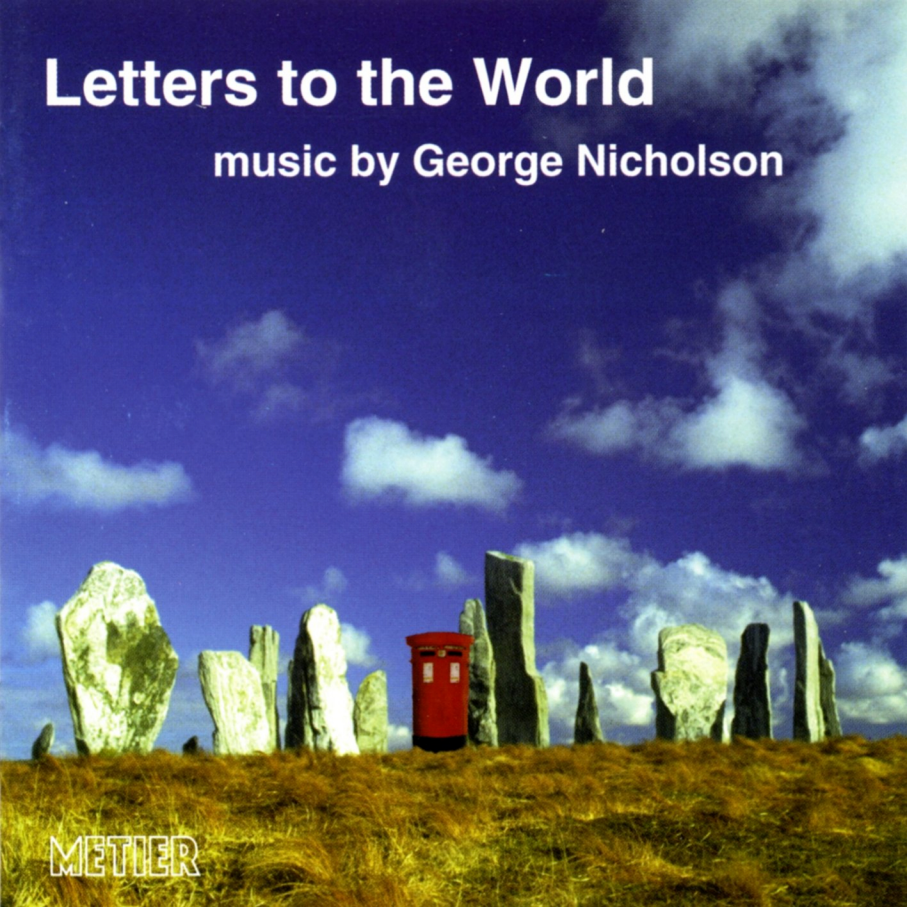


# Letters to the World

music by George Nicholson



METIER

Most of the works recorded here date from the last ten years or so. *Nodus* is a much older piece, but I think its inclusion draws attention to the practices and preoccupations that have remained important to me as a composer. A concern for the dramatic use of musical gesture and timbral colouration is perhaps most explicit in relation to the demands of a text setting, as in *Letters to the World*, but this is always underpinned by a clear and systematic organisation of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic types. Above all, I am constantly alert to the challenge of working with the grain of every instrument I write for, exploring and exploiting its expressive potential to the full: as a result my writing often makes virtuoso demands on the players.

### Spring Songs

In 1978 (immediately prior to writing *Nodus*) I composed a five-movement work for clarinet, harp and percussion called *Winter Music*. In some respects when I came to write *Spring Songs* for John Turner in 1991 I was thinking of it as a sequel - another sequence of five movements, alternating in mood between the reflective and the athletic. In terms of writing for the treble recorder as a solo voice I can recall being acutely aware of its extraordinary freshness of sonority as well as its characteristic deftness, summoning 'spring' in more than one sense of the word.

### For Miles, Sung without words and In accord

These pieces are the third, fourth and fifth of my *Mots Justes* - a set of five inventions for piano composed between 1988 and 1997: the others are *Impromptu* and *All systems go*. Each of the pieces explores the keyboard in a quite systematic and prescribed way, and although designed to be self-contained they do briefly quote material from one another. The final three of the set were written in memory of major figures in the jazz world who had recently died, but the music largely avoids any specific reference to jazz idioms. *For Miles* (in memoriam Miles Davis) does go so far as to borrow from jazz the device of a recurrent harmonic ground, against which is superimposed a freely evolving improvisatory melodic line: however, the two layers of material are not presented 'in step' as they would be in a jazz performance, but in the large polyrhythm 16:17. *Sung without words* (in memoriam Ella Fitzgerald) is an attempt to catch the spirit and energy of scat singing in pianistic terms, and for much of the time a single-line texture prevails. In the course of the piece the entire gamut of the keyboard is in constant use: in fact each key on the piano is sounded precisely thirteen times - a property shared by the second piece of the set, *All systems go*. *In accord* (in memoriam Gerry Mulligan), a meditation on a single six-part chord, is the longest and most introspective of the pieces, yet based on the most closely circumscribed material.

## Nodus

*Nodus* is the oldest of the pieces recorded here, dating from 1978. It is predicated on the idea of different materials becoming pulled together so that their identities gradually merge in the 'knot' of the title that results. The piece opens with a long clarinet line and rich piano harmonies, but before long the clarinet has more vigorous coloratura passages hovering around nodal points. From these two ideas the discourse develops. Ultimately things go rather too far, and the knotted material finally threatens to snap altogether.

### Letters to the World

*This is my letter to the World  
That never wrote to Me -  
The simple News that Nature told -  
With tender Majesty  
  
Her Message is committed  
To Hands I cannot see -  
For love of Her - Sweet - countrymen -  
Judge tenderly - of Me*

The collected edition of Emily Dickinson's poetry comprises 1775 texts, most of them very brief and pithy. Even a cursory examination of her work will reveal her preoccupation with a fairly well circumscribed stock of favoured topics: clearly she was sometimes given to revising old texts (thus generating new ones), and it was also her habit to revisit old subject matter, bringing to it new insights and reflections. In assembling a number of Dickinson poems into a coherent cycle I wished to echo her working methods and project some of her philosophical preoccupations, and so I selected pairs of texts related by subject matter. Only the first poem stands alone: it refers, quite casually and naturally, to Belshazzar's prophetic graffiti as some kind of supernatural letter. The remaining texts are all paired according to their subject matter: the wonder and infinitude of the natural world (nos. 2 and 4); the season of summer and its passing (nos. 3 and 6); the past, remembrance and forgetting (nos. 5 and 8); mortality and immortality (nos. 9 and 10). Two further texts (nos. 7 and 11) return to the whimsy of the first poem, this time in relation to the natural world.

*Letters to the World* is dedicated to the performers on this recording. I very much enjoyed treating their ensemble as a modern resource, with full participation of the instruments traditionally assigned a continuo role. If there is any element of archaism in the piece at all, it appears at the structural level: the pairing of texts echoes the fondness in Baroque instrumental music for writing 'doubles'.

1

Belshazzar had a Letter -  
 He never had but one -  
 Belshazzar's Correspondent  
 Concluded and begun  
 In that immortal Copy  
 The Conscience of us all  
 Can read without its glasses  
 On Revelation's Wall -

2

Of Yellow was the outer sky  
 In Yellower Yellow hewn  
 Till Saffron in Vermilion slid  
 Whose seam could not be shewn.

3

Answer July -  
 Where is the Bee -  
 Where is the Blush -  
 Where is the Hay ?  
 Ah, said July -  
 Where is the Seed -  
 Where is the Bud -  
 Where is the May -  
 Answer Thee - Me -  
 Nay - said the May -  
 Show me the Snow -  
 Show me the Bells -  
 Show me the Jay !  
 Quibbled the Jay -  
 Where be the Maize -  
 Where be the Haze -  
 Where be the Bur ?  
 Here - said the Year -

4

There is a solitude of space  
 A solitude of sea  
 A solitude of death, but these  
 Society shall be  
 Compared with that profounder site  
 That polar privacy  
 A soul admitted to itself -  
 Finite infinity.

5

Yesterday is History,  
 'Tis so far away -  
 Yesterday is Poetry -  
 'Tis Philosophy -  
 Yesterday is mystery -  
 Where it is Today  
 While we shrewdly speculate  
 Flutter both away

6

As imperceptibly as Grief  
 The Summer lapsed away -  
 Too imperceptible at last  
 To seem like Perfidy -  
 A Quietness distilled  
 As Twilight long begun,  
 Or Nature spending with herself  
 Sequestered Afternoon -  
 The Dusk drew earlier in -  
 The Morning foreign shone -  
 A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,  
 As Guest, that would be gone -  
 And thus, without a Wing  
 Or service of a Keel  
 Our Summer made her light escape  
 Into the Beautiful.

7

Bee! I'm expecting you!  
 Was saying Yesterday  
 To Somebody you know  
 That you were due -  
 The Frogs got Home last Week -  
 Are settled, and at work -  
 Birds, mostly back -  
 The Clover warm and thick -  
 You'll get my Letter by  
 The seventeenth; Reply  
 Or better, be with me -  
 Yours, Fly.

Heart! We will forget him!  
 You and I - tonight!  
 You may forget the warmth he gave -  
 I will forget the light!

When you have done, pray tell me  
 That I may straight begin!  
 Hasten! lest while you're lagging  
 I remember him!

He scanned it - staggered -  
 Dropped the Loop  
 To Past or Period -  
 Caught helpless at a sense as if  
 His Mind were going blind -

Groped up, to see if God was there -  
 Groped backward at Himself  
 Caressed a Trigger absently  
 And wandered out of Life.

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some  
 Who till they died, did not alive become -  
 Who had they lived, had died but when  
 They died, Vitality begun.

The Wind didn't come from the Orchard - today -  
 Further than that -  
 Nor stop to play with the Hay -  
 Nor joggle a Hat -  
 He's a transitive fellow - very -  
 Rely on that -

If he leave a Bur at the door  
 We know He has climbed a Fir -  
 But the Fir is Where - Declare -  
 Were you ever there?

If He brings Odors of Clovers -  
 And that is His business - not Ours -  
 Then He has been with the Mowers -  
 Whetting away the Hours  
 To sweet pauses of Hay -  
 His Way - of a June Day -

If He fling Sand, and Pebble -  
 Little Boys Hats - and Stubble -  
 With an occasional Steeple -  
 And a hoarse "Get out of the way, I say,"  
 Who'd be the fool to stay?  
 Would you - Say -  
 Would you be the fool to stay?

**GEORGE NICHOLSON** was born in County Durham in 1949 and studied at the University of York with David Blake and Bernard Rands, receiving his doctorate in composition in 1979. For ten years he pursued a freelance career in London before being appointed Lecturer in Music and Director of Composition at Keele University in 1988. In January 1996 he took up the post of Senior Lecturer in Composition at Sheffield University and now directs the Sheffield University New Music Ensemble. He is a keen pianist and conductor, is a founder member of the chamber groups Triple Echo and Nomos, and also gives regular recitals with his wife, the soprano Jane Ginsborg, and with the trombonist, John Kenny.

His list of works includes a flute concerto, commissioned and premièred in 1994 in Zürich by James Galway; a 'cello concerto (for Moray Welsh) and a chamber concerto, both commissioned by the BBC; three string quartets; the orchestral song-cycle *Blisworth Tunnel Blues, The Convergence of the Twain* and *1132* for chamber orchestra, and a variety of chamber works, vocal pieces and piano music. His work is published by the University of York Music Press and Warwick Music. His Third String Quartet has been recorded by the Bochmann Quartet for METIER (MSV CD92016), and the short song cycle *Peripheral Visions* is included in a recital of recent British vocal music recorded by Alison Smart and Katharine Durran, again on a METIER CD (MSV CD92025).

**Allison Wells** was born in Yorkshire and originally trained as a pianist. After reading mathematics and music at London University, she spent a year at the Royal Academy of Music, before beginning her vocal studies. She has appeared in all the major London halls and in many festivals both here and abroad. Much of her work has been in contemporary music, with ensembles such as Matrix, Gemini, Psappha, Music Projects/London, Lontano, Composers Ensemble, the French ensemble 2e2m, and with ASKO and the Schoenberg Ensemble in Amsterdam. She broadcasts regularly as soloist on Radio 3 and in recital with her husband Martyn Parry. She also teaches singing to choral exhibitors at Cambridge.

**John Turner** was Senior Scholar in Law at Fitzwilliam College Cambridge before pursuing a legal career, acting for many distinguished musicians and musical organisations. His early musical activities included numerous appearances with David Munrow's pioneering Early Music Consort of London. He now devotes his time to playing, writing, reviewing, publishing, composing and "generally energising". He has played and broadcast as soloist with, amongst others, the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the Academy of Ancient Music, the English Chamber Orchestra and the English Baroque Soloists. He has recently played in Germany, Switzerland, Poland, France, New Zealand and the USA, and given several recitals on Radio 3 with pianist Peter Lawson. He has premiered some 300 works for the recorder, many of which have now entered the standard repertoire.

**Jonathan Price** plays with a wide variety of chamber ensembles, performing music spanning four centuries. For ten years he was a member of the Matisse Piano Quartet, broadcasting most of the piano quartet repertoire for the BBC. In addition to his work with the Legrand Ensemble he also performs and broadcasts with the baroque group Musical Offering, and the Camerata Ensemble, whose members are principal players with the Manchester Camerata. He is also 'cello tutor at Manchester University. In addition to concerts throughout Europe and in North and South America, he has also played in Australia, Israel, the Azores, Hong Kong, Macau, and Hawaii.

British pianist **Peter Lawson** has gained a distinguished reputation for his adventurous programming from a repertoire stretching from the Classics to Jazz. He regularly broadcasts on BBC Radio 3 and has appeared with many of Britain's leading orchestras. Peter's commercial recordings reflect his particular interest in 20th century music. His first, a CD on EMI of Satie, was awarded a Silver Disc in 1989. The award of a prestigious Churchill Fellowship to the USA in 1993 recognised his promotion of American repertoire, some of which he has now recorded. More recent recordings include Nyman's *The Piano Concerto* with the RPO and Anthony Gilbert's *Towards Asavari*.

**Keith Elcombe** was Organ Scholar at Trinity College, Cambridge, and is now Senior Lecturer in Music and University Organist at Manchester University. He is also Conductor of the University Chorus. He plays continuo with a number of chamber ensembles and orchestras, and specialises in performing keyboard music of the 16th and 17th centuries. His critical writings are well known and he is a frequent contributor to various scholarly publications.

**Philip Edwards** studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Alan Hacker. He has worked with the Wren Orchestra, Langham Chamber Orchestra and Sinfonia 21. A firm advocate of British contemporary music, he has been involved in many first performances as a soloist, and with such groups as the Park Lane Music Players, Music Projects/London, Circle, Gemini, The Composers Ensemble, the Orpheus Ensemble and Polyphilo. Composers whose solo works he has premiered include Michael Finnis, Richard Rodney Bennett and Gary Carpenter. He has broadcast on BBC Radio 3, Dutch, French and Greek radio, as well as appearing on BBC 2, Channel 4, and German television.

# Letters to the World

chamber music by  
**George Nicholson**



## 1 Spring Songs

John Turner - recorder

- 1. I 1:25
- 2. II 1:46
- 3. III 3:24
- 4. IV 2:02
- 5. V 2:42

## 6 three pieces from **Mots Justes**

Peter Lawson - piano

- 6. **For Miles** 5:56
- 7. **Sung without words** 5:36
- 8. **In accord** 12:55

## 9 Nodus 10:44

Philip Edwards - clarinet and George Nicholson - piano

## 10 Letters to the World

Alison Wells - soprano, John Turner - recorder,  
Keith Elcombe - harpsichord and Jonathan Price - cello

- 10. I **Belshazzar had a letter** 2:06
- 11. II **Of Yellow was the outer sky** 4:07
- 12. III **Answer July** 1:16
- 13. IV **There is a solitude of space** 3:14
- 14. V **Yesterday is History** 1:29
- 15. VI **As imperceptibly as Grief** 6:12
- 16. VII **Bee! I'm expecting you!** 2:37
- 17. VIII **Heart! We will forget him!** 2:45
- 18. IX **He scanned it** 2:43
- 19. X **A Death blow is a Life blow to Some** 3:26
- 20. XI **The Wind didn't come from the Orchard** 2:31

**Total 79:27**

George Nicholson is published by UYMP



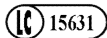
This recording was made in the recital hall of Manchester University on 12 - 14 September 2000.  
Recording Producer / Sound Engineer / Digital Editor / Cover design and booklet layout: David Lefebber  
Cover image: David Lefebber  
Metier Sound & Vision gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the  
University of Sheffield and the Holst Foundation in making this recording possible.

**METIER**  
MSV CD92062

©2000, Original recording made by David Lefebber, Metier Sound & Vision



msvcd 92062



## DIVINE ART RECORDINGS GROUP



Over 500 titles, with full track details, reviews, artist profiles and audio samples, can be browsed on our website. Available at any good dealer or direct from our online store in CD, 24-bit HD, FLAC and MP3 digital download formats.

UK: Divine Art Ltd.  
email: [uksales@divineartrecords.com](mailto:uksales@divineartrecords.com)

USA: Diversions LLC  
email: [sales@divineartrecords.com](mailto:sales@divineartrecords.com)  
[www.divineartrecords.com](http://www.divineartrecords.com)

**find us on facebook, youtube and twitter**

WARNING: Copyright subsists in all recordings issued under this label. Any unauthorised broadcasting, public performance, copying or re-recording thereof in any manner whatsoever will constitute an infringement of such copyright. In the United Kingdom, licences for the use of recordings for public performance may be obtained from Phonographic Performance Ltd, 1, Upper James Street, London W1R 3HG.