



John  
**McCABE**

## **Piano Music**

**Variations • Aubade • Gaudí  
Five Bagatelles • Mosaic • Haydn Variations**

**John McCabe, Piano**



## John McCabe (1939-2015)

### Piano Music

John McCabe, CBE, was born in Huyton, Lancashire, on April 21st, 1939. He studied at Manchester University from 1958-60, gaining his degree (B. Mus.) despite being expelled from the composition class of Humphrey Proctor-Gregg for having the temerity to play one of his own pieces in a recital at his old school (Liverpool Institute High School for Boys) against his tutor's wishes. From 1961-2 McCabe studied with Thomas Pittfield (composition) and Gordon Greene (piano) at the Royal Manchester College of Music and attended the Munich Hochschule für Musik in 1964 where his composition teacher was Harald Genzmer, a former pupil of Hindemith. His intention had been to study with the great Bavarian composer Karl Amadeus Hartmann, a performance of whose *Concerto funebre* for violin and strings (1939, rev 1959) had made a great impact on the young composer (so much so that he wrote one of his own, but for viola, in 1962). Although McCabe was interviewed by Hartmann – who took no students but agreed to supervise McCabe's tuition there – in 1963, the Bavarian died in December that same year. McCabe composed his *Variations on a theme of Karl Amadeus Hartmann* in 1964 in his memory.

Variation form is a recurrent feature of McCabe's large output (of over two hundred and thirty pieces), whether as constituent movements or episodes of larger works, as in several of the concertos or his ballet *Edward II* (1994-5), or as complete works, such as the *Concertante Variations on a theme of Nicholas Maw* for strings (1970), the *Fantasy on a theme of Liszt* for piano (1967) and – his most spectacular achievement in the medium – the *Haydn Variations* (1983). His mastery of the genre was aptly demonstrated, however, fully two decades earlier, even before the *Hartmann Variations*, in the set published as Opus 22 (though the composer soon dropped the use of opus numbers). Entitled simply *Variations*, these were written in 1963 and published soon after as the first of a “modern piano series edited by John Ogdon” (then still fresh from his success in the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in 1961) called *Virtuoso*. McCabe's original intention had been to write a set of etudes,

which may account for their extra degree of exploratory writing, and were dedicated to Gordon Greene “with affection and gratitude”. There are eighteen variations in all, with a brief Cadenza interposed between Nos. 17 and 18, on the opening eight-bar theme. This theme alternates a growing, *lento* dotted phrase (encompassing the triton, C-F#), with *più mosso* semi- and demisemiquaver octaves almost at every bar, a melodic ‘profile’ reprised closely in variation 3. The composer described the use of the triton as “the springboard of the theme”. As Ogdon commented in a note prefacing the printed score, there is “a basic melodic unity” to the whole work, placing it “closer to Rachmaninov's use of variation technique... than to Brahms's”. The variations also often flow one into another to form groups, thus: theme and variations 1-3; variations 4-7 (all *doppio movimento*); the much slower variations 8-12; Nos. 13-16 (all *più mosso*); and the final triptych, *grandioso – cadenza – maestoso*.

The first group forms a kind of exposition with the first variation primarily developing the dotted phrase (already changing within the eight-bar theme itself) and in the second beginning to fuse elements of both ‘subjects’. The partial reprise of the theme in the third clearly delineates this group from the *leggiero* fourth, which cracks on *doppio movimento* where the second left off. No. 5 is essentially a variation, *all'ottava*, on its immediate predecessor; only in the sixth does the theme's alternate octave subject, rapidly arpeggiated, return to centre stage in the left hand, with the constantly extending dotted phrase, now itself a theme, in the right hand. The staccato seventh variation presents the extended dotted theme mainly in sevenths, a subtle twist on the octaves of the main theme. The climax of the passage from Variations 4-7 is reached in the *lento* eighth, the start of what might be thought a slow movement. There is a Bartókian feel to the music here, which is succeeded by impressionistic waves rising three times from the depths to the heights (and written on three staves; subsequent variations require four). The *adagio* tenth variation is a highly sublimated presentation of the theme, recalling the original profile in its apparent alternation of tempi (in fact

the speed is unified), but in Nos. 11, *pochissimo più mosso*, and 12, *poco meno mosso*, the writing becomes gradually more intense, leading to the *più mosso* group (Nos. 13-16), the first two of which are tiny: just three highly packed bars apiece. Their busy triplet motion, a logical outcome of elements in earlier variations, is developed further in Nos. 15-16, in the latter juxtaposed with a contrary motion passage rising to the heights and falling to the depths at the same time, before exploding into the *grandioso* writing of the seventeenth variation, where five-note octave chords alternate with demisemiquaver runs – another transformation of the opening theme's profile. After the brief upward-running *cadenza*, the *maestoso* eighteenth and last variation closes with an apotheosis of the theme before closing with a peremptory octave-tritone chord in the bass (A – Eb – A).

Ogdon noted the “larger canvas” of the *Variations'* ten-minute span when set against McCabe's other piano compositions of the period, such as the *Three Impromptus* (1963) and *Five Bagatelles* (1964) which, in Ogdon's words “illustrated different aspects of pianistic and compositional techniques – atonality included – with brevity and assurance.” This double intent is important as McCabe was very distinctly a composer-pianist, who successfully progressed both careers around the globe (with the emphasis at home and abroad varying from the composer to the pianist at different times). Out-and-out composer-pianists of international standing in both disciplines are few and far between – one thinks of Bartók and Rachmaninov (on each of whom McCabe wrote short, penetrating studies), Prokofiev and Stravinsky before the Second World War, or Ogdon and Finnissy in more recent times. McCabe's most distinguished achievement as a recording artist was the much-acclaimed set of the complete Haydn *Piano Sonatas* for Decca, and which in forty years has never been out of print, although his recorded legacy encompassed Hindemith, Bax, Howells, William Schuman, Nielsen and many more. The career of the late John Ogdon afforded a revealing parallel to McCabe's own: both possessed a formidable keyboard technique and virtuosity in alliance with compositional precocity. But if Ogdon possessed perhaps the more

mercurial pianistic genius, as a composer McCabe outstripped Ogdon, setting his sights rather higher. It is no accident that pianists have more readily taken up McCabe's pieces than Ogdon's.

Brevity is the watchword for the *Five Bagatelles* which are all over and done with in as many minutes. The composer told the present writer that they “were written to a request for not-too-difficult 12-note pieces”. All share a dance-like, almost balletic quality that seemed with hindsight like a premonition of the composer's later acclaimed stage works, like *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1973-5) and *Edward II*. The opening *Capriccio* proceeds by staccato chords slamming their way, however light-footedly, through an ill-tempered dance; the succeeding *Aria* is quiet, reserved, with a Sarabande-like momentum. The third bagatelle, *Elegia*, is sparer in texture, more questioning in spirit, but seems not to find any answers, while the *Toccata* moves brashly around the keyboard oblivious to all concerns. The final *Notturmo* combines the reservation of the *Aria* with the *Elegia*'s questing; here at last by contemplation is a resolution arrived at.

In early 1969, McCabe began the composition of a series of piano *Studies* which, while designed to be independent “works in their own right, ... all include as part of their basic composition an exploration of certain aspects of piano technique or compositional procedure.” The series started with *Capriccio* and *Sostenuto*, and continued in 1970 with *Gaudí*, in the composer's words “formally, a large-scale *Rondo* ... a tribute to the work of the Spanish architect Antonio Gaudí whose extraordinary and unique buildings” – including the astonishing (and still unfinished) *Sagrada Família* Cathedral in Barcelona – “are a source of continual fascination”. In a preface to the printed score the composer has provided the best description to the overall sound-world of this haunting tribute in some notes he made *before* composing the piece, of what he wanted to express: “Bells / deep gong sounds; contrast of decoration with static sculptural forms; intricate, ornate ornamentation; variety of planes, textures and materials; juxtaposition of the ferocious and the idyllic”.

The music on the printed page has a radically different look from that of the *Variations* or *Bagatelles*: in *Gaudí*, the

piece proceeds for the most part with no pulse in the conventional sense, just as the architect's most characteristic buildings took their inspiration from features of the natural rather than architectural landscape, not least the fantastic pillars and towers of the great Montserrat outcrop. (The composer suggested once, however, that the "strongest influence on *Gaudí*, was Stockhausen!") The study progresses through the interaction of five contrasting tempi and the musics associated with them: quaver = 152, with its five-chord rhythmic charge recurring throughout the piece, often associated with deep, gong-like tetrachords; dotted quaver = 152 in rapid triplets; crotchet = 76 in a single, weird passage of glassy counterpoint marked *esitando* on its outset; the *martellato*, driving but deliberate crotchet = 144-152 with its Bartókian note clusters; and quaver = 144 (in a wonderful *quasi campanelli* section). These combine elemental power with the delicacy of a butterfly's wing in a fantasia of kaleidoscopic colours and sounds. The crux of the work is a short, strange, pianissimo passage marked *largo possible* and *lontano, glassy tone*, a quiet, undulating synthesis of the work's entire process, after which follows a brief, varied recapitulation of the first two tempi's musics – the basic cells of the work – to conclude.

By contrast with *Gaudí*, *Aubade*, written that same year, is much simpler and conventionally written though no less evocative. According to the composer, "the music derives principally from the extended use of arpeggio features and appoggiaturas, as the pianistic elements uppermost in the piece ... it is intended to conjure up not so much the coming dawn ... but the moment of stillness before dawn." Its dreamy, Messiaen-like sonorities conjure up through some exotic birdsong-like inflections a captivating, if un-British dawn chorus. Again, there is an alternation of two basic elements, marked initially *Lento, con rubato* and *pochissimo più mosso*, respectively a fast-moving current of notes and a progression of static chords with grace-notes which fuse into something entirely new.

In 1979 and 1980, McCabe wrote a further pair of Studies, the *Paraphrase on 'Mary, Queen of Scots'* and *Mosaic*. The latter is another large-scale offering, running to around a quarter-of-an-hour as with *Gaudí*. *Mosaic* was

dedicated to the Welsh composer William Mathias (another composer-pianist) and written to a commission for the 1980 North Wales Festival. As with the three preceding works in the series, there was an extra-musical aspect of the music, the beautiful mosaics in the mosques of Damascus that the composer saw during a concert tour there the previous year. The title, however, reflects equally well the process of construction. *Mosaic* opens slowly and quietly, *quasi lontano*, with a thrice-repeated five note refrain, C# – D# – D – E – C. Alternating in slow and fast "streams", the latter *senza misura*, this refrain gradually extends and modifies to form an eleven-note row: C# – D# – D – E – C – Bb – Ab – A – F# – G# – F, with only G missing. The row is not treated remotely serially – rather it is a source from which the fast "stream" develops ever more sinuous, octave-leaping lines, where notes are repeated freely and change places, but with the basic sequence holding good. Both "streams" introduce new elements, building from the row and assimilating aspects of each other, while frequently recalling earlier passages or variants on them, like the recurring patterns in a Damascene mosaic. The treatment of the material becomes ever more elaborate, the study proceeding as a fantasia-like set of dovetailed and freewheeling variations on the opening page. The climax is reached via a long, fast *marcato* passage that starts out over a constantly changing pulse, effectively – though not marked as such – 4/4, 6/4, 3/4, 7/16, 9/16, 5/8, 3/4, before slipping the shackles of the bar-line altogether in a relentless upward-climbing crescendo. The apex is crowned by a short ostinato on the notes C# – D# – D – E – C – Bb that the player is directed to "repeat c. 10 times, with Rall[entando] towards the end". The music then unravels back rapidly through a couple of selected variations in a kind of reverse recapitulation leading to the reprise of the opening five-note refrain, which is then unpicked note by note to leave a final C#.

Of his solo piano works, at 26 minutes in duration the longest and largest in scale is the *Haydn Variations*, written in 1983 for Philip Fowke to a commission from the City Music Society, London, and premiered in Goldsmith's Hall, by the dedicatee in October that year. In layout, the *Haydn Variations* are rather unorthodox, even given McCabe's

highly original use of variation techniques. The Theme, taken from the first movement (*Moderato*) of Haydn's *Piano Sonata No 32 in G minor*, Hob XVI: 44, does not appear until page 32 of the 53-page score, where it emerges *pianissimo* as an appendage to the preceding *Lento e solenne* variation. Delaying the statement of the theme to be varied, and then making it seem inconsequential, is nothing new – one need look no further than Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* for a precedent – but rarely can the theme have been delayed so long. What initially sounds like the theme, the opening *Vivo, con bravura*, has nothing Haydnesque about it in sound, though it is a fairly straightforward *brillante* rhythmic transformation of the theme's opening triplet (D – Eb – D) applied across the entire melody. The ensuing *Deciso* is a fugue, seeing the melody largely in terms of repeated notes, its contrasting *Pochissimo meno mosso (Lirico)* episode having a more gently flowing "take" on Haydn's tune.

The variations are not clear-cut in the manner of the Op 22 set of twenty years earlier. McCabe does not number them and with good reason, since what may appear on the page as separate variations or sub-variations (nearly three dozen in all) are rather episodes in much larger sections. The composer had in mind Haydn's "alternating variation" technique, where two themes, one each in the major and minor, were varied in parallel, though here McCabe does not alternate themes, but rather different variations of the same theme. Thus far the *Deciso* – *Pochissimo meno mosso (Lirico)* sub-variations are in fact the opening two episodes in an integrated movement within the overall composition, leading through an interchange of *Presto possible*, *Senza misura* and *Deciso* passages to a final *Allegro*. There follows immediately a fugal-sounding *Vigoroso*, complete in itself, where the profile of Haydn's tune again becomes audible, though smoothed out into even crotchets and quavers. What follows is a large double variation in the form of a complex of micro-developments upon two derivations of the theme of such divergent character that they are almost alien species. The first, *Accel. al Presto possibile (Tempo 1)*, is quiet, gently arpeggiated and moving mostly in parallel motion; the second, *Lento, senza misura (Tempo 2)*, is a short set of three harsh

chords. These then flow into and exchange facets of themselves with each other, and emerge at the other side as two quite distinct new hybrids. Each stage in the process has its own "Tempo", each derived from a predecessor; at the conclusion the chord sequence originating in *Tempo 2* has extended somewhat into a long chain of quiet, *staccato* chords, while the undulating contrary motion of *Tempo 1* has metamorphosed into something hard and unyielding, eventually losing even its motion in a series of hammered repeated chords.

Another important feature of the work is the use of pauses. "The pauses are crucial", the composer wrote, "the music disintegrating before turning a corner and restarting." Something akin to a slow movement emerges from the huge double variation after just such a pause in a sequence of (apparently) eight variations. The first, *Lento*, is brief and introductory, the succeeding *Grazioso* and *Lento e solenne* building on elements of it, and themselves containing smaller sub-variations of their initial passages. Only after the bell-like sonorities of the *Lento e solenne* have died away does the Theme finally emerge at the same tempo, masked by quietly dissonant chords over the top, as if a throwaway episode of one of its own variations. This is followed by the calm of the *Andante* and *Adagio* fifth and sixth variations, which lead directly into the *Lento con moto* seventh, a slow, serene musing on the opening *Vivo, con bravura* with its dominant triplet rhythm. A clear shift of mood occurs at the start of the next variation, *Andante*, heralding a new movement within the larger whole. The additional markings of this new section (*misterioso, murmurando*) lucidly indicate its character, at least at first. Through seven notional sub-variations the music becomes less mysterious and more intense until the pace changes to *Deliberato*. Through a series of lengthening *accelerandi*, each returning to the initial tempo, a new cascading elaboration of the theme is heard high in the treble reach of the piano before subsiding into a partial recapitulation of part of the earlier *Deciso* section. The final variation is a quiet coda, *Andante*, its unhurried flow nonetheless closing the book on this highly original utterance with total satisfaction.

Guy Rickards

## John McCabe

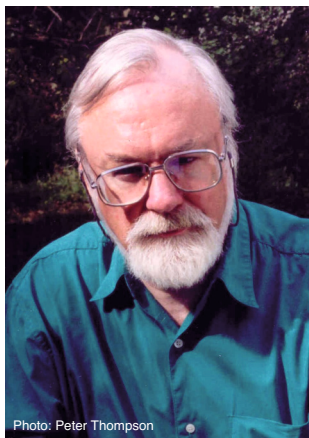


Photo: Peter Thompson

A prolific composer from childhood, John McCabe studied in Manchester and Munich, and embarked on an international career as composer and pianist. He 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 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 performed and recorded widely, including the landmark set of complete Haydn *Piano Sonatas* on Decca and many British works, and he was 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. He died in February 2015, after a long illness. 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.

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[www.britishmusicsociety.com](http://www.britishmusicsociety.com)

John McCabe was a composer-pianist who excelled internationally in both fields. For his own instrument he wrote a distinguished series of works in which variation form is a recurrent feature. Seventeen years separate the *Variations, Op. 22*, described by John Ogdon as standing “closer to Rachmaninov’s use of variation technique than to Brahms’s”, and the masterly, unorthodox and original *Haydn Variations*, McCabe’s longest solo piano work. The evocative *Bagatelles* and *Studies* are notable for their unceasing exploration of pianistic and compositional techniques.



## John McCABE (1939-2015)

- |    |   |       |
|----|---|-------|
| 1  | <b>Variations, Op. 22 (1963)</b>  | 9:43  |
|    | Lento – Più mosso; 1. Più mosso; 2. Doppio movimento; 3. Tempo I – Più mosso; 4-7. Doppio movimento; 8. Lento maestoso – Lento (con rubato); 10. Adagio; 11. Pochissimo più mosso; 12. Poco meno mosso; 13-16. Più mosso; 17. Grandioso; Cadenza: rubato; 18. Maestoso  |       |
| 2  | <b>Aubade (Study No. 4) (1970)</b>  | 6:00  |
| 3  | <b>Gaudí (Study No. 3) (1970)</b>   | 14:42 |
|    | <b>Five Bagatelles (1964)</b>   | 4:47  |
| 4  | I. Capriccio  | 0:36  |
| 5  | II. Aria  | 1:05  |
| 6  | III. Elegia   | 1:09  |
| 7  | IV. Toccata   | 0:40  |
| 8  | V. Notturmo   | 1:17  |
| 9  | <b>Mosaic (Study No. 6) (1980)*</b>   | 13:42 |
| 10 | <b>Haydn Variations (1983)*</b>   | 27:17 |
|    | Vivo, con bravura; Deciso – Pochissimo meno mosso (Lirico) – Presto possibile – Deciso – Allegro; Vigoroso; Accel. al Presto possibile (Tempo 1) – Lento, senza misura (Tempo 2) – Tempo 1, ma un poco meno mosso (Tempo 3) – [simile Tempo 4 – Tempo 11]; Lento – Grazioso – Lento e solenne – (TEMA) – Andante – Adagio – Lento con moto; Andante (misterioso, murmurando) – Deliberato – Deciso; Andante |       |

\*WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

### John McCabe, Piano

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