

## William Wordsworth: Cheesecombe Suite for piano solo (1945)

I first discovered William Wordsworth's (1908-88) music back in 1975. I had been assiduously exploring the record browsers in the music department of Harrods' Knightsbridge store. Amongst the usual fare, I found two Lyrita albums of piano music: Franz Reizenstein (RCS19) and William Wordsworth (RCS.13). I immediately bought them, despite having no clue as to their sound world: the prestigious record label was reason enough. After returning home to Glasgow I listened to both with eager anticipation. I confess that I was a little disappointed. Both albums presented music very different to the diet of Vaughan Williams, Elgar and Delius that I was exploring at that time.



I had imagined that the *Cheesecombe Suite* would have been a 'pastoral' ramble, clearly inspired by some real or imaginary place in the depths of the English countryside. In fact, it was probably the title that persuaded me to buy this record of music by a composer I knew nothing about.

Interestingly, Mosco Carner, writing a short review of an early performance of the Suite in *The Daily Telegraph* (24 October 1950) pointed out that on the previous evening, pianist Frank Merrick had included the *Cheesecombe Suite* in his recital at the Conway Hall. He felt that this 'proved to be *pastoral* [my italics] music as its name suggests, not particularly pianistic in character but unpretentiously pleasing.' Other works at Merrick's recital included Prokofiev's Third Sonata.

The 'pastoral character of the music is not a view I would concur with. In fact, it is one of the reasons that I did not warm to this Suite in 1975: it did not evoke (for me) a mood of topography or countryside meditations.

William Wordsworth's *Cheesecombe Suite* was composed in the spring of 1945. The work carries the following dedication: 'To my friends B.A., C.A., D.C., and G.E. whose initials provide the theme for these pieces.' At this point I would only be guessing in trying to tie a name down to each set of initials.

There is some discussion as to where 'Cheesecombe' is, and the composer's relation to it. Roger Fiske, (*The Gramophone* June 1963) presumes that it is the name of the Wordsworth's house at Hindhead. I think that he is wrong. At the time of composition, Wordsworth was living at Little Hatch, Churt Road, Hindhead. This village, which is the highest in Surrey, lies some 10 miles south west of Guildford. It is close to the Devil's Punch Bowl, which is a local beauty spot.

Paul Conway (*MusicWeb International*) has suggested that 'Cheesecombe' was in fact located near Lyme Regis in the village of Harcombe. It was here that Wordsworth, who was a conscientious objector, may have carried out agricultural war-work in lieu of military service.

Harry Croft-Jackson provided the original liner notes for the Lyrita LP. I quote the description of each movement:

Prelude: Pensive *Andante tranquillo* in A minor, full of charm and innocence.

Scherzo: A deft *Allegro scherzando* in G. Although written in simple triple time [3/4] the beats often divide into triplets as the music chuckles its way through a series of impish key changes.

Nocturne: An example of the composer's ability to express with economy and restraint a sustained, nostalgic mood.

Fughetta: Like the Prelude, this 9/8 *Allegretto* is in A minor, with a soft aeolian flavour. Subject and answer are announced 'delicato,' and are followed by three 'pianissimo' middle entries. There after the Fughetta gradually mounts in excitement to a vigorous conclusion.

Paul Conway rewrote the liner notes for the CD reissue of this album. The only additional comments he makes is to note the 'capricious key changes and constantly varying rhythms' making 'the gambolling Scherzo a light-hearted romp, revealing the composer's humorous side.' He believes that the Nocturne 'is the most profound movement'. This initially wistful pieces 'intensifies to generate a powerful climax, before falling back on its initial reveries'.

The premiere of Wordsworth's *Cheesecombe Suite* was given during a lunchtime concert at the Wigmore Hall, on 19 May 1948. Miss Yvonne Enoch's playing was apparently too tentative to 'invest its four short movements with positive character.' (*The Times*, 24 May 1948).

The sheet music for the *Cheesecombe Suite* was published in 1948 by Lengnick, London. It was reviewed by Kenneth Avery in *Music and Letters* (July 1948). Avery considered that 'Mr Wordsworth's suite of four pieces...shows considerable ability in working with insufficient material. The pieces all have the disadvantage of sounding uninteresting, although this composer's great talent is apparent on every page he writes. Pianists are recommended to purchase the '*Cheesecombe Suite*', however, for it is, after all, the most accessible work by one of the foremost of our younger composers.'

The Prelude & Fughetta from the Suite was played on Radio 3 during a recital of Scottish music by pianist William Wright on 18 October 1974. Also included in that programme was Wordsworth's 'Valediction' for piano (Op.82) which was composed for Ronald Stevenson, in memory of Joe Watson. It was later arranged by the composer for full orchestra (op.82a, 1969). Other pieces included the now forgotten Suite by John Bevan Baker (1926-94) and Frank Spedding's (1902-84) Eight Impromptus after Paganini.

The recording history is straightforward. Originally released by Lyrita in 1963, this is a mono album. Margret Kitchin (1914-2008) also featured Wordsworth's splendid Piano Sonata in D minor, op.13 (1938) and the rhapsodic Ballade, Op.41 (1949). The music was recorded during July 1959 in the 'Music Room' of Lyrita record producer Richard Itter's house.

The original LP was discussed in *The Gramophone* (June 1963) by Roger Fiske. He was moderately impressed and stated that 'the final fughetta...ends splendidly and is very well played.' He considered that the Prelude and the Nocturne 'took too long to end, but...are otherwise pleasant enough.'

The album was re-released in identical packaging in 1975. In 2007 the LP was remastered for CD as REAM.2106. This disc also includes Margaret Kitchin's splendid recordings of Iain Hamilton's Piano Sonata, op,13 (1951) and Michael Tippett's Piano Sonata No.1 (1937, rev. 1954).

In 1975 Michael Oliver reviewed the LP (vinyl) re-release of this album for *The Gramophone* (September 1975). His thoughts on the composer in general are worth recalling. He considers

that Wordsworth is a ‘perplexing composer...despite writing in an accessibly tonal language and being superficially dismissible as a late romantic...’ The ‘predominant mood of his music is a craggy brooding darkness, degenerating at times into glum heaviness or apparently aimless wanderings, but at its best conveying a brusque, unaccommodating nobility. It is not music for every day and it is undeniably uneven in quality, but there are several passages... whose sombre gravity evokes the world of Thomas Hardy or even of the composer’s namesake and kinsman himself.’ This is a cue for a dissertation.

Rob Barnett (*MusicWeb International*, 8 September 2008), reviewing the CD release, writes about the *Cheesecombe Suite*: ‘...darkling gloom pervades both the *Prelude* and the pensive overcast tolling of the *Nocturne* but is dispelled by the devil-may-care angularity of the *Scherzo*. The little *Fughetta* finale comes and goes in a few turbulent moments.’

Writing for *MusicWeb International*, (8 October 2008) Jonathan Woolf explained that the ‘*Cheesecombe Suite*...opens in vertiginous [lofty] but wholly tonal style and has its ‘darkling thrush’ [Thomas Hardy] moments. Cool and still and also vaguely watchful the *Nocturne* sits at its heart but there’s also a frantic *Fughetta* to end things – almost, it has to be said, in hysteria. Adherents of British piano music of the period will want to seek out Margaret Kitchin’s pioneering disc...’

For the record, I feel that William Wordsworth’s *Cheesecombe Suite* is a delightful excursion into neo-classicism, that has touches of romanticism, little in the way of modernism and virtually nothing of the ‘cow and gate.’ Despite its occasional lack of pianism, it is a worthy Suite that deserves pianists’ attention in 2017.

The *Cheesecombe Suite*, finely played by Margaret Kitchin, can be heard on LYRITA REAM 2016. It remains the sole recording of this work. It is available to subscribers of the Naxos Music Library.

**John France September 2017 (revised December 2017)**