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**John Turner –
Grand Master
of the Recorder**

by Peter Dickinson

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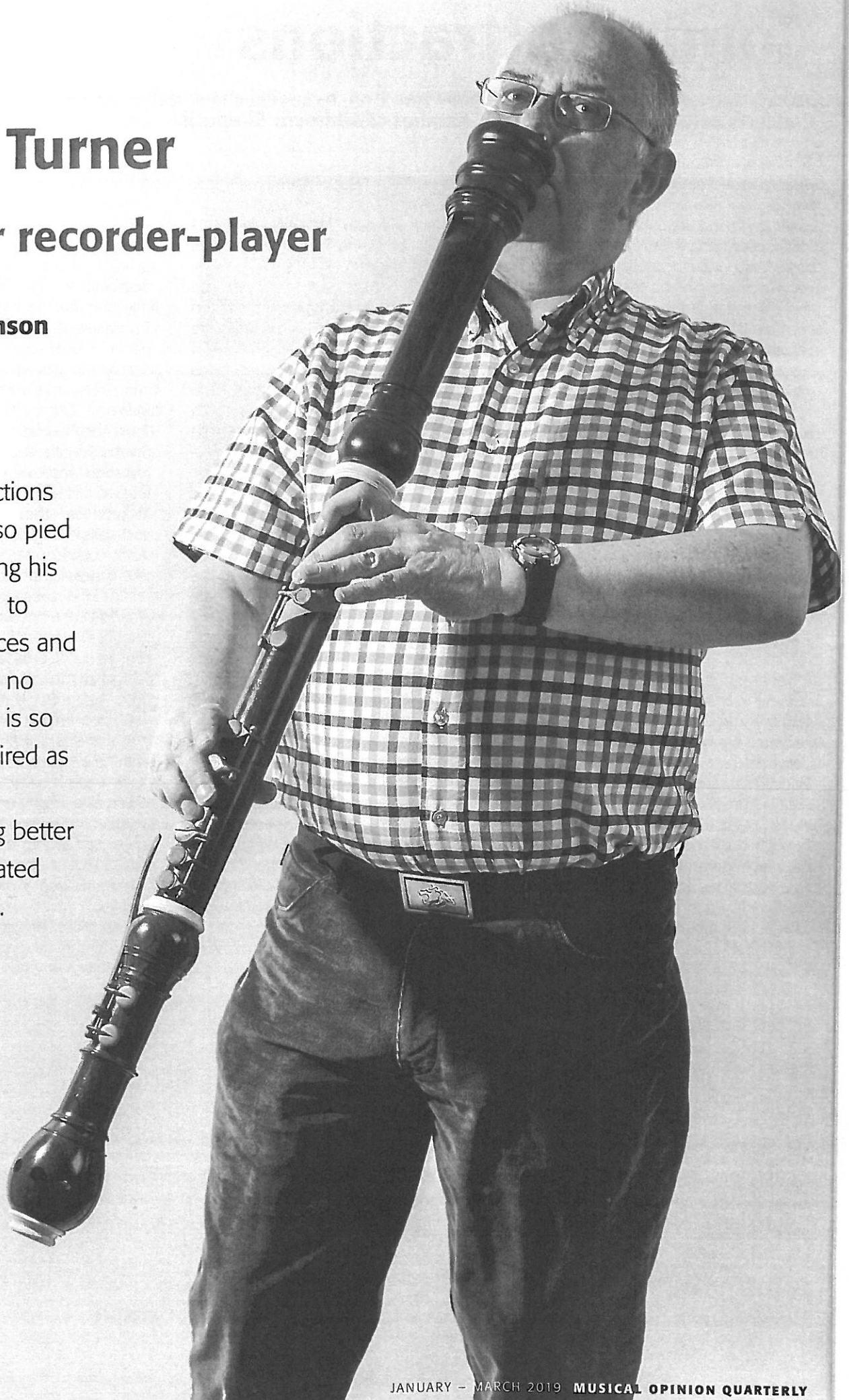
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John Turner

Master recorder-player

Peter Dickinson

Turner functions as a virtuoso piper leading his composers to performances and recordings: no wonder he is so much admired as composers like nothing better than dedicated performers.



The author pays tribute to the virtuoso recorder player who has created a substantial repertoire and supported hundreds of composers known and unknown.

The figures for the premieres given by the pioneering British recorder player, John Turner, are overwhelming. Almost a hundred solo works; over two hundred with recorder and keyboard; nearly three hundred involving recorder and voice; and that's before including the over sixty works for recorder and orchestra and some seventy-six CDs. This represents a phenomenal level of activity over many years and it is unique. How did all this start? Turner's mother was a good pianist who taught piano and French and her father, who ran a haulage service, was for many years choirmaster of All Saints, Shillong, Assam, and a masonic organist in Calcutta. Turner has said that his main influences have been his school music teacher; the composer Thomas Pitfield; and his colleague and friend, the early music pioneer David Munrow.

Douglas Steele (1910-1999) was a music master at Stockport Grammar School from 1960-71; had been Beecham's secretary; and was involved in the setting up of Cheethams as a specialist music school.¹ Turner admires him as a composer – he admires most of his composers – but Steele had a troubled life with some instability, often destroying his own music. Steele gave Turner encouragement – he started by playing the flute – and was the first composer to write a piece for him, which is now on the examination syllabus of Trinity College, London.

Thomas Pitfield (1903-99) was an English Georgian composer, ruthlessly old-fashioned, of what at first appears to be not particularly distinctive music. But thanks to the efforts of supporters such as Turner and a crop of fine performers, he has gained a substantial place in the record catalogue since his death. Pitfield was centred in the musical life of Manchester, later teaching at the Royal Northern College; he wrote poetry, which belonged with the pre-war English Georgians; and produced many sketches and illustrations. He suffered appalling privations in reaching and sustaining a musical career but was widely appreciated in his Manchester context. Pitfield gave Turner an initiation into the wider musical

world and introduced him to composers such as William Alwyn and John McCabe, who became a lifelong friend.

David Munrow (1942-76) brought early music to a wide public through his unquenchable enthusiasm expressed in international concerts and his long-running BBC Radio 3 series *Pied Piper*. In 1970 he wrote the soundtrack for the film *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* which brought renaissance instruments to a wide public. His tremendous initiative was sadly not to be continued for long with his premature death. Turner met Munrow at Cambridge where Turner was Senior Scholar in Law at Fitzwilliam and Munrow read English at Pembroke. They were both in the Early Music Consort of London; Turner played early music with the Academy of Ancient Music, the English Chamber Orchestra, the Academy of St Martin's in the Fields, the English Baroque Soloists and many more. He has recorded five sets of the Brandenburg Concertos. Such is Turner's emphasis on his composers that his discography lists his many recordings of the standard repertoire in an addendum merely headed Also. After Cambridge, Turner settled down – if such a hyper-active person ever does – to a legal career with George Davis & Co. in Manchester, eventually becoming a senior partner. Here the law and music overlapped fruitfully as Turner acted for many musical organisations and individuals.

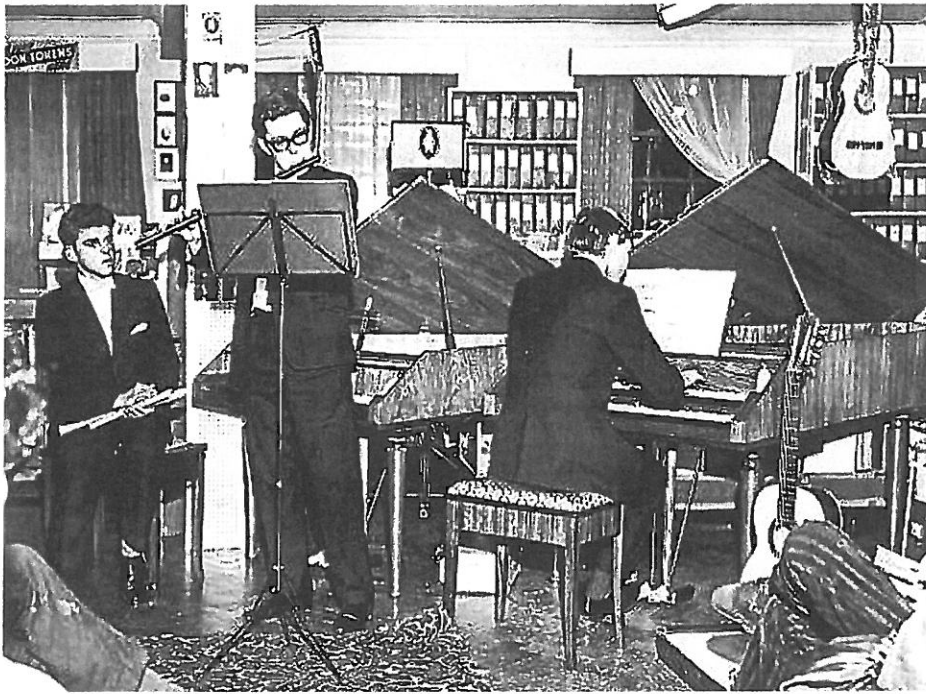
But what of the huge corpus of music Turner has brought into being? Admittedly many pieces are short but the range of composers is vast and the recorder repertoire has been transformed. One of the more ambitious CDs is called *English Recorder Concertos*. In a live performance such a role for the recorder can be hazardous, but in a recording judicious balancing can keep the soloist in the picture. Most of the pieces, including John Gardner,

John McCabe, Philip Lane and Norman Kay, are in a light vein and not concertos at all, but Kenneth Leighton's Concerto Op. 80, is a real double concerto for recorder and harpsichord. A serious piece in three movements, with a fine Elegy to finish, it gets an outstanding performance from Turner and the late Keith Elcombe.²

Another CD is called *British Recorder Concertos*. It opens with Peter Hope's Concerto, with strings and percussion, which was a tribute to Turner on his sixtieth birthday. This is fluent, lusciously scored and knowing in the placing of the recorder in different attractive textures. The Intermezzo draws on the bass recorder and the final tarantella is a virtuoso exercise brilliantly delivered. Hans Gal's Concertino was written in 1961 and premiered by Dolmetsch in the version with string quartet: this may be the work's first outing with orchestra from a composer who had a major career in Austria before emigrating here in 1938 and soon being sent to the Isle of Man as an enemy alien. His Concertino is perfectly balanced for the recorder and his large output is now substantially recorded. David Ellis's *Divertimento Elegiaco* in memoriam Ida Carroll is more adventurous, scored for recorder, strings, harp and marimba. Ellis, who was for many years Head of Music at the BBC in Manchester, takes aspects of Carroll's character as the subject of each movement and the final chaconne, where

the soloist plays a medieval bell is an eloquent tribute to the principal of the Northern School of Music in Manchester. Turner has launched some twenty-three works by Ian Parrott, who was Professor at Aberystwyth University for over thirty years until he retired in 1983. He gained some publicity in 1978 when he wrote a book about the spiritualist medium Rosemary Brown, who claimed to have received dictated music from deceased composers. At the time the claim was seriously investigated and some distinguished

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musicians were impressed. Parrott's four-movement *Sinfonia Concertante* is an eccentric duo concertino for recorder and violin. A CD called *English Recorder Music* adds further concertos – Malcolm Arnold's with strings, orchestrated from the 1953 sonatina by Philip Lane; Pitfield's Concerto for recorder, string orchestra and percussion; a Concertino by David Lyon; and pretty pastel shades in Edward Gregson's *Three Matisse Impressions*.³

An ambitious release came out in 2015: two CDs called *The Nostalgic Recorder* and *The Proud Recorder*. This time with string quartet which gives the soloist less competition than orchestras. *The Nostalgic* CD starts with Anthony Hopkins, which could well be nostalgic for older listeners who remember his BBC talks which ran for some thirty-five years. His *Methuselah Dances* come from pastiche incidental music written in 1946 for a production of Shaw's play. Turner also schemed a two-CD set based on Hopkins' music in celebration of his ninetieth birthday. He wrote or rewrote plenty for recorder and the CD, which includes tributes from eight composers, was supported by some three hundred subscribers.⁴ Of the better-known composers in *The Nostalgic Recorder* John McCabe provides a *Meditation on a Northern Ballad*; Antony Gilbert, who can be uncompromising, is amiable in a brief Dance for recorder and cello; David Ellis responds to the world of Astaire and Rogers in *Fred's Blue Ginger Staircase Music*. The first piece turns into a kind of Erik Satie waltz; the second shows off

Turner rarely heard in a blues; mode; and the last is a helter-skelter. Geoffrey Poole calls his *City Square*, based on architecture in four cities, 'a festive entertainment' and, like countless pieces, it's a tribute to Turner: this one has been widely performed. *The Proud Recorder* starts with a Quintet by the late Patric Stanford, a prolific composer who once attracted considerable attention and whose works gained international awards. His Quintet is ingeniously laid out with a first movement where assertive strings are effectively set against a penetratingly high recorder. The final score was interrupted by Stanford's death so Turner had some editorial work to do. It confirms Turner's claim that 'composers can write for the instrument in a serious context'. Steve Plews is from a jazz background so brings something different to his task in *Magellan in Moscow*, of all weird time-travelling prospects. His cryptic gestures sometimes challenge the soloist even with the skilled editing of Richard Scott, the technical wizard in many of these recordings.

Recorder Fireworks is the title of another collection, this time for recorder with harpsichord, an apt duo since the dry keyboard sound points up the recorder's sostenuto.⁵ Many performers, wanting to show off, would have made arrangements of well-known material from various

periods, but Turner has assembled seven works specially written for him and this recording, adding on a polished *Miniature Suite* by David Lord written for David Munrow in 1969 and Rubbra's *Meditation on Coeurs désolés* of 1949, which celebrates the glories of the triad. Fireworks with Turner are effortlessly in the line of normal business and this is an attractive collection.

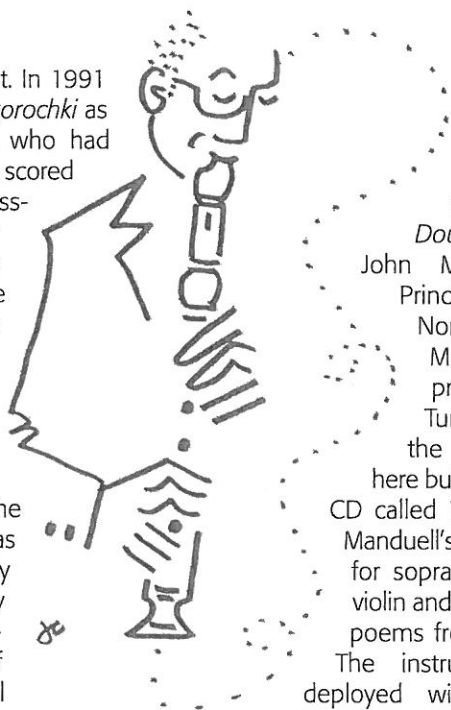
When John McCabe died in 2015 John Turner assembled tributes from nineteen composers who had known him and these came out on CD as *A Garland for John McCabe*.⁶ Many of these were premiered at the William Alwyn Festival at Blythburgh in 2016 and some of them are not merely pièces d'occasion. David Matthews used his tribute as the last movement of his Sonatina for clarinet, viola and piano. The oldest composer represented is Gerard Schurmann now in his mid-nineties but still with a flourishing international career. His *Memento* for piano is another sad piece in this cornucopia of elegies. Chris Gunning, in his *Danse des fourmis*, and I, in my own *A Rag for McCabe*, draw attention to McCabe's sense of humour and Gary Carpenter's fun tribute is named after one of McCabe's favourite whiskies. Emily Howard is the youngest composer included. Her *Outback* packs a lot into an unsettling less than three minutes.

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For many years Turner's Christmas card was the first to arrive and it always contained his own specially written carol, usually for SATB. Some of them got performed and *A Song on the Birth of Christ* was broadcast by the BBC Singers. Now the whole collection of twenty-three carols and a Canzonetta for recorder and harp have been recorded and it is likely that these celebrations of traditional Christmas will be drawn on widely for Christmas fare based on these excellent performances, most of which are dedicated to friends and colleagues.⁷

Turner's range as a performer is far wider than some of the lighter pieces in

these collections suggest. In 1991 Anthony Gilbert wrote *Igorochki* as a tribute to Stravinsky, who had died twenty years earlier, scored imaginatively for percussion, cimbalom, guitar and string quartet. Some unusual techniques are applied to the recorders used – multi-phonic, humming and some improvisation, climaxing in a moto perpetuo with strongly overblown notes on the bass recorder. Turner has given some twenty premiers of works by Gilbert, a prolific composer who was head of Composition at the Royal Northern College until 1999.⁸ Another composer supported by Turner is Gordon Crosse, who was launched at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1964 and subsequently supported by Britten. Crosse's early achievements such as *Changes* for chorus and orchestra, the opera *Purgatory*, *Ariadne* for oboe and orchestra and *Memories of Morning: Night* for mezzo and orchestra established him as a major figure. In 1990 Crosse ceased to compose and worked as a computer programmer for some eighteen years. It was Turner who rekindled his creativity and eventually gave thirteen premieres and some recordings. Crosse features on *Mixed Doubles: Double Concertos* by John Manduell and Gordon Crosse with *Brief Encounter*, for oboe d'amore, recorder and strings.⁹ This is an example of how, even in the recording, setting any kind of oboe against the recorder makes for unfair competition. Some of Turner's tributes in live performances have highlighted this imbalance when composers were offered an ensemble with both instruments. However, Crosse's recent *On the Shoreline* for recorder and seven solo strings is a powerfully atmospheric piece, brilliantly played, arising out of landscape in the most direct way. The CD sleeve shows Crosse's house on the northern island of Papa Westray in the Orkneys from across the bay – an evocative picture which



amplifies the impression of the sound-world it inspired.¹⁰ The other half of *Mixed Doubles* is devoted to John Manduell, founding Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music and an entrepreneur of genius. Turner doesn't play in the Manduell pieces here but he does on another CD called *The Rose Tree* with Manduell's *Verses from Calvary* for soprano, recorder, oboe, violin and cello, setting strange poems from a play by Yeats. The instrumental group is deployed with sensitivity and Leslie-Jane Rogers, in contrasting

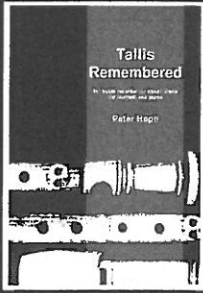
moods, shines as soloist.¹¹ This CD, in memory of Basil Deane who was Professor at Manchester University, also has the distinction of launching the first recording of Sir Lennox Berkeley's late work *Una and the Lion*, Op. 98, for soprano, recorder, gamba and harpsichord to verses from Spenser's *The Fairy Queen*.

Curiosities include the only piece Leonard Bernstein wrote for the recorder. Humphrey Burton, who became Bernstein's biographer, was working with him, filming concerts with the Vienna Philharmonic, and Burton's daughter, Helena, asked Bernstein if he'd write a piece for recorder, which she played well. He did,


at the end of 1988 – *Variations on an Octatonic Scale* for recorder and cello; Turner gave the premiere in 1997; and Bernstein extended the piece as the slow movement of his Concerto for Orchestra soon after he wrote it.¹² It's an oddly attractive piece with recorder flutter-tonguing, ending with the soloist on his own.

No account of Turner's achievements is complete without reference to his detective work on behalf of composers. He has keenly supported the work of Alan Rawsthorne and was responsible for the discovery of his Chamber Cantata, long considered lost, in the papers of the American writer and composer Halsey Stevens at the Library of Congress.¹³ It was also Turner's idea to commission a version of Rawsthorne's *Practical Cats* (TS Eliot) for speaker and piano, which appears on the same disc. The novelist


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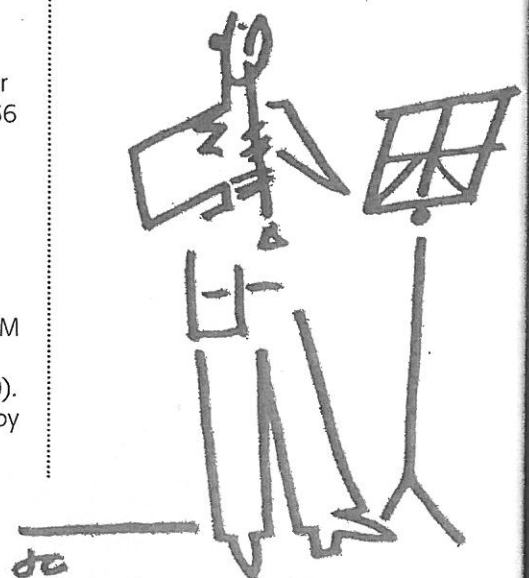
John Turner
and Julie

Antony Burgess wrote some two-hundred and fifty musical works which are virtually unknown. Turner found four works with recorder and put them onto an all-Burgess CD.¹⁴ Further, he supported an unknown composer, Roy Heaton Smith (1928-2014), with a two-CD set of works mostly unpublished. Not only that, but Turner persuaded eighty subscribers to sign up to this more-or-less blind date. There are three works with recorder but Heaton is not as considerate as some composers in allowing for the competition with other instruments. Pieces like his String Quartet are refreshingly uncomplicated, entirely without angst by turning a blind ear to anything relating to the Second Viennese School and obviously grateful to play. In these exaggerated times it is hard to see how Heaton Smith could make an impact but he, like other composers championed by Turner, couldn't get a better chance than in these polished performances.¹⁵

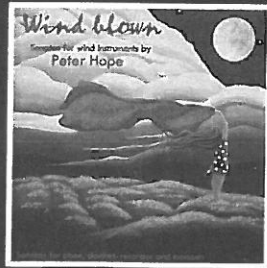
It has been possible to draw attention here to only a fraction of Turner's output. And very selectively at that. Many of his commissions have been tributes to composers connected with Manchester, which has long had its own vigorous musical life. Turner functions as a virtuoso piper leading his composers to performances and recordings: no wonder he is so much admired as composers like nothing better than dedicated performers. ■

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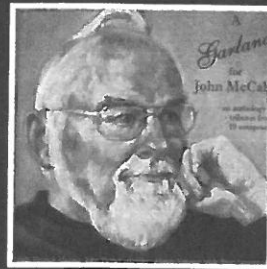


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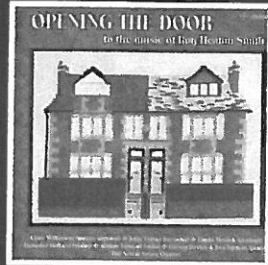
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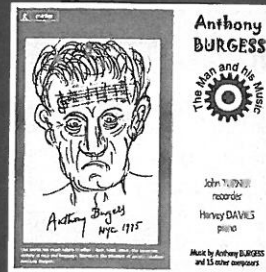
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