

Star Preludes

Rawsthorne

Peter Sheppard Skærved
Christine Sohn
Tamami Honma

McCabe

violin
violin
piano



métier

STAR PRELUDES

violin music by Alan Rawsthorne and John McCabe

John McCabe

1	Maze Dances (1973)	16.29
	<i>Peter Sheppard Skærved, solo violin</i>	

Alan Rawsthorne

	Sonata for violin and piano (1959)	16.52
2	I.	4.39
3	II.	3.53
4	III. Toccata	3.50
5	IV. Epilogue	4.30
	<i>Peter Sheppard Skærved, violin; Tamami Honma, piano</i>	

Alan Rawsthorne

	Theme and Variations for two violins (1938)	15.57
6	Theme	0.35
7	Capriccietto	0.59
8	Siciliano	2.08
9	Cancrizzante	1.02
10	Rhapsodia	2.44
11	Notturmo	2.52
12	Scherzetto	0.37
13	Ostinato	1.20
14	Canone	0.27
15	Fantasia	3.13
	<i>Peter Sheppard Skærved & Christine Sohn, violins</i>	

John McCabe

16	Star Preludes (1978)	12.32
	<i>Peter Sheppard Skærved, violin; Tamami Honma, piano</i>	

total duration	61.56
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The John McCabe works are published by Novello & Co.

The Alan Rawsthorne works are published by O.U.P.

STAR PRELUDES

Alan Rawsthorne (1905-1971)

John McCabe (b.1939)

There is a sense of shared lineage between the composers on this disc. This may not be noticed aurally, but is there in their mutual sense of artistic integrity. They seem to be two generations of a marvellous dynasty.

Alan Rawsthorne was coy when discussing the structure of his *Theme and Variations*, the work with which he broke onto the international stage in 1938: "I am convinced that the theme appears in each variation..." (Alan Rawsthorne)

The opening of this piece is not so much a theme as a premise, providing the justification for the ensuing eight inventions. This is a rather a set of nine movements from the same source, rather than the conventional flow of development and elaboration.

For its time this duo was certainly not unique, in instrumentation or intent. The 1920s and 30s had seen an explosion of inventive string duos. These included: Bartók's *44 Duos* (published 1932), Prokofiev's *Duo-Sonata* (published 1932), Hindemith's *14 Leichte Stücke* (published 1931) and 2 *Kanonische Duetten* (published 1930), Ravel's *Duo* (published 1923), and Kodály's *Duo* (published 1920).

Rawsthorne's masterpiece is unique for its incorporation of the multiple conventions and traditions of the genre. He seems to have been more aware of the scope of the duo tradition, from the 18th to the 20th century, than some of his contemporaries. Until his ground-breaking work, the conventions of writing for two violins had generally remained exclusive. These included the pedagogical (Leopold Mozart *Duos*), the virtuoso (Spohr *Duos*), operatic arrangements, the literary (Telemann *Gulliver-Suite*) and the intellectual (Telemann *Canonic Duos*). Each of these genres had been reflected in the 20th century, but only Rawsthorne was bold enough to comment on so many of the older and more recent archetypes. It is difficult to resist the hunch that he was playing with the construction of a miniature 'Goldberg-Variationen' or 'Musicalisches Opfer'; the movement titles certainly bear this out.

Several commentators have remarked on the economical style of this duo. However, this was very much a feature of the then current style of duo writing. Most of the 'serious' works in the genre, written during the 1920s and 30s, were notable for their great technical restraint. Even

Ravel's *Sonata for Violin and Cello* stripped the medium down, often to only one line, using an unprecedented degree of monody and hocketing.

This succinctness was very much a feature of Rawsthorne's own style. His orchestral works are often pared down to the barest part writing, and the brilliant effect of the *Violin Sonata* belies its parsimony of means. A letter from Patrick Hadley to Cecil Green, written in 1934, bears this out: "Rawsthorne... is fresh and keen, familiar and sympathetic with 'modern' continental [rather than English] effort, and has at his command a fine 'modern' international technique himself ... he is easy to get on with and the reverse of pedagogic and intolerant."

The D'Aranyi sisters, Adila and Jelly, were another forceful influence on the British new-music scene from the mid 1920s onwards. These fiery Hungarians captivated a generation of composers. Bartók's two violin sonatas were written for Jelly. Like Egon Wellesz's *Solo Sonata*, they might be seen as a portrait of her performance style. The two sisters were famed for their performances of the Bach *Double Concerto*; their 1927 performance inspired Gustav Holst's curious *Double Concerto*, which was premièred in 1929. This work, like the Rawsthorne *Theme and Variations*, exploits the contrapuntal potential of the two instruments to the full. Its fugues and canons certainly bewildered the audience at the 1929 premiere in the Queens Hall.

Even if Rawsthorne did not have the D'Aranyi duo in mind when he wrote the *Theme and Variations*, they were responsible for the resurgence of violin-duo playing. This may have been behind the formation of the Hinchcliffe-Washbourne Duo, which premièred the work at the Wigmore Hall in 1938.

"...so great is this uniformity that Rawsthorne's whole output is in a sense a succession of variations on a group of thematic formulae" (Charles Mason – 1954 *Grove Encyclopedia of Music*)

My own introduction to Rawsthorne's music was through a teacher, Manoug Parikian. He arrived at a lesson bearing a sheaf of photo-copies. It was the *Theme and Variations*. He thrust it into my hands with the words, "This is the best work ever written for two violins". I immediately recognised that this was music of extraordinary beauty and craftsmanship, but was also intimidated by its technical and musical refinement, which certainly pointed up the weaknesses in my own playing. I did not realise that Parikian had given the premières of both the revised second *Concerto* and the *Violin Sonata*, which he had broadcast with Lamar Crowson.

"I can think of no other British Violin Sonata that essays such an important journey, nor one that achieves so much with such apparent economy of means and yet such fascinating wealth of inventive detail." (John McCabe – *Musical Times* 1971)

The *Violin Sonata* was originally commissioned by the legendary Hungarian violinist, Joseph Szigeti. By 1958, the popular perception was that his playing had begun to fail, and he did not have an agent, so it was somewhat difficult for him to obtain concerts. It seems he was hoping that Rawsthorne himself would be able to organise and fund a première. This was not to be, and he never played the piece. Listening to the remarkable recordings made by Szigeti around this time, it is difficult not to view this as a tragedy.

"I've been strongly influenced, I think, by Rawsthorne's delight in exploring to the utmost a small group of motifs (or even just one), drawing on a small reservoir of material for a composition (variation or metamorphosis technique, which fascinates me; this becomes one of the main features of the development). I also like his refusal to repeat anything exactly (*vide* also Busoni) and the sense of a tonal centre, which works very nicely in serial music as well." (John McCabe in a letter to PSS, December 2000)

John McCabe's admiration for Rawsthorne's music might stand well as his own musical aesthetic. One fascinating aspect of juxtaposing these two composers is the equilibrium between their artistic standards, the sheer sufficiency of their writing, and the sense that nothing could be added nor taken away.

The *Star Preludes* were premiered in 1978 by the composer, with Erich Gruenberg (another one of my teachers), in Los Angeles. This work is possessed of huge structural and formal rigour, but the listener is never lectured to. The drama always sounds instinctual, even surprising. When I suggested that this was also a feature of Rawsthorne's music, John rightly pointed out the poverty of my thought. Once again, his comments are extremely revealing of his own musical priorities.

"I feel that the contrast between ... linguistic rigour and expressive freedom is a benefit and not a conflict, they act as counter balance on each other and prevent excess of one or the other." (Letter to PSS, December 2000)

"One must always remember what analysts sometimes seem to overlook: that the intellectual rationalisation of a musical sound does not always precede the invention or use of that sound but follows it." (John McCabe, Introduction to *Alan Rawsthorne*, Oxford, 1999)

The structure of Rawsthorne's *Sonata* seems to have been an inspiration for this work. I like to think that the older composer would have relished the dramatic 'space-scape' with which *Star Preludes* begins and ends.

One of the stylistic problems for today's violinist is the splintering of ideals of string playing that happened at the time of the First World War. Certain composers were unhappy to find that the increasing complexity of compositional style was driving away their 'ideal' quasi-improvising virtuoso, and forcing them into the arms of intellectually-minded performers; their closet wont was for the impulsive free spirit. The keening world of Bartók's violin sound, and the rhapsodic opening cadenza of Ravel's *Tzigane*, inhabit a totally different technical and musical world from Schoenberg's *Fantasia* or Berg's *Violin Concerto*.

This stylistic split continued through the century – you might say that each of the two McCabe works on this disc inhabits one of the styles. Certainly the 'Modern-zigeuner' technical aesthetic, which *Maze Dances* (1973) demands, is one long-term ramification of D'Aranyi's impact, and the narrative style which she pioneered. I remember the late Ralph Holmes saying that Enescu had pointed out that one had to understand the distance between the two stylisations in, say, a work by Sarasate and Ravel's *Tzigane*. The former had to be seen as 'from the source' whereas the latter had to be seen as 'synthesis'. The 'modern' manifestation of this 'zigeuner-style' is a product of this synthesis, and can be said to be partly responsible for works such as *Maze Dances* to the sound worlds of younger composers such as Jorg Widmann or Nigel Clarke.

The breadth of McCabe's expression drives him to each extreme. To a degree, this is reflected in his precise sensitivity for the sound world in each of these pieces. As a performer himself, his music communicates a very clear aural picture of the technical and tonal requirements of each of his works. *Maze Dances* was premièred at the Wigmore Hall in 1974 by its dedicatee, Michael Davis.

"The kind of material I was using, as the actual idea behind the pieces ... always affected the nature of the instrumental-vocal writing and explains any differences between [two] pieces written within a decade." (Letter to PSS, December 2000)

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This recording was made at St. Mary's Church, Dinton, Wiltshire on 2 June 1999 (tracks 6-15) and 28 June 1999 (track 1) and in Challow Park, Wantage, Oxfordshire on 12 September 1999 (tracks 2-5, 16).

Recording producer / sound engineer / digital editor: David Lefeber

Cover design: David Lefeber. The cover image is a scan of the body of the Habeneck Stradivarius played by Peter Sheppard Skærved. The producer and Metier Records gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Rawsthorne Trust and the London College of Music and Media in making this recording possible.

Peter Sheppard Skærvæd was first inspired to play new British violin music by his teacher, the great Ralph Holmes, who died tragically young in 1984. His instrument was the 1734 Habeneck Stradivarius, on which this recital was recorded. Sheppard Skærvæd's other teachers included Manoug Parikian, who premièred the Rawsthorne sonata, and Erich Gruenberg, for whom John McCabe's *Star Preludes* was composed. His last mentor, the Ukrainian violinist Louis Krasner, premièred the Berg and Schoenberg concertos. This disc is by way of a small homage to them all. Peter has himself premièred well over 100 works for violin. These include pieces dedicated to him by Hans Werner Henze, David Matthews, Voldmyr Rundchak, Jorg Widmann, Michael Finnissy, Dmitri Smirnov, Melanie Daiken and Nigel Clarke. The 'Habeneck' Stradivarius instrument heard here, made when the master was 92 years old, is graciously loaned by the Royal Academy of Music, where Peter is a professor and research fellow.

Tamami Honma made her US concerto debut at the age of seven, following which she was first-prize winner in a number of international competitions. She studied with the legendary Byron Janis in New York and at the Royal Academy of Music with Christopher Elton, where she lectures on the Piano literature course. She has made solo and concerto appearances across the USA, the UK, and toured extensively in Germany, Switzerland, Poland, Japan, Israel, and Russia, where she has performed with the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra. She has a particularly strong connection to the Baltic republics and has organised two London Festivals of New Lithuanian music, premièring many new works. She regularly appears with the Vilnius Quartet and with the Kreutzer Quartet, including a highly successful performance at the 2000 Warsaw Autumn Festival.

Christine Sohn is one of the most gifted violinists to emerge from the Juilliard School in recent years. She has appeared all over the US, including highly successful performances at venues from the Aspen Festival to the Lincoln Centre. In recent years she has been based in the UK, where she gave her critically acclaimed Wigmore Hall debut two years ago. She appears as guest leader with some of the UK's most prominent orchestras, including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and most recently the London Symphony, whom she has led for conductors including Sir Colin Davis and Mstislav Rostropovich. She has also recently broadcast for the Bayerisches Rundfunk in Munich. Having studied with Dorothy Delay in New York, she now is sought out for masterclasses. She plays a violin made by Nicolo Gagliano.

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