

A top-down photograph of various colorful, reflective spheres and objects scattered on a light-colored wooden surface. The objects include a yellow sphere with a black center, a red sphere with a black center, a blue sphere, a small glass jar with a red substance inside, and several other spheres in various colors and finishes. The lighting is warm and directional, creating strong highlights and shadows.

a table of noises

St Vitus in the kettle
witness to a snow miracle

Colin Currie *percussion* • Chloë Hanslip *violin* • Hallé • Nicholas Collon *conductor*



photo © Andrzej Urbaniak

Simon Holt

a table of noises

1	JUTE	3'30
2	ghost one	0'37
3	fly	3'35
4	ghost two	1'03
5	a drawer full of eyes	2'38
6	ghost three	0'57
7	Skennin' Mary	4'11
8	ghost four	1'31
9	table top / ghost five	6'02
10	under glass	3'37

Colin Currie *percussion* • Hallé • Nicholas Collon *conductor*

11	St Vitus in the kettle	5'56
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Hallé • Nicholas Collon *conductor*

witness to a snow miracle

12	Eulalia of Merida	2'05
13	the tearing, the burning	3'17
14	flames become birds	3'26
15	snowfall on ashes	4'17
16	witness	3'12
17	torments	3'10
18	halo	3'52

Chloë Hanslip *violin* • Hallé • Nicholas Collon *conductor*

Total timing:	57'13
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Simon Holt Miracles and Memories

“I have a feeling that the simpler and more direct something is, the more mysterious it is.”

So says the multi award-winning Simon Holt, reflecting on his journey as an orchestral composer: from 1987 and his inaugural BBC Proms commission, *Syrensong*, to the present day via the three post-millennium works that comprise this illuminating fourth, full album of his music from NMC.

Holt's comment points to a fascination with the monolithic that has often informed his work, but which has become steadily more crucial to his orchestral writing. His propensity for finding inspiration in literature and poetry, mythology and visual art is well-known. This is combined with a penchant for outlandish folk tales and a kind of oblique ritualism, and a willingness

to delve deep into personal as well as collective memory as the works here attest: the violin concerto, *witness to a snow miracle* (2005), and the short orchestral showpiece, *St Vitus in the kettle* (2008), explore the macabre yet wonder-inducing martyrdom of child saints; closer to home, the percussion concerto, *a table of noises* (2007), revels in the eccentricity of Holt's taxidermist great uncle Ashworth.

In expressive terms, Holt's quest amounts to the probing of stories and ideas that capture his imagination, bringing them vividly to life through the abstract yet physical stuff of musical material. His pieces are rich with the tension of opposites, explored through an idiom that is

typically highly charged, colouristic and atonal; eschewing 'systems' or theoretical dogma, but rather chiselled-out as a sculptor might do, to often filigree levels of refinement.

More deeply, these resources are deployed in pursuit of metaphysical questions; not to find answers *per se*, but in time-honoured modernist tradition to interrogate concepts, beliefs and the material itself in a way which somehow pierces through to the heart of the experience. Holt has said of *St Vitus*, "I'm not at all religious – completely irreligious in fact – but I'm interested in the stranger saints and the idea of belief and the faith people have and the lengths they will go to protect it". He offers no moral judgement upon the stories he chooses. Rather, paradox and enigma loom large in his music, where suggestive atmospheres and pictorial, sometimes surreally witty 'scenes' are soaked in claustrophobic disquiet and lit with an exquisite, dark beauty.

Holt's textures and formal structures are strikingly idiosyncratic and loaded with aural theatre. The concertos comprise a series of short, episodic movements or tableau; there are seven in *snow miracle* whilst *noises* has six, interspersed with five, equally characterful "ghost" interludes. In both works the soloist forms the focal point of an orchestral narrative which – like that of *St Vitus* – is full of turbulent momentum arrested by sudden ruptures and fragmentation, yet intensely subtle and retaining an underlying sense of stillness.

Extremes of register abound as, for example, shrill piccolos contrast with sonorous, rumbling contrabassoon and tuba. The string sections hold surprises, too; whilst *snow miracle* omits violas and cellos, and *noises* omits violins, *St Vitus* eschews strings altogether except for six double basses which – like all Holt's ensemble strings – are frequently divided into smaller,

delicate groupings. It goes without saying that the concerto soloists require not just technical brilliance but great sonic imagination. Yet every player in Holt's extraordinary orchestral soundworld performs a vital, dramatic role. Allusive and multi-layered, his music is amongst the most exciting and intriguing of today.

witness to a snow miracle (2005)

From the initial, frenzied cadenza for solo violin, *witness to a snow miracle* turns on its head any conventional idea about what a concerto is. The title is derived from W. G. Sebald's 'As the Snow on the Alps', from the prose-poem, *After Nature*. This concerns the renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald, famous for his grotesque religious panels in which physical torment is portrayed in harrowing technicolour detail. Holt's subject is the Christian martyr St Eulalia of Merida, who was put to

death by the Romans in 304 A.D. Aged just 12-14 years old, she had supposedly refused to worship "false gods" decreed by the emperor Diocletian. In the composer's words, he presents the concerto's seven movements "as if part of a painting in which we see all the events of her life and eventual martyrdom".

Eulalia's story is certainly gruesome, and Holt utilises visceral musical imagery in a score replete with subtle medieval hues. He describes how she was tortured: "... torn by iron hooks revealing her very bones, and flames applied to the wounds to increase her suffering. She was dragged by the hair, berating her captors all the while and threatening them with the terrors of the Final Judgement, to the place of execution where she was covered in hot coals. Her hair caught fire and she was suffocated by the smoke. A blanket of snow fell on her ashes, at which point she was declared a saint."

The opening 'Eulalia of Merida' – and indeed the entire violin part, with its obsessive, frantic lines off-set by shrieking woodwind; thumping and rasping brass; clanking percussion and rippling harp and celeste – suggests that the soloist represents the saint herself. However, as so often in Holt's music, his mode of expression might be strikingly direct, but meanings or associations are ambiguous. Who is it that bears witness? Perhaps we listeners do – but are we sure that the violinist does not? Does Eulalia actually expire, or is she rather transmuted? Holt's movements run thus:

- 1 Eulalia of Merida
- 2 the tearing, the burning
- 3 flames become birds
- 4 snowfall on ashes
- 5 witness
- 6 torments
- 7 halo

More important than narrative logic, here, is its absence; that

is, the absence of reason in the fundamentalist, unswerving faith held by tormented and tormentors alike. Holt's unflinching aural images compel just as they repel. He seems to ask: where ends and where begins horror and beauty; fire and ice; monster and miracle? The piece is finally inscrutable, as the soloist is instructed to turn his or her back to the audience as it dies away.

Commissioned by the BBC. Premiere: violinist Viviane Hagner with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Jonathan Nott. Awarded Best Orchestral Work at the 2006 British Composer Awards.

a table of noises (2007)

The title, *a table of noises*, contains several clues as to the inspiration behind Holt's extraordinary percussion concerto, and the mischief that pervades it. In his composer's note, Holt explains that "the percussionist will, for the most part, be seated on a cajon (a box-

like instrument most often used in flamenco). At other times he will play the xylophone and finally the glockenspiel, but all the other instruments will be laid out on a table in front of the soloist; hence the title.”

The music itself suggests further twists: a ‘table’ also describes a method of categorising, and Holt casts the work’s subject, his taxidermist great uncle Ashworth, as a kind of maverick scientist-cum-collector. There is irony, too, in that the piece confounds expectations of a percussion concerto in being mainly quiet in dynamic and delicately subtle – as well as fearsomely virtuosic. Indeed, Holt writes for pitched and un-pitched percussion alike with great lyrical care and sensitivity, belying lazy ‘categorisations’ of percussion as ‘noise’ as opposed to ‘music’.

How does the orchestra stand in relation to this ‘table of noises’; a

tongue-in-cheek collective noun? Holt’s score is both wittily inventive and poignant in its portrayal of Ash and aspects of his life. It is also gratifyingly substantial, utilising startling, mainly chamber textures within a series of brief movements linked by five “ghost” orchestral interludes:

- 1 JUTE (a rough material used for stuffing animal skins)
- 2 ghost one
- 3 fly (Ash’s dog, who would fall asleep standing up, staring into the fire)
- 4 ghost two
- 5 a drawer full of eyes (discovered by Holt’s mother in Ash’s bedroom tallboy)
- 6 ghost three
- 7 Skennin’ Mary (a neighbour with a glass eye that spun when she became angry)
- 8 ghost four
- 9 table top (everything to hand since Ash had a “gammy leg”) / ghost five (for bass clarinet,

played simultaneously with
'table top')

10 under glass (Ash's display
cabinet of stuffed animals and
family photos)

Orchestral percussion, together with two prominent piccolos, are positioned antiphonally at the back of the ensemble to form a triangle with the soloist at the front. These and the rest of the orchestra – down to booming, sepulchral, bass trombone and tuba – range from whistling almost-ditties to eerie chords and spectral mirages. Not unlike *witness to a snow miracle*, the soloist becomes in effect the central character within a musical narrative whilst reflecting upon it. Again, death is ghoulishly surreal, but here there is overt black humour. What means the designation “ghost” of the orchestral interludes? Is it the spirit of Uncle Ash? Or perhaps that of the animals he preserved to stare forever out with glassy eyes?

Commissioned for Colin Currie jointly by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the Borletti-Buitoni Trust. Awarded Best Orchestral Work at the 2009 British Composer Awards.

St Vitus in the kettle (2008)

This short, fantastical orchestral showpiece was composed early in Holt's tenure as BBC National Orchestra of Wales Composer-in-Association (2008-2014). It was commissioned to celebrate the orchestra's move to a new home in January 2009 at BBC Hoddinott Hall in Cardiff Bay. Dazzlingly energetic and full of fast-changing, quirky timbres, the piece also achieves within its six-minute span a meditative quality that invites reflection on, as well as astonishment at, the story of its martyr subject.

Holt describes St Vitus as “the patron saint of actors, comedians, Czechoslovakia, epileptics and

dancers”, and protector against “snake and dog bites, lightning and storms”. Said to have been between seven and twelve years old when he was put to death, the saint shares further kinship with St Eulalia in having fallen foul of the Roman, Diocletian; in his case, despite having rid that emperor’s son of an evil spirit.

In the way of diabolically inventive medieval torture, St Vitus was boiled in a kettle of lead – and it was Holt’s coming across a “rather serene and yet not a little comical” sculpture in Berlin of this unenviable fate that inspired his piece. The tale that St Vitus sprang unharmed from the cauldron gave rise to a bizarre ritual in 16th-century Germany whereby peasants danced maniacally in front of his statue in the belief that this would ensure good health for the coming year. From this came the naming of the nervous disorder, ‘St Vitus’ Dance’, whose sufferers were

supposedly driven to dash their brains out, “roaring and foaming”.

Unsurprisingly, dancing hysteria features in Holt’s alternately inviting and chilling, episodic musical response. Propelled by pizzicato double basses and tinnitus-high piccolos, percussive outbursts are intercut with ominous block chords and swirling, ragged woodwind. Contrary to the insanity and excess it describes, the piece is a model of concision and control.

Premiere performance by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, conducted by Thierry Fischer.

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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. He is a Fellow of the Royal Northern College of Music and of the University of Bolton. As a young composer he was commissioned by the late Michael Vyner, then artistic director of the London Sinfonietta, to write *Kites* (1983). In 1985 he was featured composer of the Bath International Festival at which the late William Mann was the artistic director. 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 *Sueños* (2006) for baritone and ensemble, performed by Roderick Williams and the London Sinfonietta conducted by Thierry Fischer in London and Madrid.

Simon Holt's output for the chamber ensemble is large, with eight pieces written for the Nash Ensemble including *Shadow Realm* (1983), *Era madrugada* (1984), *Canciones* (1986) and *Sparrow Night* (1989).

To date, Holt has been commissioned to write four major orchestral pieces for the BBC Proms – in 1987, John Drummond commissioned *Syrensong* for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, later followed by the viola concerto *Walking with the River's Roar*, premiered by Nobuko Imai and the BBC Philharmonic in 1992. Latterly, *Troubled Light* and *Morpheus Wakes* for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

Simon Holt has found inspiration in, amongst other things, the world of Greek myth. 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 conducted by Daniel Harding. In addition, he feels a great affinity for the writing of Federico Garcia Lorca whose dark, passionate and enigmatic texts have much in common with Holt's own sound world. He has set Lorca's texts in his song cycle *Canciones* and his first opera *The Nightingale's to Blame*. This was a commission from Opera North, the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, and the Munich Biennale, and the premiere formed the focal point of a major retrospective at the 1998 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. Simon Holt's soprano and orchestra piece, *Sunrise' yellow noise* (2000) for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Lisa Milne under Sir Simon Rattle went on to tour the Cologne Triennale in May 2000, and was the subject of a one-hour South Bank Show TV documentary. In 2001, Simon Holt received Le Prix de la Fondation Prince Pierre, Monaco for this piece.

Sunrise' yellow noise is the first part of the cycle, *a ribbon of time*, which encompasses five works of various genre based on poems by Emily Dickinson. The other four pieces are Two Movements for string quartet (2001), which received the Royal Philharmonic Society Award in 2002; *Boots of Lead* (2002) for alto and ensemble, which was premiered by BCMG, Rinat Shaham and Sir Simon Rattle in October 2002 and 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 'spin off' pieces – *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 large-scale pieces include 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*, which also won the Orchestral Award at the British Composer Awards in 2009. *Troubled Light* was premiered at the BBC Proms with Thierry Fischer conducting the BBC NOW. His flute concerto, *Morpheus Wakes*, was premiered by Emmanuel Pahud with Thierry Fischer conducting the BBC NOW at the 2014 BBC Proms.

Holt was Composer in Association at the BBC National Orchestra of Wales 2008–2014 and during that time wrote a number of successful orchestral works including *St Vitus in the kettle*, *Centauromachy*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Morpheus Wakes*.

Information about the artists on this disc can be found on NMC's website:
www.nmcrec.co.uk

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With thanks to The Hinrichsen Foundation for supporting NMC's Hallé Series through its New Initiatives programme.

NMC is grateful for the support of the Hallé and the RVW Trust in making this recording.

a table of noises and *St Vitus in the kettle* were recorded on 29 July 2014; *witness to a snow miracle* was recorded on 9 November 2015. All at Hallé St Peter's, Ancoats, Manchester

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Simon Holt's music is published by Chester Music, part of the Music Sales Group

NMC Recordings is a charitable company (reg. no. 328052) established for the recording of contemporary music by the Holst Foundation; it is grateful for funding from Arts Council England, the Britten-Pears Foundation, The Boltini Trust and The Delius Trust.

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Catalogue no: NMC D218

