



**The Life and Music of
Eric Coates**

Michael Payne

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THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF ERIC COATES

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The Life and Music of Eric Coates

MICHAEL PAYNE

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Abbreviations and Library Sigla

Bibliographical Abbreviations

Austin Coates, programme 1	05/08/1986 <i>Eric Coates – King of Light Music: Programme 1, 1886–1923</i> . Written and Presented by Austin Coates. BBC Radio 2
Austin Coates, programme 2	12/08/1986 <i>Eric Coates – King of Light Music: Programme 2, 1923–1931</i> . Written and Presented by Austin Coates. BBC Radio 2
Austin Coates, programme 3	19/08/1986 <i>Eric Coates – King of Light Music: Programme 3, 1931–1940</i> . Written and Presented by Austin Coates. BBC Radio 2
Austin Coates, programme 4	26/08/1986 <i>Eric Coates – King of Light Music: Programme 4, 1940–1957</i> . Written and Presented by Austin Coates. BBC Radio 2

The transcripts of these programmes have been made by the author.

Library Sigla

<i>GB-Bcbso</i>	City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Birmingham
<i>GB-Cu</i>	University of Cambridge Library, Cambridge
<i>GB-HCKl</i>	Hucknall Public Library
<i>GB-Lam</i>	Royal Academy of Music, London
<i>GB-LAu</i>	University of Lancaster
<i>GB-Lbh</i>	Boosey and Hawkes, London
<i>GB-Lbl</i>	The British Library, London
<i>GB-Lcm</i>	Royal College of Music, London
<i>GB-Lprs</i>	Performing Right Society, London
<i>GB-Mhallé</i>	Hallé Orchestra, Manchester
<i>GB-NO</i>	University of Nottingham Library, Nottingham
<i>GB-Rwac</i>	BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading
<i>US-Wc</i>	National Library of Congress, Washington DC, United States of America
<i>US-Wgu</i>	Georgetown University Library, Washington DC, United States of America

Any manuscript referred to without a sigla denotes a source in private hands.

Unless otherwise stated, all material marked *GB-Rwac* is taken from Coates' personal files and all sources marked *GB-Lcm* refer to material in box 186 unless otherwise stated.

All dates used in this book are in the British format, i.e. 05/08/1986 is 5 August 1986.

Preface and Acknowledgements

It was the redoubtable and formidable Ethel Smyth who, on being introduced to Eric Coates at Eastbourne, said in her brusque voice: ‘You are the man who writes tunes? Come and sit down beside me and tell me how you manage to make your effects’!¹ ‘The man who writes tunes’ sums up the legacy of Coates, a man who has written several of the most memorable and enjoyable light-orchestral works of the twentieth century – works that are still loved by millions.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the life and work of Eric Coates. It does not seek to be a salacious exposé of his private life, nor to put forward a case for the redressing the balance between light and serious music, but to discuss how and why he became one of Britain’s most popular and successful composers.

My interest in the music of Eric Coates stems from playing *The Dam Busters* March at school. Around the time of choosing topics for my undergraduate dissertation, I had been introduced to the delights of British light music. Not wanting to choose a topic that was over-populated with research, I decided on Coates. The more I read, researched and listened to Coates’ music, the more I was struck by the very high standard of construction of his scores, the brilliance of his melodic writing and the felicitousness of his orchestration. Furthermore, I was intrigued by his business acumen and his ability to embrace the new media of the time, namely the BBC and the gramophone, which enabled him to become one of the most popular and successful composers of his generation, if not the most successful. Inspired by this, my undergraduate research turned into a doctoral study that in turn resulted in this book.

It was whilst researching my undergraduate dissertation that I was struck by the absence of literature on Coates. Whilst there is the composer’s own delightful autobiography, *Suite in Four Movements*, and Geoffrey Self’s short centennial biography published in 1986, both books left important questions and ventures unanswered. With the current resurgence of interest in light music and the growing stature of Coates within the field of twentieth-century British music a fuller picture of his life and music was required.

I have been fortunate to have access to Coates’ surviving papers and manuscripts as well as other important collections of Coates’ material. I would like to thank the following for their assistance in the writing of this book: Hilary and Bill Ashton; Gareth Atkins; Geoffrey and Dorothy Atkinson; Paul Banks; Duncan Barker; Ray Bickel; Heidi Bishop, Laura Macy and all the staff at Ashgate; Malcolm Bulcock; George Capel; Andy Chan; Frances Cook; Marjorie Cullern and Gilles Gouset; Jeremy Dibble; Peter Edwards; Liz Fawcett; Katherine Gale; Michael Grey;

¹ Eric Coates, *Suite in Four Movements* (London, 1953), p. 152.

Rod Hamilton and Ike Egbetola; Alan Heinecke; Peter Horton and all the staff of the Royal College of Music Library; Beresford King-Smith; Valerie Langfield; Daniel Leech-Wilkinson; Paul Lilley; Stephen Lloyd; Ray Luker; Ruth Mariner and Tom Creedy; Charlotte Mortimer; Thomas Muir; David Nathan; Louise North; Bridget Palmer; Michael Ponder; Libby Rice; Eleanor Roberts; the late Geoffrey Self; Geoff Sheldon; Harry and Ann Smith; the Syndics of Cambridge University Library to reproduce material in the Christopher Hassall Collection; Ernest Tomlinson and his late wife, Jean; Elizabeth Wardle; John Wilson.

Finally, I wish to thank all the members of my family, especially my parents, Alan and Christine Payne, who have supported all my research into Coates. My wife Anne has been a tower of strength, a valuable proofreader and has sacrificed so much to let me write this book. Sadly, my father did not live to see this book into print and it is to his memory I dedicate this book.

Michael Payne
Bristol, February 2012

PART I
The Early Years

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Chapter 1

Light Music

It was a Viennese friend of mine, who years ago, was teasing me about English music. ‘What is all this about “light music”?’ he asked. ‘Are you still such a nation of shop keepers that you even sell music by weight?’¹

The name of Eric Coates is synonymous with the genre of light music, a genre he practically defines. Mention light music and Coates is the first, and in many cases the only, name that people will think of. In discussing Coates’ contribution to the genre one has to consider the history of light music and his place within that genre.

Light music has never attracted a proper, rigorous study as a genre. There is no ‘Urtext’ definition of light music; even the august *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition, does not have an entry for ‘light music’ or the adjective ‘light’ as applied to music, which is a staggering omission. Indeed, the origins and first use of ‘light music’ are shrouded in mystery. The composer Richard Addinsell believed: ‘The trouble is that no two people mean the same thing by “light music” ... for “light music” can be both an art form and an art perversion.’² The term ‘light’, is, as Louise Latham in the *Oxford Companion to Music* defined it, ‘an adjective applied broadly (often pejoratively) to music deemed of no great intellectual or emotional depth, intended for light entertainment, and usually for orchestra. There is a large repertory of British light music, much of it witty, imaginative, and skilfully orchestrated ...’³ Latham is right to praise it for its humour and orchestration, but light music is a genre in which melody (most importantly), emotional buoyancy and a sense of humour all combine to produce a piece of music that raises a smile, is easily enjoyable and does not outstay its welcome. The genre also shares a large amount of common ground with ‘serious music’ by dint of the fact that light music is almost exclusively scored for orchestra (not used in any ‘light way’). Because of its immense popular appeal, light music has often been the victim of snobbery. Light music is an ‘umbrella term’ for music that appears to be too frivolous and likely to damage the reputation of a ‘serious’ composer. It can range from symphonic pieces such as Haydn Wood’s *May Day Overture* and Coates’ *Four Centuries Suite* to mere fripperies such as Torch’s *Comic Cuts* and Bucalossi’s *The Grasshopper’s Dance* to the operettas and musicals of Arthur Sullivan, Vivian Ellis and, dare one say, Andrew Lloyd

¹ Spike Hughes ‘Introductory Note’, 1955 Light Programme Festival of Music Programme.

² Richard Addinsell quoted in the 11/08/1944 *Radio Times*.

³ Latham, Alison (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford, 2002), p. 695.

Webber. By its very nature, light music is eclectic. Coates never thought of himself as a light-weight composer, but as a composer of light music. In much the same way, Edward German did not want to be viewed as a ‘good *light* composer’, but as a composer of ‘light *good* music’.⁴

Light music, if considered to be a genre expressing emotional buoyancy, has existed for many centuries without being designated as such. Consider the catches of Purcell and the minuets of Haydn, which are examples of technical dexterity but are undoubtedly light (or indeed vulgar in the case of Purcell) in terms of sentiment. The success of these works clearly demonstrates that in past centuries there was little or no aesthetic distinction made between the ‘buoyant’ and the ‘grave’. By the mid-nineteenth century, the ‘light’ and ‘serious’ strands of music were becoming increasingly polarized as there was a growing trend towards a lighter style of writing in the works of Bizet, Rossini (cf. his opera overtures), the Strauss family and Tchaikovsky, often in their opera (especially that of the French school, cf. Massenet, Thomas and Offenbach) and ballet music. The philosopher Theodor Adorno in his essay *Leichte Musik* (translated by Ashton as ‘Popular music’) talks of light and serious music as initially originating from the same circle; they had both come from the same source but had bifurcated into two polarized semicircles.⁵ Perhaps this polarization was strongest in England. Great Britain has constantly had a great volume of light composers, almost to the point that, with certain key exceptions, light music is a British peculiarity. America and Europe have also had their share of light music composers, such as John Philip Sousa, Leroy Anderson, David Rose, Franz Lehár and Paul Linke respectively, but their composers of light music have tended to be more ‘serious’ composers who have written lighter works; there is not a dynasty of light-music composers as in England.

In England, this concept of writing in a lighter style was swiftly grasped by many composers at the *fin-de-siècle* (such as Arthur Sullivan and Edward German) who then wrote a good deal of lighter music such as operettas, incidental music and concert music. Geoffrey Self, in his history of light music, places Sullivan’s overture *Di Ballo* (written for the 1870 Birmingham Festival) as ‘the progenitor of a whole of line of light music’.⁶ German’s dances from *Nell Gwyn*, *Henry VIII* and *Merrie England* became immensely popular in the early years of the twentieth century. Alongside German, there was a growing army of musicians who were specializing in writing light music, such as Charles Ancliffe, Sydney Baynes, Archibald Joyce, Kenneth Alford, Albert Ketèlbey and John Ansell. By the 1930s, there was a particular flowering of composers, a so-called ‘golden age’

⁴ Edward German quoted by David Hulme in sleeve notes to *Edward German, Orchestral Works, Volume 2* (Naxos, 8.223726).

⁵ Theodor Adorno, ‘Popular Music’ in Adorno, Theodor, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York, 1989), p. 24.

⁶ Geoffrey Self, *Light Music in Britain since 1870* (Aldershot, 2001), p. 10.

that included established names such as Eric Coates, Haydn Wood, Percy Fletcher and Billy Mayerl.

There was nothing 'light' about the education of these composers, they were all educated in exactly the same way as 'serious' composers. They were, however, content to write almost exclusively light music. There were exceptions: Wood wrote a violin and a piano concerto and Phillips two piano concertos (written early in his career). From the start of his student days, Coates chose to write exclusively light-orchestral works. The fillip for the focus of so many composers of light music was a demand for short, tuneful, effervescent miniatures. After the First World War, there was a surge of interest in orchestral music. By October 1923, the music publishers Chappell and Company had disbanded their Ballad Concerts in favour of Popular Orchestral Concerts.⁷ The likes of Haydn Wood and Montague Phillips had had great success with their songs during the war and, in the 1920s, Phillips had scored success in light opera with *The Rebel Maid*.

Until the end of the 1930s there were a large number of openings for light composers, not solely with orchestral music. Also popular were ballads (where large money could be made in the 1900s and 1910s), music for brass and military bands, light opera, instrumental music for the amateur market and music for the theatre and music hall.

The revolutions caused by the advent of the cinema and broadcasting brought the need for library or 'mood' music; music that conjured up quickly the mood that was being presented on screen or in the programme. Albert Ketèlbey published a number of pieces for this genre, with titles such as *Mysterious* and *Love's Awakening*. The De Wolf Recorded Music Library was founded in 1927 to provide background music for films. Post war, publishing firms such as Chappells, Boosey & Hawkes, Francis, Day and Hunter and Paxtons all ran flourishing recorded music libraries to provide music for film and broadcasting.

After the Second World War, the focus of light music moved towards providing music for radio, television and film: either using original music or writing music for the recorded music libraries. Light music was still a popular feature on BBC Radio and featured in a whole host of dedicated programmes such as: *Music While You Work*, *Grand Hotel* and *Friday Night is Music Night*. In addition, the rising younger generation, comprising such composers as Charles Williams, Sidney Torch, Ronald Binge, Ernest Tomlinson, Trevor Duncan, Mona Liter, George Melachrino and Robert Farnon continued to provide works for the concert hall, helped in the 1950s by the BBC's Light Music Festivals. By the 1960s and 1970s, light music was in terminal decline and featuring less in radio broadcasts and in the concert hall. The conductor Iain Sutherland commented of these developments that: 'It wasn't that light music was dead, just the BBC were in the process of burying it alive.'⁸ Owing to the mass appeal of pop music, the younger generation were not interested in light music and the genre was increasingly alienated from

⁷ *Musical Times* 64 (1923), p. 713.

⁸ This remark has been erroneously attributed to Robert Farnon for a number of years.

the contemporary ‘classical’ music of Boulez, Berio, Birtwistle, Maxwell Davies and Ligeti. There were still several opportunities for concert works, but life was difficult and opportunities scarce for light-music composers. Peter Hope gave up composition in the 1970s, focusing entirely on orchestrations and arrangements (though since 2000 he has returned to composition). It was not until the 1990s that light music began to become more popular on radio, CD (with a landmark series devoted to British Light Music on the Marco Polo label) and to feature more prominently in concert programmes. Today the genre is undergoing a further renaissance with a growing number of composers such as Philip Lane (also a noted record producer), Matthew Curtis and Adam Saunders amongst others who are producing new works and enjoying success in the recording studio.

Even within mainstream British music of the twentieth century, one occasionally catches a glimpse of a lighter style, some may call it lyricism, in the music of composers such as Henry Balfour Gardiner (*Shepherd Fennel’s Dance*), Arnold Bax (*Rogue’s Comedy Overture*), Arthur Bliss (*Adam Zero*), George Dyson (*Children’s Suite*), Gerald Finzi (*Five Bagatelles* for clarinet and piano), E.J. Moeran (*Serenade in G*), and Ralph Vaughan Williams (*English Folk Song Suite*). While these composers are most definitely ‘serious’ in their outlook, there is at times a degree of lightness beneath the surface. This lighter edge can still be seen today in composers such as Bryan Kelly, Patric Standford and David Lyon, whose work is difficult to pigeonhole.

To understand the wholesale appeal of light music in the twentieth century it is necessary to view the social context of the period and the immense cultural changes that Britain experienced in the first half of the twentieth century. Before broadcasting in 1922, music was everywhere; it was played in parks, hotels, restaurants and tea shops, notably the famous Lyon’s Corner Houses, to great effect. The majority of London restaurants employed an orchestra of sorts to perform light music to accompany diners at lunch, afternoon tea and a more substantial programme over the evening meal, a tradition that was still in existence in the 1930s.⁹ These ensembles would play a wide variety of music, from rearranged classics to the latest ‘hot tune’, but most frequently they would play light music. Eugene Goossens remembered, in his autobiography, that when he was in a hotel orchestra, the ensemble was expected to play anything from Liszt to Lehár at a moment’s notice.¹⁰

In Britain during the first-half of the twentieth century, light music was often written for coastal music festivals, ballad concerts, broadcasting or as ‘fillers’ for concerts; it was designed to appeal to all. When most light music was published, it was often printed with a piano-conductor part (it is exceptionally rare to find a printed full score for any piece of British light music) to enable the conductor to fill in the missing parts at the piano or bolster a weak part; the first violin part usually had general cues to enable direction from the leader in the case of

⁹ David Tunley, *The Bel Canto Violin* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 4.

¹⁰ Eugene Goossens, *Overture and Beginners* (London, 1951), p. 83.

small orchestras. A good deal of light music was published in versions for salon orchestras (orchestras with a vastly reduced or unusual combination of woodwind and brass, an ensemble largely brought about by the cinema), in addition to the standard orchestral edition. Coates' orchestral work was often issued in standard orchestral format (with extensive cues), as well as for military band, piano solo and occasionally a version for small/salon orchestra.

In the interwar period of the twentieth century, there was a vast change to the cultural climate in Britain as LeMahieu has argued:

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the development of popular national daily newspapers, the cinema, the gramophone, and other forms of mass entertainment threatened to upset traditional patterns of British culture, attracting an audience of unprecedented size, this 'mass' or 'commercial' culture – no single term unambiguously defines the phenomenon – was created for profit, dependent upon new technologies, and often dominated by individuals outside the mainstream of British cultural life. Writers, artists, musicians, critics, and their numerous sympathizers responded in a variety of ways. Some retreated into self-conscious isolation from the popular and the profane. Others engaged in detailed polemics against the mass media. Still others embraced new technology and sought to uplift tastes. All these groups struggled against a culture that measured success by popularity rather than aesthetic merit.¹¹

During the interwar period, the average working week decreased from fifty-four hours to forty-eight and the average salary, per capita, rose from £1-12-0 in 1913 to £3-10-0 in 1938 – leisure activities were at last within the range of the average man.¹² The early decades of the twentieth century saw a widespread expansion of the press, the extensive adoption of the gramophone; the foundation and phenomenal growth of the BBC; the wide availability of ensembles that performed orchestral music, the twilight of mass sales of sheet music and the foundation of the Performing Right Society (PRS). The 1930s brought the development of what LeMahieu called a 'common culture', a culture shared by all regardless of class.¹³

This was the curious musical world into which Coates emerged as a composer. He may have entered this environment of widespread cultural change with Edwardian musical values, but he consciously and successfully exploited the latest technologies and crazes of the early twentieth century such as the gramophone record, the BBC and the world of dance music. It was his success at exploiting these new media that put him at the forefront of light music, above his competitors.

¹¹ Dan LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 2–3. These changes were also seen, at a more marked level, in popular music of the period.

¹² James Nott, *Music for the People* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 2–3.

¹³ LeMahieu, p. 227.

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Chapter 2

A Nottinghamshire Childhood, 1886–1906

Eric Coates was born in the Nottinghamshire town of Hucknall (known as Hucknall Torkard until 1916). Hucknall has had a long and distinguished history dating back to at least the twelfth century, if not well before. The town is situated seven miles northwest of Nottingham in the valley of the River Leen and within easy reach of Newstead Abbey and Sherwood Forest and in close proximity to the counties of Lincolnshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the focus of the town's industry switched from weaving and agriculture to coal mining; the first mines were sunk in the 1860s. Today, the town is famous as the resting place of the poet Lord Byron (who is buried in the parish church) and as the birthplace of Eric Coates.¹

Coates' father, William Harrison Coates, known as Harrison, was born in June 1851 in Ringwood, Hampshire, where his father, William Thomas Coates, was a draper. Thomas, who originally hailed from Whitchurch in Shropshire, married Emma Harrison in Croydon and lived in Ringwood and Saffron Walden before finally settling in Henley-on-Thames where he became Mayor in 1888.² In the late 1860s, Harrison moved to London to study medicine at St. Thomas' Hospital, then in a temporary site whilst the new hospital was built in Lambeth. He qualified as a doctor in 1872, becoming a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries. He appears to have commenced his medical career in Saxmundham in Suffolk before moving to Hucknall with his wife Mary, where he was kept busy dealing with the assorted ailments of the large community of miners and colliery accidents. Dr Coates practiced in Hucknall for over forty years and was a well-known and popular figure, known as 't' little doctor' because of his diminutive stature. He retired to Kent until his death in 1935.³ Outside his busy medical practice, Dr Coates was a highly proficient photographer (whose pictures had graced many local periodicals and books),⁴ and a keen breeder of bulldogs. He was also an amateur musician, playing the flute and running St Mary's Church Choir. Coates was always very much in awe of his father and shared his hobby of photography; he became a proficient photographer

¹ Both of these feature in the local heritage trail.

² 18/08/1985 Austin Coates to Geoffrey Self. Austin also recalled that his Great-Grandfather was only Mayor of Henley once, not thrice as his father had indicated (Eric Coates, *Suite in Four Movements* (London, 1953), p. 5).

³ 30/05/1935 *Hucknall Dispatch*. Mary Coates had died in March 1928 aged 77.

⁴ Albert Brecknock, *The Pilgrim Poet: Lord Byron of Newstead* (London: Francis Griffith, 1911). This book has several plates taken by Dr Coates.

himself (the majority of the plates in his autobiography *Suite in Four Movements* were his own photographs).

Coates' mother, Mary Jane Gwyn Coates (née Blower) was born in 1850 in Gwernesney, three miles from Usk in Monmouthshire, where her father, James Blower, was rector of St Michael's Church and an exponent of strict Victorian morals. With a great independence of mind, she left home to become a governess in Herefordshire (the only daughter to leave the household, even after the deaths of their parents in the 1860s). By 1871, Mary was governess to the large family of James Girling (attorney and solicitor) in Tamerton Foliot, Devon. It seems plausible that she later moved with the Girling Family to Suffolk, where she met the young Dr Coates.⁵ The two were married on St George's Day 1877 in the market town of Stratford St Andrew. Shortly after their marriage the Coates moved to Hucknall where their first child was born in the following year (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 Dr Harrison and Mrs Mary Coates at Tenter Hill, Hucknall circa 1920

⁵ There was certainly a James Girling practicing near Saxmundham in the late 1870s. It has not been possible to find positive proof that this was the same James Girling, but it does seem plausible as Girling had his roots in East Anglia.

The Coates eventually had five children Gladys, Gwyn, Meta and Dorothy, with their final child, Eric, descending into the *ménage* on 27 August 1886.⁶ Dr and Mrs Coates had originally intended to call their youngest child ‘Frank Harrison Coates’, but soon changed their minds to ‘Eric Francis Harrison Coates’.⁷ Within a few years of Coates’ arrival the family moved the short distance to a larger house, Tenter Hill, built on the corner of Duke Street and Beardall Street. In many ways, Coates had an idyllic childhood in Hucknall with trips with his father to Southwell and other locations on photographic expeditions. At a young age, he acquired a bicycle and would disappear on expeditions initially with his mother and brother Gwyn, but latterly on his own, as he recalled in 1947:

I remember how I loved to get away on my own and spend a whole day with no-body knowing where I was, my bicycle, a waterproof cape, sandwiches and a bottle of ginger beer (put up by my mother) and an Ordnance Map borrowed from my father. I wish that all children could spend the kind of life I lived as a child.⁸

The tranquillity of the Coates *ménage* was interrupted in 1899 when his father, who was always kept busy, was suddenly taken very ill and diagnosed with septic influenza with complications resulting from overwork and was prescribed several months’ complete rest.⁹ It took Dr Coates nine months to recover followed by a six-week family holiday to Barmouth. This illness must have put considerable strain on family resources with the cost of paying a locum and the patience involved in coping with an invalid, especially one who had hitherto been so active.

The Coates family was very musical and one of Coates’ earliest recollections was listening to his mother, an able pianist, playing the piano and singing downstairs whilst he was trying to go to sleep.¹⁰ Indeed, he chose Chopin’s Valse in E minor for his appearance on *Desert Island Discs* in 1951 because of its associations with his mother.¹¹ From his first sighting of the ‘queer-looking black box’ of Pen Peyton (a family friend), which contained a violin brought to a family party, Coates wanted to learn the violin.¹² A violin was duly procured from the local music shop, run by John Munks, and the young Coates made his first tentative steps. After initial study with a local teacher, Miss Harrington, he went to be tutored by Georg Ellenberger (a former pupil of the violinist Joseph Joachim)

⁶ He was baptised 26 February 1887 at St Mary Magdalene’s Church, Hucknall.

⁷ Eric Coates’ birth certificate. All the Coates’ children bore the middle name of Harrison, a tribute to Harrison’s mother, Emma, whose maiden name was Harrison.

⁸ 29/05/1947 EC to Eric Morley. *GB-HCKI*.

⁹ Eric Coates, *Suite in Four Movements* (autograph), p. 48.

¹⁰ 1935 *Sunray* (*The Magazine of Hucknall Carnival*), p. 6.

¹¹ 20/06/1951 *Desert Island Discs*, broadcast, BBC Light Programme. *GB-Rwac* Desert Island Discs Scripts.

¹² Coates, p. 7.

and studied harmony and counterpoint with Ralph Horner in Nottingham.¹³ The young Coates would arrange music for the family orchestra (occasionally augmented by local musicians), as most of the family played an instrument or sang. The end result must have sounded bizarre given that the family orchestra consisted of flute, violins, piano, cello and mandolin!¹⁴

Early musical life was hectic for the adolescent Coates: two violin lessons a week and a harmony lesson, quartet rehearsal, along with travel to Nottingham by train, practice time and writing exercises for Horner – in all, six half days a week – in addition to the normal rigours of a young person's academic work. He was never educated at a school, but at home with a governess,¹⁵ and music was always the most important aspect of his education. Dr Horner was adamant that the youthful Coates should not compose until he had a thorough grasp of all the rudiments of harmony, counterpoint, canon and fugue. However, Coates managed to steal a few brief moments during his practice schedule to compose several pieces including a *Romance* for violin Op 1 and a *Berceuse* for viola Op 2 (he later re-used this opus number for the *Ballad* for String Orchestra), both now lost. He also had a voracious appetite for music and would not only play through the piano accompaniments of his violin pieces but also the songs of Grieg and Schubert and the waltzes of Strauss and Waldteufel, all borrowed from Nottingham Public Library. One can detect their influence in his first compositions.

On top of his lessons, he was performing more frequently in public. At the age of ten he was summoned one evening when a soloist at a concert in Nottingham was delayed by fog and failed to arrive on time. The composer's son, Austin, recalled the event: 'would Dr Coates allow Master Eric to help out. Master Eric had in fact gone to bed; he was awakened, dressed and rushed by train to Nottingham where he played Svendsen's *Romance* with a calm professionalism that astonished many.'¹⁶ As Coates progressed with his violin playing he was invited to join Ellenberger's own string quartet in addition to all his other activities.

Coates came to learn the viola almost by accident: Ellenberger wanted to perform Brahms' Clarinet Quintet with his own quartet and after disastrous results with a local cleric playing the clarinet part,¹⁷ Ellenberger found Brahms' edition for solo viola rather than the usual clarinet: Coates was asked to play the solo part,

¹³ Ralph Joseph Horner (1848–1926) was born in Wales and studied in Leipzig. He moved to Nottingham in 1888 to become Lecturer in Music at the university and conducted various local music groups. Horner obtained a DMus from the University of Durham in 1898. He emigrated to America in 1906, held a number of posts and remained there until his death. (www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/horner_rj.shtml, accessed 17/12/2009.)

¹⁴ 20/06/1951 Eric Coates in *Desert Island Discs* broadcast, BBC Light Programme.

¹⁵ 18/08/1985 Austin Coates to Geoffrey Self. Austin believed that the governess was present to teach Coates' two sisters and that Eric joined in. Dr Coates seemed to have no belief that Eric should attend a school.

¹⁶ Austin Coates, programme 1.

¹⁷ See Coates, pp. 39–40 for the full story.

although he had never played the viola before. Playing this instrument opened up many avenues for Coates; it was his passport to many a local orchestra, including several performances under the rising conductor Henry Wood in Nottingham. Mixing so much with adults he began to smoke at a relatively young age, a habit that was to become an important creative stimulus and a lifelong pleasure.¹⁸

With the frequent invitations to perform as a soloist in concerts and engagements with local orchestras, it was not unnatural for Coates to use these outlets to perform several of his early compositions, most notably a *Ballad* for String Orchestra Op 2, first performed in the Albert Hall, Nottingham in late 1904. The performance received reasonable press notices,¹⁹ but the composer later dismissed it in his autobiography as: ‘It was an unambitious, youthful attempt, and it did not come off too badly.’²⁰ Judging by this aside and the fact that the work appears not to have been performed again in his lifetime (it was recorded in 1991), it seems that Coates grew to dislike the *Ballad*.²¹ The piece is a set of eight through-composed variations of an original theme. Though it is essentially monothematic, he splits the theme into two parts (part I, bars 1–4 and part II, 4–8); bars 4–8 bear a resemblance to the theme of Elgar’s *‘Enigma’ Variations*, then much in fashion (see Example 2.1).

Example 2.1 *Ballad* for String Orchestra Op 2, bars 1–8

The *Ballad* has all the hallmarks of his later musical style: sectional form, frequent melodic imitation (even if only for two bars, such as in variations 4 and 5), a well-composed main theme and assured string writing. The work shows a slight predilection for mildly unorthodox harmony, as variations 2 and 3 juxtapose

¹⁸ 18/08/1985 Austin Coates to Geoffrey Self. Whoever it was who introduced him to the habit also instilled in him a love of Turkish cigarettes, never Virginian.

¹⁹ Undated, November–December 1904? *Nottingham Guardian*. (Coates Scrapbook 1).

²⁰ Coates, pp. 42–3.

²¹ *The Three Elizabeths Suite* (ASV, CDWHL 2053). There is no evidence of the work being performed during Coates’ time as a viola professor at the Royal Academy of Music, though his ‘Menuetto on an Old Irish Air’ was frequently performed.