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# JOHN McCABE

Symphonies 2 & 3 and Cello Concerto



Raphael Wallfisch, *cello*

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra | Kenneth Woods, *conductor*

# JOHN McCABE (1939-2015)

## SYMPHONY 2, CELLO CONCERTO, SYMPHONY 3

### Symphony No 2 (1970-1)

|                     |        |
|---------------------|--------|
| 1 I. Vivo           | [5.13] |
| 2 II. Andante       | [4.53] |
| 3 III. Allegrissimo | [3.52] |
| 4 IV. Lento         | [6.48] |
| 5 V. Vivo           | [5.28] |

### Cello Concerto, "Songline" (2007)

|                     |         |
|---------------------|---------|
| 6 I. Allegro vivace | [6.18]  |
| 7 II. Adagio        | [14.16] |
| 8 III. Allegro      | [5.55]  |

### Symphony No 3, "Hommages" (1978)

|                                     |        |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| 9 I. Flessible                      | [9.44] |
| 10 II. Adagio (Fantasia)            | [5.49] |
| 11 III. Moderato (Fugue-Variations) | [9.16] |

Total timings: [1.17.32]

RAPHAEL WALLFISCH *cello*  
BBC SCOTTISH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
KENNETH WOODS *conductor*

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If Music is 'about' anything, and not just an aural pleasure in itself, then the three John McCabe works here can be described in the following terms: Symphony No. 2 concerns itself with mankind's recurring cycles of unthinking and unchanging violence, as exemplified here through the 1969 Peckinpah Western *The Wild Bunch*. Symphony No. 3, subtitled *Hommages*, is John's homage to music, as well as his specifically named composers, Haydn and Nielsen. The Cello Concerto, *Songline*, seems to penetrate with great psychological depth the musings of an aging person – the early vigour, the pleasant memories, the deep and painful sorrows. We can all have our differing interpretations; these are mine.

Despite other deep-held interests, such as cinema and literature, not to mention cricket, John McCabe was undoubtedly born to be a musician. He started composing even before learning the piano, although he later threw away these juvenile scribbles, saying that he had not known what he was doing, but was fascinated by music. Though born in England, and devoted to music of this country, in fact he had very little English blood. His mother was German, while his father was of mainly Irish descent. He studied the piano from an early age with the great teacher, Gordon Green, and he fell in love with the music of Haydn, then almost

totally neglected, after hearing Sviatoslav Richter play a sonata. Thereafter Haydn was a mainstay of his immensely wide repertoire. Nielsen also was virtually unknown in this country when John discovered his beautiful Chaconne for piano. In time he was to record, with deep understanding, all of the solo piano works of both composers. These recordings still stand as exemplars after half a century. John's total devotion to music was selfless, as may be shown by his recordings and performances of works by other composers, male and female, including his contemporaries from Britain, America and Australia.

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## PROGRAMME NOTES

As with Sibelius, John McCabe gave the title symphony to ten compositions, not all of which were numbered as part of an official canon. And like the Finnish master, the first two of McCabe's were rather untypical, an organ *Sinfonia*—his only one for a single instrument—from 1961, akin to a baroque suite, and the slightly larger *Symphony for 10 wind instruments* (1964). The latter was constructed as a chain of interdependent sections, the whole being more than the sum of its parts and a considerable advance in musical integration, pointing towards McCabe's mature concept of a symphony. Before the year was out he had been commissioned by the Hallé Concerts Society to write his first orchestral symphony, *Elegy*, for the Hallé Orchestra, premiered by them under Barbirolli at the 1966 Cheltenham Festival.

That First Symphony adopted a relatively conventional three-movement design, slow-fast-slow, with quicker sections animating the outer *Prelude* and *Elegy*. In the **Second Symphony** (1970-1), McCabe arranged his five sections (none independent enough to be considered a standalone movement) Bartók-like in an arch within a single span, fast-slow-faster-slower-fast. Much has been made of McCabe's comment that

the “main impulse behind the work came from seeing Sam Peckinpah's film *The Wild Bunch* ... the extraordinarily satisfying, thoroughly musical shape of the [film], with an exposition, lengthy development, and recapitulation.” McCabe made no attempt to represent the film's action (especially not the violence, which he felt was “greatly overstressed by critics at the time”) with the musical developments arising for purely musical reasons although the symphony's design does owe something to Peckinpah, from the initial statement at the start of the opening **Vivo** [1] of the “crucial” core material, for 3 flutes supported by harp and a quiet tattoo for the percussion over a held string chord. These two main elements galvanise the rest of the orchestra into rapidly evolving variants, each more excitable than the previous one yet spaciouly, lightly scored so that each component is clearly audible—whether chattering woodwinds, rapidly chiming percussion, or ostinati in the bass—all building tension inexorably to a climax, topped by violent percussion, and a varied reprise of the flutes' opening gesture, transferred more urgently to the strings. The **Andante** second section [2] opens without pause in an atmosphere of mystery with a desolate high flute melody over a roll on the tom-toms alternating with a countermelody for the clarinet and bassoons. This material is varied

and enhanced as it moves through the orchestra, the textures changing like waves softly breaking—mostly—on a beach. (There is a lovely oboe d'amore solo along the way.) The mood lightens as the **Allegro** steals in [3], picking up the threads of the opening *Vivo*. Quiet, softly dancing figures in the woodwinds alternate with a more static variant for muted trumpets and trombones in a passage that foreshadows the *Edward II* ballet (1993-5). McCabe's scoring throughout this scherzo-like section is a model of luminosity, even when more instruments are added, the mood darkens and the dance becomes more circular. The squall passes as suddenly as it appeared in the **Lento** [4], with its evocative, rather wistful opening horn call. Three horns take up this theme over a quietly swirling background of multiple divided strings, each member playing as a soloist rather than in section, and it is the strings who effectively shoulder the main burden of the symphony's progress to a brief *tutti* climax, closing the *Andante* with a threnody. The final **Vivo** [5] again opens quietly but rapidly gains momentum in a freewheeling, intoxicating dance (not for nothing was this score adapted, with additional passages from McCabe's *Variations on a theme of Hartmann* for the ballet *Shadow-Reach* by the Irish Ballet Company in 1978). This culminates in the final, violent climax, and brief quiet epilogue

where a chastened version of the opening flute passage returns.

The Second Symphony, the only one of McCabe's orchestral symphonies without a subtitle, is scored for a standard orchestra of triple woodwind, including doublings, a standard complement of brass (4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba) and strings, plus piano, celesta, harp, and a substantial arsenal of percussion. It was commissioned by the John Feeney Trust for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and their then Principal Conductor, Louis Frémaux, who premiered it at the Birmingham Triennial Festival on 25th September 1971, recording it along with the wonderful cantata *Notturmi ed Alba* (1970) shortly afterwards.

The **Third Symphony** [7] was completed in 1978 to a commission from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, who premiered it under Charles Dutoit at London's Royal Festival Hall on 11th July 1978. Scored for a very similar orchestra to its predecessor, it dispenses with the doublings of oboe d'amore, bass and E flat clarinets, and contrabassoon used in No 2. In a note prefacing the score, McCabe explained that:

The title of this symphony *Hommages*, derives from two specific areas of homage which are encountered in the music. The more overt of these is a direct quotation from two composers of the past – Haydn, the slow movement of whose String Quartet, Op 76 No 6, forms the basis of the central Adagio, and Nielsen, from whose Suite for Piano, Opus 45, two chords are used in this piece as material of considerable importance.

Haydn, Nielsen: composers well known for their orchestral symphonies whose keyboard works McCabe the pianist recorded to great acclaim; indeed, his complete survey of the Haydn Sonatas has never gone out of print and set the benchmark for all subsequent surveys. McCabe also drew attention to two other ‘areas of homage’ “more as a matter of allusion”, noting that “some of the orchestral textures owe their provenance to the example of Szymanowski, and so on.” The final ‘homage’ was “to the continued fascination of tonality”; while never a serial or twelve-note composer per se, McCabe did at times deploy elements of Schoenbergian technique in some earlier works but in 1976, while composing his *Stabat Mater* (a rare excursion into religious music) he decided that he should be deciding the order of the notes, not someone else! *Hommages*

opens and closes in the key of E but the first of its three movements (fast-slow-fast, playing continuously) alone touches on all the other tonal centres in its coruscating flow.

In contrast to the spare textures at the start of its predecessor, *Hommages*’ opening *Flessibile* [7] begins for the orchestra *tutti* without preamble with a theme “related to” a theme in the Haydn Quartet (though sounding purely McCabe) over a busily undulating texture, This is punctuated by the two chords derived from Nielsen’s Suite (*Den Luciferiske*—The ‘Luciferian’), with a distinctively insistent rhythm that recurs throughout the symphony. These contrasting ideas take on many forms and variants, always differently scored, providing textural variations as much as thematic ones. The soundworld at times evokes, at some distance, that of Tippett in *The Midsummer Marriage*, another composer—and work—McCabe admired. A weird passage with prominent timpani, bongos and tom-toms leads to a climax, ushering in the central *Adagio*, subtitled like that in Haydn’s Quartet, ‘Fantasia’, which opens with an enchanting roudade on the flutes. [8] McCabe likened this movement as a “commentary” on Haydn’s, which is largely present as part of the phantasmagorical texture, before reaching a climax in the brass based on the Nielsen chords

and rhythm. A reminiscence of the flutes’ roudade sounds again before the final *Moderato*, subtitled ‘Fugue-Variations’, emerges with a piccolo solo [9]. This swiftly becomes a duo with the principal flute, then a trio. Brass and other winds provide support as the pace slowly quickens, with many contrapuntal variants along the way, building towards the restatements of the symphony’s opening theme, culminating—after a brief percussion tattoo—in one of the most glorious musical apotheoses in McCabe’s output which, once uttered, fades quickly into silence.

The *Cello Concerto “Songline”* (2007) [6] is the last but one of McCabe’s two dozen concertante works (only the Trumpet Concerto *La Primavera* succeeded it, in 2012). At first sight, it might also appear to have a last musical association with Australia, given its connection to Bruce Chatwin’s book *The Songlines* concerning, as per McCabe’s note on the concerto, “the invisible pathways of the Australian aboriginals, routes that they sing into life, naming or relating to everything they see or encounter”. However, the songlines are not only physical paths through the actual landscape but “psychological routes by which they trace their culture.” The composer added that it had “for a long time seemed to me that we all do something like this anyway, when we travel anywhere, revisit

old haunts, encounter old friends, and so on, and this Cello Concerto “sings” its journey through the exploration of its material – though the use of the singular ‘Songline’ indicates that this is just one of many possible routes through the music.” As such—as the composer’s widow, Monica, pointed out to the present writer in December 2025—it is linked expressively to his seventh and final symphony, *Labyrinth*, written that same year.

The concerto opens softly but *Allegro vivace* with rapid repeated semiquavers from the solo cello accompanied lightly by xylophone alone (which instrument has a prominent role in the concerto). Slowly, other notes and instrumental lines (beginning with flutes, the other winds, strings) are added though the pace does not falter. Subtle thematic refinements and alternatives come and go, the orchestration remarkably limpid, almost chamber-musical in character, except that the instrumental palette is that of a standard orchestra with double winds and the usual brass complement. The cello is always centre-stage front, never overwhelmed, always supported. A substantial orchestral interlude gives way to the cello unaccompanied and, after some interplay with the brass, a pastoral *Adagio* section opens up like a pleasant memory where the cello duets with small groups of instruments

from individual sections, especially *divisi* strings. Brief reminiscences of the very opening punctuate an otherwise hushed musical landscape (or it is a peaceful recollection?), initiating the central cadenza, a passage which—in hindsight—seems the conclusion of what has gone before and the springboard for what follows. The concluding half of the concerto is a further exploration of these musical paths of memory, sometimes pleasant, sometimes pained, in shifting tempi like a set of whirling symphonic variations. The concerto concludes abruptly, as if waking from a reverie, reality once more intruding.

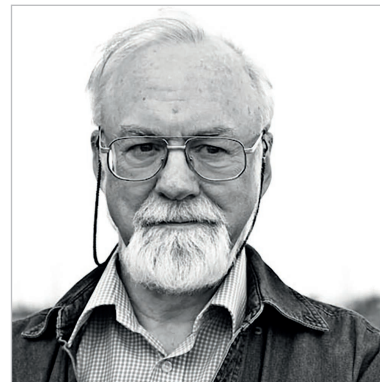
Commissioned once again by the Hallé Concerts Society, the first performance was given in the Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, on 17th January 2008 by Truls Mørk with the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Mark Elder.

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## JOHN McCABE (1939-2015)

John McCabe was born in 1939 near Liverpool of Irish descent from his physicist father, and German/Finnish from his mother, Elisabeth Herlitzius, a keen amateur violinist. He decided to become a composer at five-and-a-half, even before he began to study piano, with a pupil of the leading teacher Gordon Green. Following studies at the then Royal Manchester College of Music (now the Royal Northern) and in Munich, on a German Government scholarship, he began a career as both composer and pianist. Early attracted to Haydn's music, he fell in love with the piano sonatas while young, and later recorded a ground-breaking complete set (now on 12 albums) for Decca, which has never been out of the catalogue, and has provided a standard for pianists who followed in his wake.

John McCabe's compositions, which have been performed all over the world, cover every genre. Among his most successful works is the ballet *Edward II*, created and choreographed by David Bintley (Stuttgart Ballet 1995), and premiered to great acclaim, by the Birmingham Royal Ballet in the UK, winning among others, the 1998 Barclays Theatre Award.



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Other major works to be found in the McCabe catalogue include *Notturmi ed Alba* (with soprano soloist), *The Chagall Windows* for orchestra, *Concerto for Orchestra*, seven symphonies and numerous concertos. *Cloudcatcher Fells* and *Salamander* have become classics in the Brass Band repertoire. McCabe's full-length ballet *Arthur, Part 1: Arthur Pendragon*, with choreography by David Bintley, was premiered by Birmingham Royal Ballet in 2000. It is the first half of a cycle of two full-evening ballets, the second of which, *Arthur, Part 2: Mort d'Arthur* received its world premiere in 2001 at Sadler's Wells, with the Birmingham Royal Ballet.

Of more recent orchestral work, *Symphony 'Labyrinth'* (2007) was commissioned by the BBC for the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, *Horn Concerto Rainforest IV* (2006) for David Pyatt and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Cello Concerto *Songline* (2007) for Truls Mørk and the Hallé Orchestra, and *Joybox* (2013) by the BBC Proms for the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. Other compositions included works for The King's Singers, Stile Antico (Three Choirs Festival) and the Carducci String Quartet (Presteigne Festival).

Many albums have been released in recent years of a wide variety of his music, from the complete *Edward II*, orchestral and chamber music, to piano and choral music. The Dutton Epoch recording of his *Piano Concerto No. 1* with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and conductor Christopher Austin was awarded the accolade as Best New Piano Music Recording of 2007 by International Piano magazine. In the 2011/12 season there were five major album releases, including his Farewell Piano Recital (Toccata Classics), and, featuring his own music, albums of piano duos (Quartz), clarinet chamber works (Guild), string orchestral music (Dutton) and choral works (Naxos). During his 75th Birthday year in 2014 further albums were issued which included recordings of his Trumpet Concerto,

*La Primavera* (2012), Symphony No 1 *Elegy*, and *Tuning* (which included a rare performance of McCabe as conductor).

Final works include *Psalm-Cantata* (2012), commissioned by the English Baroque Choir and their music director Jeremy Jackman, who gave the first performance in March 2013 at Sinfonia Smith Square, London and *Christ's Nativity* (2014), which was commissioned by the Hallé Choir and premiered in Manchester in December 2014.

McCabe was active as a writer of music, and was appointed C.B.E. by HM The Queen in 1985 for his services to British music. In 2004, the Incorporated Society of Musicians honoured John McCabe with the Distinguished Musician Award in recognition of his 'outstanding contribution to British musical life' and in 2006, Liverpool University awarded him an Honorary Doctorate in Music. In 2014 he was awarded the Ivors Classical Music Award and the Iles Medal for contributions to the brass band movement.

His music is published exclusively by Novello and Company, London. A book on the music of John McCabe, 'Landscapes of the Mind', is published by Routledge, and 'So Written to After-Times' by Monica McCabe is published by Forsyth.

## RAPHAEL WALLFISCH, cello

Raphael Wallfisch is one of the world's most celebrated cellists performing on the international stage, renowned for his curiosity and commitment to exploring and broadening the full range of repertoire for the instrument, and drawing on a rich musical heritage.

He was born in London into a family of distinguished musicians, his mother the cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and his father the pianist Peter Wallfisch, and was inspired at an early age by hearing Zara Nelsova play, going on to study in California with Gregor Piatigorsky, who chose him to perform with Jascha Heifetz in the informal recitals at his home. His career was launched at the age of twenty-four when he won the Gaspar Cassadó International Competition in Florence. Since then he has enjoyed a global career, much loved in his home country where he has forged close relationships with orchestras including the London Symphony, London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, BBC Symphony, BBC Philharmonic, Hallé, BBC NOW, Royal Scottish National, BBC Scottish and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic; and respected around the world, working throughout Europe with the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Konzerthausorchester Berlin, WDR Symphony,



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RAI Torino, Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Gulbenkian, Bergen Philharmonic, Gothenburg Symphony, Lahti Symphony and Budapest Festival orchestras, and further afield with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Minnesota Orchestra, Sydney Symphony, New Zealand Symphony, Singapore Symphony and many others, working with such leading conductors as Łukasz Borowicz, Martyn Brabbins, Nicholas Collon, Sir Andrew Davis, Neeme Järvi, Kirill Karabits, Andrew Litton, Ed Spanjaard, Gábor Takács-Nagy, Yan Pascal Tortelier and Bramwell Tovey.

The depth of Wallfisch's interest in the repertoire is borne out in his extraordinary discography – including a long relationship with Chandos, a complete Vivaldi series on Naxos with Nicholas Kraemer, and with EMI, Decca, Black Box, ASV, CPO and Nimbus – which explores both the mainstream and countless lesser-known works by Barber, Dohnanyi, Hindemith and Respighi, to name a few, and what is considered the benchmark recording of Martinů concertos with the Czech Philharmonic and Jiří Bělohlávek. Wallfisch is a particular champion of British repertoire, recording concertos by Bax, Bliss, Britten, Delius, Finzi, Moeran and Walton, written for Piatigorsky, which he was privileged to record for the Chandos Walton Edition. He enjoyed strong early collaborations and musical friendships with such legendary conductors as Vernon Handley, Richard Hickox and Sir Charles Mackerras, and he is now President of the British Music Society.

## BBC SCOTTISH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

As Scotland's national broadcasting orchestra, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra has been performing for audiences across Scotland, the UK and internationally since 1935. The orchestra's live performances are regularly broadcast on BBC Radio 3, Radio Scotland and Sounds, as well as BBC Television and iPlayer.

Opening eyes and ears with ambitious repertoire beyond any benchmark, the BBC SSO is Scotland's leading champion of new music. Across nine decades, it has commissioned orchestral music by the most original voices of its time and hosts its annual Tectonics Festival of new and experimental music each spring alongside its Creative Partner Ilan Volkov.

With Associate Artist Lucy Drever, the orchestra runs projects that inspire creativity and connection with families, schools and communities across Scotland. And through a close association with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, the orchestra mentors the next generation of conductors, composers and instrumentalists. The orchestra also supports young musical talent in BBC Radio Scotland's Young Classical Musician of the Year competition.

Ryan Wigglesworth began his tenure as Chief Conductor in September 2022. One of the foremost composer-conductors of his generation, he has directed a wide range of repertoire with the BBC SSO including the ballets of Stravinsky, major works of Elgar, and UK premieres by György Kurtág and Hans Abrahamsen. Regularly performing at the BBC Proms and Edinburgh International Festival, the orchestra is a recipient of a Royal Philharmonic Society Award and four Gramophone Awards.



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### First Violins

Abigail Young (*guest leader*)  
David Routledge  
Iona McDonald  
Elita Poulter  
Gent Koço  
Olivier Lemoine  
Emily Ward  
Katrina Lee  
Alastair Savage  
Catherine James  
Gillian Risi  
Feargus Hetherington  
Wen Wang  
Joe Hodson

### Second Violins

Greg Lawson  
Liza Johnson  
Brigid Leman  
Julia Norton  
Barbara Downie  
Alice Rickards  
Ben Norris  
Alex Gascoine  
Julia Lungu  
Tessa Henderson  
Fiona Stephen  
Scott Bryant

### Violas

Andrew Berridge  
Morag Robertson  
Jessica Beeston  
Rik Evans  
Mary Ward  
Martin Wiggins  
Rhoslyn Lawton  
Liam Brolly  
Emma Connell-Smith  
Sasha Buettner

### Cellos

Siân Bell  
Nick Byrne  
Sarah Oliver  
Gill De Groote  
Anne Brincourt  
Feargus Egan  
Andrew Huggan  
Clea Friend  
Miranda Phythian Adams

### Double Basses

Gyunam Kim  
Iain Crawford  
Genna Spinks  
Lynette Eaton  
Olaya Garcia Alvarez  
Daniel Griffin

### Flutes

Matthew Higham  
Brontë Hudnott  
Adam Richardson

### Oboes

Stella McCracken  
Kirstie Logan  
James Horan

### Clarinets

Yann Ghiri  
Adam Lee  
Jenny Stephenson

### Bassoons

Patrick Bolton  
Graeme Brown  
Peter Wesley

### Horns

Oliver Johnson  
Stephanie Jones  
Lauren Reeve-Rawlings  
Hayley Tonner  
Neil Mitchell  
Helena Jacklin

### Trumpets

Chris Hart  
Mark Addison  
Hedley Benson

### Trombones

Merin Rhyd  
Huw Evans

### Bass Trombone

Alexander Kelly

### Tuba

Craig Anderson

### Timpani

Gordon Rigby

### Percussion

Patrick Nolan  
David Lyons  
Martin Willis  
Kate Openshaw

### Harp

Helen Thomson

### Celeste

Lynda Cochrane

## KENNETH WOODS

Hailed by Gramophone Magazine as “a symphonic conductor of stature”, Kenneth Woods was appointed Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of the English Symphony Orchestra in 2013, and has quickly built up an impressive and acclaimed body of work and recordings with them. Woods also serves as Artistic Director of both the Colorado MahlerFest – the only US organisation other than the New York Philharmonic to receive the International Gustav Mahler Society’s Gold Medal – and (since 2017) the founding Artistic Director of The Elgar Festival in Worcester. Woods has conducted the National Symphony Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Royal Northern Sinfonia and the English Chamber Orchestra, and has made numerous broadcasts for BBC Radio 3, National Public Radio and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He has appeared on the stages of some of the world’s leading music festivals, such as Aspen, Scotia and Lucerne.

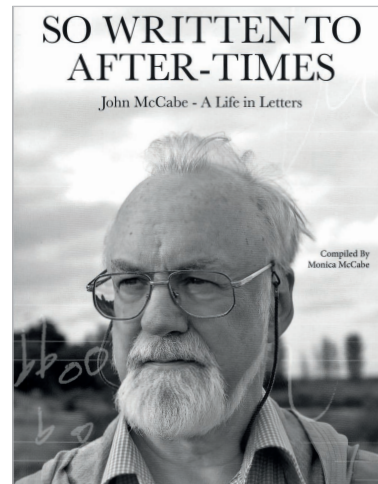
Under Kenneth Woods’ leadership, the English Symphony Orchestra has gained widespread recognition as one of the most innovative and influential orchestras in the UK. The first of



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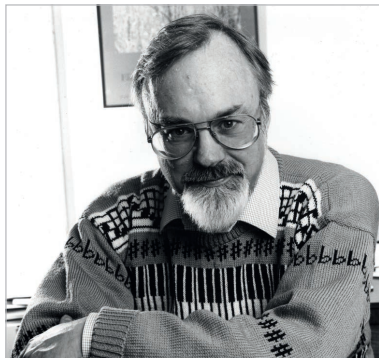
Woods’ many acclaimed ESO albums was volume one in the Complete Piano Concertos of Ernst Krenek, selected by The Times as one of their “Best Recordings of 2016.” His recording of Fraser’s *Elgar orchestrations* for Avie was a Classic FM Disc of the Month. The ESO’s Nimbus Alliance recording of Kenneth’s orchestration of *Brahms’ Piano Quartet in A Major* was chosen as one of the 10 Best Classical CDs of 2018 by The Arts Desk. In 2016 Woods and the ESO launched their 21st Century Symphony Project, an ambitious multi-year effort to commission, premiere and record nine new symphonies by leading composers, with the triumphant premiere of Philip Sawyers’ *Third*

*Symphony* at Sinfonia Smith Square. In 2018, the Project continued with the premiere of David Matthews’ *Ninth Symphony*, selected by The Spectator as one of the Top Ten Classical Events of the year, followed in 2019 by Matthew Taylor’s *Fifth Symphony*, hailed by ClassicalSource as “a masterpiece” at its premiere.  
[kennethwoods.net](http://kennethwoods.net)



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‘So Written to After-Times’, edited by Monica McCabe.  
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John McCabe at 50



John McCabe at the BBC



The Presteigne Festival in 2009. Back, left to right: Peter Fribbins; George Vass (Festival Director/Conductor); John Hawkins; David Matthews; Matthew Taylor; Hugh Wood; Alan Mills; James Francis Brown. Front: Huw Watkins; John McCabe.

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