Landscapes and Images

Paul Hindmarsh – 19 March 2020

Monica and John McCabe visiting The Maunsell Forts

Although composer, pianist, author, teacher John McCabe (1939 – 2015) found the sound worlds of wind and brass "endlessly fascinating", he composed for bands and ensembles only when he felt he had something fresh to say. "There's no point in writing something that you're not interested in"(1). There are just six works for brass band, constituting a comparatively small, but significant contribution to the repertoire. McCabe's standing remains high within the brass band community, in which he is considered an innovator in his approach to sound and structure with a reputation that exceeds many of the more prolific brass band specialists. This is due in large measure to one piece – *Cloudcatcher Fells* (1985). It is a much-cherished work in the brass repertoire of the late twentieth century and one of his most frequently performed works, given the number of times it is used as a contest piece. The six brass band works (including the expansion of the ensemble piece *Desert II – Horizon*) are spread over almost twenty-five years, from the abstractions of *Images* (1978), via the evocative musical landscapes of *Cloudcatcher Fells* to the atmospheric seascapes of *The Maunsell Forts* (2002). During this extended period, McCabe's method of working changed substantially, as he took full advantage of every innovation, computer technology especially. However, as his widow, Monica McCabe told the audience at the RNCM Brass Band Festival in 2016, the approach to composition did not change.

This changed of course over the 40-plus years we were together, as new inventions came along. At first he wrote on m/s paper. Later it was transparencies, using a special pen. Later on he was among the earliest classical composers to work on a computer, from the beginning, I think, using Sibelius software. I emphasise that he always wrote on to the computer using a mouse. He never worked on a keyboard. He worked directly from his head, and his internal hearing of the music. Even before computers, he never composed at the piano. Some composers do. Even, I believe I'm right in saying Richard Rodney Bennett used to compose at the piano, though he was also a pianist. But John never did, I think because, as a pianist, he was afraid it would influence the composition towards keyboard-

type music. He wanted to direct his thoughts towards the instruments he was writing for. The computer was merely an additional, very useful, tool, because it was much easier to make changes and corrections to the score than when using transparencies, which were difficult to alter. Once he used a computer, he would make sketches on the computer also, but in fact he never went anywhere without a small music m/s book, in which he would jot down ideas, especially when he was travelling, for example, by train. (These ideas might not necessarily be for the work he was currently writing – he often jotted down ideas for future use.) [Monica McCabe, Manchester 2016]

Images is a pivotal work standing between the handful of purely abstract early works and those later ones revealing McCabe's response to landscape. Common to them all, however, is an unorthodox approach to texture and timbre, brought about by the blurring of conventional distinctions between orchestral and chamber "voicing". All the larger band works contain extensive passages of chamber-like interplay. The wind orchestra offers a more extensive and subtler palette that the brass band, but McCabe exploits to the full the colour contrasts between all the instrumental families – low brass versus high woodwind or cornets, double reeds versus "blown" instruments, as in the early Symphony and many passages in the brass band works. Elsewhere he blends instrumental timbres in unexpected, ear-catching ways, as in the blend of high euphonium and muted cornet in *Grisedale Tarn,* the third section of *Cloudcatcher Fells*. In this respect McCabe could be described as a rather 'painterly' composer, searching out subtle details and tones that are layered over a firm, but constantly shifting background. Each work is very different in concept, colour and construction, but there are a number of governing principles of form and argument common to them all.

Themes and melodies tend to revolve around pivotal or repeating phrases, fashioned from small intervals-tones, semi-tones, major and minor thirds and, most characteristically of all perhaps the augmented fourth or tritone. In this context, the impact of ideas that range more widely or take on a more angular aspect is decisive, as in parts of *Rounds* or *The Maunsell Forts*. The broader musical processes are tightly organized, with seemingly contrasting material sharing the same musical "DNA" both melodic and harmonic. They unfold through repetition, overlapping textures, temporal and textural layering, sustained by a range of contrapuntal – especially canonic and mirror – devices. "I make much use of canons in my work. It is a way of creating interesting harmony by movement of parts"(2). These are elements which the Polish master Witold Lutoslawski might have written down in his unbarred boxes. Indeed, there are three instances in the wind and brass music when McCabe uses the 'Lutoslawski' boxes for atmospheric effect – the start and close of *Desert II* and a brief passage for the cornets in *Images* – but he prefers to maintain control of momentum, proportion and formal balance through the convention of bar-lines. The effect of the layered textures and meters is frequently intensified by the superimposition of independent chord formations and progressions, blurring the underlying sense of key with polytonal colour. The opening bars of *Images* and the broad cantabile section in *Angle Tarn (Cloudcatcher Fells)* are clearly audible examples.

Angle Tarn

McCabe writes his music down rather in the same way that Elgar did, not necessarily taking 'route one' from kick-off to goal, but in a more circuitous way. "Once I'm ready to go, I want to get as much on paper as possible. I can't do what some composers do and write from A to Z in a straight line – I'm more inclined to write in a mosaic fashion, as if it were all the blue bits this week, all the red bits next and so on"(3). For example, *Angle Tarn* was the first part of *Cloudcatcher Fells* to be written down. This piecemeal approach goes hand-in-hand with the multi-layered and mosaic-like structures which he devised for each of the big wind works. Sir Michael Tippett developed a rigorous mosaic process in the late 1950s and early 60s, of which his second Piano Sonata and Concerto for Orchestra are the two seminal works. McCabe's approach, inspired to some extent by Tippett's example, perhaps, is less formulaic. McCabe's formal outlines are also multi-faceted, with arch-like, single movements enclosing, in various ways, the range of expression and activity of a multi-movement work.

In 1965, McCabe was invited by his publishers to contribute to a series of publications for amateur instrumentalists – *Music for Today*. His offering was a little **Fantasy op.35**, for a quartet of two trumpets, French horn and tenor trombone. In keeping with the brief, it is a modest score. The individual parts sit comfortably within their mid-range and the four-part ensemble texture persists unrelieved throughout in treble, alto, tenor and baritone 'voices', with no overlapping and few rests. The notes would even lie easily under the fingers of a young pianist wanting something other than Bartok's *Mikrokosmos* to play. Within these constraints, however, the four miniature movements are clearly differentiated in

tempo and character and as a simple example illustrating how McCabe builds his musical fabric, this could not be clearer. A brief *Introduction,* beginning on open fifths, sets out a simple linear phrase, which is passed down the ensemble like a relay or round. This becomes the theme for a lilting 9/8 *Pastorale*. The energy and bite of the dances in *Mikrokosmos* spring to mind in the *Capriccio*, with its awkward, but persistent 11/8 gait and its obstinate chordal 'trio'. At the close of the short *Corale,* all four players get the chance to play the first phrase in canon as a tailpiece, just as in "Trios" of the wind Symphony. The *Fantasy* ends with a short *Fughetta*, which revolves round a theme build from oscillating tones and semitones and a typically insistent syncopated ostinato.

"One thing I have particularly enjoyed", McCabe has said, "is combining harmonies with melodies that go from one instrument to another, sometimes rather a challenge for the players" (4). In his next piece of brass chamber music, this idea of a kind of musical relay greatly enhances the range colour and texture that a quintet of 2 trumpets, horn, trombone and tuba offers. ***Rounds*** was commissioned by the Hallé Brass Consort, who gave the first performance in February 1968 at Salford University. The horn takes the baton in the concise opening fanfare, presenting a strident fourth-based theme with a pivotal augmented fourth (tritone) providing an unexpected intensity. Heraldic fanfares in triplets from the trumpets gradually fuse into a repeating chordal accompaniment which overlays the tuba's expressive cantabile expansion of the horn theme in the second section. The musical relay veers between the playful and alarming in the central scherzo, twice breaking down into 'hocketing' major sevenths, as the melodic outline passes round the ensemble at break-neck speed. Order is restored in the Lento section, where the opening horn theme is passed up and down the ensemble and then used to support a new, rather eerie "distant" fanfare dialogue between the trumpets. The final Allegro, provides both the climax and reprise, with leaping major sevenths replacing the more controlled major fourth in a final dramatic thematic transformation, which extends the compass of the 'relay' theme to almost two octaves.

Writing for the more homogenous brass band is generally regarded as rather specialised, with its prescribed instrumentation of 10 cornets, flugel horn, 3 tenor horns (alto instruments not to be confused with the French horn), two baritone horns, which are tenor instruments at the same pitch as the three trombones and two euphoniums, plus four tubas and percussion. With the predominance of lower brass, it can be an unwieldy medium to write for and composers not steeped in the culture, or with little experience of its idiosyncrasies, have resisted it. Despite being born, raised and educated in the brass band heartland of Lancashire, McCabe was "singularly unaware of the band heritage"(5) and did not get involved until the 1960s. He was introduced to the unique sound of a British brass band by the distinguished horn player Ifor James (1931 – 2004) in the 1960s. They worked together as a horn and piano duo a great deal throughout this period, and it was while they were in Ifor James's home town of Carlisle that they went to hear a rehearsal of the local St. Stephen's Band. Ifor James and his father both had connections with this once famous band. In 1927, Carlisle St. Stephen's had been the first band from Cumbria to become National Champions and among its list of distinguished guest conductors had been Gustav Holst, who conducted a concert with them in 1933. Through Ifor James McCabe became fascinated by the sound of brass band instruments and their creative potential.

Between 1972 and 1978, James was the Musical Director of the Besses o' th' Barn Band, bringing to this famous North Manchester ensemble his professional acumen and experience. Besses was not a 'crack' contesting band during this time, but Ifor James used his connections with leading conductors and composers to broaden its concert life and thus its repertoire. André Previn visited Besses at its Whitefield band room. Tuba virtuoso John Fletcher gave the premiere of a Concerto commissioned from Edward Gregson in 1976. John McCabe's debut with Besses was as arranger and soloist in Mendelssohn's *Capriccio Brilliante,* which they also recorded. McCabe found the band's playing "staggeringly good….with an enormous wealth of technique and abundant natural musicianship" (6). With such a skilled resource at his disposal, he pulled out all the creative stops for his ambitious Besses commission – ***Images*** (1978) – premiered by Ifor James and the band on 30 March 1978 at Goldsmith's Hall, London.

Five years later the skills of all ninety-six bands in the elite division of the National Championships were tested by the work, when *Images* was set as the test piece for the Regional Qualifying rounds in 1983. Never in the150-year history of brass band contesting had a choice of test piece been met with such universal opprobrium by conductors, players and audiences alike. According to the brass band press, McCabe's music was full of "outrageous modernism", clearly a step too far for the brass band contesting movement of the early 1980s. Playing in the National finals at the Royal Albert Hall is every band's greatest aim. The twenty-eight amateur musicians in each ensemble live and breathe the qualifying work sometimes for weeks of painstaking preparation. If a test-piece presents baffling musical and stylistic challenges, as *Images* did, rather than the customary technical hurdles to be surmounted within a conventional tonal framework, reactions are bound to be intense and unequivocal. There were similar, though not quite so universal, storms of protest when I set Judith Bingham's uncompromising work *Prague* (a 1995 BBC Commission) for the same competition in 2002. In the brass band culture, the value or quality of a work is judged, in the main, by how hard it is to play or how successful the contest. – by anecdote rather than rigorous musical "critique". John McCabe found the controversy rather amusing. "Having been regarded by the concert classical world as a bit reactionary (unfairly I think!), it was entertaining to be cast into the role of the revolutionary criminal" (7)

Without the burden of tradition or expectation behind him, McCabe approached the medium in his own terms. "I think of the band rather as I think of the orchestra, i.e. several instrumental choirs, and use them in that way – and of course, since I love the sound of any one of the orchestral groupings, I tend to use the band in that way also" (8). *Images* was genuinely revolutionary in the way McCabe separated out the individual sections. For the first time in a contest work, each instrument, down to the four basses had its own part. There was no place to hide. Using the four solo cornets as a concertante group diminished the traditional role of the principal cornet as the main soloist. Instead, McCabe favoured the tonal brilliance of the highest instrument in the band, the soprano cornet, and the more mellow timbre of the flugel horn. McCabe's orchestral and wind band palette seeks out extremes of range – low sustained basses supporting more active flutes and piccolo. Enhancing the role of the soprano cornet in particular, as well as extending the range of muting effects was an attempt to replicate that. "You might lose the highest register, but the band has a tremendous variety of tone colours, with or without mutes" (9). The way McCabe maximizes the colouristic potential of both individual players and instrumental

families within the band in this and later works, especially *Cloudcatcher Fells*, has been hugely influential.

Images

Images was going to be called 'Reflections', with the idea of suggesting reflections on a purely musical theme. As the composer has remarked "I talk sometimes about the imagery in, say, Robert Simpson's music when I mean the musical imagery per se and not specifically any pictorial or colouristic element: and that's what the title means. The musical ideas have, I hope, a particular musical kind of significance and present a musical character. I never mind if people put their own pictures to my music though. If they do it tells you that they are responding to it and that's what it's all about." (10). Indeed as work in the piece progressed, some visual images passed through the composer's mind. Some, he has said, were works of art and others were simply abstract patterns and colours. There are four substantial "reflections" on the themes and harmonies presented in the introduction linked by short "refrains" derived from aspects of the introduction.

Lively – At the outset layers of oscillating minor thirds [A] are underpinned on different tonal planes by sustained dominant 7^{th} formations [B]; a fanfare motto [C] built from dissonant tones and tritone, answered by a falling arpeggiated theme [D]. A contrasting episode presents sequences of running triplets in fourths over four-part chords on the tubas.

Leisurely – A broad melodic "second subject" expanding [A] and [D]. The elegant cantabile line passes from euphonium to soprano cornet and then flugelhorn, with a mosaic of contrasting accompaniments, highlighting individually the cornets, saxhorns, trombones and tubas. Cascading cornet figures dovetail into the first short refrain or transition, in which the oscillating thirds [A] now appear on the low brass, supporting the falling sequences of the cornets.

Decisive – A biting, jagged central scherzo. The falling themes are inverted and transformed into rapid upward flourishes; the oscillating thirds are slowed down and bounced in close canon between cornets and trombones. The scherzo comes to an abrupt, fractured close, after which more sustained fragments of the fanfare[C] dovetail into the central slow section.

Reflective – Out of the harmonic configuration of the opening of the work emerges a more rhetorical slow movement, building to a dramatic transformation of the motto themes for the final "reflection".

Agitated – an inexorable gathering of momentum to the end of the work, embracing elements of reprise and including the most complex textural array in the work, with 21 distinct parts. at the centre [fig.26 -27]. After this the symphonic arch is completed – as in *Rounds* – by a much transformed, urgent and often canonic reprise of the lyrical subject followed by a final tumultuous recall of [A] and an echo of [C] before the musical journey comes to a resolute close on B flat.

At the 1983 Regional competition, the abstractions of *Images* behaved in a most unexpected and unpredictable way for many bandspeople more used to the conventions of diatonic harmony and melody. The notion that two or more tonalities

could operate at the same time or that distinct musical elements – texture, metre, rhythm – could overlap or be played simultaneously in layers was completely new to the contesting arena. The modernist tendencies of some of the other works commissioned in the 1970s for Grimethorpe Colliery by Elgar Howarth such as *Grimethorpe Aria* (Birtwistle), and for Besses o' th' Barn by Ifor James like *Chromascope* (Paul Patterson), were never exposed in this way. The music of composers who were exemplars for McCabe's mosaic-like approach to form and texture – Bartók, Tippett, Lutoslawski – was completely unknown. The furore which surrounded the 1983 performances of *Images* is now the stuff of legend in the brass band world. It has not been used as a set piece since then, though many of those who were its most vehement critics at the time are now among its strongest advocates and it is performed as a concert item from time to time when elite or college bands have an opportunity to perform more ambitious concert programmes for studio recording or a major festival.

The abstractions of musical modernism have loomed large on the horizon of the brass band movement since the 1970s. Composers of contest pieces in particular have found greater chance of a sympathetic interpretation if they applied non-musical associations – images, landscape, narrative – to their works. There have been notable exceptions of course, like Wilfred Heaton's *Contest Music*and Edward Gregson's *Dances and Arias*. If the abstractions of McCabe's *Images* proved intractable in 1983, the imagery and locations of ***Cloudcatcher Fells,*** commissioned for the finals of the National Championships at the Royal Albert Hall two years later, were crystal clear. Its tunefulness also appealed to the band musicians and audience. Textures appeared less complex in their layering. The level of dissonance appeared much reduced, governed more by the perfect fifth than the tritone and with a firmer nod in the direction of traditionally functioning tonality. McCabe has emphasized that this simplification of language was not so much a response to the occasion, like some kind of compensation for *Images* or through a desire to please, as a direct and personal response to a much-loved area of the Lake District. As in all McCabe's landscape pieces, the image or more accurately the composer's view of it – desert, rainforest or mountain – goes right to the core of the musical inspiration, directly influencing the way themes and harmonies behave and informing broader brush strokes of texture, and atmosphere. For example, the opening theme of *Cloudcatcher Fells,* with its undulating construction could be understood as a musical paradigm of a mountain landscape as viewed from a distance perhaps or underneath a huge sky. The modality of the theme also conditions the evocative, open sounding harmonic frame and perhaps also its warm, expressive quality.

By contrast, ***Desert II – Horizon***, composed in 1981 between *Images* and *Cloudcatcher,* begins, not with an epic vista, but with the smallest of details. A desert of sand might appear to be a static, blank, empty canvas, but as McCabe observed in a 1992 BBC Radio 3 broadcast, "A desert is never still. Grains of sand constantly shift in the wind, building sand dunes. It's that sense of vast space built out of tiny grains of shifting sand that I wanted to start and end the piece with ..... I have one instrument after another coming in with a very quiet repeated pattern, building up an [evocative] texture in the upper register."(11). The tiny unbarred fragments, built out of layers of shifting semitones in the upper brass begin randomly but gradually accumulate and coalesce into dense, resonant polychords. This is painting with sound in one sense, but more significantly, the fabric of the work has been carefully

derived from the behaviour of the physical landscape, with the full effect gained from the longer perspective which the sequence of massive chords brings. *Desert II – Horizon* was inspired by Middle Eastern desert landscape and was written in 1981 for the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble. Six years later, McCabe opened out the sound-scape from ten-piece symphonic brass to full brass band with percussion at the suggestion of the conductor Howard Snell, a former member of the ensemble.

The work is more simply structured than the other wind and brass pieces, with three substantial episodes, marked Lively, Slow and Decisive, enclosed within the "fade–in" opening and "fade-out" close. The lively music is clear and crisp. The sequences of open fifths in the bass present perhaps a clichéd image of the progress of a camel train across the horizon. However, in the vast arid and monochrome expanses of sand, any object or activity will appear to dominate the horizon, to lead the eye. So here, the exaggerated, not to say desiccated quality of the repeating phrases provides an unmistakeable musical character. The image gradually fades into a shimmering mirage of wispy scales on the upper brass. McCabe also says that images of refreshment in a desert oasis may also come to mind in the central slow section, where there is a more liquid, almost hypnotic quality to the invention. Melodic outlines in the foreground are blurred through close canons and cascading effects on the cornets/trumpets – techniques which were explored in *Images*. In the final decisive section, fresh perspectives are brought to earlier music – fast and slow – and after a dynamic climax, the flurries of sand once again dominate the skyline. In the final bars the music disintegrates back into its elemental, fragmentary state.

Cloudcatcher Fells - Commissioned for the finals of the 1985 National Brass Band Championships, Royal Albert Hall, London.

The lakes and fells of Cumbria were part of John McCabe's life from boyhood, having spent three months in the Patterdale area of the Lake District for health reasons. He spent a lot of time there subsequently, both for work and relaxation. The first Violin Concerto (1959) was sketched in the "Lakes" and the last movement of String Quartet No. 3 also has "Lakeland" associations. The title *Cloudcatcher Fells* comes from the poem *Cockermouth* by David Wright.This is the fourth verse:

And Derwent shuffles by it, over stones.
And if you look up the valley toward Isel
With Blindcrake to the north, cloudcatcher fells,
Whose waters track past here to Workington. (12)

Cloudcatcher Fells is the only one of McCabe's musical 'landscapes' in which each episode is given a specific location. However, the piece should not be thought of a simply a personal travelogue, a memoire or a series of musical scene paintings. The titles themselves emerged during the composition and as his notes reveal were not finalised until the music was sketched. The richness of the work lies in its multi-faceted symphonic variation design and in the way McCabe's responses to the nine locations influence directly the detail and dynamic of the musical argument. The sections are grouped them into a sequence of four larger sequences: slow (1-3); fast(4,5); slow(6); fast(7-9).

1.Great Gable – is the highest point of an imposing massif, part of the Wasdale Fell formation to the north of Scafell Pike and the west of Patterdale. The horns present a nine-note motto theme in unison. Simply constructed in the dorian mode (the d minor "white note" scale on the keyboard) from minor thirds and tones, its three-fold, undulating contour is shaped like a series of mountain peaks viewed, as it were, in relief, from a distance or against a very large and perhaps cloudy sky – as represented by the miraculous shimmering chords on muted cornets which punctuate the three statements of the theme. The tune changes slightly on each appearance, reflecting perhaps how the play of clouds and the changing light, alters the view. Beneath the cloudy sky, as it were, the trombones and lower brass present a gently syncopated thematic variant that will generate much of the rhythmic drive in the faster sections to come.

2.Grasmoor – Considered to be one of the most beautiful areas of the national park, the Grasmoor Fells lie to the north west of Great Gable, on the other side of Buttermere. *Grasmoor* itself stands a little further to the west in splendid isolation and this aspect is hauntingly captured in the music through the layering of the sustained syncopated theme in the low brass, against a broader series of peaks and troughs, this time sweeping through the entire cornet section from lowly third cornet to the quartet of solo cornets and back again. The sense of space is skilfully engineered as activity increases. The five primary notes of the motto bounce between individual cornet parts and are set against a slowly unfolding bass line, which draws our ears inexorably to the first full chord.

3.Grisedale Tarn – is the large oval-shaped body of water standing at the head of Grisedale, the valley which extended south west of Patterdale. Here the motto theme is transformed into lilting siciliana. There is a balletic poise about the solo line, which is passed from euphonium to cornets and back, and its gently syncopated accompaniment. As the music unfolds the elegant surface is disturbed by more threatening undercurrents from deep below the surface on the basses and by arabesque-like detail high up on the solo cornets.

4.Haystacks – is one of the most popular fells for walkers. Located between Buttermere and Great Gable, its name derives from its jagged tops. Musically, *Haystacks* is the first part of the scherzando. The impetus of the music stems from the way McCabe uses the syncopated chords heard beneath the "clouds" in *Great Gable* to generate jagged bursts of activity around the band. The soprano cornet has a particularly precarious time in the little trio section. There is almost a jazzy feel to the way the percussion binds the elements together here and then lead the way into:

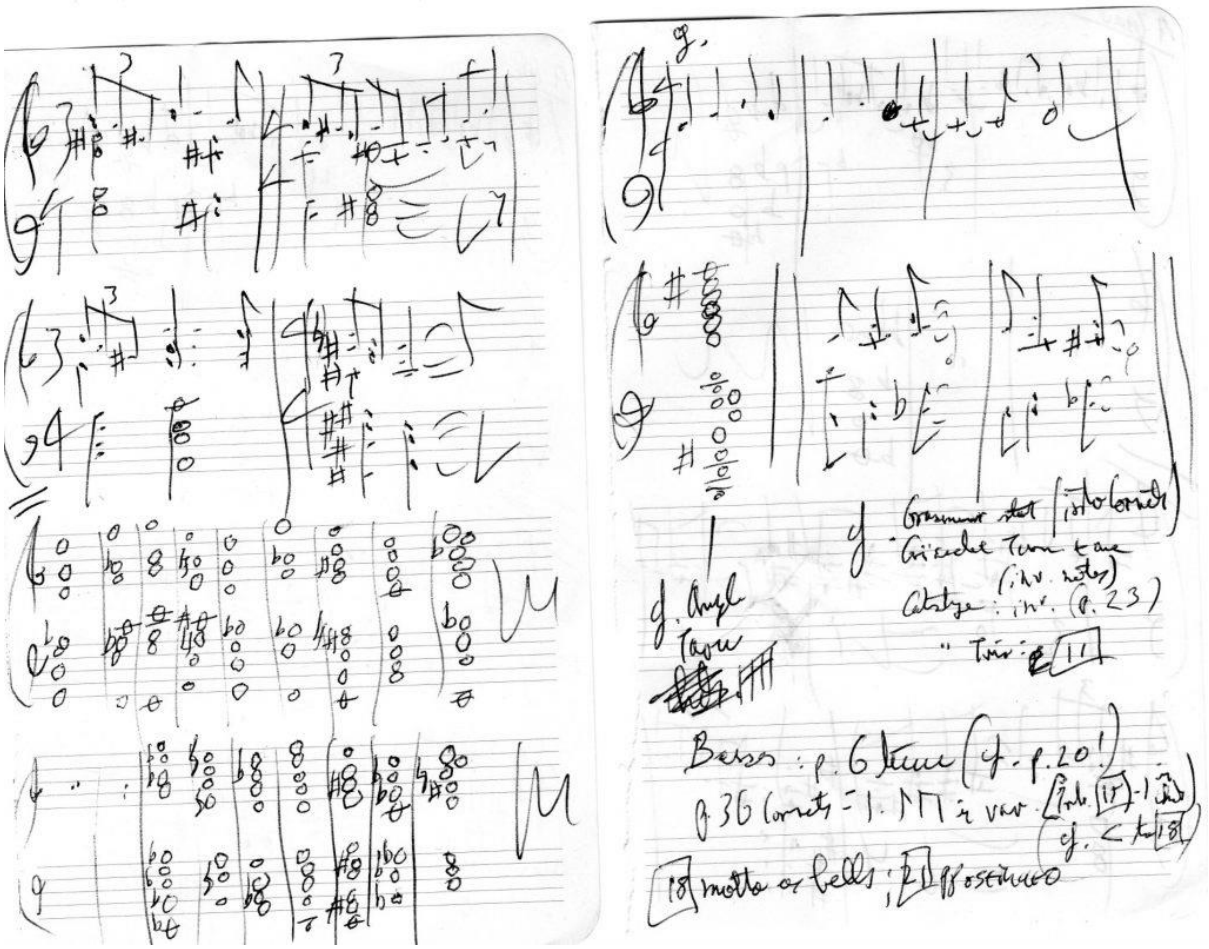
5. *Catchedicam* or *Catstye Cam* – a steep sided conical peak, lying just to the north east of the great Helvellyn chain, five kilometres due west of Patterdale. Marked *Giocoso,* this is as near to a jazz riff as McCabe gets, with the chord formations now set irregular metres – 4/4, 5/8,7/8 – and after a moment of respite on the trombones, a searing first climax, where McCabe's layering of texture, metre and melody comes into its own.

6. *Angle Tarn* – There are two Angle Tarns in the Cumbrian Fells. This one nestles between the summits of three of the lower fells to the east of Patterdale. It was regarded as one of the most scenic of the summits' tarns by the great fell-walker Alfred Wainwright. John McCabe describes it as his "most favourite place in the whole world." (13) The music of *Angle Tarn* is some of the most warm-hearted and affectionate that he has composed. The structure of the opening mirrors the very start of the work, but additional rhythmic impulses and overlapping cornet and baritone/euphonium arabesques create a glistening, brighter surface. At the heart of this substantial slow movement is a broad and generous melody. Contrasting tonal and textural layers above and below also engage the ear: above a trio of cornets blur the image, as though through a reflection or heat haze; below the surface, the longer lines on the basses remind us perhaps of the massive landscape that surrounds the tarn.

7-9. *Grisedale Brow – Striding Edge – Helvellyn* – form the eastern spur of the great Helvellyn chain and feature in the final portion of one of the Lake District's most challenging and imposing fell walks from Patterdale to the majestic peak itself. The sheer physical effort demanded by the fell walker seems to be captured in the way the music grows in textural activity and momentum through the first of the two faster sections. *Grisedale Brow* begins lightly, almost nonchalantly, but gradually the exertion begins to take its toll. Scherzando textures, not unlike those already heard in *Haystacks,* become fractured. Textures become fragmented and tortuous. A soprano cornet solo sounds deliberately effortful and short-winded. The long ridge of *Striding Edge* is one of the most imposing sights in the Helvellyn range, and also one of the most precarious to traverse. There is an easy path, but McCabe's impetuous and at time faltering mosaic of duets and trios reveal in musical terms, something of its dangers. As the momentum gathers towards its climax, the sound is suddenly obscured. Only the muffled sounds of muted horns and baritones are left. The motto theme (ie. the view) is hardly audible (ie. visible). But as quickly as the mist came down it lifts to reveal the peak of *Helvellyn* in all its glory. Here, as the final summit is reached, the main theme, heard in the distance at the start of the work, is now revealed close-up as a series of emphatic triadic chords, ending this masterly work with the triumphant sound of burnished brass, treble forte.

The variation form has been fertile ground for so many of the important brass band scores since Vaughan Williams's *Variations* of 1957. *Cloudcatcher Fells*, with its synthesis of musical logic, technical challenge, evocative content and, crucially, its personal association is one of the finest examples. Such is the significance of the piece within the brass band canon, that it has become a seminal study work among students of the repertoire and has been the subject of research projects, none more interesting than the work of Ruth E. DeSarno. Her Ph.D dissertation in the 1990s involved transcribing British brass band works for American symphonic wind bands as a means of providing a musical bridge between the two genres. Her impressive

transcription of *Cloudcatcher Fells* is available as part of John McCabe's published work.



Sketches for *Cloudcatcher Fells*

Following the success of *Cloudcatcher* at the 1985 National Championships, McCabe inevitably received requests for a *Cloudcatcher* mark 2. However, McCabe did not go in for sequels. As is evident from this commentary, he embarked on a new work for brass only when there was an appropriate idea, strong enough to bring fresh inspiration. There was a gap of some six years before he added to his band catalogue. The wait was well worth it, however, as four substantial pieces for wind and brass band were produced in quick succession. *Canyons* was the first, a commission from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London and McCabe's only work to date for the large symphonic wind orchestra. The first performance took place in the Barbican, London on 9 July 1991. Three months later on 11 October, *Rainforest III (Dandenongs)* for thirteen winds was premiered by London Winds at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival. The following February *Harbour with Ships (Five Impressions)* was performed by the Phoenix Brass Quintet at Peel Hall, Salford University and a few months after that *Northern Lights*, a joint commission from the Britannia Building Society (now Fodens) Band and the Royal Northern College of Music, was premiered just down the road in the RNCM Concert Hall. What is remarkable about these pieces is their very different characters and sound worlds.

Harbour with Ships is McCabe's most extended chamber music work for brass. Subtitled *Five Impressions*, its most striking feature is the 'morse code' chattering of

the two trumpeters at the start. As in the earlier quintet *Rounds*, solos and duets form a significant part of the structure. The slow second movement features extended cadenzas for the French horn, for example. The scherzo comes next and its playful mood continues to some extent into the Andante, where the composer has great fun with a hocketing texture even more perilous in layout (for the players at least) than the fragmentary relays in *Rounds*.

Northern Lights is the least known and the "lightest" of the brass and wind works. McCabe describes the musical language as being perhaps similar to that of *Cloudcatcher Fells*. Textures are transparent, the themes are based on consonant intervals – major and minor thirds, perfect fourths and fifths, which combine into arpeggiated figures. Its structure, however, is much more straightforward and one dimensional than the earlier work. Enclosed within a typical arch-like episodic frame is a prelude and fugue. The music opens boldly, almost prosaically with a bracing 'ump-ah' chord sequence – like a call to attention. Out of this flows an extrovert fanfare, characteristically built from patterns and chords based on layered thirds. The second episode is a flowing Andantino. The sound of four muted tubas and glockenspiel sets an extended soprano cornet solo in stark relief. McCabe's other favourite brass soloists – the flugel horn and euphonium – are given elaborate cadenzas based on the fanfare figures. A brief reprise of the full fanfare material leads to the fugue. McCabe dug deep into his old sketch books for the theme, which dates from 1959 or 1960 during his own student days at the Royal Northern College's predecessor, the Royal Manchester College of Music. There is a nice connection here and McCabe was delighted to find this opportunity of adapting it to this new purpose. The title *Northern Lights* has nothing to do with the *aurora borealis* that illuminates the night sky of the Arctic. The connections are personal. McCabe is a Northerner himself, and the piece was commissioned by the Royal Northern College of Music for two bands from the North West of England. He dedicated the piece to the memory of one of the great luminaries of the brass band of the twentieth century – Harry Mortimer C.B.E. *Northern Lights* is an engaging and enjoyable work, but it has never really "taken off" in the brass band world. This may have something to do with its comparatively modest technical demands, compared to his other brass band works. It is perhaps not quite as effectively "voiced" as its earlier companions. Yet, there are five levels or divisions within the brass band structure and *Northern Lights* would greatly enrich the repertoire choices for those selecting test-pieces for the section immediately below the elite Championship division.

McCabe followed *Northern Lights* with ***Salamander.*** Commissioned by Michael Webber for English Heritage to celebrate the 10th birthday of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, it was designed to be used as the accompaniment to a firework display. The spectacular premiere took place in June 1994 outdoors in the music dome by the lake side at Kenwood, on the northerly fringes of Hampstead Heath in London. It was played on that occasion by the massed ranks of Grimethorpe Colliery band and the now disbanded D.U.T. Yorkshire Imperial Band (Leeds), conducted by Geoffrey Brand. The composer remembers being mightily impressed with the way the array of fireworks was co-ordinated to fit the more demonstrative passages of the music. Of course, the choice of the mythical salamander as the subject could not have been more appropriate. In ancient times the salamander was, according to Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, "a mythical lizard-like monster that was supposed to be able to live in fire, which, however, it quenches by the chill of its body. (The name) was adopted by Paracelsus

as the name of the elemental being inhabiting fire." It was this definition that was the inspiration for this piece.

Salamander is the most homogenously scored of the brass band works. The outdoor setting and the need to be heard above the bangs and crackles of fireworks, may have been in the composer's mind. There is far more octave doubling than in any of the other wind and brass works. Voices are blended in what might be described as more traditional brass band manner. That is not to deny the work's colourful, not to say flamboyant character. Its orchestral, rather than chamber-like quality may also have something to do with the fact that he was putting the final touches to his ballet Edward II. when the commission came. The two works are closely connected. The haunting central lyrical section of *Salamander* is a re-working of one of the most beautiful moments in the entire *Edward* ballet – the plangent cantabile and shimmering, almost impressionistic textures of the *pas de deux* for Edward and Gaveston from Act 1, scene 2.

The music is overwhelmingly affirmative in character, reflecting something of the character of the ballet music in its melodic range and direct mode of utterance. McCabe describes the piece as "a passacaglia (variations on a ground bass), quite tricky and tightly organised. The bass tune is there all the time in one shape or another" (15). It takes the form of a pattern of interlocking triads, perhaps taking their cue from the limpid falling triads that give the "pas de deux" its expressive quality. At the start we hear a version of the tune rising, Salamander- like, out of the bass pedal G and then through the band until it resounds in its downward configuration – a series of brilliant tutti chords, with the notes of the tune at the top. Flickering and crackling over the top of this rising gesture is a quick-fire figuration of interlocking semi-quavers, which when heard against the long pedal point sound distinctly Brahmsian, and that is no coincidence. One of McCabe's favourite works from the nineteenth century is Brahms's Fourth Symphony, which ends with a masterly passacaglia and opens with a theme based on a series of interlocking thirds and sixths. *Salamander* builds to a terrific climax, via a breathless fugue – built out of some of the elements of the ground bass – to a final blazing statement of the original chordal version.

Salamander has been used as a competition piece on two occasions: the first for the Open Brass Band Championship at Symphony Hall, Birmingham in September 1994 and the second, more recently at the European Brass Band Championships. Its lack of extended opportunities for the band soloists may be a reason why it has not been used more often, because in every other respect it contains all the ingredients of a successful contest and concert work – fast and loud passage work, a forthright opening and an exciting ending, with extended moments of elegant and expressive lyricism as a contrast.

John McCabe has never felt the need deliberately to over-burden his "Test Pieces" with technical traps and tricks. In fact during the 1990s he became rather disillusioned with the brass band world. He began to sense that the desire for ever more brilliant virtuosity for its own sake was getting in the way of genuine musical expression and understanding. "For the most part I've managed to write exactly what I wanted, such as *Salamander* and *Cloudcatcher*. I ran into trouble, as I fully anticipated, with ***The Maunsell Forts***. I had decided not to write any more band pieces and then got the idea for this piece – an idea that I felt I had to fulfill. I warned

everyone that (a) it would begin and end quietly and slowly and (b) as a result the bands would hate it. It was a piece that I had to write and I'm not somebody who wants to churn out yet another loud, fast collection of thousands of notes".(16) Well, it was not a popular choice to mark the 150th Open, either with the players or the audiences. The expectation was for something more celebratory. The reaction was not as fierce as that which greeted *Images* in 1983. *The Maunsell Forts* was admired for its musical qualities. It simply did not chime with the occasion and has therefore been overlooked ever since.

The Maunsell Forts came to be written after many years of gentle probing and prodding from the organisers of the British Open and from the present writer, who eventually persuaded BBC Radio 3 to commission it for the 2002 Open Championships. It is McCabe's own personal favourite among his brass band compositions, "...because like *Cloudcatcher* it has an added element. The earlier piece derived from deep love of one particular corner of the Lake District around Patterdale, which I've known since 1947. Maunsell derives from the Second World War anti-aircraft defensive forts, rather H.G.Wells-like tetrapods in the Thames Estuary and the reflections which seeing them conjured up for me. And they are only just off-shore where I now live, so it's a more personal thing for me that writing about , say, a war memorial in some other country."(18)

There were six huge Sea Forts erected to protect the shipping lanes of the Mersey and the Thames. They were designed by the engineer Guy Maunsell and constructed in 1942. The four that remain, in various degrees of salt and wind-induced decay, are a bleak reminder of the war years, like something out of *The War of the Worlds*. Some of them stand just off the North Kent coast at Whistable, not that far from the McCabe residence. Moncia and John visited three of them by boat on a calm summer's day in 2001. Shivering Sands and Red Sands are collections of single buildings on stilts used variously for living and keeping watch for enemy aircraft. They were connected by precarious rope walkways, open to the elements. The other fort, is Knock John – a large single platform supported above the water by two huge concrete pillars and topped out by a single multi-purpose building.

The Maunsell Forts

McCabe found the collections of tetrapods particularly fascinating and it is their mysterious shapes looming large out of the estuary that form both the underlying mood and also the structure of the music. The subtitle *Nocturne* for brass band refers, as McCabe has said "to the fact that it would have been at night that the greatest danger came".(18) It is a substantial score, at 16 – 17 minutes almost as long as *Cloudcatcher*, but in terms of its material much more economic. It is also full of enormous contrasts. There are two substantial episodes of fast music: one based on a powerful descending theme, which goes round and round the band, obsessively driving the music forward; the other is a passacaglia, framed by wave-like surges of texture and including sharp retorts as vivid as night-time anti-aircraft fire with tracer bullets. These two sections stand proud of the musical seascape around them – a structural analogy in music for the forts themselves, perhaps. The three connecting ritornelli, with their bell-like resonating chords, fanfares and restless, axial phrases, are as uneasy in sound as the rope walkways must have been to negotiate. This rondo–like form is then framed by the atmospheric opening and the long elegiac coda. There are some fascinating technical correspondences between the start here and the opening bars of *Cloudcatcher*. Here the music wells up from the depths in an overlapping upward formation to reveal the work's main theme, gently swaying on the horns and baritones, built on a dominant 7th chord on A. The cornets answer with a glistening array of repeated notes forming a high, dissonant polychord. Where the clouds had obscured the expanse of *Great Gable* in the earlier piece, here in *Maunsell,* the moonlight perhaps casts ominous, threatening shadows. But, the harmonic frame could not be further removed from the nostalgic added sixths and open fifths of its predecessor. It is the ambiguities of the augmented fourth, the tritone, that is the overwhelming presence here, no more so than in the fanfare figures and in the rushing wave formations.

The long coda forms an eloquent and moving elegy. The writing for the band is some of the subtlest and most sophisticated that the composer has achieved, with treble and bass "choirs" fanning out to enable the middle of the band to add a rich resonance. Towards the end, just before the nocturnal seascape returns to end the piece as it began, the soprano cornet, shadowed three octaves below by a single bass tuba, leads the cornets and trombones in a brief and poignant chorale. A phrase of it had been heard earlier in the introduction almost hidden on euphoniums and baritones, but here, for those that know the St. Matthew Passion, the reference to the chorale melody "O Sacred Head once wounded" is unmistakeable. "It would have seemed less [than] honourable to write a work finishing with a loud and triumphant conclusion, in view of the subject matter. The Thames forts still stand, as a memorial as well as intriguing and remarkably affecting artefacts, an unexpected page of recent but not yet forgotten human history"(19)

For many, including the composer himself, *Cloudcatcher Fells* and *The Maunsell Forts*, are his most personal achievements for wind and brass, enshrining a deep personal experience from childhood and adulthood – one reflecting much-loved region and the other an act of remembrance. The haunting rituals and symbols of *Dandenongs* for 13 winds and the sheer richness in invention of *Images* might also be added to this list. John McCabe, like his fellow composer Robert Simpson (1924 – 1997), came to the brass band medium fascinated by the sound, but blissfully unaware of the conventions, not to say idiosyncrasies of what remains a somewhat insular and narrow musical world. That ignorance was a blessing, because he has enriched the medium in his own terms, by taking his unique approach to orchestral

sound and structure and applying it to the wind ensemble and the brass band. The results, particularly for the brass band musician have been hugely influential. His liberation of the instrumental families – separating out the colour pallete, providing individual parts for the whole assembly – his love of mosaic construction, the elegance of his formal designs and the economy of his thematic working have all been influential on other, younger and more specialist brass composers. How sad then that in recent years he has become less enthusiastic about writing for brass band. *The Maunsell Forts* was be John McCabe's last work for brass band.

Notes

1] John McCabe, "Portraits in Brass", BBC Radio 3, 1992, produced by Paul Hindmarsh
2] Rodney Newton, "McCabe's musical memorial", British Bandsman, Issue No.5212, 7th September 2002
3] Christopher Thomas, "The 4barsrest Interview", 2005
4] Thomas, 2005
5] Thomas, 2005
6] "Portraits in Brass", 1992
7] Thomas, 2005.
8] "Portraits in Brass", 1992.
9] "Portraits in Brass", 1992
10] Thomas, 2005.
11] "Portraits in Brass", 1992.
12] David Wright (1920 – 1994) was born in Johannesburg, South Africa He came to England aged 14 and was educated at Northampton School for the Deaf and at Oriel College, Oxford, graduating in 1942. He became a freelance writer in 1947 after working on *The Sunday Times* for five years. He co-founded and co-edited the quarterly literary review *X* from 1959-1962. His work includes three books about Portugal written with Patrick Swift, his co-founder and co-editor of *X*. His *Deafness: A Personal Account* (1969) was autobiographical while *Roy Campbell* was a critical piece of work about a fellow South African. He has also edited *Longer Contemporary Poems* (1966), the *Penguin Book of English Romantic Verse* (1968) and the *Penguin Book Of Everday Verse* (1976). His published poems include: *Moral Stories* (1954), *Monologue of a Deaf Man* (1958), *Adam at Evening* (1965), *To the gods the Shades: New and Collected Poems* (1976), *Metrical Observations* (1980), *Selected Poems* (1988) and *Elegies* (1990). 'His poetry is remarkable for its quiet intelligence and humour, and the integrity of its style. The tone is conversational, though not in the sense of reproducing a facitious chattiness; rather, it creates the lively curve of an eminently humane mind's thinking and speaking' (T.J.G. Harris, in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Ian Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 589). "Cockermouth" was published in *The Lake District: An Anthology*, (Hale, 1977)
13] "Portraits in Brass", 1992
14] Programme note, Novello & Co
15] Programme note, Novello & Co.
16] Thomas, 2005
17] Programme note, Novello & Co.
18] Rodney Newton, British Bandsman, 7th September 2002
19] Programme note, Novello & Co.