism about overtly mechanistic systems at one extreme and pastoral nostalgia at the other. At the same time, the often forceful ruggedness of his materials, textures and processes reveals affinities with an earlier generation of British modernists, of which Holt's fellow Lancastrian Sir Harrison Birtwistle (b1934) is the leading representative.

Holt studied at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester with Anthony Gilbert – recent string quartets by master and pupil can be heard on the album 'Bracing Change' (NMC, 8/17) – and had his first professional successes in the early 1980s. At that time, Tippett and Maxwell Davies were especially prominent among contemporary British composers, yet the musical climate also owed much to a determinedly internationalist outlook, especially at the BBC and with such

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enterprising outfits as the London Sinfonietta and the Nash Ensemble. In this respect, Holt has something in common with another close contemporary, Richard Barrett (b1959), who like him has spent long periods living and working on the Continent. On the other hand, Holt has shown less sympathy than Barrett with the rhythmic complexities of Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy and James Dillon; and Barrett's direct involvement in performance (mainly in connection with live electronics) contrasts considerably with Holt's Birtwistle-like avoidance of the performer's role.

Holt also shares Birtwistle's interest in the fine arts, and made these a special study before switching to music. Although the musical results are never simplistically pictorial, visual materials have been vital sources of inspiration, from as early as *Maiistra* (1981) for solo flute (doubling alto flute), which references a mysteriously bird-like sculpture by Brancusi, and *Burlesca oscura* (1985) for clarinet quintet, the first of several works relating to Goya etchings. The Goya connection is an indication of Holt's close associations with Spain. He first set Federico García Lorca in *Canciones* (1986) and used a play by Lorca in his opera *The Nightingale's to Blame* (1996-8), first performed by Opera North (and which



Simon Holt: finds constant musical inspiration in the visual arts

sadly remains unrecorded). Holt's literary sources and allusions – which also include Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson and Antonio Machado – are nevertheless as diverse as his references to painters or sculptors; no artist has been more significant for him than the very un-Goya-like American abstractionist Ellsworth Kelly (1923-2015), linked to the orchestral pieces *Troubled Light* (2008) and *Ellsworth 2* (2012).

The sheer range of such extramusical promptings might suggest a consistent need to find validity for music outside music itself. But that is to ignore the very immediate and compelling sense of musical identity to be heard across the 30 plus years of creative endeavour which are, by now, reasonably well represented on disc. The steady stream of commissions Holt has received from the BBC, the Nash Ensemble, the London Sinfonietta, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and the Huddersfield Festival could portray him as a 'niche' establishment modernist, with his roots in early 20th-century expressionism and surrealism, and feeling most at home with the sinister, even ghoulish, prompted by Birtwistle's delight in night pieces and laments. Such an atmosphere is indeed to be heard in works with titles like *Black Lanterns* (1984), *Ballad of the Black Sorrow* (1988), *Sparrow Night* (1989), *Banshee* (1994), *Boots of Lead* (2002) and (because of its grisly scenario involving the martyrdom of St Eulalia) *Witness to a Snow Miracle* (2005). But the boldness and directness of



HOLT FACTS

Born Bolton, Greater Manchester, February 21, 1958
Education Bolton Art College (1976-77), RNCM (1978-82)

Teaching posts City, University of London; Royal Holloway, University of London; Royal College of Music (composition professor since 2012)

Selected awards Royal Philharmonic Society award in 1989 for *Capriccio spettrale* (1988); two British Composer Awards: in 2004 for *Who Put Bella in the Wych Elm?* (2003), in 2009 for *A Table of Noises* (2007). Composer in Association with BBC NOW (2008-14).

Holt on Holt 'I wouldn't call myself a composer in the traditional sense. I'm just someone who is trying to make work that happens to involve sound and instruments and people playing it - that's very important for me. It's not an academic exercise ... I'm interested in the sculptural aspect of it and the work almost becoming physical - in the moment - like it's an object that we're actually watching.' (2015)

material and expression to be heard in all these scores keep Holt's music well clear of horror-movie clichés: and

even if he counts as a 'non-performer' among composers, he consistently demonstrates an acute ear for freshly minted sonorities allied to an unflinching sense of what is possible and effective when performers of the highest professional calibre are involved. Most striking of all is his ability to switch from uninhibited forcefulness to much more restrained, mysterious moods, and to achieve a coherent relation between these contrasts. In this one might occasionally detect associations with the music of Roberto Gerhard, who also found ways of connecting British understatement with Iberian impulsiveness.

Holt has written a substantial amount of strongly atmospheric piano music, as can be heard on Rolf Hind's excellent recital disc 'A Book of Colours' (NMC, 10/09). In a 2015 interview, the composer spoke of playing chords over and over until he feels he can 'inhabit' them as personal presences, something that conveys (to some commentators) an affinity with Xenakis. But he has also described his admiring response to the echoing spectra of Oliveros's large-scale Deep Listening project, in which long-sustained, cavernously resonant and euphonious harmonies create a mesmerisingly hypnotic effect. Since Oliveros is usually thought of as being on the 'experimental' wing of the contemporary compositional spectrum, this reinforces the relevance of Holt's self-confessed resistance to anything that characterises him as a composer 'in the traditional sense'.

He goes on to describe musical compositions (even those which set or refer to verbal texts) as resembling sculptural objects to be observed from multiple vantage points. A composer 'in the traditional sense' might rather support the relatively common view of music as a language, the basis for eloquent oratory.

Holt's wish to rethink the nature of composition does not, it would appear, lead to the kind of questioning of the very nature of music itself that experimentalists such as John Cage and Christian Wolff have advocated. Holt works with, rather than against, well-established performing institutions and the traditional environment of concert and operatic stage, the more effectively to challenge the long-lasting premisses of such traditions. Thus his music-theatre piece *Who Put Bella in the Wych Elm?* (2003) brings some of the instrumentalists directly into the action. And works that present themselves initially as conventionally generic, like the violin concerto *Witness to a Snow Miracle* or the basset clarinet concerto *Joy Beast* (2016), written for Mark Simpson, have aspects of theatricality about their character and presentation that need to be seen as well as heard. Holt vividly reconfigures the conventional association between solo display by an onstage protagonist and more overtly interactive virtuosity in which the character of the soloist-protagonist is defined as much by how the other players react as by the soloist's own material. From *Walking with the River's Roar* (1991, revised 2006 and 2016) for viola and orchestra, to *Morpheus Wakes* (2011) for flute and orchestra without violins, and on to *Joy Beast*, Holt's concertos are among the most original and enterprising on the contemporary scene. More recordings of them would be a particularly welcome addition to the Holt discography. **G**

HOLT ON DISC

Works that span his career from the 1980s to the present



...Era madrugada. Canciones. Shadow Realm. Sparrow Night

Fiona Kimm *mezzo* Gareth Hulse *ob* Nash Ens / Lionel Friend NMC (5/93)

The first of NMC's Holt discs contains four of his most vividly imaginative night pieces from the 1980s. All were premiered by the Nash Ensemble, and were recorded here in 1991.



'Boots of Lead - Feet of Clay'

Rinat Shaham *mez* Ulrich Heinen *vc* Rolf Hind *pf* BCMG / Martyn Brabbins, Simon Rattle NMC (A/04)

Here are five works: four for chamber ensemble, including his earliest characteristic composition, *Kites* (1983), and the Emily Dickinson setting *Boots of Lead* (2002), recorded at its premiere; and one for solo cello - *Feet of Clay* (2003).



'A Table of Noises'

Chloë Hanslip *vn* Colin Currie *perc* Hallé Orch / Nicholas Collon NMC (5/17)

This offers powerful evidence of Holt's orchestral mastery. *St Vitus in the Kettle* (2008), a brief, abrasive scherzo, comes between two very different concertos. *A Table of Noises* (2007) makes a display piece for percussion out of a portrait in sound of Holt's taxidermist great-uncle, while the violin concerto *Witness to a Snow Miracle* (2005) evokes Matthias Grünewald's harrowing paintings and the youthful Christian martyr St Eulalia of Mérida. At once elusive and aggressive, the music on this disc encapsulates with special directness the rewards and challenges of Holt's highly personal sound world.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDRZEJ URBANIAK