

Photo: Jane East



John McCabe — Issue 84, 3 March 2015

English composer and pianist John McCabe has died, on 13 February 2015 in Rochester, Kent, following a long battle with a brain tumour.

Born at Huyton, Liverpool, on 21 April 1939, McCabe (pictured above in 2014, seated, with his wife Monica, George Vass and members of the City of Canterbury Chamber Choir) had written thirteen symphonies by the age of eleven. He studied in Manchester and Munich, and then began his dual career as composer and pianist. His rounded life as a musician also included seven years as director of the London College of Music.



John McCabe in his twenties

He first became known as a pianist, playing music by Arnold Bax, John Corigliano, Franz Joseph Haydn, Paul Hindemith, Alan Rawsthorne and Anton Webern. He recorded the complete Haydn Piano Sonatas for Decca, between 1974 and 1976. He was always very generous in performing the music of other contemporary composers, and was a particular champion of British music.

His *Variations on a Theme of Hartmann* of 1964 first put him on the map as a composer, and he wrote many concerti, symphonies, ballet scores, brass band works, string quartets and solo instrumental pieces. Much of his music was

commissioned, notably the orchestral song cycle *Notturmi ed alba* by the Hereford Three Choirs Festival for performance in 1970, *Rainforest I* by the Chamber Music Society of

Lincoln Center, New York, *Cloudcatcher Fells* by the Arts Council of Great Britain through Boosey and Hawkes Band Festivals, the ballet score *Edward II* by Stuttgart Ballet, and the huge two part ballet *Arthur* by Birmingham Royal Ballet.

McCabe wrote BBC Music Guides 'Bartók's Orchestral Music' (1974) and 'Haydn: Piano Sonatas' (1986), the Novello Short Biography of Rachmaninov (1974) and, for Oxford University Press, *Alan Rawsthorne - Portrait of a Composer* (1999).

He was awarded the CBE for services to music in 1983, and the Distinguished Musician Award from the Incorporated Society of Musicians in 2004.

Read further tributes via the John McCabe website ...

We also mark the passing of Andrzej Koszewski, Désiré Dondeyne, Anne Naysmith, Marvin David Levy and Joseph Alfydi.

In other news, Odyssey releases two new DVDs in March 2015: Adrian Munsey's *Inner Landscapes* and *Alma Mater*. Naxos announces the launch of its high-definition and lossless classical music streaming service, *ClassicsOnline HD.LL*

News in detail ...

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YOUNG GENIUS — THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF BRAHMS IN HIS TWENTIES

George Colerick investigates: 'Brahms' emotional existence during his twenties is more interesting in relation to his creative phase than that of his later life, when he was a resigned, perhaps lonely bachelor. He was twenty-three when he suffered the death of his friend and protégée, Robert Schumann. Years of stress and indecision followed, and his ambivalent feelings for Schumann's wife, Clara. She similarly, perhaps from jealousy that he might be eyeing her daughter, Julie. Clara Schumann may have influenced Brahms' decision not to marry the daughter of a professor, Agathe von Siebold. That likely affair was sublimated in several of his works and a late novel by her.'

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Johannes Brahms in 1853

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A THOUGHT PROVOKING COMBINATION — CONCERT AND OPERA REVIEWS

Maria Nockin reports: 'On 14 February 2015, The Metropolitan Opera transmitted Tchaikovsky's melodic, romantic one-act opera, *Iolanta*, live in high definition to cinemas in seventy countries. Mariusz Trelinski's updated production featured a revolving box-shaped cabin by Boris Kudlicka and myriad partially abstract hanging trees that give the impression of a dense forest. At the beginning we saw animated deer wandering through the snow in Lighting Designer Mark Heinz's night-soaked woodland. Marek Adamski's black and white costumes continued the wintery scenario. Unfortunately, some of his designs for *Iolanta*, Anna Netrebko, wrinkled at the shoulder because of a possible pattern flaw. Serving women clothed *Iolanta* and brought her food while guards made sure that no one could see her without her father's permission. Netrebko has been singing frequently this winter and at this performance her voice sounded less than fresh.'



The finale of Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta* at New York Metropolitan Opera. Photo © 2015 Marty Sohl

Maria is also impressed by the Met's HD transmission of Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* and by Rachel Barton Pine's solo Paganini in Arizona.

Mike Wheeler writes: 'Former pupil of Joanna McGregor, pianist Christina McMaster has clearly absorbed a knack for intelligent programme planning, along with everything else. How often do we get to hear a complete performance of one or other of Debussy's books of Preludes, let alone one topped off with contrasting slices of Americana and an early mid-period Beethoven sonata? A programme that might, on paper, have seemed too eclectic for its own good turned out to have a remarkably coherent shape all its own (Derby Chamber Music, Multi-Faith Centre, Derby University, 20 February 2015). One thing in particular that emerged from McMaster's way with Book One of Debussy's Preludes was a command of the music's colours resulting from careful voicing of its sonorities. Allied to this was a willingness to put soft-focus pastel shades aside and trust the music to respond to a more robust approach where appropriate.'



Christina McMaster

Mike also listens to Grieg, Tchaikovsky and Nielsen from Katherine Watson, Gary Griffiths, Jian Wang, Nikolaj Znaider and the Hallé Orchestra, and to Mendelssohn, Mozart and Brahms from Julian Bliss, Andrew Gourlay and Sinfonia Viva.

Giuseppe Pennisi was at a new production of Mozart's *Lucio Silla*: 'The importance of the work is not only the role of the woman, the real protagonist of the opera, but the many musical advances. From the D major overture, the listener feels that this is not a traditional *opera seria* with the music as a mere support to belcanto. The conductor, Marc Minkowski, almost caressed the orchestra to provide different colors and different tints: the sober cemetery scene and grandiose finale were magnificent. More significantly, Minkowski underlined the premonitions of the later Mozart's *opera seria*, especially the innovating use of short recitatives gently sliding into arias and the masterful use of alternating major and minor keys in the same tonalities. There are also premonitions of Rossini's early *opera seria*, such as *Tancredi*; although there is no record, it is possible that the young Rossini may have sat in on a performance of *Lucio Silla*.'



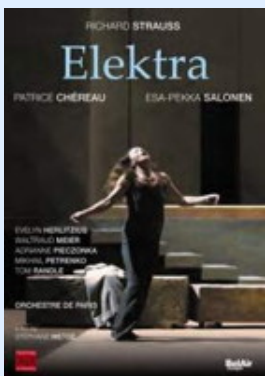
Lenneke Ruiten as Giunia and Kresimir Spicer in the title role of Mozart's *Lucio Silla* at Teatro alla Scala.
Photo © 2015 Brescia/Amisano

Giuseppe also experiences Gluck's *Orfeo e Euridice* in Palermo, in the Berlioz version, Bellini's *I Puritani* in Florence, an icy Paris/Milan production of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and praises *Le Ventre de Paris* in Venice and Hans Werner Henze's *Gisela!* in Palermo.

Keith Bramich listens to an all-Mozart concert from young Hong Kong Chinese conductor Ho Tung Wong and his newly formed Horton Chamber Orchestra.

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DVD REVIEW — DOUBLE MURDER — STRAUSS 'ELEKTRA'



Robert Anderson: 'I first came across the late Patrice Chéreau at the Bayreuth centenary of 1976, when I could take little pleasure in his staging of *The Ring*. This *Elektra* demonstrates how much he has learnt since, and it is fascinating to hear him explain the fact at the end of the DVD. The sets represent some sort of baleful Mycenae, the costumes a mixture of modest now, with Electra as a dishevelled down-and-out roaming her cheerless courtyard. The tidings of Adrienne Pieczonka as Chrysothemis to her sister Electra that she is to be immured in a tower by her father's murderers is greeted merely by the obsessive clamour for their death. ... the whole cast has been exemplary under the masterful direction of Esa-Pekka Salonen.'

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CD REVIEWS — STUNNING WORKS



Andrew Schartmann: 'As is typical of MacMillan's work, pitch is often treated as a static parameter — a recipe for frustration in the hands of a lesser ensemble. With the Edinburgh Quartet, however, this potentially dangerous feature sparkles from beginning to end. The opening movement of *Visions of a November Spring*, for instance, depends for much of its effect on nuanced manipulations of a single note. With masterful control over pitch-bending techniques and textural cues, the Edinburgh achieves a sound that is at once frantic and serene.' Andrew also listens to John Pickard's *Gaia Symphony* and *Eden* on BIS Records.

Gerald Fenech: 'This well filled CD contains some of the finest music Vivaldi composed for the recorder or the *flauto dolce* — a very popular instrument in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Maurice Steger is a notable exponent of the seven concertos on this disc, with the D minor particularly poignant. Perhaps the most famous of the works on offer is the well-known *Il gardellino* with its final movement particularly enticing. Steger is a likeable exponent of the music and pushes it to its maximum, especially in the final movement.' Gerald also recommends choral and vocal music by Herbert Howells, and orchestral works by the young Bartók, both on Naxos.

Howard Smith: 'The inspiring value of this choral program is its discovery of sixteen Connecticut girls so closely resembling their English counterparts in British cathedrals and shires beyond the Atlantic ... This seasonal programme maintains excellent musical standards and high technical achievements we are finding in the best work of MSR Classics, and their Lent/Easter production deserves every success.' Howard also listens to orchestral music by Barbara Harbach on MSR Classics and to Poulenc ballet suites for piano on Naxos.

Paul Sarcich: 'There is no doubting the technical equipment on display here from both performers, and it is a fine thing that they have chosen not to go completely with old warhorses, but give us the lesser-known Granados and Turina. Other versions of the de Falla may offer more smoky Spanish sensuality, and given Talamantes' quite soft-edged Spanish (more rolling of the r's and kicking the hard consonants for dramatic effect as well as diction would not go amiss) fiery Spanish grit as well. But this is not to denigrate a recording that should find much favour among lovers of Spanish song. MSR spells out to us that the recording is uncompressed, and exhorts us to put it on high quality gear and turn it up. Well, it will take that. The booklet contains informative notes by William Craig Hause and the texts in Spanish, with English translations by Dehlinger. High quality work all round.'

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ASK ALICE — DEBORAH PRITCHARD'S WALL OF WATER

Alice McVeigh: 'So, after Pritchard demonstrated a fantastic ability to communicate complicated ideas in layman's language, describing for example the first orchestra note (deep A in lower strings) as the bedrock of sea, the elegant violin soloist Harriet MacKenzie spoke very entertainingly about the day they went to Hambling's home, where she and Pritchard were privileged to see one of the series before anyone else, and the ESO's ever articulate Kenneth Woods neatly encapsulated his own approach to the score. Then all three were effortlessly upstaged by Maggi Hambling, hunkered down the end of the row like a malevolent wood-sprite, having donned, for the occasion, her *very best* jeans and sneakers.



'What a character she is!!! She moved from the sublime (how Britten's *War Requiem* inspired a major piece) to this hilarious response, when asked by the National Gallery's resident boffin whether hearing Pritchard's emotional and moving "take" on her series of paintings in any way altered her own perception of her own works?

('No.')

Read more ...

Ask Alice your classical music-related questions ...

COMMENT (ON THE MET'S 'TALES OF HOFFMANN' HD TRANSMISSION) ...

Thomas Hampson was on stage almost as much as H and N and he played his 4 incarnations with superb differences of evilness. 2nd Act contrasts with the melodramatic Antonia story (she dies of singing) moving and beautifully sung. One glitch in the filming was when camera came off Antonia (or was it Hoffmann? I forget, not a good sign) as she/he is sitting down.

Unfortunately I lost interest at the Venetian act due I think to muddled staging and continued darkness. How about a nice big looking glass to make the point of the stolen reflexion? Didn't like the coarse so called sexy dancing either.

Have been listening to this wonderful, fabulously performed music on the radio at home and it is really a more pleasant experience tho I admit remembering certain scenes (eg the crowd's consternation when the doll collapses) adds to it.

More ...

This newsletter, edited by Keith Bramich, is a monthly taster for Basil Ramsey's high quality and colourful online classical music magazine, published every day since January 1999.

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