

Simon Holt



a book of colours

Rolf Hind, piano

SIMON HOLT

This CD of the majority of my piano pieces is dedicated with much affection to the memory of Bill Collieran, who was such an enormous support to me through the early '80s and well into the '90s at Universal Edition. I owe him a great deal and will remember him always. S.H.

1	Tauromaquia (1985)	12'18
	a book of colours	
2	Duendecitos (1988)	1'59
3	Figurine (1991)	3'53
4	A shapeless flame (1992)	3'28
5	Some distant chimes (1992)	4'42
6	The thing that makes ashes (1993)	7'22
7	Black Lanterns (1984, revised 2004)	8'10
	Klop's Last Bite (2004)	
8	Enter Klop	0'25
9	Klop bides his time	1'06
10	Klop waits and waits	1'00
11	Klop falls asleep and dreams of warm blood	1'24
12	The mad flea	0'14
13	Klop awakes to an attack	1'17
14	Klop takes a bite	1'00
15	Klop victorious	0'39
16	Klop has delusions of grandeur	1'07
17	The mad flea exacts revenge	0'38
18	Klop's dead	1'32
19	Nigredo (1994, revised 2004)	16'18
	Total timing	69'17

photo: Chris Christodoulou



SIMON HOLT a book of colours

Just a quick scan through the titles of Simon Holt's works confirms that the extra-musical ingredients that have informed and inspired his music for more than a quarter of a century, especially those from the visual arts and literature, have been as consistent as they have been exhilaratingly diverse. Indeed such impulses often seem to have figured as significantly in his development as a composer as any of the purely musical influences – in themselves equally varied – and it has been the way in which those various sources have been refracted through Holt's creative personality that has given his music its pungency and instantly identifiable character.

If piano music has never seemed to feature prominently in an output whose centre of gravity has always been located in his works for ensemble, Holt has in fact returned regularly to composing for the instrument that was his second study when he was a student at the Royal Northern College of Music between 1978 and 1982. As this collection demonstrates, there is now enough of those pieces to comfortably fill a CD – more than enough, actually, as one work, the five miniatures making up *a book of shadow*, completed in 2005, has been omitted.

If the earliest work here, *Tauromaquia*, seems stylistically to be set apart from the later pieces, betraying a debt to Messiaen's piano writing that otherwise scarcely surfaces in Holt's output, its starting point is an entirely characteristic one. Spain and its culture, both visual and literary, have been perhaps his most persistent inspiration, running like a refrain through his output, and for *Tauromaquia* specifically it was Goya's 1815 series of studies of the same name, depicting images of bullfighting, and particularly one that portrays the death of José Delgado. Holt's piece ends, he says, with a cortège for the famous bullfighter, and instructs that the piece is to be played not only with 'great bravura and at all times a knife-edge intensity and power' but with '*duende*' – that hard to define, peculiarly Spanish quality, much analysed by Lorca, signifying emotional authenticity and depth.

The five movements that make up *a book of colours* then emerged piecemeal. The starting point was *Duendecitos*, a short piece Holt was commissioned by the BBC to write in 1988 for an 80th-birthday tribute to Sir William Glock, the corporation's former Controller, Music, and which again references an etching

by Goya – in this case one from the series *Los Caprichos* showing a group of lecherous, dwarfish monks. After completing *Duendecitos* Holt decided to add further pieces to make a set, and the other four emerged over the next five years, all with similarly evocative titles, which perhaps owe something to Debussy's *Préludes*. The brief, static *Figurine* was composed for the pianist and writer Stephen Pruslin, while *A shapeless flame* and *Some distant chimes* were conceived as a sharply contrasted pair, the first flickering and impermanent, the second a sombre exploration of the extremes of the keyboard, which were first performed together in 1992. *The thing that makes ashes* was added the following year and specifically intended as a summation of the conflicting tendencies of the previous pieces in the entire cycle. Its title comes from an African tribe which, terrified of using the word fire, in case it summons the devil, resorts to euphemisms such as this phrase.

Over the last decade or so Holt has increasingly explored small forms, constructing even some of his most substantial recent works, such as the 2007 violin concerto, *Witness to a snow*

miracle, and the 2008 percussion concerto *A table of noises*, out of programmatic collections of such miniatures. *Klop's Last Bite* takes that tendency to an extreme with a sequence of ten sometimes microscopically short pieces that trace out an action-packed scenario – a battle between a bed bug called Klop and a mad, marauding flea, which all ends rather tragically. Yet such are the quirky connective processes of Holt's creativity that the starting point for this latter day *Combattimento* – Holt calls it an 'insect snuff movie' – was a press article about the late Peter Ustinov which mentioned his father, who had spied during World War II under the codename of Klop (the Russian word for a bedbug), and from that trigger one thing led to another.

Though initially composed ten years apart, *Black Lanterns* and *Nigredo* seem a strongly connected pair. Both pieces were revised in 2004, and both were written as tributes to composers who were strong supporters of Holt in the early part of his career. *Black Lanterns* was a 50th-birthday tribute to Harrison Birtwistle in 1984, while *Nigredo*, composed for Rolf Hind, was a salute to Peter Maxwell Davies on his 60th a decade later. They seem at least

Right: Simon Holt and Rolf Hind at Potton Hall

distantly related musically too, for each starts out from an obsessive fascination with an oscillating semitone, before venturing into far more bravura territory. *Nigredo* is the more ambitious and substantial of the two, and perhaps also the most consciously pianistic of all Holt's piano works, though its title hints at something darker and more introspective than mere display. In alchemy 'nigredo' was the first cleansing stage in the process of transmutation, which turned base metal into gold, and was taken over into Jungian psychoanalysis to describe the point of maximum despair from which personal development has to begin. And it is also the title of a painting by Anselm Kiefer, which Holt discovered when he began to write the piece; such a bundle of visual, literary and historical influences is the kind of rich mix on which Holt's music so often thrives.

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SIMON HOLT

Simon Holt was born in Bolton, Lancashire in 1958. After completing a foundation course at Bolton Art College, he went on to study composition with Anthony Gilbert at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester.

One of his first major commissions as a young composer came from the late Michael Vyner, then artistic director of the London Sinfonietta, who commissioned *Kites* (1983). Holt's relationship with the London Sinfonietta has continued with a steady stream of performances and premieres, including *Ballad of the Black Sorrow* (1988), *eco-pavan* (1998) and his most recent large-scale piece, *Sueños* (2007) for baritone and ensemble.

Simon Holt's large output for chamber ensemble includes seven pieces written for the Nash Ensemble; the first of four of these – *Shadow Realm* (1983), *...era madrugada* (1984), *Canciones*

(1986) and *Sparrow Night* (1989) were recorded by the Nash for NMC (NMC D008). More recently, Holt has developed a very fruitful relationship with Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, which recorded *Kites*, *Lilith* (1990), *eco-pavan* (1998), *Boots of Lead* (2002) and *feet of clay* (2003) on NMC D094.

To date, Holt has been commissioned to write three major orchestral pieces for the BBC Proms: in 1987, John Drummond commissioned *Syrensong* for the BBC Symphony Orchestra; this was followed by the viola concerto *Walking with the River's Roar* (1992), and latterly *Troubled Light* for the BBC NOW in 2008.

The world of Greek myth has provided inspiration for a number of Holt's works: his *Icarus Trilogy* culminated in 1995 with the premiere of his cello concerto *Daedalus Remembers*,

commissioned by the Cheltenham festival for Rohan de Saram and Sinfonia 21. He also feels a great affinity for the writing of Federico Garcia Lorca, whose texts have much in common with Holt's own sound world, and which he has set for the song cycle *Canciones* and opera *The Nightingale's to Blame*. A further source of inspiration is the writing of Emily Dickinson, which has produced *Sunrise' yellow noise* (2000), for soprano and orchestra, which earned its composer the 2001 Prix de la Fondation Prince Pierre, Monaco. It is the first part of the cycle, *a ribbon of time*, which encompasses five works based on poems by Dickinson: the others are *Two Movements* for string quartet (2001), which received the Royal Philharmonic Society Award; *Boots of Lead* (2002) for alto and ensemble, which received the Ivor Novello Classical Music Award; *Clandestiny* (2000) for soprano and organ; and *Startled Grass*

(2001) for female voices and cello.

The music theatre piece, *Who Put Bella in the Wych Elm?*, commissioned by Almeida Aldeburgh Opera, was performed around the UK in 2003 to great acclaim and judged Best Stage Work at the 2004 British Composer Awards. It led to a number of related works: *The Coroner's Report* (2004) for ensemble, *the other side of silence* (2004) for flute, viola and harp, and *The sharp end of night* (2005) for solo violin.

Holt's recent large-scale pieces have included the violin concerto *witness to a snow miracle*, judged Best Orchestral Work at the 2006 British Composer Awards, and a percussion concerto for Colin Currie entitled *a table of noises* (2008). He currently holds the position of Composer in Association at BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

ROLF HIND piano

Rolf Hind has worked closely with living composers across a broad range of styles: from John Adams and Tan Dun to Ligeti and Lachenmann, Xenakis and Messiaen to George Benjamin and Judith Weir.

Born in London and now living there after studies at the Royal College of Music and in Los Angeles, his career has many facets. He appears regularly at new music festivals throughout Europe: in Brussels, Oslo, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Darmstadt, Vienna, Strasbourg and Paris. He is in demand as a soloist with all the major BBC orchestras and plays regularly with the London Sinfonietta. Further afield he has made numerous appearances with, amongst others, the Baltimore Symphony, Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Munich Radio Orchestra, Stockholm Philharmonic, South West German

Radio Orchestra, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Slovenian Radio Philharmonic and Oslo Sinfonietta. As a performer he has had a number of concertos written for him, by Unsuk Chin (with BBC NOW), Poul Ruders (LPO) Bent Sorensen (BBCSO/ Danish Radio), Simon Holt (London Sinfonietta) and David Sawer (BBC Symphony/ BBC Proms); he has worked with conductors including Vladimir Ashkenazy, Simon Rattle, Leonard Slatkin, Andrew Davis, Markus Stenz, Oliver Knussen, David Robertson and Franz Welsch-Möst.

His appearances overseas include tours of Korea, Taiwan and Cuba, and recitals and concertos at Perth and Wellington Festivals, Sydney Opera House, Carnegie Hall and the Lincoln Center. Rolf has also worked with some of the world's greatest dancers and choreographers, including Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker at Rosas,

Richard Alston, and the London Contemporary Dance Theatre.

In the last few years Rolf has developed a growing reputation as a composer; *The Independent* called him "one of the rare examples of a performer who can make a successful career as a composer". His piano pieces and chamber works have been broadcast by the BBC and played widely throughout Europe. Recent commissions include *Eye of Fire*, which he played with The Duke Quartet, and *Sunnata* for five pianos and one honky-tonk. He premiered his piano concerto *Maya-Sesha*, commissioned by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Martyn Brabbins in 2008. He is published by Ricordi London.

Rolf is in demand as a teacher, holding a professorial post at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (teaching composition and

the piano); he teaches at the Royal Academy of Music and is a regular guest at Dartington International Summer School.

He has a long-standing relationship with Simon Holt's music: *nigredo*, "the thing that makes ashes" and the concertante piece *ecopavan* were all written for and premiered by him. He also had a leading role as the onstage pianist in Holt's opera *Who put Bella in the Wych-Elm?*

For NMC, he has recorded music by David Sawer and Vic Hoyland (NMC D020S), Simon Holt (NMC D094), Benjamin Britten (NMC D140) and his own composition (on NMC D078). He has also recorded for Factory Classics, Virgin, Teldec, Bridge and DaCapo.

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NMC Recordings is very grateful to the RWV Trust for funding towards this recording. It has been made with kind financial assistance from the Ida Carroll Trust, in association with Manchester Musical Heritage Trust.

This disc was recorded on 27-28 July 2008 at Potton Hall, Suffolk.

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Inlay image **RICHARD LONG** Mud Hand Circle: Untitled
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Graphic design **FRANCOIS HALL**

Simon Holt's music is published by Chester Music.

NMC Recordings is a charitable company established for the recording of contemporary music by the Holst Foundation; it is grateful for funding from the Britten-Pears Foundation and Arts Council England.

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NMC Recordings Ltd.
at 18-20 Southwark Street, London SE1 1TJ, UK.
Tel: +44 (0)20 7403 9445 Fax: +44 (0)20 7403 9446
E-mail: nmc@nmcrec.co.uk Website: www.nmcrec.co.uk

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Catalogue number: NMC D128

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