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Richard E McGregor

It's all about time. Indeed there is not a single piece of musical composition that is not in some way about time. And for Davies the manipulation of time is rooted in his understanding of late Medieval and early Renaissance musical techniques and practices refracted through post 12-note pitch manipulation.

In this article I take to task the uncritical use of terminology in relation to the music of Peter Maxwell Davies. Though my generating text is the quotation from John Warnaby's 1990 doctoral thesis:

Since parody is implied in the notion of using pre-existing material as a creative model, it can be argued that, as traditionally understood, it is rarely absent from Maxwell Davies's music[1]

this is in no wise a criticism of Warnaby for whom I have much respect, and especially his ability to be able to perceive patterns, trends and unifying features between works and across extended periods of time. Rather, it is a commentary on particular aspects of Davies's music which are often linked together under the catch-all term 'parody':

#### EXAMPLE 1: Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*[2]

I take as my starting point the painting *The Persistence of Memory* by Salvador Dali, a painting which operates on a number of levels, the most obvious, because of the immediate imagery, being that it has something to do with time. But, as to what it has to do with time in relation to memory is not easy to answer unequivocally.

What do we see in this picture? The background is a quasi-realistic scenic vista whose lines are unrealistically sharp and whose colours, though they look natural, are also unnatural. In the foreground is an unidentified raised box into which a dead tree is planted. Also in the foreground is a strange shaped object, having some elements of a shell but dominated by what is actually a self-portrait of Dali's eyebrows. Draped across these three items are what catches our eyes first: typical gold and silver coloured timepieces which have stretched or maybe melted – suggesting time bending, elongating, distorting.

Although the picture is surreal and to a degree absurd, we do not perceive this image of time to be a parody, and for that reason I want to use it as a 'metaphor' for some of the processes found in Davies's music and particularly to frame those which have traditionally been labelled as parody in his work.

If not parody, then what?

Dali's scenic background evokes, among other things, those backgrounds found in late Medieval and Renaissance paintings. In the same way Davies underpins sections, if not whole movements, with long-term structural components operating in the background, and related to early music models, as I will explore in due course. These form the musical substructure, the background, on which the other musical components operate. Nicholas Jones has examined some these background elements as expressed through the harmonic elements of the third and sixth symphonies in his recent *Musical Times* article,[3] and the sketches for the third symphony show that the opening of the first movement, for example, is based on a long-term unfolding of two distinct middle-lying thematic lines functioning as the background for this part of the movement.

This suggests the kind of 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> century structural techniques which Davies in fact makes explicit in his programme note for the first symphony when he declares that the 'voice or part which unifies the harmony is not necessarily a bass line, but often a "tenor" which usually has long notes'.[4] These long notes are derived from the plainsong manipulated through the magic square in an extension of the organising principle of the *cantus firmus* mass. In that Davies uses this idea constantly, this clearly defines a relationship with earlier practices, which, while obvious, has received comparatively little attention, and I shall return to it later.

This article is primarily concerned with parody. For most people the concept of parody will be unambiguously parsed as the mocking of some *gestalt* such that its essential meaning is distorted, and often, turned into a focus for ridicule. So, when King George intones 'Comfort ye' in *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) that is parody. Or is it?

In that Davies quotes the original Handel, or more precisely, borrows it, then it is a parody in the musical sense, but it is not quoted exactly since the accompaniment leading up to it is reworked into a swing rhythm:

EXAMPLE 2: Country Dance (Scotch Bonnet), no.7 of *Eight Songs for a Mad King*[5]

and strictly interpreted the more likely early music antecedent is 'paraphrase' not parody. Thereafter the original Handel is quite clearly being paraphrased in the succeeding musical material, as for example in the exaggerated trill and ensuing vocal pyrotechnics. As far as the character of the King is concerned we are not being asked to think of this as a parody but as pathos: if we view the musical texture as parody in the generally accepted sense then we miss the point. It is, I admit, a close run thing as to how this is perceived since one is bound to interpret the jazzed-up accompaniment as essentially humorous – this is one of the problematic areas of the work – but, in retrospect, it is at least a bitter sweet humour.

Davies's 1996 note on the printed score for *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* (1974) underlines this. In it he refers to *Eight Songs* as 'serious and tragic', and quotes Randolph Stow at the after show party as saying 'let's write a funny one, as a sequel'. This implies that neither librettist nor composer thought of *Eight Songs* as evoking humour which would normally be the desired by-product of parody.

*Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* parallels *Eight Songs* in its use of an historically- based musical substructure, which is effectively a collection of dances, a suite of sorts, starting with a Prelude and ending with a Reel, the cousin of the traditional Gigue, but going by way of a Victorianised Elizabethan 'dompe' and a Rant:

EXAMPLE 3: *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot*, title page

Once again the intention is pathos not parody and the musical content with its cross-temporal illusions is not parody either but clearly freely composed on borrowed substructure, none of which is actually original: Davies has simply created an pastiche, of which more later.

Perhaps *St Thomas Wake* (1969) comes nearest to parody but even here the intention is not so much humour as the creation of an essential conflict between the honky-tonk versions of the John Bull *Pavan* and the orchestra's serious musical argument:

EXAMPLE 4: *St Thomas Wake* bar 492 *et seq.*

What does it mean? Is Davies sending himself up, or is it a comment perhaps on the widening gap between popular and serious music: the fact is that the original *Pavan* material has been paraphrased not parodied. It would only work as a parody if we understood the point of the parody. As we do not, then we should not view the work *as* parody. However the honky-tonk piano is a recurring stylistic element in Davies work of this period and we need to understand better its symbolic significance for the composer before we can attempt a further re-interpretation of *St Thomas Wake*.

The preceding examples have all come from that period in Davies's life when he was the *enfant terrible* of British music and all the works mentioned have been given a good outing in terms of commentary, not always, I am suggesting, accurate to the musical context intended by the composer.

After the first two symphonies it seems like the establishment lost interest in that terrible child: he had become, or so it seemed, *passé*. If it appeared that Davies, for the most part, was no longer doing those humorous 'parodies', such obvious time and place distortions, such obvious exaggerations, such, as it might seem on the surface, deliberately provocative manoeuvres, then perhaps we should consider that for the composer, the late seventies, eighties and nineties were a period of integration and stabilisation. In what will undoubtedly come to be seen as his middle period, Davies was about consolidation.

Remember the Dali: those elongated timepieces became a trademark. He translated them into real tangible artefacts (jewellery) and they became part of the essence of the artist. So it is with middle period Davies. All the elements are still present and come to the surface or stay rather in the shadows depending on the work. A good example of a work whose background comes into the foreground is the Strathclyde Concerto no. 5 (1991) which is based on a realisation of Jan Albert Ban's two-part song 'Vanitas vanitum' and Haydn's *L'isola disabitata*. I suspect, but cannot at present prove, that there is some personal biographical element here rather like the seashell eyebrows of Dali. Not all of Davies works contain biographical elements but there are some notable examples, such as, what Davies calls 'the Metin square'[6] in Symphony no. 4 (1989) (after a partner of the time); the use of the early piano piece *Parade* (1949) in Symphonies 3 (1984) and 6 (1996); the whole of the Salford cycle and especially 'Chat Moss' (1993) which produced one of the sources for the Symphony no. 5 (1994); and, it appears, also the set of string quartets, currently in progress.

Pre-compositional processes – thoughts on a deeper time frame

Davies's compositional methodology for the creation of source sets employed in his larger scale works is now quite well documented so I do not propose to present any such material here, but I do want to offer some thoughts on the antecedents of that methodology, not in relation to recent serial practice but in relation to those aspects which might have been influenced by his studies and understanding of early music.

In his first published works, such as *Alma Redemptoris Mater* (1958), Davies showed quite clearly his debt to older sources. In that work a tenor is subject to melismatic elaboration in the manner, if not substance, of the early polyphonic style. Similar thematic constructions are found in some of the works of the following five years, but the same basic idea underlines an example like this from the Strathclyde Concerto no. 5 where the magic square is read across its diagonals:

#### EXAMPLE 5: Strathclyde Concerto no 5, first movement, letter G

The demisemiquavers and triplet semiquavers are melismatic decorations or elaborations and *not* pitches of the square, though the starting point for each melisma *is* a pitch from the magic square, as circled in the example.

That this proved to be a useful way of generating soloistic material for the concertos is shown by the technique's continual recurrence in works of this type. Another example is found in this extract:

#### EXAMPLE 6: Strathclyde Concerto no.3, first movement, figure 1

from Strathclyde Concerto no. 3, for trumpet and horn *solì*, written in 1989.

When he was using transformation sets, from about 1963 onwards, and had to generate a very large amount of pre-compositional charts, one can see melismatic material being 'created' on the sketches, often using collections of pitches derived from the intervallic distances between opposite ends of the transformation set processes. However, my impression is that this has become an intuitive aspect for what I would term Davies's second level works of the 1980s and 1990s, that is, those pieces where the organisation is not so all encompassing as in the symphonies, namely, the *concerti* and the ballets in particular. However it is an intuitive aspect founded on an intimate, memorised, knowledge of the pre-compositional charts and workings created for a particular work.

In the 1958 work *Prolation*, Davies experimented with the technique of that name, and in the String Quartet of 1961 with *Mensuration and Coloration*, but these have not had a direct influence on later work. On the other hand, once he had arrived at the technique of Transformation Sets, which would later transmute into Magic squares, a certain consistency of approach became evident in his preparatory sketch processes.

Davies's pre-compositional method normally involves taking the pre-existing source, whatever it might be, often a plainsong but equally it might be any predominantly melodic/thematic source, such as the tune *Cumha Craobh nan Teud* in the Strathclyde Concerto no. 4 (1990), or the Ban and Haydn already mentioned for Strathclyde no 5. The pitch sieving[7] process he uses, which usually removes repeated pitches and often adds accidentals, essentially creates a paraphrase of the original idea, which is then rolled out across the various Transposition and Transformation processes created for works up to *Ave Maris Stella* of 1975, and after that work into magic squares. The magic square creates both pitch and rhythmic matrices which have

elements of both the *cantus firmus* and isorhythmic techniques of early music without belonging strictly to either process. The permutating numeric series based on 9, of which this is an example from *Ave Maris Stella*:

EXAMPLE 7: *Ave Maris Stella* Section II, figure H

is effectively a variant of a regularly repeating *talea*. The permutating pitch patterns from the same 9 base are therefore a variant of a regularly repeating *color*.

As can be seen in this extract from *Ave Maris Stella* the deployment of this material is often in the 'tenor' of the instrumental texture, functioning as a *cantus firmus*. Almost every 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> century antecedent here *except* parody in fact.

This then is the one constant in the composer's pre-compositional processes which links his serious music, and some of his less serious works, to the stylistic models which he took from his studies of early music.

We might, in addition, be able to suggest that Davies, probably unconsciously, borrowed the idea of the cyclic nature of some musical techniques of early music where parody, paraphrase or *cantus firmus* were used to unify a whole Mass, setting up relationships with the underpinning recurring thematic idea.

It could also be argued that Davies's transmutation of an existing work, such as the orchestral piece *Time and the Raven* (1995) into the Symphony no. 6 is as close to the original idea of parody as to make no difference to one's perception. However, as is the case with the Sixth Symphony, this is only true of the very opening and within a short time the music is pulled into the typical paraphrasing which I am suggesting is the predominant impetus behind Davies's musical borrowing.

### Parody vs Pastiche

If Davies's work hardly ever demonstrates parody in any of its senses then perhaps we need to be more exact as to what is usually being implied by the assigning of the catch-all term 'parody' to his music. It is generally more accurate to speak of *pastiche* in relation to the composer's music, although of course use of this term no longer carries an early music connotation with which some commentators would wish to characterise, indeed pigeon-hole, his stylistic antecedents.

Referring back to examples cited earlier, it is clear, I think, that whatever else they may be, the dance forms which underpin *Eight Songs* and *Miss Donnithorne*, and the honky-tonk version of the John Bull *Pavan* in *St Thomas Wake* are all essentially pastiche and not parody. This applies also, for example, to parts of *The Lighthouse* (1979) such as, for example, the mock Victorian gospel song 'This be thy God, oh Israel'. We are not meant to laugh at this, but to sense the uncompromising religious zeal behind it, which gives the song a dangerous, oppressive quality: our understanding of the character of Arthur is enhanced and the context is not trivialised by its inclusion.

EXAMPLE 8: 'Arthur's Song' from *The Lighthouse*, letter B<sup>1</sup>

Viewed in this way, pastiche, and not parody, is a technique much used by Davies but normally only within a dramatic, or abstract-dramatic, context, and his purpose varies with the context. So in the ballet *Caroline Mathilde* (1990), the opening is a derived version of a John Dunstable

original while the music that begins the Queen's Chamber Scene is a pastiche of a Scottish type folk tune but has no original source as its basis. Even the bagpipe solo at the end of *An Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* (1985) is a pastiche – we smile not because we recognise the tune as having been distorted in some way, nor because it is a send-up of suchlike tunes, but because it is a successful pastiche drawing on folk memories and archetypes, and placed in a context where its semiotic meaning is clear.

It is quite incorrect to apply the term parody in its meaning as a humorous distortion *or* in its relational sense to early music in such cases. When Davies does use parody, and it is comparatively rare, then he does so with the express purpose of sending up his subject. *Mavis in Las Vegas* (1997) includes several examples of pastiche which are to be perceived as parody; such is the case with the 'Liberace moment'. Davies therefore uses pastiche to evoke a memory, to create conflict, or elicit an emotional response.

I have used this opportunity to try to explode the notion that one can categorise an aspect of Davies's style under a single discrete classification. It is almost as meaningless as trying to assert that Davies previously wrote in a style which reflected the Franco-Flemish masters of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, whereas recently, with greater use of 3rds and 6ths – a more obvious modality – he has succumbed to the *Contenance Angloise* (and presumably would not if he had been born in Scotland!).

I began with Dali and I shall finish there too.

#### EXAMPLE 9: DALI *The Persistence of Memory*

Dali's pieces of jewellery made in the shape of these stretched timepieces may be attractive in their own right, but, viewed as single items, they lack context and derived meaning. In *The Persistence of Memory* they *have* meaning and the 'meaning' is interpretable, but, the range of interpretations is large. Do they suggest: the heat of the sun; time being distorted (as when it passes quickly, or, when it drags); are they exaggerations of reality, set in a context of other exaggerated realities; are they intended to link time past (the suggestion of earlier types of painting from the background) with the present, and so on?

Peter Maxwell Davies's musical idiom is both eclectic and inclusive. It is rather easy to dismiss some of his work as having no real substance, of being all surface and no depth, of playing for cheap thrills at the expense of the paying public. This gloss on criticism of his work, albeit somewhat exaggerated, is not too far from the truth of the matter, in that Davies's music has been dismissed by some of his contemporaries as trivial and designed to court cheap popularity, unlike, for example, Birtwistle for whom there *is* 'no compromise'.

Davies's music engages with multiple layers of meaning, all interpretable, but none absolute. It remains one of the fascinating aspects of his musical idiom that it does function at different levels simultaneously. As I hope I have demonstrated, it is inaccurate to use the term 'parody' as a catch-all characterising his stylistic processes since the term fails to do justice to the diversity of levels through which his music operates in relation to style, content and idea within his compositional technique.

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[1] John Warnaby, 'The Music of Peter Maxwell Davies based on the writings of George MacKay Brown', Ph.D., Open University 1990.

[2] Reproductions of this famous picture, which is on display at The Museum of Modern Art in

New York, can be readily found on the internet and therefore no reproduction is included. See for example:

[www.moma.org/collection/provenance/items/162.34.html](http://www.moma.org/collection/provenance/items/162.34.html) or [www.3d-dali.com/Tour/persistencia.htm](http://www.3d-dali.com/Tour/persistencia.htm) [as at 17 June 2005].

[3] Nicholas Jones, 'Dominant Logic: Peter Maxwell Davies's basic unifying hypothesis', *The Musical Times* 143, Spring 2002, pp. 37-45.

[4] Peter Maxwell Davies, programme note for the First Symphony:  
([www.maxopus.com/works/symph\\_1.htm](http://www.maxopus.com/works/symph_1.htm))

[5] It has been assumed that the reader will have access to scores of Davies's work and as a result Examples 2, 3, 4 and 8, from *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot*, *St Thomas Wake*, and *The Lighthouse* respectively, have not been reproduced.

[6] This 'label is only seen on the sketch and even then in Davies's personal script, so not intended to be 'read' as such.

[7] 'Sieving' is a term coined by David Roberts in his ground-breaking Ph.D. thesis to describe Davies's set generation processes: David Roberts, 'Techniques of Composition in the Music of Peter Maxwell Davies', Ph.D., Birmingham University, 1985.