

ROGER SACHEVERELL COKE (1912-1972)

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COMPACT
DISC
DIGITAL AUDIO
DDD

24 Preludes Opp. 33 & 34 · 15 Variations & Finale Op. 37

SIMON CALLAGHAN piano

Preludes Op.33 (1938-39) (22:46)

1	1 Appassionato	1:57
2	2 Andante	2:02
3	3 Andantino	1:48
4	4 Molto maestoso	2:17
5	5 Andantino	1:49
6	6 Presto agitato	1:12
7	7 Grazioso	1:54
8	8 Lento maestoso	2:02
9	9 Leggiero scherzando	1:46
10	10 Vivace	1:10
11	11 Andante cantabile	4:49

Preludes Op.34 (1941) (25:51)

12	12 Allegro scherzando	3:03
13	13 Cantabile	1:55

14 14 Allegro assai 1:22

15	15 Andante cantabile	1:29
16	16 Andantino patetico	1:25
17	17 Moderato	3:40
18	18 Presto agitato	1:00
19	19 Allegro comodo	2:28
20	20 Languido e rubato	3:40
21	21 Amabile	0:59
22	22 Andantino	1:45
23	23 Amabile	1:19
24	24 Maestoso	1:46

Variations Op.37 (1939) (28:15)

25	Theme Lento	1:18
26	Var. 1 Più mosso	0:14
27	Var. 2 Allegro	1:12

28 Var. 3 Lento assai, doloroso 1:57

29	Var. 4 Allegretto	1:09
30	Var. 5 Moderato maestoso	1:13
31	Var. 6 Presto scherzando	0:45
32	Var. 7 Chorale - Andantino cantabile	1:52
33	Var. 8 Andantino	1:37
34	Var. 9 Moderato	2:08
35	Var. 10 Allegro molto energico	2:17
36	Var. 11 Intermezzo - Andante rubato	2:01
37	Var. 12 Andantino semplice e grazioso	1:42
38	Var. 13 Moderato appassionato	0:39
39	Var. 14 Allegro risoluto	1:47
40	Var. 15 Largo doloroso	3:29
41	Finale Tempo di Tema	2:57

Total duration: 77:12

Recorded at the Old Granary Studios, Suffolk, on 26 & 27 August 2014

Piano: Steinway Concert Grand Model D

Recording Producer: Siva Oke Recording Engineer: Ben Connellan

Front Cover Photograph of Simon Callaghan: Benjamin Ealovega

Design & Layout: Andrew Giles

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Première Recordings



ROGER SACHEVERELL COKE

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ROGER SACHEVERELL COKE piano music

ROGER SACHEVERELL COKE was born in Alfreton, Derbyshire in October 1912, into a comfortably situated upper middle-class family with strong military traditions, a family that traced their Plantagenet lineage from King Edward III. Coke's father Langton had been born in Cape Town, where his father in turn was a civil engineer (a Colonel in the Derbyshire Regiment, attached to the Royal Engineers), and on returning to Brookhill, the family home in England, Langton enlisted in the Army, being seconded for a time to the Egyptian Army before eventually joining the Irish Guards in 1900. He left the Army and became Private Secretary to the Postmaster General in Henry Asquith's Liberal government, but on the outbreak of War in August 1914 Langton re-enlisted in the Irish Guards, was commissioned as a Lieutenant and sent to Belgium, where he was killed during the first battle of Ypres in October 1914. His body was never found, his name being engraved on the Menin Gate at Ypres.

His only son, Roger, was two years old. As the boy grew to maturity on being sent to Eton, the undoubted artistic side of his family – an earlier 19th-century relative, Alfred Sacheverell Coke, was a noted pre-Raphaelite artist, a member of the group known as the 'Lost Romantics' – came to the fore. The result was that with the death of Roger's father, the family's long military tradition came to an end: it was not art, but music, that consumed the youth.

In this, he was indulged by his wealthy mother and by his French Governess. It was playing the piano and composition that were Roger's main musical interests

Opposite page: Coke at Eton

when he entered Eton, pursuits that placed him securely in the generation of British composers that included Benjamin Britten and George Lloyd, and – like those two – it was the English countryside, rather than the metropolitan hub of London or the bigger cities, that proved the greatest spur to Coke's creativity. The mention of Britten recalls the one operatic character Roger most represented himself in real life – Owen Wingrave, the scion of a family with a proud military history that he himself rejected. But whereas in Henry James's story Owen pays a heavy price, the death of Roger's father in war and the indulgence of his widowed mother ensured he would not be disowned, but greatly encouraged in whatever he chose.

Her encouragement was practical in many ways: for Roger's 21st birthday in 1933 his mother had the coach house and stable block converted into a large music studio with gallery, capable of seating an audience of several hundred, with a magnificent Steinway grand piano. The studio became Roger's main home, where he did almost all of his composing. With such familial support, and free from financial worries, it would appear that Coke had everything an aspiring composer could wish for – he studied music thoroughly and professionally, becoming a pupil of John Frederic Staton (a very distinguished Derbyshire musician and tutor, who had also served in the War, being awarded the Croix de Guerre by Marshal Joffre) and later of Alan Bush. Coke's piano teacher was Mabel Lander, who was to teach the piano to the young Princess who became Queen Elizabeth II. It was to Mabel Lander that Coke dedicated the second of his six piano concertos 'with affection and admiration'. This work marked Coke's debut as a broadcast pianist, in November 1933 with the Torquay Municipal Orchestra under Ernest Goss.

All seemed set fair for the young composer-pianist, but it was not quite to be what he and his supporters had hoped. Coke suffered from a number of mental health disorders, which, whilst not consistent or serious, nonetheless at times affected his day-to-day living and his relationships, exacerbated by his addiction to tobacco: from the early 1930s, Coke reputedly smoked around 100 cigarettes a day. In addition, he was homosexual, which in the 1930s (until the late 1960s) was a criminal offence, carrying imprisonment for those convicted. Here was further pressure on the young composer-pianist, but his creative energies would not be gainsaid, and – in the security and safety of his music studio – his compositions grew in number, the piano featuring in almost all of them. Coke composed twelve full-scale chamber works and more than 100 songs, alongside an impressive series of orchestral works – the six piano concertos already mentioned, two 'Vocal Concertos' for soprano and orchestra, three Symphonies, four Symphonic Poems, and a substantial output of solo piano music. His largest work was a three-act opera, *The Cenci*, based on Shelley's play with a libretto fashioned by Coke himself. *The Cenci* was composed between 1940-50, and received its one-and-only performance in November 1959, at the Scala Theatre in London, conducted by Sir Eugene Goossens. The orchestra on that occasion was the London Symphony, and Coke himself bore the costs of the production.

The reaction of the press was unanimous in condemning the opera: by the dawn of the 1960s the tide had turned against the late-Romanticism which Coke's musical language maintained – one only has to consider the deplorable entry on Rachmaninoff, one of the notable disfigurements of the fifth edition of Grove's Dictionary of 1954 – and the time could not have been worse for the unveiling of

Coke sits smoking at his Steinway in his music studio at Brookhill Hall, c.1960s. The Twenty-Four Preludes are on the music stand.



the *magnum opus* of a composer who was perceived to be eminently backward-looking and not even fully competent in his technique.

If the reaction of the press was wholly unsympathetic, Coke's reaction to the criticisms can well be imagined. He had staked everything on this production, and had seemingly failed – at least, in the critical terms of the day – plunging the composer into a period of depression. But the music was not that of an inexperienced composer who had had little chance of hearing his own work: in the 1930s and 40s, Coke's music was quite frequently played and occasionally broadcast, and he had enjoyed the friendship and encouragement of several highly significant musicians, including – for example – Rachmaninoff, Moiseiwitsch and Goossens.

It was hearing Moiseiwitsch as a teenager that finally inspired Coke to take up the piano seriously; quite early on, Coke formed a friendship with the pianist – as he did with Rachmaninoff, who came to visit Coke in Derbyshire, inviting Coke in return to stay at his new home, 'Senar', on the banks of Lake Lucerne. Rachmaninoff accepted the dedication of Coke's Second Symphony (1936-38, and broadcast by the BBC), and if any composer's music can be said to have influenced Coke it was that of Rachmaninoff. But there is no slavish imitation of the Russian's music in Coke's work, although such an influence can occasionally be discerned. Coke was also a competent conductor, and formed the Brookhill Symphony Orchestra in 1940, putting on concerts in Brookhill Hall. Among the music he conducted were – for those days – such very rarely-heard works as Bruckner's Fourth and Sixth Symphonies, Mahler's Fourth Symphony, and Rachmaninoff's Second – small wonder he found himself out-of-step with the critical climate of the times!

In 1939, the fine Irish pianist Charles Lynch (who had given the British premiere of Rachmaninoff's Second Sonata, having played it to the composer) gave the broadcast premiere of Coke's Third Piano Concerto with the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra (forerunner of the Bournemouth Symphony) under Richard Austin. Coke had high hopes for this work, the publication of which he subvented himself – and therein lies the rub, it seems. For, despite the support of several great musicians and with his music being heard reasonably frequently across the country, live and on air, no music publisher took Coke's music up. The scores of his music which were published in his lifetime were issued at his own expense.

It is difficult, when confronted by the works on this disc, not to regard Coke's life and his neglect as rather more than a personal tragedy. Driven by a fierce inner belief, and continuing to write in the teeth of disinterestedness and downright hostility, from a distance we can see that here is a body of work more than worthy of investigation. For both major sets of piano pieces that Simon Callaghan presents here are but two from a significant output of solo piano music by a composer who was himself a gifted pianist – as the programmes of his three Wigmore Hall recitals would tend to confirm. Coke's set of Twenty-Four Preludes date from between 1938 and 1941 and are dedicated to his mother. They follow a sequence of rising fifths, starting from C major, with each Prelude followed by one in the relative minor; thus, they can be performed singly, as a selection, or – as we experience them here – as a large-scale continuous sequence.

The contemporaneous 15 Variations and Finale in C minor date from 1939, and may have been suggested by Rachmaninoff's 'Corelli' Variations Opus

42; they are dedicated to another distinguished musical friend, Prince George Chavchavadze, a highly-regarded international pianist of the day, an exiled member of the Romanov dynasty and a man who was also often noted, one has to say, for his considerable sexual athleticism and wide-ranging proclivities in that area.

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Simon Callaghan would like to thank Chesterfield Library, Griselda Brook, Christopher Darwin, Rupert Ridgewell, Jonathan Tindall and Steinway & Sons London for their invaluable assistance.

Coke (left) with his mother and Harold Hemming.

Harold and his wife were Canadians who moved to London in about 1930. They were great family friends and it was in their house in Elsworth Road NW3 that Roger stayed in the 1930s.



SIMON CALLAGHAN

Steinway Artist **Simon Callaghan** is in constant demand internationally as a soloist and chamber musician. Highlights include Royal Festival Hall, Wigmore Hall, Symphony Hall Birmingham, St David's Hall Cardiff, a concerto performance with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, tours of Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Thailand and numerous broadcasts on radio and television. As Artistic Director of the famous Conway Hall Sunday Concert series, he is strongly dedicated to chamber music and is a founder member of the Werther Ensemble and the Parnassius Piano Duo.

Callaghan has also worked at the Banff Centre (Canada), giving numerous recitals on both harpsichord and piano, most recently in collaboration with the 'cellist Raphael Wallfisch. He has a long-standing partnership with the actor Timothy West promoting the much-neglected repertoire for reciter and piano, notably Richard Strauss's *Enoch Arden*. Equally at home performing lesser-known pieces as in the mainstream repertoire, he recently gave a rare performance of Michael Tippett's *Piano* and the first performance since 1946 of Medtner's *Third Piano Concerto*.

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