

McGregor, Richard (2009) Appendix II: source material used in the works of Peter Maxwell Davies, 1957–2006. In: Gloag, Kenneth and Jones, Nicholas, (eds.) Peter Maxwell Davies studies. Cambridge Composer Studies . Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp. 242-254.

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Peter Maxwell Davies Studies

2009 marks the 75th birthday of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, an occasion that presents an opportunity for reflection upon, and appreciation of, a period of compositional achievement that extends from the 1950s to the present. This book forms part of that reflection through a statement of the current condition of research on Davies's music. Detailed analytical discussions of individual works, such as the opera *Taverner* and the First Symphony, coexist with broader issues and perspectives; these include Davies's own writings about music, his engagement with sonata form, the compositional sources, problems of text, and the situating of this music within and in relation to 'modern times'. The book describes selected works from all periods of Davies's rich and diverse career, resulting in a portrait of the music that, while it may be incomplete, reveals the essence of this remarkable composer and his music.

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Edited by Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones
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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521886581

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First published 2009

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-88658-1 hardback

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In memory of John Warnaby (1942–2007)

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Preface

2009 marks the 75th birthday of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, an occasion that presents an opportunity for reflection upon, and appreciation of, a period of compositional achievement that extends from the 1950s to the present and during which Davies has been at the forefront of musical life in Britain and beyond. The status of Davies as one of the leading international composers of the present is now generally accepted, with numerous recordings and a seemingly endless succession of high-profile commissions reflecting this status. Yet, while attention is drawn to some seminal studies of this music, such as David Roberts's thesis on Davies's compositional techniques, completed in 1985,¹ which is referred to throughout this book, and articles from Peter Owens, Arnold Whittall, Richard McGregor, Nicholas Jones, and John Warnaby, among others, there is still a notable shortage of extensive, informed studies of this music, with the collection of essays edited by Richard McGregor, published in 2000, still appearing as a somewhat isolated example.² Paul Griffiths's short book, an invaluable source, was published in 1982 and obviously does not reflect the composer's development after this point,³ while Mike Seabrook's book is essentially biography and therefore cannot do justice to the musical detail.⁴ While *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies*, in itself, cannot begin to address the absence of a fully developed discourse on this music, we are confident that it will provide a meaningful reflection of the current condition of research and suggest possible directions for future investigation and interpretation.

Each chapter is effectively a self-contained study that involves an engagement with a clearly defined subject that reflects the diversity of the music in terms of periods, genres, forms, techniques and related issues through a wide range of critical, theoretical and analytical interpretations and perspectives. It is clear therefore that this book does not seek to provide a comprehensive overview; rather the works, and related issues, that are selected for discussion reflect the current interests and approaches of the individual contributors.

¹ David Roberts, 'Techniques of Composition in the Music of Peter Maxwell Davies' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1985).

² Richard McGregor (ed.), *Perspectives on Peter Maxwell Davies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

³ Paul Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies* (London: Robson Books, 1982).

⁴ Mike Seabrook, *Max: The Life and Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (London: Gollancz, 1994).

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While important works, such as the First Symphony and the opera *Taverner*, for example, are selected for commentary from a number of different perspectives, inevitably some important works, such as *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, are not brought into focus in the way that a comprehensive overview of Davies's music would require.

Davies emerged in the 1950s as a young composer already aware of current developments in Europe, and sceptical of the conservatism of British music of the time; at this early stage of his career he put in place the elements of a rigorous modernist musical language. Early works such as the Trumpet Sonata and the Five Pieces for Piano, both of which feature extensively in Philip Rupprecht's contribution to this book, highlight the European, modernist context of the period, but they also give an indication of Davies's emerging individuality, with Rupprecht's explication of the 'thematic drama' of these and other works providing a telling insight into this emergent individual compositional identity. The early stages of Davies's career also involved recourse to the written word as a means of articulating ideas and concerns about music; the somewhat trenchant nature of his writing from this period is captured and contextualized in Nicholas Jones's contribution. Davies's role as an essayist and polemicist has not received the attention it deserves, and we expect that the complete listing of such writing as Appendix I will help stimulate further thoughts on this body of writings and its potential connection to the music.

During the 1960s Davies defined himself as a radical voice through innovative works such as the music theatre of *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, which situated his musical language on the sharp, avant-garde edge of modernism. However, the mid-1970s saw a turn towards more explicit historical forms and genres, with the First Symphony, which both is the subject of Kenneth Gloag's chapter and is discussed as part of Rodney Lister's overview of Davies's engagement with sonata form, in retrospect being seen as the opening of a path to the long sequence of genre-based works, such as the Strathclyde Concertos and Naxos String Quartets, the project that has come to define the latest stage of Davies's musical journey.

At each moment in that journey Davies has produced music that evinces both a powerful sense of drama, regardless of the context, and an immediate means of communication. However, as much of the emerging scholarship indicates, these qualities are constructed and articulated through an often highly complex level of musical structure and compositional technique: hence the relevance of Rupprecht's definition of 'thematic drama'. Issues of compositional technique and process are highlighted in a number of the contributions to this book. For example, Richard McGregor provides a detailed account of Davies's use of plainchant as the starting point of an often labyrinthine transformational process, and Peter Owens's description of

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978-0-521-88658-1 - Peter Maxwell Davies Studies

Edited by Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones

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textual issues in the published scores is based upon a deep understanding of the source material. We hope that the publication of the complete listing of Davies's usages of plainchant and other musical materials as compositional sources in the form of Appendix II, compiled by Richard McGregor, will help enable and develop further work in this area. The importance of the compositional origin and source is also evident in David Beard's interpretation of *Taverner*, Davies's seminal encounter with the operatic genre and a work that is pivotal in his development as a composer through the 1960s.

Davies himself was not invited to contribute to this book, but he is of course a constant presence, and not just as its subject. Davies, more than many composers, most likely unintentionally, has done much to shape the evolving critical discourses around his own music. His written commentaries on music, which, as Nicholas Jones demonstrates in his focused survey of Davies's writings of the 1950s, first emerge in parallel with the early stages of his compositional career, provide potential insights into the composer's thought processes. However, the music-literary form of the programme note, for example, increasingly presents signposts towards interpretation. Davies's programme note for the First Symphony, which was published as a text in *Tempo* and reprinted along with other programme notes in the Griffiths book, is a good demonstration of this.⁵ This text gives 'clues' to the harmonic language of the work, through factors such as Davies's written references to contextually defined 'tonics' and 'dominants' and the 'ghost of sonata form' that invite the analyst to look in certain directions, an invitation that both Gloag and Lister, in different ways, respond to.

In conjunction with the direction towards interpretation that the programme note provides, the copious amounts of sketch material – drafts, pre-compositional plans, and so on – that are available provide a rich research resource, which several contributors to this book make great use of. However, the ready availability of such materials, in conjunction with the programmatic clues and signposts, can often ground the process of interpretation at the level of intent, which is valuable and insightful, but perhaps a future study of this music will start to go beyond this framework into new critical terrain through the cultivation of theoretical models and analytical strategies that are positioned at some distance from what the composer has to tell us about his work, and the documents that tell us how it might have been composed, and begins to explicate the music in and for itself. Of course, the possibility of music 'in itself' has, in recent years, become increasingly problematic, and either in dialogue with, or in contrast to, other approaches,

⁵ Peter Maxwell Davies, 'Symphony', *Tempo*, 124 (1978), 2–5, reprinted in Paul Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies*, 157–62.

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we may begin to bear witness to an engaged, hermeneutic response to this music.

Such a response may start from the wide perspective of Arnold Whittall's contribution to this book, within which Davies's music is presented through an apposite comparison with Mahler and Berg, and refracted through the reference to Adorno. Even the most passing of references to the critical theory of Adorno may still stand as exceptional within the evolving study of Davies's music, but Whittall suggests the need to understand modernism as both a context and a concept in order to effectively situate this music; it is at this level of conceptual engagement that we anticipate new, critical responses may begin to be positioned. Scope for further approaches to this music may also be embedded in the sensitive interplay between source and interpretation that David Beard employs in relation to *Taverner*. Beard's chapter may come to provide a point of departure for studies that use the pre-compositional materials as part of a dialogue with the completed work within wider interpretative frameworks, with Beard's references to a draft of the libretto, which leads towards Jung, acting as a reminder of the multiple nature of what may actually constitute a source.

Other chapters in this book highlight the fact that Davies is not only a composer but also, as indicated above, a commentator on music, including his own. He is also a performer, directing performances and recordings of his own music, activities that are effectively summarized by Grenville Hancox. Teaching has also been important to Davies throughout his career, from working with schoolchildren at Cirencester to the development of young composers as part of the Dartington summer school and beyond, and the context of the Dartington experience is reflected in this book in the composer Philip Grange's personal recollection of, and reflection upon, that experience. The consideration of these activities helps provide other perspectives on the role of the composer as defined by Davies.

The various contributions to this book provide telling insights into the selected works and related issues, presenting a statement of current research and indications of future directions for the study of Davies's music. We hope it will be received as a healthy mix of differing responses to a wide range of music from one of the most fascinating composers of our time.

KENNETH GLOAG
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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Victoria Cooper, without whom this volume would not have been possible, and the staff at Cambridge University Press, especially Rebecca Jones whose help and assistance have been invaluable. We also record our thanks to Nicolas Bell at the British Library, and to David Wyn Jones for his advice and helpful comments on this project. Finally, Nicholas Jones wishes to thank his wife and children for their patience and understanding, and his parents for their unfailing support of him and his work over the years.

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Apel and Archibald T. Davison, 2nd rev. edn (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard
University Press, 1949), No. 65: *Alma Redemptoris Mater* by Guillaume
Dufay (primary source: *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Oesterreich* (83 vols.,
1894–1938), XXVII.I, p. 19).

Nicholas Jones would like to thank Francesca Kemp (BBC), Lee Taylor
(British Library), Anthony Powers, Charles Wilson, Gill Jones, Judith Hurford
(Cardiff University) and Judith Agus (Royal Welsh College of Music and
Drama) for their help in preparing Appendix I.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88658-1 - Peter Maxwell Davies Studies
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