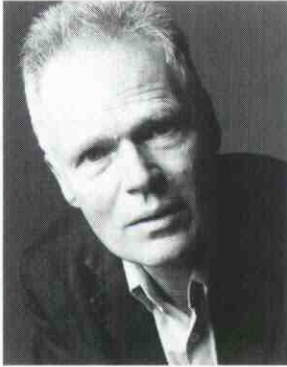




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## CELEBRATING ROBIN HOLLOWAY

*Robin Holloway will celebrate his 60th birthday on 19 October. Although this journal has long preferred not to have its agenda dictated by birthdays and anniversaries, it seemed high time to celebrate a composer who has long been a valued contributor to and supporter of Tempo. A number of friends and former pupils – most, as it happens, dedicatees of different variations in Holloway's 2-piano work Gilded Goldberg's after J.S.Bach, reviewed elsewhere in this issue – have been invited to contribute short articles for the occasion, whether memoirs, tributes or thoughts about particular works. Their contributions begin in this issue and continue in the October number, when Robin Holloway himself will be our Composer In Interview.*

## WOGGLING IN FINELLA

Chris Walton

It was in the mid-1970s that I first came across the name of Robin Holloway, in the column for the Third Programme in the *Radio Times*, at what must have been the world première of his *Romanza* for violin and small orchestra. There was a brief feature on him, accompanied (and this is what has stuck in the mind) by a strange drawing of him nestling uneasily into the side of a very large violin (at least, that is how memory recalls it). I didn't listen to the broadcast performance, though wish now, of course, that I had. Some three years later, on a weekend in early January, I visited Cambridge for the first time, as part of a scheme set up for sixth-formers to reconnoitre the hallowed halls for which their dreams perspired. A must was, of course, a foray to Gonville and Caius College to visit that odd man who nestled uneasily into giant violins in the *Radio Times*. He seemed preoccupied with a thousand other things, but took the time to sit and chat for five or ten minutes, and ended by telling me peremptorily that I should apply to King's. That did it, of course: I put Caius first on my list and duly arrived eighteen months later.

My first real contact with Robin came towards the end of my first year, when we played the piano duet accompaniment to a selection from Brahms's *Neue Liebeslieder Waltzes* at the Caius May Week concert (I distinctly remember him plying the alto soloist with much port when she became hoarse just before the performance). Robin by then was resident in Finella, a fabulous *art deco* monstrosity on the Queens' Road that somehow seems to exist in a symbiotic relationship with him – one could now never imagine Robin without the house, or vice versa. My rooms were in Harvey Court, about a minute's walk away. Soon, as one of a long, continuing line of students, I was spending much of my spare time playing piano duos and duets with him, exploring the symphonies of Brahms, Bruckner and others, plus everything by Percy Grainger that we could get our hands on (Grainger's vocabulary was in itself a revelation – a *tremolo* never seems quite the same once you've wiggled). It was at this time, too, that Robin wrote his *Souvenirs de Montsalvat* for piano duet (later orchestrated as *Wagner Nights*), and for a while we would meet just about every other day to play through what he had written thus far.

The piano duet-playing with Robin was always fascinating. He also had a knack of putting his finger on anything in the structure of the music that was out of the ordinary, or that didn't quite work (such as the passages in the opening movement of Brahms Two where the machinery begins to creak). As a lecturer, Robin was the least orthodox we had, but undoubtedly one of the finest, and the most entertaining. As in every other aspect of his work, his teaching was at all times informed by his composing. Not only did he hear things with a composer's ears, but he could put those things into words like almost no one else, with a concision and directness that could be quite arresting. I know from the reminiscences of colleagues that certain of his phrases stuck in all our minds; my favourite is still his description of Schoenberg's early 12-tone works, in particular the Wind Quintet: 'masterly in every way, except that all the notes are wrong' – which at the time summed up how many of us felt, but did not dare to express.

The first work of Robin's that I heard was his *Romanza*, though long after it had been featured in the *Radio Times*, and it changed for ever the way I heard contemporary music. That impression was merely strengthened by a subsequent, deeper acquaintance with his oeuvre. The *Scenes from Schumann*, the Second Concerto for Orchestra, *The Lover's Well* and other works never cease to captivate, while the première of *Clarissa* remains one of my most thrilling operatic experiences. It is difficult to comprehend that Robin is now approaching sixty, for he somehow seems to remain as youthful as ever, while age etches itself ever deeper into the faces of the rest of us. In gratitude for so much learnt, in the confident hope that another generation of students will learn from him as much as did we, and in eager anticipation of future works to flow from his remarkable imagination, I wish to join the chorus wishing Robin an excellent birthday, and many happy returns.

## CAMBRIDGE, CIRCA 1990

Nicolas Hodges

I believe I only had one formal composition lesson with Robin, during my second year at Cambridge, of which I can recall one moment. He briefly pored over my latest Masterwork and said in his inimitable manner 'But Nic, it's just grey; that piece you played us last week was much better'. The 'us' to which he referred was the group of (mostly) composers which met on a Wednesday evening in his rooms in Finella, in order to hear recent music by ourselves or others (and to drink wine). We were forced to face up to the challenge of discussing music unhindered by knowledge of any facts about it, and were able to observe Robin doing the same (he often played music sent to him by strangers, or his recent discoveries). I don't think anything I heard during those evenings changed my life: neither the music nor the discussions. Indeed at worst they were a good forum for the entrenchment of views, bearing in mind the decisiveness of Robin's own, and the ill-informed naivety of even relatively bright 20-year-old composers. But when the mood was good (on both sides) we had the opportunity to explore and refine our own judgement, and Robin's encouragement to do so.

The complexity and subtlety of his views gives Robin one of his most notable virtues. I have never heard him dismiss a composer in a single stroke. Busoni's *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* is tedious; *Doktor Faust* is luminous. So-and-so piece of contemporary music is dreary



and poorly heard; but so-and-so other work by the same composer has numerous qualities. In similar vein, faced in conversation with a diametrically opposite view, he often gently works to establish at least some common ground, taking the edge off what might otherwise be an icy confrontation. (Robin always listened to students, and thus gave them plenty of rope with which to hang themselves, before discussion began.)

Robin absorbs and discusses music – or rather, all of art – with a naturalness which is unusual in someone so cultured; it is this straightforward appreciation of art which nourishes him, as his selfless sharing of it nourished us, and that goes some way to explaining the fond regard in which he is held by former students, however many aesthetic disagreements there may be.

## NOTES ON ROBIN HOLLOWAY'S SYMPHONY

Edward Rushton

How to pay tribute – in words – to a composer who has shown me so much – in music? My own music probably shows its own debt eloquently enough, and I don't feel at ease enough with words to write something appropriate to a man with such a distinctive gift for writing about music.

One of the few occasions I've actually tried to write about music since leaving college was when the Editor of this publication asked Annelise Plummer and myself to comment for *Tempo* on the first performance of Robin Holloway's *Symphony* at the Proms in July 2000. In the end I was too insecure to send in my contribution on time – only Annelise's part made it into print.<sup>1</sup>

That seems like a long time ago. I remember the run-up to the première, above all the prospect of hearing a new and big piece of Holloway, and I remember all those old arguments relating to *The Symphony* being wheeled out again: is it dead? Is it alive? What is it anyway? Why does Holloway need to write one? And so on. It all seemed interesting then, even piquant. Re-reading my notes now, well into this new century, I can't help feeling all that debate to be futile. Yes, a symphony. So what? What's the problem? Thankfully we're left with the music and not the mind-games.

These were my notes:

If anyone can bring off such a tapestry of quotations as heard in the first movement, then it is Robin Holloway, who has been known to write whole movements entirely built from other people's music. He succeeds in transcending a mere 'spot-the-tune' game, firstly because in this case the allusions are glued together with generous amounts of unmistakable Holloway, and secondly because this glue itself oozes out of the joints to diffuse and discolour the materials in such a way that the whole is a genuine unified stylistic arch: the movement works on a 'pure-music' level. Still, if one does play the tune-spotting game (almost unavoidable at the première, with an educated Proms audience familiar with the great classics of the early 20th century), the effect is as if one were flying blurringly fast between the musical capitals of Europe at around 1914, taking on board the hum of the sum of musical chatter one could hear. The music is mercurial, humorous and very clever. And it is not overripe: thankfully Holloway knows how to

<sup>1</sup> *Tempo* 214 (October 2000). Robin Holloway's *Symphony*, his largest orchestral work to date, is a three-movement score lasting an hour, the result of a commission by the BBC with the daunting proviso that the resulting work should 'chart the course of the 20th century' in music.

handle his material and not be seduced into the orgy it might have become in the hands of a lesser sensibility.

Doubtless, Donald Runnicles' controlled, almost detached performance favoured clarity at the expense of lushness, but I don't imagine this movement ever becoming overblown, or 'purple': Holloway's climaxes are sparing and decisive. A sense of perspective is given by a motif crucial to the course of the piece, a sketch from around 1914 by Sibelius for his Fifth Symphony. For Sibelius, this ascending chordal passage was associated with being 'in a deep valley ... beginning to see dimly the mountain I shall surely climb... For an instant God opens his door and His orchestra plays the Fifth Symphony'. Sibelius never used the sketch, but Holloway brings it to life, squeezing out its full musical and pictorial potential; it represents some detached, all-seeing observer of the blind fiddlings of humanity – powerless, in the first two movements, to deflect the world's descent into violence and apocalypse.

This is no *La Valse*, however: Holloway is not one to repeat what has been successfully achieved before. He rounds off the first and second movements by taking 'time out', detached and distant, to make his own elegiac commentaries. These miniature movements within movements are designed to balance the descriptive and the epic aspects of the Symphony, and to prepare for the silent cataclysms of the spaces between the movements. For these traditional pauses, usually a sort of sewer to flush accumulated bodily tension down, become in Holloway's hands pregnant places of speechlessness. His programme note is eloquent and convincing on his decision not to illustrate or commentate upon the two World Wars, gaping punctuation points of the 20th century. Aside from the hint of a jackboot marching across

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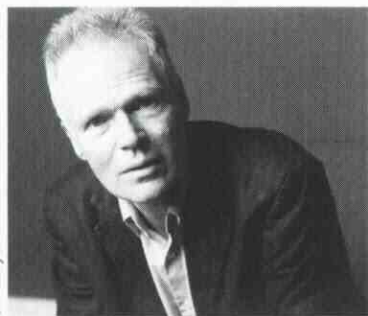
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# Robin Holloway at 60

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Holloway celebrates his 60th birthday with a season of special events



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**Presteigne Festival** (22-26 August 2003)

**Wigmore Hall portrait concert** (4 October 2003)

**Philharmonia Music of Today** (9 October 2003)

**Manchester Resonances** (16-18 October 2003)

**Cambridge Festival** (14-20 November)

Recording of **Violin Concerto** and **Horn Concerto** released on NMC's *Ancora* label later this year.

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For further information on Holloway's music visit our website at [www.boosey.com/holloway](http://www.boosey.com/holloway)

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the second (scherzo) movement, the politics and images of violence are reserved for what are perhaps the most provocative 'statements' of the piece.

It is the interludes which show the way to the end, as the observing camera recedes during the Symphony: the first part has dealt with music as a metaphor for history, the second part has dealt intellectually with structure (contrapuntal and formal) as a means of distancing oneself from catastrophe, and the third part is an all-seeing and distant look at the whole planet, its colours and its state of health after the two great cataclysms. Here the composer's personal view comes into its own, the ultimate composing-out of the interlude-type 'pure' music. For me, this personal aspect of the last movement makes it the most successful: there's less external content, more internal music. There is no literal attempt to illustrate the frightening exponential curve of our own blind technological revolution, for example. Holloway sets himself the boundary of only dealing with that for which he can find a musical metaphor; instead, the last, widest view of the dying century is one of Holloway's own personal, fantastical, diverse world. The ending is stunning, a stroke of genius.

In this monumental work Holloway takes on many highly-charged elements: it's 'about' music, but also about history and finding a (sometimes musical) metaphor for history. It's also about finding a sonic metaphor for colour, for squashed time and for frozen time, and the search for an adequately distant viewpoint from which to 'chart the course of the twentieth century' with sufficient perspective, all at the service of a musical structure. This ambition, which during the process of composition also became the ambition to write a Symphony, may seem eccentric, even impossible, but the commission clearly came from an authority that was convinced that Holloway was the man for whatever job he would make of it.

In a way, of course, the title *Symphony* is itself an intensely provocative statement. To call a piece written at the end of the 20th century, a piece which deals explicitly with music-historical aspects of the that century, a piece for huge orchestra in a compound-movement structure with difficult and diverse content 'Symphony' ... does one enter the controversy or not? Perhaps the title refers, like the first movement, to musical history ... On the other hand, the most truly symphonic movement is the last one, because it makes the most rounded, epic gesture. Or are we to drown the terrifying ghost of the Symphony once and for all, freed by Holloway's heroic battle with a genre he never thought he would ever have reason to tackle? After all, in this day and age, at the dawn of a new century, the symphony should surely be allowed to be whatever one wants it to be.

Yes. In a sense, the work fulfils Mahler's criterion for the symphony, in that it both assimilates the diverse bits and pieces of an existing world and at the same time shows us a living planet of the composer's own creation. It is complete in its external and internal aspects. It is both diverse and unified. But in response to the predictable 'is the symphony dead' question at his pre-concert talk, the composer responded memorably and simply that 'nothing is dead that can be shown to have life'. And I think it's beside the point to ask *à propos* of this piece 'why symphony?', since Holloway's aim is way above the tired old argument of a (20th-century) critical brotherhood: he has given us an intricate fantasy that operates on many levels, and a vast piece of music that demonstrably lives.



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