

JOHN SYKES

**THEME and VARIATIONS
in G minor**

for Pianoforte

The JOHN SYKES PROJECT

MMXII

John Austin Sykes (1909 – 1962)



John Sykes was born in India in 1909 - in India because his father was in the Indian civil service. Back in England he won a music scholarship to Clifton College, Bristol, and whilst still a schoolboy gained his A.R.C.O. and F.R.C.O. In 1928 he went up to Oxford as organ scholar at Balliol. In those days, undergraduates were not able to read Music as a first degree, so Sykes read Modern History, and followed it up with a B.Mus. One contemporary source considered him to have been the most distinguished musical undergraduate of his time. He was president of the famous Oxford University Opera Club and active in the Music Club and Union. He was sufficiently important to be given a full-page spread in the undergraduate newspaper 'Isis' – which referred to his ability to 'make a piano do anything but swim'. He was a friend of the left-wing poet Randall Swingler, and also a contemporary of W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis, whom he knew, so it is perhaps not surprising that he was a fluent, though not distinguished, poet. After Oxford, he went to London, to the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition under Ralph Vaughan Williams, R. O. Morris and Gordon Jacob. In 1936 he was appointed to the staff of Kingswood School, and there he stayed, except for war service, until he died of cancer in the school Sanatorium in the summer term of 1962.

The John Sykes Project is an informal group of former pupils who are transcribing and publishing his music on the internet, and encouraging its performance.

www.jasykes.online
sykesproj@talktalk.net

Theme and Variations in G minor

The manuscript of this piece (in the John Sykes Archive at Kingswood School, Bath, kindly donated by the Randall Swingler archive) shows that it was composed in January 1941 – the dark days of the second World War. He started it whilst staying with his sister Christal in Worcester and finished it after term had started and he was back at Kingswood School (which was then in wartime exile in Uppingham, cheek by jowl with Uppingham School and sharing its facilities). Later that year he was start his war service as a conscientious objector, involved with such work as building sewers. Its provenance from the Swingler archive shows that Sykes must have shown it (at the least) to the Peppin twins¹, and probably to the other pianists and musicians (such as James Gibb and Alan Bush) who congregated at the Swinglers' London home and later at Pebmarsh.

The music is obviously written by a virtuoso pianist, and requires a formidable technique in performance – someone who can “make a piano do anything but swim”². The innocuous theme (a mere four bars long) allows great freedom of approach in its variations, of which there are fifteen. The last (labelled *Finale*) forms an exuberant peroration, being much longer than its predecessors, taking up about a quarter of the work.

¹ Geraldine and Mary Peppin were a concert pianist duo well known in the middle years of the twentieth century. Geraldine married the poet Randall Swingler, and later became a professor at the Guildhall School of Music. The Swinglers' home in 'Fitzrovia', and later in their remote Essex cottage near Pebmarsh, was a centre for left wing intellectuals such as Louis MacNeice, E. P. Thompson, Alan Bush and Alan Rawsthorne. Coincidentally, Randall Swingler was called up for military service at the end of 1941, more or less when Sykes' civilian service started.

² 'The Isis', Nov. 25, 1931, where he is that issue's "Isis Idol", and "Even his consumption of beer, which is as dexterous as his playing, is performed with something of the same dexterity."

Theme and Variations in G minor

John Sykes

Grave | **Andante**

f *dim.* *pp* *legato e sostenuto*

6 *rit.*

9 **a tempo**

12 *rit.* **Poco piu mosso** *pp mp cantabile*

14 *mf f dim.* *rit.*

16 **a tempo**

mp

18

pp *dolciss.* **rall.**

20 **rall.** **IV Allegro**

mf *f* *pp* *p*

23

mp

28

mf

32

f

V Moderato

36 *ff* *p legato e dolce* *tr*

38 *tr*

40 *tr*

42

44 *tr*

46 *tr*

48

leggero dim. pp

rit. tr.

49 **VI Allegro scherzando**

mp sf p

53

mf

57

f

60 **VII Quasi recitativo: andante**

sf p f pesante tr.

63

pp tranquillo pp

rall.

a tempo accel.

a tempo

rit.

66

mp p

poco accel.

R.H.

L.H.

70

f pesante

f pesante

R.H.

72

ff pp

rapide e cresc.

ff pp

rapide e cresc.

a tempo

accel.

a tempo

rit.

75

sf f cresc. ff p mp dim.

sf f cresc. ff p mp dim.

VIII Con brio

80

pp p

pp p

85

tr mf

tr mf

90

f

94

98

tremolo

mp

102

non rit. 8va

IX Andant ma non troppo

108

pp

cantabile e con rubato

p

114

119 *mp*

124

128 *p*

132 *rall.* *pp*

137 **X** *L'istesso tempo ma poco capriccioso*

pp [*quasi pizz.*] *pp* *pp*

143 *smorz.* *mf* *mp* *pp* (*delicato*)

149 **a tempo**

p *pp*

154

pp *mf* *cresc. molto* *ff con forza*

158

f *dim.* *p* *rall.*

162 **a tempo** **smorz.** **rit.**

pp *pp*

168 **XI Maestoso: moderato allegro**

ppp *f*

172

ppp *f*

175

ff f

This system contains measures 175, 176, and 177. The right hand features a series of chords with a descending bass line, while the left hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. Dynamic markings include *ff* and *f*.

178

This system contains measures 178 and 179. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties, and the left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment.

180

This system contains measures 180 and 181. The right hand features a melodic line with a slur and a tie, and the left hand has eighth-note accompaniment.

182

This system contains measures 182 and 183. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties, and the left hand has eighth-note accompaniment.

184

This system contains measures 184 and 185. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties, and the left hand has eighth-note accompaniment.

186

ff

This system contains measures 186 and 187. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties, and the left hand has eighth-note accompaniment. A dynamic marking of *ff* is present.

188

Musical score for measures 188-189. The right hand features a melodic line with slurs and ties, while the left hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

190

Musical score for measures 190-191. The right hand continues the melodic line with slurs and ties. The left hand accompaniment remains consistent. The key signature changes to two flats (Bb, Eb) in measure 191.

192

poco rit.

Musical score for measures 192-193. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties. The left hand accompaniment is rhythmic. The tempo marking "poco rit." is placed above the right hand staff.

194 **XII** Poco piu mosso

f energico

Musical score for measures 194-195. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties. The left hand accompaniment is rhythmic. The tempo marking "Poco piu mosso" and dynamic marking "*f* energico" are present.

196

sempre f

Musical score for measures 196-198. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties. The left hand accompaniment is rhythmic. The dynamic marking "*sempre f*" is present.

199

Musical score for measures 199-200. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties. The left hand accompaniment is rhythmic.

201

trm

204

206

208

cresc. e non rit.

sf

XIII Poco Largo R.H.

210

R.H. *f*

f pesante

215

ff 5 [poco largamente] [a tempo] 5

8va

IV

Detailed description: This system contains measures 215 to 218. The right hand features a complex melodic line with many accidentals and slurs. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment of chords. Dynamics include fortissimo (ff) and a dynamic hairpin. Performance markings include 'poco largamente' and 'a tempo'. A '5' is written below the first measure, and another '5' is below the last measure. An '8va' marking is above the first measure, and a Roman numeral 'IV' is above the second measure.

219

5 5 5 5

f sonore

Detailed description: This system contains measures 219 to 222. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and a final flourish. The left hand continues with chordal accompaniment. Dynamics include fortissimo (f) and 'f sonore'. The number '5' is written below each of the four measures.

223

ff

5 6

Detailed description: This system contains measures 223 to 225. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. Dynamics include fortissimo (ff). The numbers '5' and '6' are written below the last two measures.

226

rit. molto dim. pp

15 15 15

8 8 8

[Attacca XIV subito]

Detailed description: This system contains measures 226 to 228. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and a final note. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. Dynamics include fortissimo (fff), 'molto dim.', and pianissimo (pp). Performance markings include 'rit.' and '[Attacca XIV subito]'. The number '15' is written below each of the three measures, and the number '8' is written below each of the three measures.

229 **XIV** Molto Allegro

f vivace

Detailed description: This system contains measures 229 to 231. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. Dynamics include fortissimo (f) and 'vivace'.

231

Musical score for measures 231-232. The treble clef staff features a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the bass clef staff provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and eighth notes.

233

Musical score for measures 233-234. The treble clef staff continues the melodic line with a slur and an accent. The bass clef staff features a steady accompaniment of chords.

235

Musical score for measures 235-236. The treble clef staff has a melodic line with a slur and an accent. The bass clef staff continues with a steady accompaniment of chords.

236

Musical score for measures 236-237. The treble clef staff has a melodic line with a slur and an accent. The bass clef staff continues with a steady accompaniment of chords.

237 *Giocoso*

mf poco leggiero

Musical score for measures 237-238. The treble clef staff has a melodic line with a slur and an accent. The bass clef staff continues with a steady accompaniment of chords.

239 *8va*

f

Musical score for measures 239-240. The treble clef staff has a melodic line with a slur and an accent. The bass clef staff continues with a steady accompaniment of chords.

240

ff

marcato

Musical score for measures 240-241. The treble clef staff has a melodic line with a slur and an accent. The bass clef staff continues with a steady accompaniment of chords.

241 *b* *>*

242 *ff*

243 *f* *8va* *ff*

245 *non rit.* *feroce* *ff*

Finale

248 **XV** *Alla marcia: non troppo allegro* *mp* *poco staccato*

253 *mf* *piu pesante*

257

3 *f*

261

3 *8^{va}*

264

3 *8^{va}* *dim.*

267

rit. **Piu moderato**

p *pp* *p espressivo*

271

3 *mp*

274

3 *pp* *p*

277

p *cresc.*

279

mf *f* *cresc. molto* *poco rit.*

281

ff *appassionato*

283

piu ff

285

allarg. *fff* *ff* *dim.* *f* *sonore*

poco rit. e smorz. Tempo di marcia

288

mp *p poco misterioso*
[basso poco staccato]

292

mf

296

piu pesante

300

f

304

f

306

f

piu allegro

309

ff vivo *f* [legato]

312

animato [marcato]

315

317

sempre animato *f*

318

319

320

[non troppo allegro]

ff con forza e brillante

322

324

cresc.

Largamente

ff Grandioso

328

fff

trionfale

molto rall.

fff