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REVIEW

Selected Writings

Peter Maxwell Davies (Cambridge University Press, 2018)

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It has been four years since British music lost Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. During this time, the world has changed abruptly, not least owing to the heightened global tension relating to climate change issues, the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum, and the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America. We may imagine what music Davies might have written in response to these events given his track record for politically-motivated and environmentalist music making (salient examples include *Kommilitonen! (Young Blood!)* and *The Yellow Cake Revue*, respectively).[1] Pertinent to Nicholas Jones' new publication, *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), is not Davies' communication through music, but through words.

Selected Writings has been published in a timely fashion to permit a detailed engagement with Davies' written and spoken outputs. As Jones highlights in his informative introduction, much attention has been afforded to Davies' copious compositional output (numbering over 500 musical works).[2] One may argue that the nature of Davies' music, particularly the well-documented use of serial devices and proportional designs, and exploration of pre-existing source material, invites analysis, as does the wealth of archival material, found in the British Library, abundant in compositional sketches and pitch tables. It is plain to see how this facet of his work absorbs attention, and yet there is much more to Davies than his musical scores.

Davies' spoken and written output is prolific.[3] Understandably, it was not possible to include all writings and transcriptions within a single volume, and so Jones takes on the task of judiciously choosing materials for inclusion. *Selected Writings* is divided into three parts, which match three distinct stages in his creative life (with echoes of the tripartite Beethovenian model): (1) From Manchester to Hoy, 1934–1970, (2) From Hoy to Sanday, 1971–1997 and (3) Sanday 1998–2016. A detailed chronology prefaces each section, containing biographical and musical data. One may wonder whether it would have been more easily accessed as a single resource at the beginning of the collection, although it serves here to reinforce the division of Davies' output into three distinct phases.

Of particular value are the meticulous transcriptions of interviews (such as 'Renaissance Architecture, Symphonic Precedents and Historical Resonances', item 52), lectures ('Remembering Darmstadt', item 48, which sits in the British Library Sound Archive) and broadcasts (see, in particular, Jones' transcription of Davies in conversation with Roger Smalley from a BBC Third Programme, 22 November 1965), made accessible in text form here for the first time. Jones also reprints material from the abandoned www.maxopus.com website, which failed to recover from the accounting conviction of one of the

[1]Davies was an outspoken critic of British politicians. See 'Peter Maxwell Davies says Queen has Converted him to a Monarchist', *Telegraph.co.uk*, 19 May 2010. Retrieved 23 October 2019. His vehement objection to the Iraq War fed into the *Third Naxos String Quartet* (2003).

[2]'For the most part, [Davies' writings and spoken word] have not been subjected to the same level of scrutiny as his music. *Selected Writings*, 1. It is worth noting, however, that Jones himself contributed a chapter on Davies' writings in *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies*, eds. Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21–44.

[3]The term 'written' is used here to encompass both Davies' writings and spoken material (such as interviews, lectures and broadcasts) which have been subsequently transcribed.

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MaxOpus directors and is offline at the time of print.[4] It is of note that a new Davies website is forthcoming (www.themaxtrust.org), which promises to rekindle the importance of an online archive, housing work lists, performances, news and so forth.

A number of themes shine through in Jones' selection, which paint a vivid image of Davies' personality. Davies was a passionate and unashamed advocate of the arts, epitomized by his letters to *The Times* in which Davies attacks planned funding cuts to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra by the Arts Council (Davies was associate conductor and composer from 1992–2002).[5] His closing statement in a letter dated 2 August 1993 is chilling, rhetorical and characteristically uncompromising: 'It takes decades to build an orchestra and the stroke of an official's pen to destroy it.'[6] Davies was not afraid to voice his opinions in order to drive change in the contemporary British musical establishment.

We also read of Davies's unyielding commitment to music education across a variety of contexts, from the pragmatic concerns of school orchestras ('Composing Music for School Use', item 12, written while Davies was director of music at Cirencester Grammar School) to the importance of analysis teaching to young composers ('Where Our Colleagues Fail', item 20) and the substantial address in 1985, given while Davies was President of the Schools Music Association ('Darkening Our Civilisation', item 42). In his address, Davies articulates with characteristic clarity the necessary building blocks of the musical establishment, as vital today as it was in 1985:

> Without the various British youth orchestras, the tertiary music colleges and professional symphony orchestras round the country would not be able to recruit musicians. Without the county youth orchestras, the national youth orchestras would not be able to recruit players. Without the school orchestras, the county youth orchestras would not be able to recruit players. Without instrumental teaching in the schools, school orchestras will disappear.[7]

As well as the published intrigue in the analysis of Davies' compositions, it is apparent from *Selected Writings* that Davies himself held the score-based analysis of music in high esteem. Evidence is presented from Davies' early days, including his 1959 article for *The Listener*, 'Problems of a British Composer Today', where he laments the state of composition teaching:

> Part at least of our young composers' trouble is the almost complete lack of competent compositional teachers. There are few who can inspire a student to study a score in close analytical detail; indeed, close analysis is sometimes discouraged.[8]

This penchant for musical analysis continues, right up to Davies' personal statement, 'Individual Parameters and Spirit-Stirring Amalgams' of 17 April 2015 – which Jones commissioned for this book and was completed only 11 months before Davies' untimely passing. Within this poignant, revealing and sentimental text, Davies revisits iconic works of the past (Beethoven's F Minor Piano Sonata op. 2/1 – also discussed in 'A Composer's Point of View (1): On Music, Mathematics and Magic Squares' (2000), and the *Eroica* Symphony; music by Bach is discussed comfortably alongside Berg) while showing a concern for analytical insights shared by Boulez, Rognoni and Ratz.[9]

Accompanying Davies' passion for education, music analysis and early music source material is his fascination with religion. Though Davies was atheist, he displayed a surprising interest, and one might say fondness, for spirituality. This tension shines through at the end of his presidential address to the

[4]The scandal of accounting which consumed the MaxOpus website was well documented in the national press. See, for example, Paul Cheston, 'Agent Faces Jail for Stealing £½m from Queen's Composer', *The Evening Standard*, Wednesday, 21 October 2009.

[5]See entries 45 and 46.

[6]*Selected Writings*, 170.

[7]Ibid., 152.

[8]*Selected Writings*, 33–4.

[9]Ibid., 299–305.

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Schools Music Association, where he states 'The Bible has, perhaps, less claim to be the word of God than has the music of Mozart, which, without words with their distracting associations, puts us into direct contact with something possible beyond mortal humanity'.[10] An issue with the organization of Christianity, yes, but a curious claim in favour of the existence of a higher spiritual entity. These themes, shining through in the eight decades of *Selected Writings*, not only provide penetrating insights into Davies' life, work and contexts, but also encourage moments of reflection, such is the gravitas of Davies' thought, and honesty and sincerity in his mode of communication.

Jones is to be commended for his invaluable contribution to Davies scholarship in *Selected Writings*, and his expertise and attention to detail is manifest in every detailed annotation and carefully selected programme note. As mentioned in his introduction, the text does not include any of Davies's private letters or 64 volumes of private journals and diaries, which are currently under embargo by Davies' estate. If released, they would undoubtedly offer a further, rich context to the evolution of Davies' musical legacy.

The text offers a wealth of potential resources, from analytical insights relating to other composers to perspectives on future trajectories for contemporary music, as well as funding in the arts, politics and religion. It is of significance, therefore, not merely for those with an immediate interest in Davies' work and contexts, but to a wide variety of musical and cultural issues through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The quality of information published by this indispensable aid to Davies' scholarship is also encouraging of further research, and forms a substantial contribution to the preservation of British musical heritage.

The ordering of articles in *Selected Writings* is poignant. Jones chooses to book-end the collection with an opening folio from *Parade* (1949) showing the witty, playful side of Davies requesting commissions at a price of £100 per note. The final entry is the closing two stanzas of the libretto for *Magnus and the Monster (Nuckleavee!)* (2015) ending *Selected Writings* with the most fitting of tributes to one of the most important and distinctive figures in the history of British contemporary classical music.

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[10]Ibid., 162.

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