

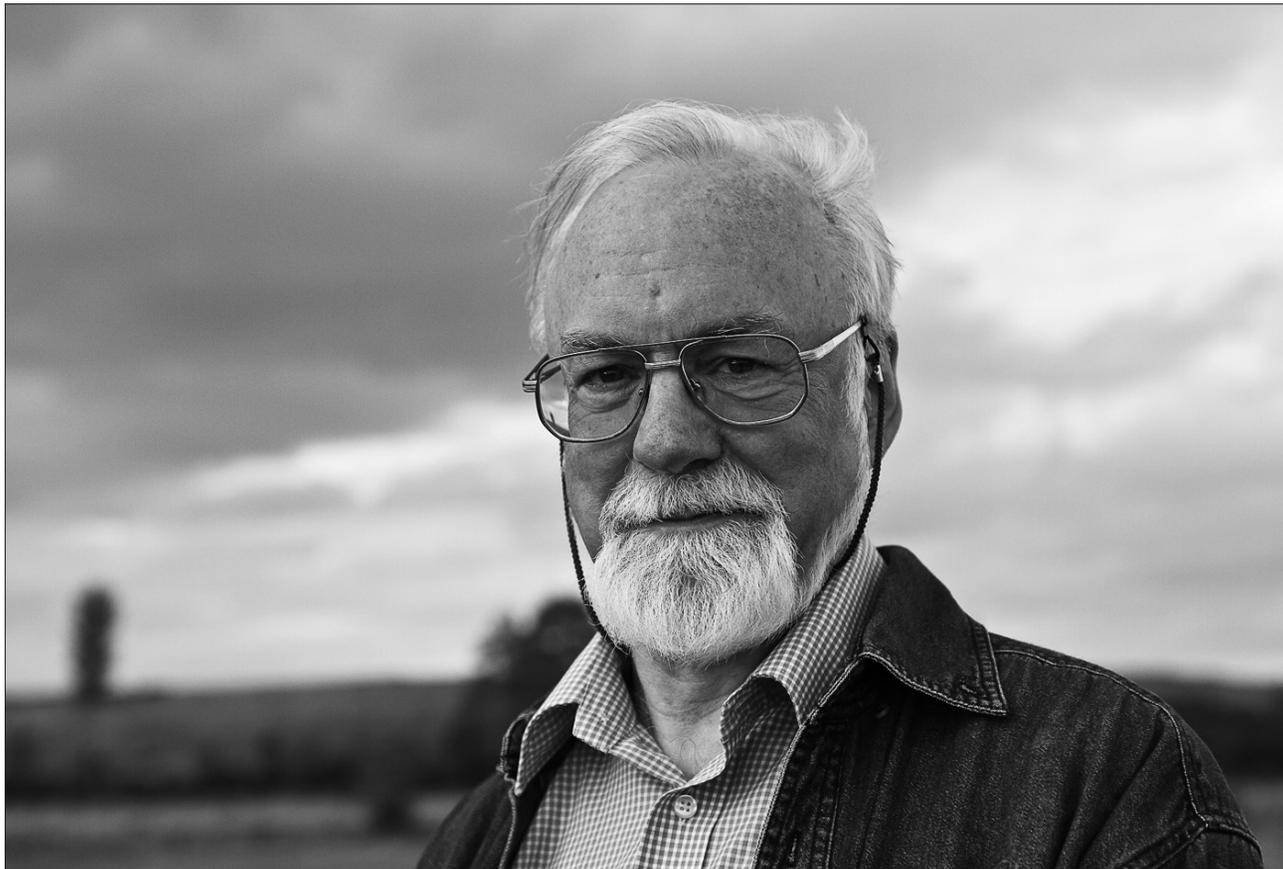
John
McCABE

Composer, Pianist, Conductor

Symphony No. 1 'Elegy' • Liszt Fantasy • Studies • Tuning

London Philharmonic Orchestra • John Snashall

National Youth Orchestra of Scotland • John McCabe



John McCabe (b. 1939) Composer, Pianist, Conductor

A group of studies by various authors of the music of John McCabe was brought together and published in 2008, edited by George Odum, under the collective title *Landscapes of the Mind*. The book's title was the composer's own, which we may take as a pointer regarding what he himself feels to be the emanation of his music.

Clearly, any music initially springs from its creator's mind – unless randomly selected by a machine – but 'Landscapes'? Does McCabe's use of that word imply his compositions are either one or part of a series of musical 'pictures'? The titles of many of his works imply a certain descriptive element, but his art is neither as simple, nor as simplistic, as that, for the musical qualities of his individual scores consistently outweigh illustrative connotations, qualities that lie at the heart of McCabe's best work and which define his stature as a greatly significant composer.

McCabe's choice of 'Landscapes' was surely intended to put the listener in a suitably receptive frame of mind, which, if properly applied, may reveal the inner sense of the best of his works – music which, on the surface, might appear to pose few 'problems', but which, on further investigation, analysis reveals always to have had an entirely *musically* inspired emanation.

Symphony No. 1 'Elegy'

John McCabe's *First Symphony* is arguably the most important of his earlier orchestral works. It is manifestly not *that* early in his output in terms of emerging language: indeed, it is surely a genuine bid to enter the symphonic process when he felt ready to do so. The *Symphony* (the first of seven) falls into three movements, and is scored for full orchestra – triple woodwind, brass (4.3.2.1.1), timpani, percussion (four players) with celeste, vibraphone, xylophone, celeste, harp and strings). It begins, *Lento moderato*, 4/4, with a *pianissimo* bare F sharp spread over seven octaves, glockenspiel gently repeating the note in even crotchets, from which a slow-moving theme arises.

Several immediate variants of this theme appear, forming the broad first part of the exposition, before a second main subject arrives, followed by what we perceive as the second subject. Thus the development has begun *before* the 'classical' exposition has finished – providing one of the first examples within McCabe's output of the influence of Haydn in his symphonic writing, and demonstrating the power of the first subject, initially somewhat innocuous in its semitone-minor third-diminished fifth melodic outline.

In classical terms, the 'subjects' having now been stated, the further 'development' evolves, this later larger section strictly falling into three parts, before coming together in a positively Mahlerian nine-note chord, wherein an 'inner' major triad of E flat appears to exert somewhat greater harmonic pressure; the initial *Tempo primo* returns for the extended coda, the final bar being a quiet *pizzicato* on double-basses reinforcing the vibraphone's higher E flat, overshadowed by a *pianissimo* final brass chord. The *Prelude* is over.

The central movement, the *Dance (Allegro molto)* begins quietly with two simple figures on side-drum and *pizzicato* double-basses, in 5/4; clarinets present an initial variant of the work's melodic parameters (as we may now call them), soon answered by flutes, off the beat, with side drum and basses reinforcing their roots. As the *Dance* progresses, variants of the rhythmic dichotomy are revealed, culminating in an insistent 3/2-7/4 pulse until eventually an abrupt, thudding B shuts the energy off, brought to a pitch of independent power as if conjoined, one upon the other.

The *Elegy (Adagio)* itself now follows, *fortissimo*, *pesante*, in 5/4, the heart of the *Symphony* unfolding at once in clashing major triads, heard together; it soon fades, with a solo bassoon intoning the *Symphony's* opening theme, here restated and expanded – structurally echoing the first movement's exposition. The music appears uncertain as to the final arbiter, but remains content, coalescing to an unresolved cadence, possibly

on D. But from the options, cellos outline an unaccompanied theme, harmonically uncertain, and eventually a contrapuntal texture unfurls, reinforced by second and first violins, the tapestry building to reveal brass alone, heralding livelier woodwinds, who recall elements of the *Dance* and the *Prelude*.

Once again, the 5/4 *Tempo primo* is heard, now *pianissimo*, *con sordino*, from which string orchestral texture a solo violin detaches itself three times, ending above the staff on B with the fundamental F-sharp below, the mode remaining indeterminate as horns oscillate, as at points throughout the *Symphony*. A lone clarinet muses over the elegiac opening, until the final tonal arbiter to which the work has been unceasingly drawn – yet has never fully acknowledged until the concluding cellos and basses *pizzicato* finally accept. It is B major/minor, here experienced not so much a key as a tonal region, bound by the tightest of melodic cells and urged by the subtlest and simplest of rhythmic displacements. After almost half a century, McCabe's *First Symphony* remains a remarkable achievement, held together by profound organic construction and exhibiting a direct emotional expression rare in 20th-century music and exceptional in music of its period.

Fantasy on a Theme of Liszt · Capriccio (Study No. 1) · Sostenuto (Study No. 2)

Writing of John McCabe's piano music in 1977, in notes accompanying the original long-playing record of these recordings, the composer, pianist and pedagogue Harold Truscott identified McCabe's *Aspects of Whiteness* (1967), for chorus and piano, as being of great significance in the composer achieving a personal piano style, which Truscott felt was 'immediately apparent in the piece which followed.' This was the *Fantasy on a theme of Liszt*, 'as near' (Truscott continued) 'to a sonata movement as its composer has yet written for piano'. Although a number of McCabe's subsequent solo piano works might have equally been entitled 'Sonata' (so broad has the definition become), he has avoided the term. As Truscott outlined in his commentary, the work's 'elements

are strong, including basic tonalities, but they are not insisted upon. But what is striking is that, here as in most of McCabe's music, his dissonances act on the ear almost like consonances, and although Liszt provided the motive power for the work, in that its material is drawn from the theme of augmented triads which opens the *Faust Symphony*, it is Beethoven who is strongly suggested. In the quieter introduction, the fierce *Allegro* main idea, the slower second theme, the even fiercer development, in which for the only time the Liszt theme is fully outlined, the wonderful passage with the middle *ostinato* part, and the coda, the sounds continually bring third period Beethoven piano writing to mind. The work is wonderfully organic, and is a concert piece which should interest any pianist worth his salt.'

The first two of McCabe's relatively extensive series of solo piano studies were written in 1969 and, as Truscott observed, 'each features a particular aspect of performing or compositional technique. *Capriccio* is built on quick repeated notes... [which] ...grow into a number of diverse yet related ideas, bound together by one figure of staccato quaver chords, and featuring, as a contrast, a chordal theme on a favourite interval: a rising and falling minor third. This grows against earlier ideas and brings the piece to its culmination. *Sostenuto*, as its name implies, involves types of sustained touch; again, the figure of a rising and falling minor third is prominent. Mostly it is reflective music, with more vigorous writing in the middle section.'

Robert Matthew-Walker

Tuning

Tuning was commissioned by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust for performance by the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland in recognition of the 150th Anniversary of the birth of Andrew Carnegie and of European Music Year 1985. It is scored for very large orchestra, including quadruple woodwind, six horns, two tubas, and a substantial percussion section. There are also five trumpets, who are spread out across the back of

the orchestra and towards the end are instructed to stand up to play their closing fanfare-like figures.

The idea for the piece had been in my mind for some time before I was asked to write a work for this orchestra, and it derived from a moment at an ensemble concert I attended, when the assembled players on the platform were tuning up prior to giving a performance of the Mozart *Serenade for 13 Wind Instruments*. By sheer chance, they alighted a couple of times on rich and sonorous chords, and it is from this accident that the impulse for this piece derives. So it is that, after an A from the oboe, the strings spread outwards from the same note and arrive at one of the four main chords of the work, sustaining it while harp and tuned percussion decorate it (though with a different harmony). After this process has been repeated, the woodwind have their 'tuning' material, their static chord being decorated by a group of wooden percussion (xylophone, temple blocks etc.), and when the brass enter, their percussion partners are drums (timpani, bongos and tom-toms).

John McCabe

Needless to say, the piece goes on to develop the harmonic material stated in these 'tuning' sections (which are written out fairly precisely, with some degree of freedom for the players), and the themes themselves are derived from these all-important chords. The work falls into two sections, the first slow and texturally quite dense, and the second fast, making much use of repeated notes and patterns and building up to a climax at which, apart from the trumpet fanfares already mentioned, the remaining brass instruments gradually join in to lead to the closing flourish. The final chords, the only moment in the whole work at which all the performers play together, is sustained quietly on solo strings, giving the effect of a distant echo.

As an adjunct to the composer's note, the critic Kenneth Walton, writing in the *Glasgow Herald* on January 6, 1986 regarding the performance of *Tuning*, reported that 'The standard of playing was quite remarkable... all-out commitment, consummate skill (especially the wind section of which the bassoons must be the envy of many a professional orchestra), and not a little enjoyment.'

John McCabe adds (September 2014) that this was his first and last attempt at conducting a large orchestra in a public performance, and it is only fair to add that the orchestra had been previously very well rehearsed by Nicholas Braithwaite.

London Philharmonic Orchestra



Recognised today as one of the finest orchestras on the international stage, the London Philharmonic Orchestra was founded in 1932 by Sir Thomas Beecham. Since then, its Principal Conductors have included Sir Adrian Boult, Bernard Haitink, Sir Georg Solti, Klaus Tennstedt and Kurt Masur. In 2007 Vladimir Jurowski became the Orchestra's Principal Conductor. The London Philharmonic Orchestra has been performing at Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall since it opened in 1951, becoming Resident Orchestra in 1992. It also has flourishing residencies in Brighton and Eastbourne, and performs regularly around Britain. Each summer it plays for Glyndebourne Festival Opera, where it has been Resident Symphony Orchestra for over fifty years. The Orchestra also regularly tours abroad. In summer 2012 the Orchestra performed as part of The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Pageant on the River Thames, and was also chosen to record all the world's national anthems for the London 2012 Olympics. The Orchestra broadcasts regularly on television and radio, and has recorded soundtracks for numerous blockbuster films including *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It has made many distinguished recordings over the last eight decades and in 2005 began releasing live, studio and archive recordings on its own CD label. For more information, please visit www.lpo.org.uk

John Snashall



The cover of the original Pye Virtuoso LP, released in 1967

The English musician John Snashall was born in Eastbourne, Sussex in 1930 and studied conducting with Aylmer Buesst at the Guildhall School of Music. He joined the Nixa Record Company in 1954 as a production assistant, and was appointed a senior producer following Pye's acquisition of the company in 1956. He became a much admired record producer and also a conductor for the company, following in the footsteps of such as EMI's Lawrance Collingwood and Decca's Victor Olof. The present recording is one of several Snashall made for Pye, part of a long-playing disc which also included Kenneth Leighton's *Concerto for Strings* and Adrian Cruft's *Divertimento for String Orchestra* – all three receiving their première recordings. In addition, he conducted the world première recording of Alan Bush's *Variations, Nocturne and Finale on an Old English Sea-Song* for piano and orchestra, with David Wilde as soloist and the Royal Philharmonic, and another rare set of recordings of Pergolesi's *Concerti armonici*, with Snashall's own chamber orchestra, the Anglian Ensemble. He also conducted the Pye recordings of Robert Starer's *Viola Concerto* and Vaughan Williams's *Suite for Viola and Orchestra* with Melvin Berger and the English Chamber Orchestra. After leaving Pye in 1969, Snashall later conducted wind suites from four Mozart operas with the London Symphonic Players for CBS and a three-album set with the National Philharmonic Orchestra of famous Overtures for the Warwick label. After leaving Pye, Snashall went on to produce occasionally for other labels, including Bax's *Third Symphony* for RCA, with (later Sir) Edward Downes and the London Symphony Orchestra. He died in December, 1994.

National Youth Orchestra of Scotland



The NYOS in January 1986

When the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland was launched in 1979 it changed the landscape of music education in Scotland, nurturing the talent of the country's next generation of musicians and building the future of instrumental music in Scotland. Since then much has changed and the organisation now boasts a pathway of eight diverse performing ensembles, and an ever-expanding outreach programme. However, the drive and determination to provide young people in Scotland with life changing music projects remains. Since its first residential training course in 1979, thousands of young musicians have been inspired through world-class tuition and performed with NYOS orchestras on concert platforms all over the world. NYOS is proud to have contributed to the lives of so many, not only the professional musicians who now perform in orchestras worldwide, but the young people who first experienced a live orchestra through NYOS and those who progressed through the NYOS Pathway into all manner of professions and walks of life.

John McCabe

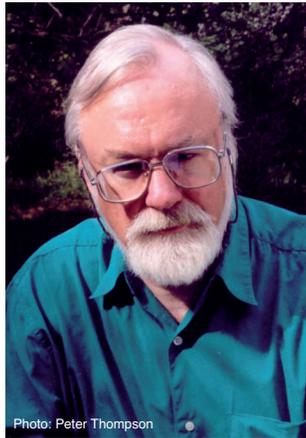


Photo: Peter Thompson

A prolific composer from childhood, John McCabe studied in Manchester and Munich, and embarked on an international career as composer and pianist. He has worked in almost every genre, though large-scale forms lie at the heart of his catalogue. Apart from full-length ballets such as *Edward II* and the two-part *Arthur*, his seven symphonies, at least twenty concertante works, and music such as *Notturmi ed Alba* (for soprano and orchestra) and *The Chagall Windows* for orchestra place him at the centre of the repertoire. *Cloudcatcher Fells* has become a classic of the brass band repertoire. His output of chamber music, including seven string quartets and numerous quintets and trios, is equally outstanding, and he has made a major contribution to the fields of piano and vocal music, including a wide range of choral work. Artists who have performed McCabe's music include the BBC Singers, Barry Douglas, James Galway, the King's Singers, Truls Mørk, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, New York, the William Ferris Chorale of Chicago, Stile Antico and the conductors Barbirolli, Boult, Elder, Groves, Haitink, Hickox, Petrenko, Previn and Solti. McCabe's mature style is characterised by dramatic post-tonalism, and vivid orchestration, combined with both accessibility and integrity. In his distinguished career as a concert pianist, he has performed and recorded widely, including the landmark set of complete Haydn *Piano Sonatas* on Decca and many British works, and he is noted for his generosity to his fellow composers. He was appointed CBE for his services to British music. A book, *Landscapes of the Mind: The Music of*

John McCabe, was published in 2008 by Ashgate Publishing (Guildhall Studies series). McCabe became President of the British Music Society following the death of Sir Lennox Berkeley in 1989, and remained in that position until 2014. The music of John McCabe is published exclusively by Novello & Co. Limited.



The **British Music Society** (Registered Charity No. 1043838), founded in 1979, brings together professional and amateur musicians, students and scholars, and music enthusiasts young and old from around the globe to promote, preserve and celebrate British music, pre-dominantly from the Twentieth century, both at home and abroad. Its extensive discography is now being re-issued by Naxos, bringing to a wider audience many highly-acclaimed performances, often world premières, of neglected British works. The Society's Historic label includes a number of famous vintage recordings by artists such as Noel Mewton-Wood and Walter Goehr.

In addition the Society produces a Journal, *British Music*, packed full of scholarly articles and reviews, as well as a regular e-newsletter for members. Our website lists forthcoming BMS events as well as performances of British music, and also provides a forum for discussion and debate.

www.britishmusicsociety.com

This collection brings together several significant recordings of the music of John McCabe, none of which has appeared before on CD. The *First Symphony*, heard here in its only recording to date, is a work of striking emotional directness and explosive energy. The *Fantasy on a Theme of Liszt* was described by Harold Truscott as ‘wonderfully organic... a concert piece which should interest any pianist worth his salt’. Scored for very large orchestra, *Tuning* develops layers of texture and sonority of overwhelming richness. This is the only recording of John McCabe as conductor.



John
McCABE
(b. 1939)



Symphony No. 1 ‘Elegy’ (1965)	19:35
❶ I. Prelude: Lento moderato	6:05
❷ II. Dance: Allegro molto	3:54
❸ III. Elegy: Adagio – Allegro vivo – Adagio	9:36
❹ Fantasy on a Theme of Liszt (1967)	11:36
❺ Capriccio (Study No. 1) (1969)	6:39
❻ Sostenuto (Study No. 2) (1969)	6:58
❼ Tuning (1985)	17:33

WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

London Philharmonic Orchestra ❶-❸ • **John Snashall** ❶-❸
National Youth Orchestra of Scotland ❼
John McCabe, Piano ❹-❻; **Conductor** ❼

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Recorded at Barking Assembly Hall, Essex, England, on 3rd and 4th May, 1967 (tracks 1-3);
in 1977 (tracks 4-6); and in concert at Glasgow City Hall, Scotland, on 4th January, 1986 (track 7)
Compilation producer: Martin Cotton • Compilation restoration engineer and editor: Morgan Roberts
(The Classical Recording Company) • Executive producer: Harry Mudd (track 7)
Producers: John Snashall (tracks 1-3); John and Monica McCabe (tracks 4-6); William Webb (track 7)
Engineers: Robert Auger (tracks 1-6); Harry Mudd (track 7) • Publisher: Novello & Co. Ltd.
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