

## Simon Jeffes and his orchestra

'You can pick out landmarks in the music, but there's an awful lot of counting going on!'

The musical score is augmented by intermittent sound effects – a gunshot, howling wind, relentless rain, claps of thunder, the creak of trees being felled.

Along with the vocal text (delivered gravely and resignedly by Jeremy Irons at the start and finish of the video performance) these effects implant a sense of realism and urgency that contrasts with the languid surrealism of the orchestrated score.



Album cover for Music from the Penguin Café; painting by Emily Young, used by her kind permission

Simon Jeffes was born in Sussex in 1949. After spending part of his childhood in Canada, he returned to England and studied the classical guitar. His early activities as a musician ranged from playing avant-garde music with a group of classical guitarists (the Omega Players) to working in experimental rock music, in which he gained a reputation for inventive and distinctive string arrangements.

In 1972 he formed the Penguin Café Orchestra which became the context for his work as a composer. The name came from an imaginary café about which he wrote extensively, describing its surreal atmosphere with paradoxical and metaphysical undercurrents. It was from this place that Jeffes found the inspiration captured on the many records the orchestra has released.

He took his influences from almost anything. He was totally open-minded about music and incorporated elements of classical, gaelic folk, African drumming, jazz, traditional South-American forms such as tango, contemporary minimalism and even avant-garde techniques such as creating music from number patterns.

This music has attracted attention throughout the world and the Penguin Café Orchestra has visited many countries, performing throughout Europe, Japan and North America. It has also made many broadcasts on radio and television including a *South Bank Show* devoted to it (1987).

The ensemble started life as just four people, a violinist, cellist, pianist and Simon himself playing the electric guitar. This soon grew to ten people, adding viola, oboe and percussion amongst others. Simon wrote for whatever instruments were available, including rubber bands and a ringing

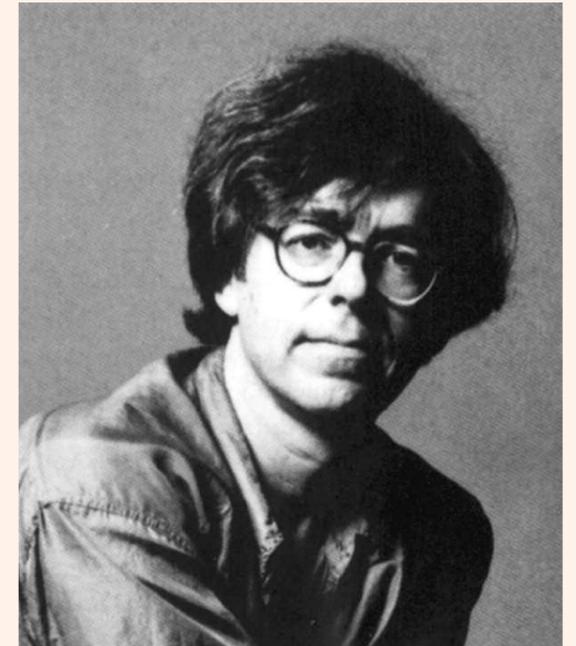


Photo: Matt Anker

telephone! The orchestra grew again to include more percussion, trumpet and trombone as well as more string players. However, in later life, Simon returned to a smaller ensemble – the Penguin Café Quintet, with which he performed at many festivals, from the classical avant-garde to Glastonbury. Jeffes died in December 1997 as the result of a brain tumour.

For his ballet David Bintley selected eight pieces from the recordings and approached Jeffes, who happily reorchestrated them for a more conventional orchestra. Jeffes's titles have been used by Bintley except for *Horns of the Bull*, which has become *Long Distance*, and *Pythagoras's Trousers*, which is now *The Ecstasy of Dancing Fleas* (not to be confused with Jeffes's original piece of the same name).