

Looking at Alan Rawsthorne's *Pierrette* for violin and piano (c.1934)

by John France

I recently discovered Alan Rawsthorne's (1905-71) charming miniature *Pierrette* for violin and piano. It has recently been released on the SOMM record label (see below for details). Although this piece has been recorded before, I seem to have missed out on hearing it. Some would argue that *Pierrette* is a trivial piece, full of salon music clichés and lacking depth and integrity. I disagree.



(approx. 1946) ©The Rawsthorne Trust

There is some debate as to the circumstances of composition of *Pierrette*. One view is that it was a wedding present for Rawsthorne's first wife, Jessie Hinchcliffe (1908–1989) who was an accomplished violinist (SOMM CD Liner Notes). She had been a fellow student with Alan at the Royal Manchester College of Music and was then playing in the BBC Symphony Orchestra. They were married on 14 July 1934 at St Martin-in-the-Fields (*Creel*, Vol.8 no.2, 2016, p.45). The marriage was not to last, and they were divorced in 1954. Another view is that it was written for Alan and Jessie to play together (John Belcher, cited Dressler, 2004, p.254) And finally, John McCabe (1999, p.37) wonders if the piece was originally devised for the light music broadcasts of the Adolph

Hallis Quintet, and then rearranged for violin and piano. At that time, Rawsthorne did many arrangements for this ensemble under the pseudonym of 'Alan Jess'.

I was unable to find details of the work's premiere in any reference books; however, it is possible that the Adolph Hallis Quintet gave the first performance of an arrangement of *Pierrette* on Tuesday 9 June 1936, on the BBC National Programme. A work of that title is listed in the contemporary *Radio Times* (5 June 1936) as composed by 'Jess'. This would confirm McCabe's suggestion above. *Pierrette* was composed sometime between 1934 and the summer of 1936.

There are two 'technical' discussions of Alan Rawsthorne's *Pierrette* in the literature. The earliest was by Sebastian Forbes in his essay 'The Chamber Music' in Alan Poulton's *Alan Rawsthorne: Essays on the Music* (1986, p.7). He writes that the 'mood here is very light and suggests little of Pierrot's rage...' I think that Forbes is misreading the work's ethos and title if he was expecting Pierrot's anger to be reflected in the music. The listener needs to understand that the designation is simply referring to a female member of a company of Pierrots and not being descriptive of the emotions and attitudes of that 'typical' character from French pantomime. At the time of composition, many holiday resorts would have had troupes of Pierrots and Pierrettes, who were usually musical entertainers with whitened faces and loose white costumes. Forbes states that 'the fluency and cleverness of the textures point to [Rawsthorne's] sparkling tarantellas of a few years later.' As for the 'tarantella', I imagine that he is thinking of the finale of the Piano Concerto No.1 (1939) or possibly the glittering second half of the Fantasy Overture: Cortège (1945).

As would be expected, John McCabe (op.cit.) in his study of the composer has presented some thoughtful information on this piece. He considers that 'it is a delightful piece of light music, a genre in which major British composers of preceding generations excelled.' McCabe adds that although it is 'untypical in its straightforward diatonic style, *Pierrette* does occasionally present the authentic Rawsthorne.' This is most obvious in the use of 'Prokofievian tonal sideslips' and the odd chord or texture that was characteristic of Rawsthorne. He further suggests that the aesthetic of *Pierrette* may nod towards William Walton's *Siesta* or 'the more Mediterranean numbers of *Façade*...'

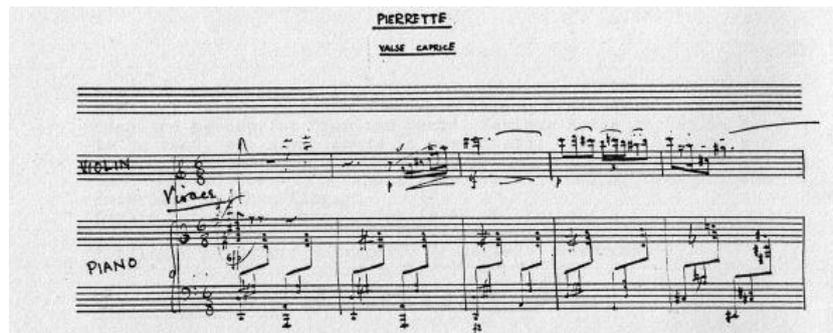


Figure 1

As to the form of *Pierrette*, McCabe sees that it is basically a tune repeated over with a straightforward 'oom-pah-pah' piano accompaniment (Fig.1). This is a little disingenuous. Rawsthorne has introduced some subtle variations to the piano part, including arpeggiated chords, a little arabesque, and even a scotch snap or two.



Figure 2

The violin part is quite varied as well, with characteristic chromatic passages and some bewitching double stopping (Fig.2). Finally, towards the conclusion of the piece, there is a brief slower section (*poco meno*) which McCabe wonders if it might have been 'a delicate, even subconscious remembrance of the Italian organ-grinder who used to entertain the Haslingden [Lancashire] populace in the Rawsthorne's childhood.' I think this may be an allusion too far.

Pierrette is a splendid example of what can be achieved when a 'serious' composer decides to write a little bit of pastiche: as suggested above, Walton's *Façade* is a large-scale example of this. *Pierrette* is elegant and delightful and was a stylish tribute to his wife.

At present, there are two recordings of Alan Rawsthorne's *Pierrette* for violin and piano. The most recent is Clare Howick and Simon Callaghan on the SOMM Label, SOMMCD 0610. Major works on this remarkable album include William Walton's Sonata, William Alwyn's Sonatina and Kenneth Leighton's Sonata No.1, all for violin and piano. Miniatures on this CD feature Gordon Jacob's Elegy, Caprice and *Little Dancer* as well as Lennox Berkeley's Elegy op.33, no.3 and his Toccata, op.33, no.3.

In the late 1990s Benedict Holland (violin) and Alan Cuckston (piano) issued an album of *Alan Rawsthorne's Music for violin and piano* (Swinsty Records FEW121CD). The disc included the Concertante and the Sonata, both for violin and piano as well as the *Four Bagatelles*, *Four Romantic Pieces*, and the *Ballade* for piano solo.

Pierrette as played by Benedict Holland and Alan Cuckston has been uploaded to [YouTube](#).

A facsimile of Rawsthorne's manuscript was published in the first edition of *The Creel*, the Rawsthorne Society's Journal (August 1989). Forsyth's music publisher, based in Manchester, has had this holograph of *Pierrette* 'engraved' and published as part of the *British Heritage Series: Jewels for violin*

highlighting British composers of the modern era and 'dedicated to increasing awareness of the music of this period.'

Acknowledgement: Musical excerpts from Alan Rawsthorne's *Pierrette* for violin and piano © Forsyth Brothers Ltd, 126 Deansgate Manchester M3 2GR UK <https://www.forsyths.co.uk/>. Reproduced by permission.

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