
diversions
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WILLIAM MATHIAS
Sonata No.1 & No.2
JOHN PICKARD
Sonata & "A Starlit Dome"
RAYMOND CLARKE piano

WILLIAM MATHIAS - Sonatas

Although William Mathias was himself a fine pianist and although much of his large output features the piano as an ensemble instrument, he actually wrote surprisingly few solo piano works. True, there are three scintillating piano concertos (1955, 1960, 1968), the first and third of which were premiered with the composer as soloist, and towards the end of his life he planned a fourth, but apart from a couple of miniatures, the two sonatas here receiving their first commercial recordings were his only contribution to the solo repertoire. It is hard to account for this anomaly; perhaps he associated writing for the piano with performing the works in public himself - something which in later life he was increasingly disinclined to do - or perhaps he came to regard the instrument more as a compositional tool than as a solo instrument for which he wished to compose.

Whatever the reasons, Mathias' modest solo piano output is a matter for regret. He wrote idiomatically and effectively for the instrument and the two sonatas are in their contrasting ways among his most impressive and powerful works in any medium. Mathias himself regarded the works as significant, describing them in a letter to Raymond Clarke as "...somewhat special to me." Although they were presumably written to play to his own pianistic strengths, Mathias was far from doctrinaire about their manner of performance, writing to Raymond Clarke in 1991, concerning the second sonata: "Yes, yes, play it your own way...a work must (if it's any good) be capable of many different approaches; it is only bad music which has only one way of interpretation. I am actually looking forward to hearing Nos. 1 & 2 in the same programme one day - perfectly reasonable as they are so different, though I am not sure in what order they would best go!".

Sonata No.1 was composed in 1963 and was first performed by John Clegg in Madrid during the following year. Its British première was given by the composer himself as part of the 1964 Bangor Arts Festival. In his book on Mathias, Malcolm Boyd describes the sonata as "a work of tremendous power and sinew - one of the most masculine of all Mathias' pieces" adding that the contrast between the aggressive energy of the first and third movements and the dreamy rhapsodising of the central one "illustrates the two facets of Mathias' dual musical personality - the fervent Welshman and the urbane cosmopolitan".

The first movement is a highly individual reinterpretation of traditional sonata form design. The first subject-group involves two important ideas: a striding octave theme marked "insistendo", embracing

the entire range of the keyboard and centring on the note C-sharp, and a rushing passage based on repeated notes divided between the hands. This pair of ideas is heard twice - characteristically, without any transition - before the repeated notes stabilize and combine with slow-moving chords in the bass to form the movement's second subject. The central development is more delicate, transforming the basic motifs of both subject groups and, with the entry of the second subject's bass chords, building to an intense climax. This is achieved by way of a recapitulation with the subjects in reverse order so that the second one acts as a preparation for the forceful return of the movement's very opening. The recollection of music from the development section, forms a reflective coda, and a distant echo of the opening octaves closes the movement with a sense of something still left unsaid.

Mathias "the fervent Welshman" is perhaps most clearly revealed in the central slow movement, where the ornate embellishment of a simple accompaniment reflects something of the character of traditional Welsh *penillion* singing. This idea is contrasted with sonorous chords urging the music to a passionate central climax from whose resonance the opening theme re-emerges, again as if heard from a great distance. The finale, which follows without a break, is a toccata of great rhythmic vitality, its additive rhythms eventually propelling the music to a bravura conclusion, crowned by the ringing octave C-sharps with which the sonata began.

Six years and a string of major works separate the first sonata from its successor. Among these the orchestral *Litanies* and the String Quartet No.1 stand as important achievements in helping to redefine Mathias' approach to large-scale musical structure in favour of a discourse based on the kaleidoscopic interaction of short, contrasted 'blocks' of material. A classicist at heart, it is natural that Mathias should have sought to integrate this approach with the idea of contrast and eventual resolution that is basic to classical sonata form - indeed the first movement of the first sonata shows him already beginning to combine these principles. However, **Sonata No.2** (composed in 1969 to a BBC commission and premièred by the composer himself the following year) carries the concept much further. Its obvious technical difficulty is an indication of Mathias' own pianistic accomplishment, and in this and other respects the work can now be seen as one of the most extreme pieces he ever wrote. For a composer whose language was rooted in traditional tonality the second sonata is, harmonically speaking, particularly astringent and often dissonant. Its predominantly brooding, introspective mood, together with the ferocity of some of its climaxes reveals a side to the composer far removed from the more popular writer of church anthems and occasional pieces.

The sonata's single movement takes as its formal model Liszt's concept of reconciling a three-movements-in-one design with the exposition, development and recapitulation sections of traditional sonata form (as shown in his B minor Sonata). In this case the result is a broadly slow-fast-slow structure with the central fast section acting as a turbulent development and the final slow section providing a gradually calming recapitulation of the opening.

However, this bald summary of the overall design reckons without the complex relationship of the details: each of the short 'blocks' of music presented in the opening slow section seems self-sufficient, though their gradual accumulation, and the lack of connecting tissue between them, creates a mood of expectancy and unease. The tension explodes in the central development where material from the opening is extended through a series of climaxes. At its heart lies a contrasting passage of eerie calm in which the natural resonance of a series of four-note chords (written as harmonics - the keys silently depressed, releasing the dampers from the instrument's strings) forms the backdrop to glacial figuration at the top of the keyboard. The moment of recapitulation is of the greatest intensity, but it gradually winds down to a peaceful conclusion in which ideas from the opening section are recalled, their relationship, once fragmented, now made continuous and whole. It is a satisfying end to a powerful sonata.

JOHN PICKARD - Piano Sonata & A Starlit Dome

The two works of my own featured on this disc are separated by almost a decade. The earlier one is the large-scale **Piano Sonata** which I composed for Raymond Clarke in 1987 - it is dedicated to him - and which he premièred in January of the following year. It was composed immediately after my Second Symphony, a work which had occupied me for over two years; by contrast, the sonata was written rather quickly. The two works have quite a lot in common: as well as sharing some harmonic material, both are highly dramatic and aggressive and both are driven by a palpable sense of protest. In this last respect, the works have a political dimension, written as they were by a young musician coming of age in Thatcher's Britain (I was in the middle of writing the second movement of the sonata when Margaret Thatcher achieved her third term of office) and who deplored everything she and her government represented. I wished to give voice to my fury - as one does at the age of 23 - and one of the results was this piano sonata. For the occasion of this recording I took the opportunity to make one or two revisions to the work: the ferocity of expression, however, has not been toned down one jot.

The work is in two parts: slow and fast. Part One is divided in half, with each half comprising a long theme with four variations. After a dramatic introductory flourish, the first theme unfolds. It begins in the bass and gradually rises through more than three octaves before falling back once again. It is accompanied throughout by dense chords in the bass, which sound rather like muffled drums, lending the whole passage the sense of a funeral march. The first variation intensifies every aspect of the theme (including its funereal associations), whilst the second is a solemn sequence of chords, rising to a climax at the exact centre before reversing its course (it is a strict palindrome). Variation three is linear, basically a two-part invention, and prepares the way for the climactic fourth variation. At its height, the music is abruptly cut off and the second set of variations begins. Here the theme is, in harmonic terms, a radical simplification of the first one. It revolves obsessively around the note B and, with its increasingly elaborate ornamentation and drone-like accompaniment (consisting only of the notes B and F-sharp), it has the quality of an incantation or a lament. The first two variations mark a gradual increase of tension, whilst the third is brutal and recalls the dramatic flourishes from the movement's opening. The final variation forms a quiet coda and, like number two of the earlier set of variations, is a solemn procession of chords bringing Part One to a mysterious conclusion.

Part Two answers the deep introspection of Part One with an outburst of sustained energy. It begins with the same chord that ended the previous movement and flickers into life before exploding into the first of three toccatas. The music is driven by ostinato patterns and is highly virtuosic throughout. Although the three toccatas maintain the same unifying tempo they are dominated respectively by quavers, triplets and semiquavers, so the effect is that of the surface of the music speeding up. At the same time the harmony actually slows down so that the music effectively moves from volatility to stability. Essential to this process is a quiet interlude between the second and third toccatas in which material from Part One is recalled and absorbed into the fast tempo. The third and final toccata then acts as a gradual build-up to the climax of the whole work and the firm establishment of the key of A major.

A Starlit Dome was composed in 1995 in response to a commission from the Criccieth Festival in association with the Arts Council of Wales. It was written for the pianist Iwan Llewelyn-Jones, who gave the first performances and to whom it is dedicated. In 1997, shortly after its London première, I revised the end of the work and that revision is incorporated into the present recording.

The title comes from W.B. Yeats' *Byzantium* - lines which exactly sum up my feelings about the universe:

A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

As a keen amateur astronomer, it often occurred to me that if I were to try my hand at writing a nocturne it would probably be very different in character from those of, say, Chopin or Field. And so it proved: 'A Starlit Dome' is an *astronomical* nocturne.

When one looks through a telescope at the Great Nebula in Orion, for example, the image is at first faint and unclear (hardly surprising, as it lies some 1600 light years away). It seems little more than a patch of grey mist in the night sky, silent and apparently quite still. But the longer one looks, the more detail emerges: a greenish tint to the mist and a recognisable structure which, after a few observations, can easily be drawn from memory. At the centre of the nebula lies a trapezium of bright new stars. It is by their light that the nebula appears to glow. In fact the whole thing is a whirling mass of gas and dust, gradually coalescing into new stars and perhaps new planetary systems.

This piece tries to reflect something of how I feel about such phenomena. It begins quietly and mysteriously, slowly coming into focus. Gradually the pace quickens and the activity increases, the music becoming louder and more virtuosic, until at the end it is bursting with energy.

Recorded at Djanogly Recital Hall, Nottingham University, on 5-6 January 1998

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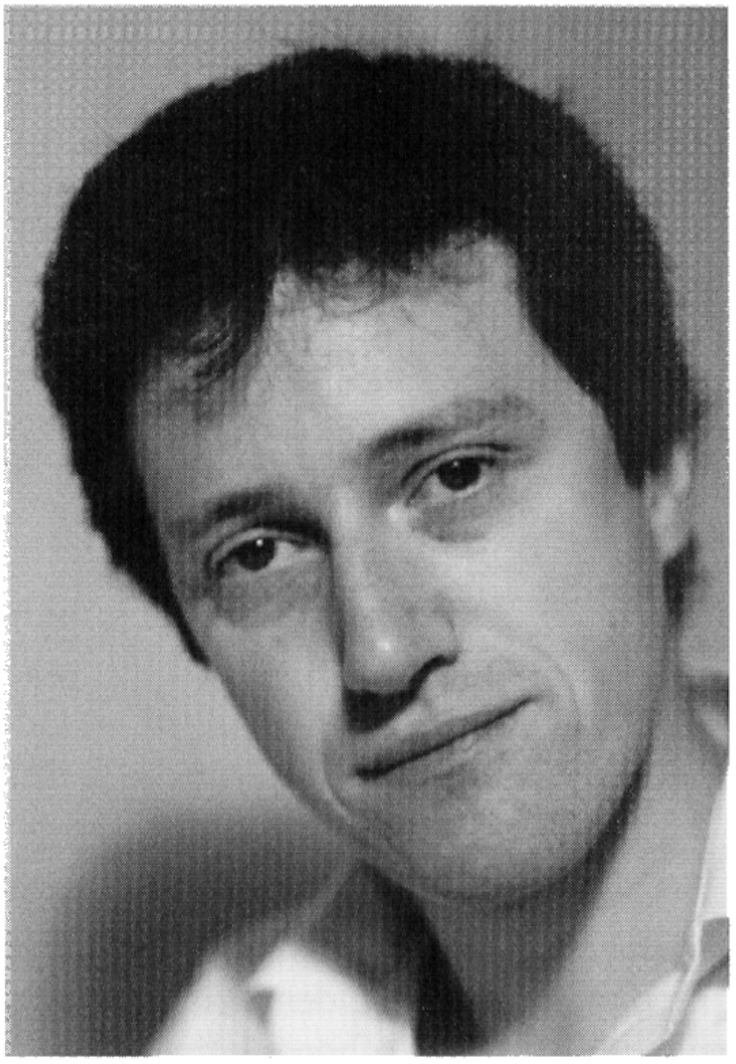
WILLIAM MATHIAS was born in Whitland, South-West Wales in 1934. He began composing at an extremely early age. He studied at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth with Professor Ian Parrott and went on to study composition with Sir Lennox Berkeley at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where he also studied piano with Peter Katin.

Apart from a brief period as Senior Lecturer at Edinburgh University (1968-69), Mathias spent his professional life in Wales - first as Lecturer in Music at the University of Wales, Bangor (1959-68) then as Professor and Head of Department there from 1970 until his retirement in 1988.

As well as serving on many influential committees, he founded the North Wales Music Festival at St. Asaph Cathedral in 1972 and remained its Artistic Director until his death in 1992.

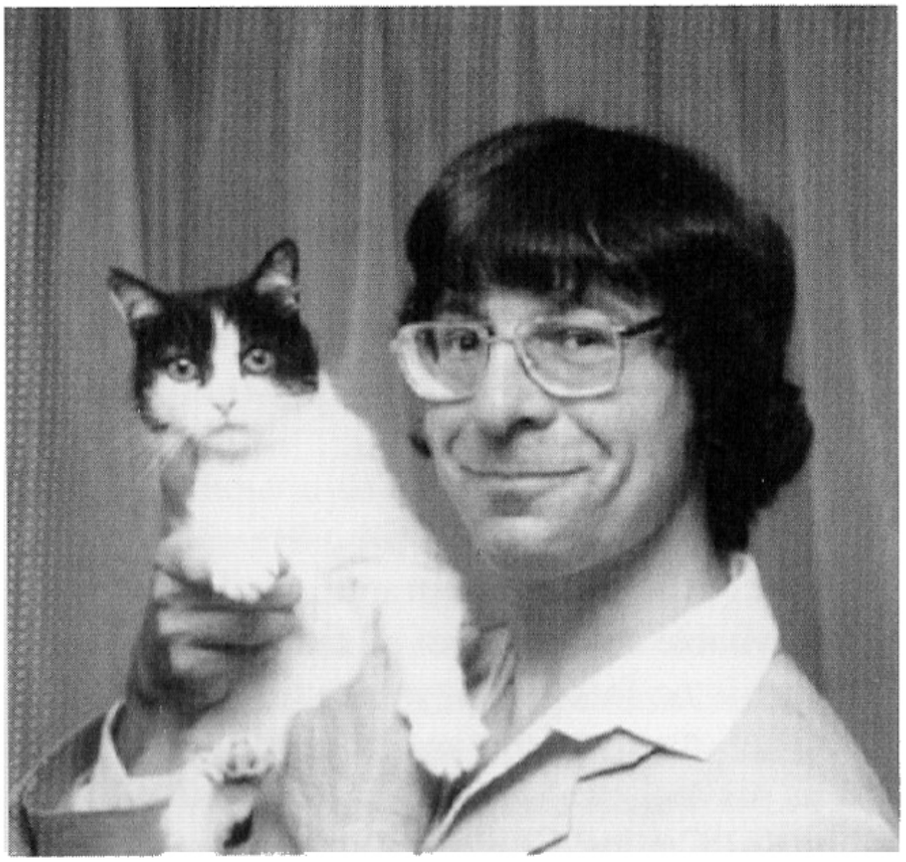
His huge output includes three each of symphonies, string quartets and piano concertos, as well as concertos for flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, violin, harp, harpsichord and organ. Mathias' contribution to the choral repertoire is among the most important of any British composer since Vaughan Williams, ranging from works for liturgical use (including the famous anthem composed for the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1981) to major choral and orchestral works like *This Worlde's Joie*, *Lux Aeterna*, and *World's Fire*. Mathias also composed for the stage and his output in this medium ranges from works designed to incorporate young performers and amateurs (*St. Teilo*, *Jonah*) to grand opera (*The Servants* - to a libretto by Iris Murdoch). He was appointed CBE in 1985.

JOHN PICKARD was born on 11 September 1963 and started to compose at an early age. He read for his B.Mus. degree at the University of Wales, Bangor, where his composition teacher was William Mathias. Between 1984 and 1985 he studied with Louis Andriessen at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, Netherlands on a Dutch Ministry of Culture Scholarship. He was awarded a PhD in composition in 1989 and is currently Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Bristol, where he has worked since 1993. John Pickard is best known for a series of powerful orchestral and instrumental works. He has written three symphonies (No. 2 premièred by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in 1989; No. 3, a BBC commission for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and Mark Wigglesworth, premièred in 1997), and other orchestral works of symphonic dimensions: *Sea-Change* (1989), *The Flight of Icarus* (1990), *Channel Firing* (1992-93) and the Trombone Concerto: *The Spindle of Necessity* (1997-98). *The Flight of Icarus* (a BBC commission), received its first performance in 1991 by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, was repeated by them at the 1996 BBC Proms and has since been played many times, both in Britain and abroad.



Recent major works include a Piano Concerto, premièred in Dresden in 2000, a large-scale song-cycle for baritone and piano: *The Borders of Sleep* (2001) and the hour-long *Gaia Symphony* (1991-2003) for brass band. John Pickard's commitment to the brass band movement was marked in 2001, when he was appointed Composer in Residence to the renowned "Buy as you View" Cory Band.

His music has been widely praised for its large-scale architectural sense and bold handling of an extended tonal idiom. His four string quartets have received particular acclaim. Reviewing the première of the Fourth Quartet in June 1998, *The Strad* called it "one of the best pieces of British chamber music to be heard for years" while the January 2003 edition of *Tempo*, reviewing the Sorrel Quartet's CD of Quartets 2, 3 & 4 (on the Dutton Epoch label), said "even if Pickard were never to write another quartet in his life, his place among the greats is secure".



RAYMOND CLARKE was born in Bournemouth in 1963, and now lives in Wales. He was awarded an academic exhibition to read Music at Selwyn College, Cambridge University from 1981-84. After graduating, he studied from 1985-87 with Ryszard Bakst at Manchester's Royal Northern College of Music, where he played four works by (then) living composers with the college orchestras, including the first performance of the revised version of Andrzej Panufnik's Piano Concerto, and a performance of the rarely-heard First Piano Concerto by Alun Hoddinott, whose Tenth Sonata he later commissioned with funds from the Welsh Arts Council and premiered at London's South Bank Centre in September 1989.

Raymond's début at the South Bank Centre in March 1988 was sponsored by the Havergal Brian Society and concluded with Ronald Stevenson's *Passacaglia on DSCH*. He premiered Robert Simpson's *Variations and Finale on a theme by Beethoven* at the same venue in September 1991 and his Hyperion CD of this composer's complete solo piano music was featured in *Gramophone*'s "Critics' Choice" survey of the best recordings issued in 1996 (Hyperion has invited him to record Simpson's Piano Concerto, which he broadcast "live" with Grant Llewellyn and the BBC Symphony Orchestra in March 2001).

Although Raymond's commercial recordings have been devoted exclusively to twentieth-century music, this is not representative of his concert programming: his first concerto appearance in London (in October 1989) was in Beethoven's Fifth Concerto, and later that season he gave five London recitals entirely of Beethoven's solo piano music, including all of the sonatas from Opus 81a onwards. His programmes have also included the complete sonatas by Mozart and Schubert. Raymond is now a recognised teacher of piano at the University of Bristol.

Other CDs by Raymond Clarke, available from the Divine Art Record Company:

The complete solo piano music of Havergal Brian, plus vocal items (Athene ATHCD12)

"Havergal Brian's piano output is small, but certainly distinctive ... The Double Fugue... is a polyphonic *tour de force*. All these works make considerable pianistic demands ... Raymond Clarke presents intelligent and scrupulously prepared performances ... recording crystalline and beautifully atmospheric." **(BBC Music Magazine)**

Szymanowski piano music, including the three sonatas (Athene ATHCD19)

"In this remarkable performance he demonstrates [Sonata No.3] to be an extraordinary piece ... the concluding fugue ... should sound like the obvious and inevitable destination of all that preceded it, and in Clarke's gripping reading it triumphantly does ... there is no fear that Szymanowski will find his technique wanting. But his love for these sonatas' rich and delicate sonorities and his absolute conviction that the Third Sonata is a masterpiece are as evident as his technical fluency ... a release of major importance." **(Gramophone) - included in Gramophone's "Critics' Choice", 1999**

Shostakovich piano music, including the two sonatas (Athene ATHCD18)

"There is never any doubt that the performer is in command. Neither is there any doubt about the amount of thought that has gone into Clarke's preparation ... Some of the *accelerando* passages are quite hair-raising in their intensity. This work [Sonata No.1] should be experienced on the edge of your seat, a state usually only achieved in the presence of a live performance. It is no mean feat that Clarke has succeeded in making this possible for the home listener ... Clarke himself has a profound interest in Shostakovich and a highly developed understanding of his music. This CD is a worthy item for Shostakovich collectors and piano enthusiasts alike." **(DSCH Journal)**

Complete solo piano music of Andrzej Panufnik, and works by Shostakovich (Divine Art 25018)

"Committed and perceptive playing from Clarke, who for more than a decade now has been among the most stimulating and wide-ranging pianists of his generation, and a recorded balance which does justice to the crisp, clear outlines of the music. More discs from this source are keenly awaited." **(Gramophone)**

Copland's Passacaglia, Variations, Sonata and Fantasy (Divine Art 25016)

"Raymond Clarke plays everything with rock-solid technique, a strong sense of purposeful movement, and outstanding clarity, both of phrasing and texture … Clarke's whole programme, especially the rarely heard Fantasy, can be enthusiastically recommended." **(BBC Music Magazine)**

Piano music for children by Shostakovich, Khachaturian, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Copland, Webern and Bartók (Divine Art 25022)

"It goes without saying that [Clarke] is technically well in command of this music, and his performances are poised, imaginative and strongly characterised". **(MusicWeb)**

Production and digital editing: **Joanna Leach**
Recording and post-production: **Mike Beville**
Photo of William Mathias: **John Ross**
Cover picture: Large spiral galaxy with central black hole from an original painting by **John Meacham**

An Athene recording: originally issued as **ATHCD15**

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Clarke: Mathias & Pickard piano music

WILLIAM MATHIAS (1934-1992)

Piano Sonata no. 1, op.23 (1963) [15:03]

① Allegro energico [6:04]

② Andante semplice [3:41]

③ Vivace e ritmico [5:09]

Piano Sonata no. 2, op.46 (1969)

④ in one movement [14:32]

JOHN PICKARD (b.1963)

⑤ A Starlit Dome (1995) [10:45]

Piano Sonata (1987) [24:58]

⑥ Part One [14:51]

⑦ Part Two [9:57]

Total CD duration: [66:06]

Raymond Clarke

piano

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