

Preface

Over the nearly seventy years of John McCabe's lifetime the classical music business in Britain has changed radically. It has moved from operating within a traditionalist culture in which classical music took its place among the arts without question and was generally admired, performed by many and respected by even those who did not listen to it much, to a diverse and more egalitarian society driven by commercialism and increasingly anti-establishment, where the majority of musical performance is electronically generated and focussed on the lowest common denominator. In Britain, music of all the arts had perhaps been the one least strongly patronised by royalty and the monied classes, and it has suffered the pressures of change even more directly as a result. The old, traditional and patronising Reithian model for broadcasting gave way to a more generally popular one based on success in audience ratings. The brave new world, so stunningly and accurately predicted by Constant Lambert in his 1931 book of essays *Music Ho!* has materialised just as he predicted it would, with the reality of what he termed 'the appalling popularity of music'.

The advent and establishment of television over this period helped accelerate the change towards a commercially driven model for the broadcasting media, where classical music had to find its level. Despite this, as a country, we still manage to maintain our many London and regional orchestras partly through subsidy and patronage alongside active repertory and touring opera and ballet, but a significant change in the Performing Rights Society's rules towards the end of the 1990s severely affected the lives and work of many composers, McCabe among them. Whereas up until the end of the twentieth century it was still possible for an active and successful composer to make a reasonable living on commissions and royalties on sales and performances, with the change to a performance payment per head of

audience, this ceased to be the case, and the publishing of notated music has become a minority business. Throughout this time McCabe himself has been very active politically in support of classical composers (for want of a better word) and still promotes their work as a performer and recording artist when he has the opportunity. Without work in television and film background music, where the practice of contemporary classical music still finds a natural home in some areas, and a small amount in the classical theatre, composers now rarely have much incentive or inclination to write large pieces for traditional forces, especially those in the symphonic tradition, excepting big commissions such as the BBC Proms.

This is one of the many reasons we have to celebrate this amazingly active composer, still in regular receipt of commissions, with six symphonies in his catalogue and currently planning at least another one or more, and still producing concertos and other symphonically based works at an amazing rate, apparently undeterred by the adverse political, cultural and financial climate. Throughout his composing life his musical style has remained remarkably stable, enduring and ignoring many changes of fashion. Rock music has taken such a hold here in Britain that it is now increasingly rare to find substantial musical criticism of classical music in the press, and the government-funded Arts Council shows little interest in the work of such superb home-grown composers as Elgar, whose 150th anniversary saw the removal of his image from the £20 note to be replaced by an economist and moral philosopher.

We celebrate then, in this volume, not only a remarkable composer of superbly beautiful and intellectually rewarding music, but also a survivor and holder of the line whose work is resonant of many centuries of fine music-making and who continues to charm the ear of his audiences and to win the hearts and minds of musicians with whom he comes into contact. His sympathy with his fellow musicians is paramount, since he is an active one himself, still engaged in playing and recording music of the classical canon as well as by British composers and contemporaries alongside his own music. This volume hopes to show how diverse and fascinating John McCabe's music has always been and remains. Through the writings of critics, musicians, music administrators and academics we hope that we can give a detailed account of McCabe's composing life, providing along the way an insight into his musical personality and a glimpse behind the scenes into the work of this extraordinary artist. *Landscapes of the Mind* was a title suggested by McCabe himself. Much of his music carries titles that refer to and evoke landscapes of different kinds, but these landscapes exist only as mental images and the music is not directly descriptive.

We have purposely avoided too much technical detail so as to assist general readers, and the reproduced pages of score have an illustrative rather than analytical function. We hope to attract the interest of young performers who have not yet experienced the pleasure and satisfaction of playing such well-crafted music and to provide a perspective and background detail to those listeners who already know some of his music from live and broadcast concerts and through his many recordings. Most of all we hope to awaken the interest of listeners who have not yet had the pleasure and enjoyment that can be gained through direct experience of the music of John McCabe.

McCabe is meticulous in his preparation for first performances and it has been his custom always to write concise but helpfully informative programme notes. Most of these can be obtained through Chester/Novello (Music Sales) on request, or obtained on the Internet at www.johnmccabe.com/publications/chesternovello. Most of the authors in this volume have drawn freely from these notes, and where there are unacknowledged quotations these will be either from such notes or, of course, directly and verbatim from John McCabe himself, who has been so supportive in the production of this book. In addition, Verity Butler made McCabe the focus of her dissertation for her Master's degree at the Royal College of Music and collected much of her information through interviews and correspondence with the composer.

Acknowledgements

It is amazing to me that this should be the first comprehensive book to be written and published on the English composer and pianist John McCabe, who at the time of writing is nearing his 70th year. I have been privileged to follow McCabe's career from its beginning but I would have been entirely unable to have produced such a detailed and comprehensive study without the assistance, generosity, insight and professional skill of all the contributors. They have each given their time most willingly in order to help to promote interest and raise awareness in the music of one of our country's most prolific composers, and both John and I will remain deeply in their debt. Without their hard work, so freely given, this book could never have been produced. They are:

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We also wish to acknowledge the help of Shelley Hughes and Samuel Wilcocks of Music Sales (Chester/Novello) in finding photographs, producing scans from scores and in giving us permission to use them, some in reproduction from the composer's own remarkably clear manuscript – in itself a skill that may be diminishing as technological manipulation takes its place. Other photographs have come from the McCabe family albums with his permission to reproduce for the first time. Each article has been read and approved by John McCabe himself and his help in getting all the details correct has been invaluable.

It has been impossible to include an excerpts disc with this publication, but, as the discography shows, there are very many recordings to choose from to begin an exploration of this remarkable composer's work, or to refresh memories of previously heard works. The Guildhall School was proud to have hosted the recent McCabe Festival in 2006 and to have commissioned *Canyons*, the recording of which, performed by the Guildhall Brass and Wind and conducted by Peter Gane, is still commercially available.

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