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Encyclopedia of Music in Ireland: Kevin Volans

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Volans, Kevin. (b Pietermaritzburg, 26 July 1949). Composer and pianist. Volans studied music at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and subsequently moved to Europe to undertake post-graduate study at the University of Aberdeen. From 1973 to 1976 he studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen at the Hochschule für Musik in Cologne and in 1975 became his teaching assistant succeeding Richard Toop. He also studied music theatre with Mauricio Kagel, electronic music with Hans Ulrich Humpert and piano with Aloys Kontarsky. While in Cologne Volans became increasingly dissatisfied with the New Music movement which he perceived as dogmatic and creatively restricting. As a reaction to this work, alongside that of other young composers such as Walter Zimmermann and Michael von Biel became known as part of the *Neue Einfachheit* (New Simplicity). Composers associated with the New Simplicity generally sought a more direct mode of expression, free from the intense abstraction of compositional procedures employed by the post-war avant garde. In June 1981 Volans, along with GERALD BARRY and Chris Newman, formed SNeM (The Society for Newer Music) in protest at the founding of the Cologne Society of New Music. In addition the three composers signed a manifesto written by Volans which outlined the society's objectives. Despite its obvious provocative intent it nevertheless contained specific ideas vital to the subsequent aesthetics of each composer, namely the desire to create art that is both a-historical and free to draw on all available sources for working material. In the late seventies Volans was commissioned by Westdeutscher Rundfunk to undertake a number of field trips to South Africa to record various kinds of indigenous African music. He returned to his homeland in 1981 to teach composition at the University of Natal where he received a DMus in 1985. He was also composer in residence at QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST (1986–89) and at Princeton University (1992). He settled in Ireland permanently in 1986 and was granted Irish citizenship in 1994.

Volans's recording field trips to South Africa had alerted him to aspects of indigenous African culture, both musical and visual, which he had previously overlooked. He thus set about planning a series of works in which he attempted to reconcile African and European aesthetics. Sometimes mistaken as minimalist, many of these works exhibit open-ended formal structuring, interlocking rhythms and repetitive gestures, all of which are features inherent in much African music. His breakthrough piece *White Man Sleeps* (1982) for two harpsichords, viola da gamba and percussion displays the composer's attempts to 'Africanize' Western European art music by transferring paraphrases and transcriptions of Venda, San, Nyungwe and Lesotho music, as well as his own material, onto re-tuned period instruments. The subsequent reworking of the piece for a recording by the Kronos Quartet became one of the biggest selling string quartet releases of all time. The works immediately following *White Man Sleeps*, such as the second and third quartets, continue to use some African references, but display an increasing preoccupation with non-directional narratives influenced by the uneven and often random patterns present in African textiles, as well as the temporal conceptions in the late works of Morton Feldman. This tendency towards abstract formal structuring is one of the defining aspects of Volans's music which has remained an integral part of his aesthetic.

In the late eighties Volans abandoned the African project altogether in order to pursue a new direction. With works such as *Chevron* (1990) and *One Hundred Frames* (1991), as well as his opera *The Man with Footsoles of Wind* (1993) based on the last year of the life of the 19th century poet Arthur Rimbaud, Volans began to forge a new style whose concerns and procedures often mirror those of various schools of abstract art. A parallel development to this was his increasing interest in writing for dance, an art-form particularly suited to Volans's open concept of form, and he has collaborated with the choreographers Jonathon Burrows, Siobhan Davies and Shobhana Jeyasingh. However the key work which confirmed a new direction is *Cicada* (1994) for two pianos which involves administering subtle changes

of tone, harmonic colour and tempo to a repeated sonority based on Bb major and A major triads. *Cicada*'s reduction in content and largely flat surface is a departure from the general high degree of activity which characterised many of his earlier works. The *Concerto for Piano and Wind instruments* composed the following year shares many of the sonorities present in *Cicada* while both works illustrate how processes from his earlier music such as interlocking rhythms and open formal constructs continue to inform his work in a background capacity. Inspired by movements in the visual arts, much of Volans's work from this time aspires to eliminate subject matter as much as possible in order to emphasize subtler aspects of harmonic and instrumental color while also investigating the possibilities of spatially separated ensembles. The *String Quartet No. 6* (2000) is reduced in material to two overlapping chords which are exchanged between two quartets (the second of which may be either live or pre-recorded). A similar concept is explored in the *Concerto for Double Orchestra* (2001) where static harmonies are spatially distributed back and forth between a split orchestra. However this tendency towards reduction is not universal. Perhaps due to the inherent nature of the medium, Volans's concertante works such as the *Trio Concerto* (2005) and the *Piano Concerto No. 2* (2006) are notable for their virtuosic writing and dynamism. Volans's most recent work constitutes yet another phase of development. Beginning with the *Partenheimer Project* (2007), much of the new work explores the interaction between individual parts playing independently of each other to some degree. The *Partenheimer Project* is spatially separated into three ensembles while both *Violin:Piano* (2008) and *Cello:Piano* (2008) contain instruments playing at different tempi propelled for the most part by irregular repetition. The transparent scoring and negation of any sense of goal-orientated progression lends the music a static floating quality. While Volans's music has often been viewed as a reaction to the perceived excesses of serialism, it is nevertheless significant that his approach to dynamics and articulation is always structurally directed and maintains a studious avoidance of any notions of neo-romantic expression.

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- Kevin Volans: *Summer Gardeners: Conversations with composers* (Durban, 1985)
 Peter Klatzow: *Composers in South Africa Today* (Cape Town, 1987)
 Axel Klein: *Die Musik Irlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim, 1996)
 Bob Gilmore: 'Wild Air: the music of Kevin Volans', *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, (2006), 24–29
 Christopher Fox: 'Where the river bends: the Cologne School in retrospect', *The Musical Times*, 148/1901, (2007), 17–42

SELECT COMPOSITIONS

STAGE: *Correspondences*, Dance Opera (1990), Bar, str qt; *The Man with Footsoles of Wind*, chamber opera (1993), 2 S, T, Tr, Bar, spkr, fl+ pic, cl, bcl, 2hn, tpt, btrbn, 2 perc, pf+cel, hpd, str; ORCHESTRA: *One Hundred Frames* (1991); *Concerto for Double Orchestra* (2001); SOLOISTS WITH ORCHESTRA: *Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments* (1995); *Cello Concerto* (1997); *Trio Concerto* (2005), vn, vc, pf, orch; *Piano Concerto No. 2 'Atlantic Crossing'* (2006); CHAMBER ENSEMBLE: *Matepe* (1980), 2 hpd, perc; *White Man Sleeps* (1982), 2 hpd, va da gamba, perc; *Walking Song* (1984), fl, hpd, 2 perc; *Leaping Dance* (1984), 2 pf; *Kneeling Dance* (1984 rev. 1987), 2 pf; *String Quartet No. 1 'White Man Sleeps'* (1986); *String Quartet No. 2 'Hunting:Gathering'* (1987); *String Quartet No. 3 'The Songlines'* (1988 rev. 1993); *Chevron* (1990), 2 fl, ob, cl+ bcl, hn, tpt, trbn+ btrbn, 2vn, va, vc; *Cicada* (1994), 2 pf; *String Quartet No. 5 'Dancers on a Plane'* (1994); *Untitled* (1996), fl, ob, cor ang, 2cl, 2bn, 2hn, pf; *String Quartet No. 6* (2000), double str qt; *Piano Trio* (2002, rev. 2005); *Shiva Dances* (2006), 2 pf; *The Partenheimer*

Project (2007), cl, 2 hn, 2 tpt, trbn, 2 va, 2 vc, pf, perc; *Violin: Piano* (2008); *Viola: Piano* (2008); *Cello:Piano* (2009); *Trumpet, Vibe, Cello, Piano* (2009); *No Translation* (2009), 2vn, 2va, 2vc, 3 perc; UNACCOMPANIED SOLO INSTRUMENTAL: *She Who Sleeps with a Small Blanket* (1985), perc; *Asanga* (1997) perc; *Akrodha* (1998), perc; *Three Structural Etudes* (2004), pf; *Three Rhythmic Etudes* (2003), pf; VOCAL: *Gloso a lo Divino* (2006), S, A, Ct, 2 T, B, tape.

Discography

She Who Sleeps with a Small Blanket (Robin Schulkowsky, CD, Sony, 1985)
String Quartet No. 1: White Man Sleeps (Kronos Quartet, CD, Elektra Nonesuch, 1987)
String Quartet No. 1: White Man Sleeps, (Dance no. 1) (Kronos Quartet, CD, Elektra Nonesuch, 1987)
String Quartet No. 1: White Man Sleeps, Mbira, She Who Sleeps with a Small Blanket, White Man Sleeps (Original version) (The Smith Quartet, Kevin Volans, Robert Hill, Margriet Tindermans, Robin Schulkowsky, CD, Landor, 1990)
Norwegian Wood: Happiness is a Warm Gun (Lennon, arr. Volans) (Aki Takahashi, CD, EMI, 1991)
String Quartet No. 2: Hunting Gathering (Kronos Quartet, CD, Elektra Nonesuch, 1991)
String Quartet No. 1: White Man Sleeps (Kronos Quartet, CD, Elektra Nonesuch, 1992)
String Quartet No. 3: The Songlines (3rd movement) (Balanesu Quartet, CD, Argos, 1994)
String Quartet No. 2: Hunting Gathering, String Quartet No. 3: The Songlines (Balanesu Quartet, CD, Decca/Argo, 1994)
String Quartet No. 5: Dancers on a Plane, String Quartet No. 4: The Ramanujan Notebooks, Movement for String Quartet, (The Duke Quartet, CD, Collins Classics, 1994)
Mbira (Kevin Volans Ensemble, CD, WDR World Network Recording, 1995)
White man Sleeps (Guitar version of Dance No. 4) (Tilman Hoppstock, CD, Signum, 1995)
Into Darkness (Sequenza, CD, Neuma, 1998)
This is How it is, Walking song, Leaping Dance, Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments, Untitled (Netherlands Wind Ensemble, cond. Wim Steinmann and Daniel Harding, CD, Chandos, 1999)
Cicada, Duets (Mathilda Hornsveld, Jill Richards, CD, Black Box, 2000)
This is How it is (Netherlands Wind Ensemble, cond. Wim Steinmann, CD, CMC, 2001)
String Quartet No. 2: Hunting; Gathering, String Quartet No. 6, String Quartet No. 1: White Man Sleeps (The Duke Quartet, CD, Black Box, 2002)
White Man Sleeps (Guitar Quartet Version) (Dublin Guitar Quartet, CD, Grelslate Records, 2005)
Piano Trio (Fidelio Trio, CD, NMC, 2008)
Walking Song (David Adams, CD, All Write Music, 2008)
Akrodha, Asange, She Who Sleeps with a Small Blanket (Jonny Axelsson, CD, 2008)
The Partenheimer Project (Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, CD, Ikon Gallery/Kunstmuseum Bonn, 2008)
Four Guitars (Dublin Guitar Quartet, CD, CMC, 2009)

DVD Discography

Dance Films by Adam Roberts (Duke Quartet, Kevin Volans, DVD, The Jonathan Burrows Group, 1995)
Zeno at 4am. (Sontonga Quartet, Pumeza Matshikiza, Lwazi Ncube, William Kentridge, DVD, Marian Goodman Gallery, 2002)
Evidenti: A film conceived By Sylvie Guillem (Duke Quartet, DVD, NVC Arts, 1995)