

## Robin Holloway – The Briefest Introduction

Robin Holloway is in many ways the archetypal modern British composer; not necessarily because his music fits into any specific 'school' or idiom, or that he exemplifies the current diversity in contemporary British music; rather that like many of his contemporaries he is equally adept at writing about music (either his own or other's) and at teaching music. His fearsome list of publications (more of which later), reviews and his illustrious list of former pupils (a 'who's who' of contemporary music) pay testament to this ability, a skill that many composers need to succeed in today's musical world.

Born in Leamington Spa in 1943, his education took him to King's College Cambridge (to read English, then music) via four years as a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral. At New College Oxford he completed a doctorate which later became the book *Debussy and Wagner* (London, 1978). Further educational appointments followed at Oxford and then Cambridge, where he is currently Professor of Musical Composition.

Holloway's music can be broadly speaking separated into two rather clumsy categories: on the one hand we have the dense, multi-layered chromatic works, undeniably showing the composer's modernist lineage (his studies with Alexander Goehr at Cambridge); on the other we have the lighter, smaller pieces derived from Holloway's study of language, gesture and quotation. Neither of these two facets is more important than the other; both show the compositional 'sides' of Holloway, a composer whose pragmatism doesn't detract from his musical integrity.

The first of these two categories may be best illustrated by the three concertos for orchestra (a fourth will be premiered by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in 2007); dark, intense works of huge scope and means. The first (1966-69) blends a serial-derived expressionism with Brahms quotations to powerful effect, perhaps the first work to show the composer's individual voice. The third (1981 – 1994) follows on from the first concerto in feeling and expression, but here orchestral texture is paramount, dominating the work. However, it is probably the second concerto (1978 – 79) which best illustrates this side of Robin Holloway's music, a hugely ambitious and complex work, as dense as his music has got. Into this complex labyrinth Holloway weaves seemingly disparate quotations; Chopin, an English hymn (Jerusalem) and an Italian popular tune. The effect is truly beguiling, creating a distinct musical vista; powerful and truly inventive.

The second of the categories is represented not only by the large amount of *Divertimentos*, *Concertinos* and *Serenades* that constitute Holloway's oeuvre, but by the larger-scale Romantically-derived works such as *Scenes from Schumann* (1970, rev. 1986) and the much-loved *Gilded Goldbergs* (1992 – 97). The *Serenade in C* (1979) is a fine example of this style, written for the same ensemble as the Schubert Octet (bsn, cl, hn & string quintet) it is a fascinating juxtaposition of Romantic language and gesture with modernist tonality. In Holloway's own words, "It is an affectionate twist to common tonal practice and light-music clichés all the way from Biedermeier Vienna to Southend Pier."

Alongside the aforementioned works, Robin Holloway has written in many genres and for many of the world's top orchestras and ensembles. He has written operas (*Clarissa*, 1976), oratorios (*Brand*, 1981), a symphony (1996-99), two string quartets (2003, 2004) and many other concertos, songs and choral works. He is currently working on pieces for the City of London Sinfonia, Vasteras Sinfonietta and the Hong Kong Sinfonietta. In 2007 he will be composer-in-residence at the Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester.

**Listening Suggestions:**

Second Concerto for Orchestra (1979)

BBC Symphony Orchestra, Knussen  
NMC D015M

Serenade in C (1979) c/w Fantasy Pieces on the Heine 'Liederkreis' of Schumann (1971)

The Nash Ensemble, Brabbins  
Hyperion CDA66930

Gilded Goldbergs (1997)

The Micallef-Inanga Piano Duo  
Hyperion CDA67360

**Further Reading:**

For writings by Robin Holloway try:

*Debussy and Wagner* (London, 1978)

'Towards a Critique', *The Music of Alexander Goehr: Interviews and Articles* (London, 1980)

Plus (from 1988) a monthly music column in the Spectator.

For a more detailed introduction to the composer's music, check out the excellent article by the composer and former pupil of Holloway, Julian Anderson on the Boosey & Hawkes website:

[www.boosey.com](http://www.boosey.com)

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