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2021 Film Music Seminar

# Natalie Holt

Moderated by Ruben De Gheselle

## Programme

**10:00 – 12:00**      Film Music Seminar with Natalie Holt

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Moderator: Ruben De Gheselle

The annual film music seminar is a Film Fest Ghent production organised in collaboration with the **KASK and Conservatory / School of Arts HOGENT**

Research texts and editing: Amira El-Belasi

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## NATALIE HOLT: BIOGRAPHY

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Multi-award winning British composer Natalie Holt has created dramatic original scores for feature films, television drama, and narrative-driven entertainment. She has also composed rich, emotional scores for the BBC drama *My Mother and Other Strangers*, the final series of BBC1 hit drama *Wallander*, and has written award winning music for the BBC's *Great Expectations*, *The Honourable Woman* (Dir: Hugo Blick) and ITV's *Victoria* for which Holt received an Emmy Nomination. Holt's music can also be heard alongside Hans Zimmer in the Weinstein company picture *Woman in Gold*, and family smash hit from the producers of *Harry Potter: Paddington*.



Holt trained in composing at the National Film and Television School after studying violin at the Royal Academy of Music, where she was made an associate in 2017. Her diverse repertoire ranges from epic full orchestral scores recorded with 80-piece choirs to intimate, small ensembles and hybrid electronic scores featuring an eclectic mix of live recorded solo instruments. To create unique sounds for each project, she draws from her large collection of instruments. As a highly accomplished musician herself, who performed at the Olympic Closing Ceremony, Holt herself performs on most of her scores.

Holt won the prestigious Ivor Novello award in 2015, was made an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music in 2017, was nominated for an Emmy award in 2017 and won the Best International Score at the Beijing International Film Festival in 2018 for her score on *Journey's End* with Hildur Guðnadóttir.

## ***BIOGRAPHY: Sources***

### **Natalie Holt: Official Website**

<https://www.natalieholt.com/>

### **British Music Collection: Natalie Holt**

[Natalie Holt | British Music Collection](#)

### **IMDb: Natalie Holt**

[Natalie Holt - Biography - IMDb](#)

### **LinkedIn: Natalie Holt**

<https://uk.linkedin.com/in/natalie-ann-holt-8b026133>



## FILMOGRAPHY

<i>Distancia de rescate</i> (Llosa, 2021)	<i>Paddington</i> (King, 2014)
* <i>Loki</i> (TV Series - Herron, 2021)	<i>The Feminist Car Commercial</i> (Baker, 2014)
<i>Kindred</i> (Marcantonio, 2020)	<i>The Honourable Woman</i> (Blick, 2014)
* <i>Deadwater Fell</i> (Miller, 2020)	<i>A Class of their Own</i> (Kim, 2013)
<i>Herself</i> (Lloyd, 2020)	<i>Chinese Lessons</i> (Kim, 2013)
<i>Infidel</i> (Nowrasteh, 2019)	<i>Animals</i> (Forés, 2012)
<i>Cordelia</i> (Shergold, 2019)	* <i>Tooned</i> (Trotter, Wait, Spendloff, 2012)
<i>Rachel</i> (Bartleet, 2019)	* <i>Great Expectations</i> (Kirk, 2011)
* <i>Beecham House</i> (Chadha, 2019)	<i>Mesocafé</i> (Al-Hamid, 2011)
* <i>Knightfall</i> (Jacobson, Reiné, Wellington, 2019)	<i>Gato encerrado</i> (Varela, 2011)
<i>Gun No 6</i> (Newton, 2018)	<i>The Holding</i> (Jacobson, 2011)
<i>Doing Money</i> (Miller, 2018)	<i>Helen</i> (Nettelbeck, 2009)
* <i>Press</i> (Vaughan, 2018)	* <i>3MW: Subtitles Not Included</i> (Cartwright, 2009)
<i>The Boy with the Topknot</i> (Miller, 2017)	<i>Echoes</i> (Brown, 2009)
* <i>Journey's End</i> (Dibb, 2017)	<i>The Clap Dudes</i> (Bánóczki, 2008)
<i>Pin Cushion</i> (Haywood, 2017)	<i>The Things I Haven't Told You</i> (Forés, 2008)
* <i>Redwater</i> (Nielsen, Nielsen, 2017)	<i>Friends Forever</i> (Forés, 2007)

* <i>Three Girls</i> (Lowthorpe, 2017)	<i>The End for Beginners</i> (Lalé, 2007)
* <i>My Mother and Other Strangers</i> (Shergold, 2016)	<i>The Other Half</i> (Scott, 2007)
* <i>The Happos Family</i> (Hiddalgo, 2016)	<i>Our Footsteps in the Leaves</i> (Sanders, 2007)
* <i>Victoria</i> (Blackburn, Goldbacher, Vaughan, 2016)	<i>1977</i> (Varela, 2007)
* <i>War &amp; Peace</i> (Harper, 2016)	<i>Moog</i> (Vafeiadis, 2007)
* <i>Wallander</i> (Caron, 2015)	<i>Dupe</i> (Waitt, 2005)
<i>Woman in Gold</i> (Curtis, 2015)	<i>Heavy Metal Jr.</i> (Waitt, 2005)

FILMS

\* TV SERIES

## Natalie Holt on Creating the Score for *Loki*, Marvel's God of Mischief

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by Amon Warmann

Although *Loki* has been a fixture of the Marvel Cinematic Universe since 2011's *Thor*, the character has never had his own musical identity. That all changed with *Loki* - the Marvel Cinematic Universe's latest Disney+ series - and the music of Natalie Holt. The innovative, versatile score is a perfect match for the God of Mischief's sensibilities and is easily among the best sonic works we've heard in the genre.

As such, we were excited to sit down with Holt to discuss the inspiration behind the score's instrumentation, sticking up for her music in late-night dub sessions, and being part of the MCU.

**I want to start right at the beginning. What was your reaction when you booked the *Loki* meeting?**

I just knew that it was the biggest opportunity I'd ever had, and I really prepped hard. I went into the meeting with my ideas really fleshed out, and quite a lot of my responses to the script seemed to by some lucky coincidence fit with the directors. That was cool. I then got to do the pitch after the meeting, so I had to score the time theater scene in episode one, and I totally went to town on that as well. I really wanted this job so much because I felt that Loki was a great character and I was a big fan.

**You and director Kate Herron were immediately on the same page in regards to using a Theremin for *Loki*. What was it about that instrument that appealed to you for this project?**

A friend of mine had sent me 'The Swan' by Clara Rockmore ages ago, and I just loved the sound of it. I had also been listening to lots of BBC Radiophonic workshops, and I'd seen this documentary about Delia Derbyshire as well so I had all these 1950's, analogue-y synth sounds buzzing around in my head. Tom Hiddleston has a Shakespeare-like quality to his performance, so I thought this needs to have some kind of classical, weighty grandness. So it was a fusion of those two things.

**You weren't on set for *Loki*, and I know that is something you like to do. In the absence of that, what sparked your creativity the most?**

It was engaging with the character in a really deep way. The storyline really got under my skin and inspired me. I had the *Loki* theme in the pitch, so that's been there from day one. And as for the riffs in the theme, I feel like *Loki* is the Salieri to Thor's Mozart, so I was listening to lots of that. There's a bit of 'Ride of the Valkyries' by Wagner in *Loki*'s theme as well. That was all in the pitch. Then I had a month to write the suite. That was the Mobius theme, the Sylvie theme, and the Variant theme.

**For all the hi-tech stuff we see in *Loki*, the *TVA* is also very analogue in some respects and you've clearly taken that into account with the score. How quickly did you catch onto that and are there any other ways that are reflected in your score?**

I sampled lots of clock-ticking sounds. I worked with Daniel Sonnabend - he's got lots of old analog tape machines - and we were messing around with that. The tape machine player almost became its own instrument. We had this big church bell for the timekeepers at the beginning of episode four. That was sampled and then downgraded, so it gets glitchy as it goes on to signify what's happening in the story. I was just messing around with a lot of that in the background, and it's all over everything. There's always an urgency and a time-ticking feeling in the background of lots of tracks.

**How long does one spend listening to samples of clocks before you find the right one?**

I've got a lot! I'm sure they'll come in handy at some point.

**I've read that you wanted a score that "reflected *Loki*'s personality." What were some of the characteristics you were looking to emphasise and accentuate with your score?**

Something that I touched on with Kate, from reading the scripts for the very first time was Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. In that film, Alex commits these horrendous acts and he's extremely violent, and yet somehow you connect with him. I feel like *Loki* is the same. He's a likable villain. In the series, he comes to terms with his fallibility and it is quite painful for him. So I suppose my job is to help him reach those emotional depths. When he sees his mother in episode one, his past is calling to him and that's when we hear those haunting Norwegian instruments that suddenly seem to shine. Yearning for your mother is something we can all relate to.

**We've spoken a bit about the use of the Theremin. What drove your selection of the other instruments?**

I did this amazing lockdown project for an ad agency. They kind of got all of their artists to play Pass the Parcel with a theme, and we just did this lockdown piece. I'm not sure how successful

it was, but the person that I got sent the material from was Charlie Draper who's a theremin player and a theremin enthusiast. So he was in the back of my mind, and I knew I really wanted to collaborate with him at some point. He played on my demo. And then the Norwegians... I saw them at a concert in Stoke Newington about three years ago. They're in this group called the Lodestar Trio. They're amazing, and they play with Max Bailey. I've known him for years, and I just went to this concert. He did all these interpretations of Bach, but with a kind of Norwegian folksy twist. I just loved the instrument combination of the Nyckelharpa, the Hardanger fiddle, and the violin. It sounds mystical and magical and amazing. It felt like the perfect pairing with *Loki*'s past.

**I read that you started with the finale and worked backward. Is that an unusual way of working for you or do you do that often?**

This whole show has been a departure from anything I've ever done before, in terms of the scale of it, and, you know, the resources. It's all just been different. I think Kate and Kevin [Feige], the producer, saw it as a six-hour film. They didn't want it to be a TV show. The thing about scoring a film is that you do have that time to really craft themes and to have more of an overarching narrative than you sometimes get to do in TV because there's usually a quicker turnaround. And I guess because of the pandemic as well, I had more time.

I didn't want to just work my way through the score in a linear order. I wanted to know where I was going and then seed it. I think writing a suite before starting on a picture, and having those themes in my mind before seeing the footage was super useful as well. I think I'm always going to do that from now on.

**Are we ever gonna hear the full suites somewhere down the line?**

I had never done one before. And I was like, "have you got any examples from anybody else?" So they sent me suites from a couple of other composers, like Ludwig Göransson's one for *Black Panther*. I was totally geeking out on that. I heard Mark Mothersbaugh's suite for Thor: Ragnarok as well, and that was kinda intimidating. But it was really good to hear that they've all gone through this process.

**You get to see these epic moments in *Loki* before there's any music to it. Was there any particular moment you watched that you were excited to work on?**

I read the scripts, and I had Mobius in my head as something very different. I saw him being a bigger person who was quite slow, like a kind of cheeseburger-eating cop. The way Owen Wilson brought that character to life was so brilliant, as was the chemistry between him and Tom. I loved watching their bromance. It was really fun to score them as their relationship

blossomed. When Mobius is pruned, that was so awesome. I loved episode four. I had seeded everything and built their friendship up. That moment where Tom walks down the corridor in slow motion with tears in his eyes... I loved scoring that.

**Loki is a man of many multitudes, and the show goes down a lot of strange avenues. I love the tracks where you really get to do something different from the main body of the score, like 'DB Cooper' or 'Miss Minutes'.**

I had a bit more time for episodes one and two. Like, I had a month to score episode one. By the time I got to episode six, it was really frantic. So, with the tracks you mentioned, I just had the time to do it. Kate was like, "we've got a source track that sort of works, but wouldn't it be really fun if we could do a version of it with the Loki theme?" And I was like, "yep, cool, let's try it." It was one of the upsides to the pandemic, that we had more time to work on it and do stuff like that. I did a film before with where I got Chris Lawrence - he's like a bass player in London, and he plays in orchestra's but he also plays at Ronnie Scott's - and he did the baseline on 'D.B. Cooper'. He's so good. And I sang on that track too!

'Miss Minutes' felt like a moment to tip your hat to those sci-fi shows and do a pastiche. So I got the theremin and the choir and had some fun with that piece. And again, that's got the TVA theme in it. I think that's really nice, and it's something they did with *WandaVision* as well. There's cohesion in the score. Even when you're hearing this jazzy track, you're still getting the Loki theme and you're hearing a different side of his character.

**You mentioned how you had more time to score the earlier episodes. Was there anything positive about having less time on the later episodes? How do you prefer to work?**

I remember reading something about people who can see colours with music. I feel that I have the same thing with a scene. I can watch a scene and I can start hearing it in my head, and as I get more into a project... I remember watching episode six, and because I was so into the project and into the characters by that point, I was like, that's what needs to happen. I could hear it as I was watching it. I feel like sometimes if you're spending ages working on something, that instinct can get a bit boiled down. Episode six felt like my most instinctive version of the music because I didn't have time to fiddle around with it. It just felt like that was my very undiluted response.

**I like it. Natalie Holt uncut.**

I just kind of sketched it all out on the piano as I heard it. It was very quick.

**How long did you have to work on that particular episode?**

I think it was a week. It was a very quick turnaround with the orchestral recording, and I thought we were going to need more time.

**How involved were you with the track Tom Hiddleston sings in Asgardian?**

They had found a Norwegian song, and he'd already recorded it. I was like, I think we need a musician in the background. There should be someone on that train who's a little bit drunk and has an instrument, and it's a kind of space-age fiddle, and they're going to accompany Tom in the scene and I think that's going to really help. Kate and Kevin were like, yeah, that could really work. So I did a few versions where I just took what Tom had done, added some violins, and then improvised a bit in the middle where Loki sings to Sylvie. And they're like, yes, we've got to do this. So they went back in and shot a pickup of an alien musician in that sequence because I insisted. I really wish it was me!

**We know that season two of *Loki* is in the works now. They better have you on camera.**

Oh my god, I'm so up for it!

**How did you find it working remotely? Were you involved in the mixing stage at all?**

It was kind of frustrating. Getting picture to work in the orchestral recording sessions was a problem. Marvel is very strict about how a picture goes out because they don't want any leaks, so that was quite challenging. I could never send people the picture to play with. It's kind of nice for the musicians to come in and see what they're playing against, but there was none of that. That was a bit of a downside. With that said, it was easier to get hold of people because everyone was at home and really happy to be working. I don't know if I'd have got the job had it not been for the fact that everyone was suddenly happy to accept more remote working than they would have done in the past. So I feel like it's opened some doors. The frustrations and the benefits seemed to be in balance.

**Speaking of opening doors, you're only the second woman to compose an MCU score (Pinar Toprak scored *Captain Marvel* in 2019). That feels significant.**

We're in a time, certainly, where I think people are very consciously opening up opportunities to all sorts of people that wouldn't have had those opportunities before, which I'm really grateful for. A few years ago, I wouldn't have gotten this opportunity until a bit further on in my career. So it accelerated things. We are moving forward. But the thing that I really struggle with... I went to a state school and I got scholarships to study music. It wasn't prohibitively expensive to go to university. I did a master's and I didn't come out with 30 grand of debt. The

opportunities are here for me now, but I think if I was young and I wanted to go to film school I wouldn't be able to afford it.

So what bothers me is social mobility. I still think we're opening up our industry, but we're not supporting people being able to study music and being able to get into film, and being able to spend those years doing low-paid jobs from the ground up. I still think we've got a long way to go with that. But I think at my age and my level, I'm just privileged that I did have those bursaries and those opportunities to study music, and I hope they're still there for my daughter's generation.

**You have a lot of synths in this score. How tricky was it to find that balance between the classical and modern instruments?**

It's a blend. There's some in-the-box stuff. Some of the synths are recorded, and then I ran them through the analog tape machine to dirty them up. I've got a Juno 60, so I've got some analog synths going on. It's such a weird process, isn't it? Creating something and being like, no, that's right! Jake Jackson - who mixed the score - must feel like I'm a complete control freak. I was like, "yeah I really like your mix but can you just go back and basically listen to my demo?" I was quite specific with him. He did an amazing job. The D.B. Cooper track... I cannot believe that he made it sound like that. I've never worked with him before, and handing your work over to an engineer does feel a bit like, oh, how's this gonna be? But it was a really, really great experience, and I think Jake is a genius. He really gets it, and he was really collaborative and respectful of my intentions with everything. I never felt like he was trying to put his mark on anything. It was a really smooth part of the process.

**What conversations do you have about how prevalent your music is in the mix when it comes to the TV side of things?**

I was so obsessed with *Loki* that I couldn't let it go. I went to the dub even when it was two o'clock in the morning. I just wanted to check in and I was calling Kate and asking her, "please can you turn the music up here?" I was like a dog with a bone until it was ripped out of my mouth and they were like that's it now, this episode is locked. I definitely fought for things to be turned up.

**You had a 32-piece choir for the last 2 episodes. What was it like to get that recording in? Are you watching as they're recording it from a remote location?**

They were a Hungarian choir. The male singers could really go down. I was adding notes in at the bottom for those guys to sing. I didn't know anyone could sing that low. That was cool. I had never recorded a choir before, so it was a new one for me. I was really lucky to have Andy

Brown from the London Metropolitan orchestra. He assisted me with the Brass and singing sessions.

**I imagine that one of the cooler things about scoring something like *Loki* is that you are now part of the wider MCU universe. I think I heard hints of Alan Silvestri's *Avengers* cue a couple of times...**

I put in a *Loki* version of the *Avengers* theme at the end of episode 4. Also, at the very start of the season before the title card, it goes from an Alan Silvestri cue and then segues and then I take it over. It was really cool to get to play around with the multitrack from that. I was always a big fan of the *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Black Panther* scores, so those were kind of my inspirations. I was just kind of honoured to be in the same league as those people and those scores because I thought they were great and quirky and had all these interesting flavours and textures.

**I love that you've been given the freedom to be as bold as you've been with your score.**

I wanted to do something a bit different, and Marvel's TV ventures... they're wanting to do something a bit different and challenging as well with this new direction that they're taking. It felt like there was a lot of creative freedom being dished out with this series, in every department. Kate was like, "let's try this *DB Cooper* scene with the theme, if it doesn't work then it's fine." It was just trying things out and seeing what stuck.

I remember handing over my score for episode one, just before Christmas 2020. I'd scored the whole thing and was very nervous because I think it was the first time Kevin Feige and the execs were going to hear my stuff. I'd really worked hard on it, and it had a lot of live stuff. There was just one note back from Kevin Feige - push it further. I think that's so cool. As we went on the execs were really happy with it, I got calls from Victoria Alonso and Louis D'Esposito [Marvel producers]. They both rang me and just thanked me and they were like, 'we're just so happy that you've taken the ball and run with it'. I couldn't have asked for a nicer bunch of people to work with. I wasn't sure how it was going to be, I was a bit intimidated. I thought it might be a bit more terrifying. But actually, it turned out to be a really amazing, fulfilling experience.

**Welcome to the world of *Loki* YouTube covers! How far down that rabbit hole have you fallen, and how much are you enjoying that side of the MCU experience?**

It's really flattering. I've posted some of them on my Twitter. It's just amazing how quickly people will post music from the show after episodes. They sound almost the same as my

demo, and they've knocked it out in about two hours the minute after they've watched the episode.

**Once your work on Loki was complete, how did you detox? Do you delete all your voice memos?**

I've still got them. The *TVA* theme actually came to me as I was walking down the high street. I've got some in the bank for the future as well. I'm always noodling and sketching things down on manuscript paper. How do I detox? I just bought a new piano. It's 100 years old. I haven't had a piano for a bit, so I've just been playing a lot of Bach.

[Natalie Holt on Creating the Score for 'Loki', Marvel's God of Mischief — Composer Magazine \(spitfireaudio.com\)](#)

## FURTHER READING

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### **British Composer Natalie Holt Breaks Down ‘Loki’ Background Score**

by Tanushi Bhatnagar

[British Composer Natalie Holt Breaks Down ‘Loki’ Background Score - \(rollingstoneindia.com\)](#)

### **Fiddles, theremins and remote orchestras: Natalie Holt on her score for Marvel’s *Loki***

by Clovis McEvoy

[Fiddles, theremins and remote orchestras: Natalie Holt on her score for Marvel’s \*Loki\* - MusicTech](#)

### **Interview: Natalie Holt on composing *Loki* and pushing the Marvel sound in a new direction**

by Peter Gray

[Interview: Natalie Holt on composing \*Loki\* and pushing the Marvel sound in a new direction - The AU Review](#)