

Introduction: ‘The Deepest Questions at the Heart of Things’

I have no illusions about being ‘important’ as composer or person: I am pleased to have the opportunity to write and that the music is played; and I should be happy to be remembered by two tunes and a dictionary footnote.

(Peter Maxwell Davies, Item 58)

The death of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies in March 2016 brought to an end an eminent and multi-textured life and career as a composer. From the middle of the 1950s, Davies was a constant figure at the forefront of musical life in Britain and beyond and, with an extraordinary fecundity, crafted a highly significant body of work – a legacy that comprises well over five hundred compositions.¹ Given this prodigious output, it is hardly surprising that scholarly attention has been focused almost exclusively on the music: indeed, the last forty years have witnessed the publication of numerous major articles and several books.² However, this book focuses on a different, yet intimately connected aspect of the composer’s creative output: namely, his writings and spoken words. For the most part, these have not been subjected to the same level of scrutiny as his music,³ yet they are significant primary sources and were the medium through which Davies articulated his views on a variety of subjects throughout his

¹ There are 339 Opus and 180 WoO numbers in Davies’s work list. See Nicholas Jones and Richard McGregor, ‘Peter Maxwell Davies’s Opus and WoO Numbers: A New Work List’, *The Musical Times*, 151 (Spring 2010), 53–86; Jones and McGregor, ‘Work List’, *MaxOpus*, www.maxopus.com; and Jones and John Warnaby, ‘Davies, Peter Maxwell: Works’, *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

² Paul Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies* (London: Robson Books, 1982); Richard McGregor (ed.), *Perspectives on Peter Maxwell Davies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones (eds.), *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³ The exception is Nicholas Jones, ‘The Writings of a Young British Composer: Peter Maxwell Davies in the 1950s’, in Gloag and Jones (eds.), *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies*, 21–44.

professional life. These subjects range widely from specific compositional concerns and other music-related issues, to commentaries that reveal the composer's interest in art and architecture, literature, popular culture, education, religion, politics and the environment. Close scrutiny of these writings promotes a variegated view of the composer and attests to a lively, passionate, intelligent, thought-provoking and, on occasion, provocative commentator.

This book brings together an extensive and varied collection of Davies's written and spoken-word items for the first time. Spanning eight decades of the composer's life, from 1949 to 2015, this compendium offers a balanced selection of Davies's articles and essays, speeches and lectures, interviews, radio broadcasts, programme notes, tributes and letters to newspapers. A number of items are being published for the first time, including, significantly, an article from Davies himself (Item 73), commissioned especially for this book and completed just eleven months before his death. Other previously unpublished items include extracts from Davies's undergraduate thesis on Indian classical music (Item 6) and several BBC radio broadcast interviews and talks from the 1960s (Items 15, 21, 24, 26 and 32). Although these latter items are available to listen to at the British Library Sound Archive, their wider dissemination has been severely hampered by the fact that they have remained hitherto untranscribed. Yet they are significant items and, in their rather formal and 'stiff' manner – reflecting a style of presentation characteristic of the time – offer an intriguing insight into the composer's own compositional technique and aesthetic and serve to provide an important perspective on the condition of contemporary music in Britain during the later part of that decade.

The editorial decision to include previously unpublished items was one of several key criteria employed to help guide the selection of the available source materials and to ensure that variety and balance were attained across the whole volume. The breadth of the source material is somewhat extensive, as the bibliography at the end of this book indicates. The items selected for this volume account for approximately two-fifths of Davies's writings currently available.⁴ I am acutely aware that not all readers will

⁴ This does not include Davies's private letters or his sixty-four volumes of private journals and diaries (the journals and diaries have been deposited at the British Library but are currently under embargo by Davies's Estate).

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be in agreement with every item that I have selected for inclusion. However, given the amount of source material available, and the word-count restriction imposed on this volume, it was necessary to make judicious and even-handed editorial decisions. A case in point concerns the items that have been excluded – in particular those items that, in theory, I would have liked to incorporate into the book but in practice proved impossible or impractical to include. Within this category, for instance, reside Davies's newspaper review of Roger Sessions's opera *Montezuma* (omitted because of copyright issues), his earliest known radio interview (omitted because it is no longer held in the British Library or BBC Sound Archives) and the composer's interviews with Murray Schafer, Paul Griffiths and Richard Dufallo (omitted because of concerns over their combined length and implications regarding overall structural balance).⁵

Another editorial issue with which I grappled concerned the abundance of detailed and revealing programme notes that Davies wrote throughout his life, particularly for the compositions written before the 1990s: these could comfortably occupy a volume of their own. Davies's notes have proved to be highly useful sources of information for scholars and have been used, for instance, to clarify aspects of the composer's compositional technique, to determine certain aesthetic underpinnings of his musical expression, and to help build a narrative around his music. My guiding principle here was to provide a broad and balanced selection of programme notes from across Davies's output, from the 1955 sonata to which he assigned his first opus number (Item 2) to his Ninth Symphony of 2012 (Item 71).⁶ The vast

⁵ The newspaper review is Davies, 'Sessions's Opera Stirs Berliners', *New York Times*, 21 April 1964, 43. The radio interview is 'Has Modern Music Gone Too Far?', BBC recording, 19 March 1960 (BBC Sound Archive, LP26416). The interviews are Murray Schafer, 'Peter Maxwell Davies', in *British Composers in Interview* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 173–82; Paul Griffiths, 'Conversations with the Composer', in *Peter Maxwell Davies* (London: Robson Books, 1982), 101–31; Griffiths, 'Peter Maxwell Davies', in *New Sounds, New Personalities: British Composers of the 1980s* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 31–8; and Richard Dufallo, 'Sir Peter Maxwell Davies', in *Trackings: Composers Speak with Richard Dufallo* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1989), 143–55.

⁶ Davies commissioned Christopher Austin (conductor and Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music) to write a programme note for his Tenth Symphony.

majority of programme notes are presented in full as self-contained entities, but several have been fused together to form single items, as in the case of the Naxos string quartet cycle (Item 62). However, notes for several key works have been substituted with items in alternative formats – such as that for the Eighth Symphony, which is based on extracts from Davies's Antarctic diary (Item 53), and, on account of its poetic mode of expression, offers a contrasting writing style. Also included is a pair of programme notes for works by Webern and Nikos Skalkottas (Items 3 and 4), written by Davies for the iconic New Music Manchester Group concert on 9 January 1956.

Produced rather less frequently, but of equal importance throughout his life, were the composer's articles and essays. Such items, in the early to middle stages of his career, were written for *The Score*, *Composer* and *Tempo* journals and *The Listener* magazine. These range from the pugilistic style of his first published essay (Item 5), through the series of articles of the late 1950s and 1960s (Items 8, 16 and 20, for instance) which confront head-on, with vim and vigour, a number of issues that preoccupied him and other young composers at that time, to the articles of the 1970s, which are distinguished by a more mature and relaxed tone (Items 35 and 37). Moving into the cyber-technological age, Davies was one of the first composers to have his own dedicated website. Launched in 1994, *MaxOpus* served as an important conduit for several of Davies's writings, such as the short piece on the influence of Aboriginal music (Item 51) and the more substantial quartet of articles (Items 57–60) which discuss parody and musical meaning, the role of 'vernacular' styles in his own work and the relationship between music and mathematics – the latter including Davies's lyrical account of the employment and significance of magic squares in his own compositional technique: 'Projected onto the page, a magic square is a dead, black conglomeration of digits; tune in, and one hears a powerful, orbiting dynamo of musical images, glowing with numen and lumen' (Item 57).

Items 57–60 also incorporate discussion of architecture and religion – topics that lie outside the immediate realm of music. Davies's interest in architecture amounted to a lifelong obsession, stretching back to at least the 1950s. In this decade he made a series of visits to Rome, where he encountered the churches of Francesco Borromini and others (see Items 62 and 72) and fell instantly and deeply in love with the

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city (see Item 54).⁷ It was also a period where he studiously engaged with Hans Sedlmayr's writings on Gothic architecture (see Items 11, 52 and 57). Davies was equally fascinated with religion. Although he never subscribed to any particular religious belief, he was enthralled nevertheless by the concepts and apparatus of religion (see Item 73), and this interest found expression in a number of his own compositions. And, even though he considered religion 'a wonderful work of art' (Item 65), in some respects Davies was – to invoke Pier Paolo Pasolini's well-known adage – an unbeliever with a nostalgia for a belief.⁸

The topics of religion and architecture also featured strongly in Davies's speeches and lectures: indeed, it was not uncommon for him to be markedly vocal and vigorously articulate in relation to both non-musical issues and music-related concerns. Several key public pronouncements appear in this book, including an early speech from the 1980s (Item 42) as well as the high-profile Royal Philharmonic Society Lecture, 'Will Serious Music Become Extinct?' (Item 65), both of which exhibit Davies's provocative and persuasive style and manner of public speaking. By the time he had delivered the Royal Philharmonic Society lecture in 2005, Davies had already occupied the post of Master of the Queen's Music (see Item 64) for over a year. The prestige which this position afforded him increased the frequency of his public engagements, and two further examples, dating from 2008 and 2009 (Items 66 and 67), forge a trilogy of public statements from this period that effectively address some of the main topics of debate with which he had been preoccupied since the 1950s.

It is worth noting, however, that for Davies musical and non-musical issues and topics were rarely seen as unrelated, isolated entities. On the contrary, they were always viewed with a meaningful interconnectedness – they were all part of what he called a 'total expression':

⁷ As part of his eulogy at Davies's memorial concert (St John's Smith Square, London, 27 June 2016), Sir Antonio Pappano warmly quipped that the composer's 'greatest ambition was to become an Italian'.

⁸ Pasolini reportedly said this in 1966 during a press conference for his film *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St Matthew*).

For myself, I can't divorce music from everything that I do and everything that I think and all that I'm about. I say this without any reservation at all. It's everything that I think and am. But all sorts of other things come into it. [...] And I think one is very conscious of being part of a total expression which involves not only music but many other things and these things are so closely interrelated that to try to be purist about the music or about musical abstractions, I find is just not possible for me.⁹

Such 'closely interrelated' factors – broadly categorized as art, religion, science and music – pose 'the deepest questions at the heart of things' and together constitute the 'essential fabric of our civilization' (Item 65). Thus, in this book, in addition to the topics already mentioned, readers will encounter an extensive and multifarious array of overarching and intersecting themes and topics that include: insights into the composer's compositional workshop and extra-musical influences on his works; considerations as to the importance of understanding the music of the past and studying and analysing other composers' music and compositional techniques; views on the state of music education in Britain; indications of Davies's voracious reading habits – which were wide-ranging, idiosyncratic and often unexpected (including, among others, Joyce, Dante, St Thomas Aquinas, Gide, Carossa, St Augustine, Shaw, Plato, Dostoevsky, Freud and Jung); reflections on the composer's own homosexuality;¹⁰ suggestions of his impish humour; and testimonies as to the cultural, social, communal and musical significance of the Orkney Islands in relation to Davies's whole existence.

The structure of the book is chronological and divided into three parts, with chronologies for each of the three sections. These chronologies enable the reader to contextualize each item: they detail noteworthy biographical events and itemize key compositions and other minor works that are

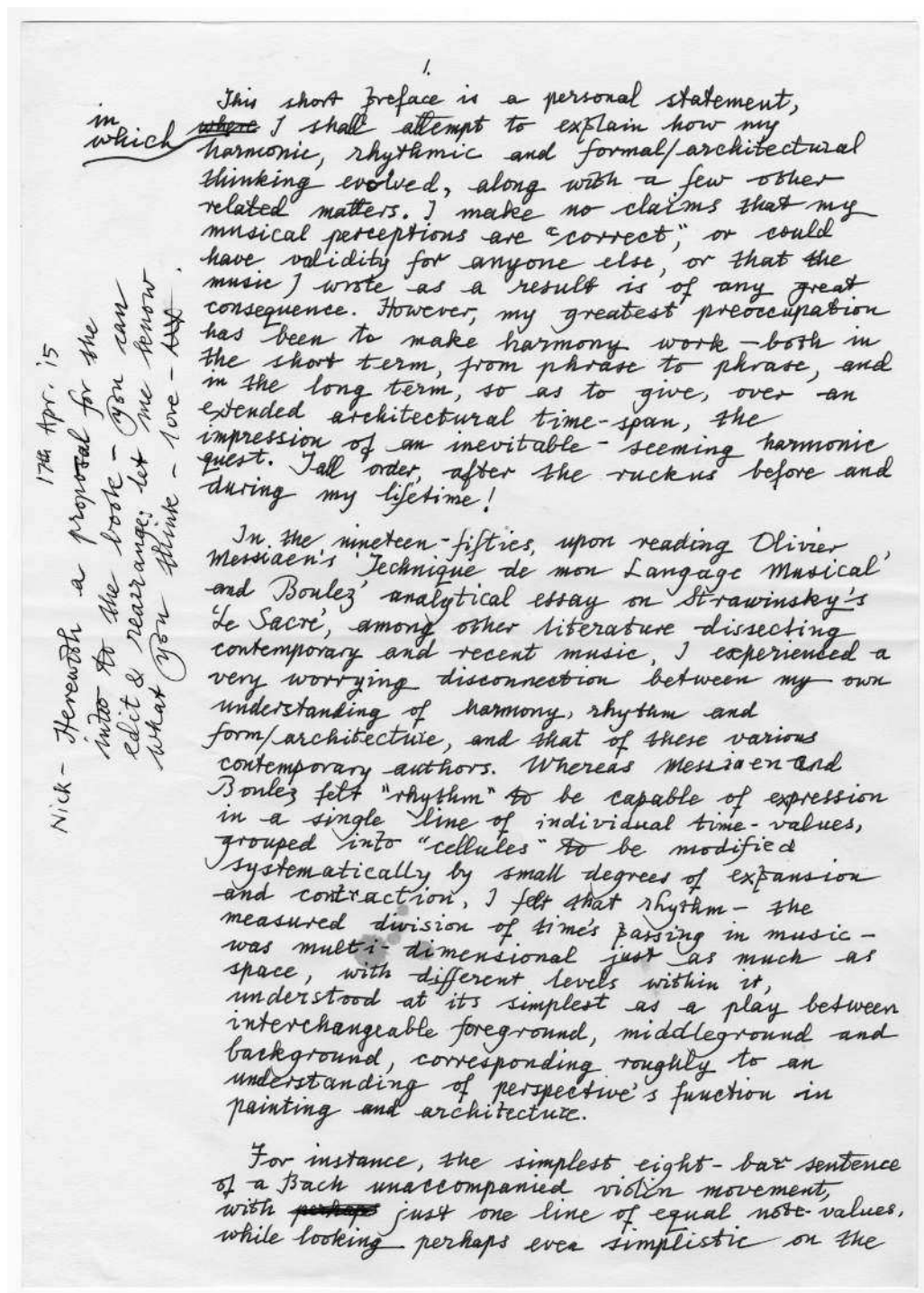
⁹ 'The Conductor and the Composer: Peter Maxwell Davies and Sir Charles Groves', broadcast BBC Radio 3, 16 March 1977 (but recorded in 1972), British Library Sound Archive, M7027BW. See also Item 58, where a very similar sentiment is articulated: 'Each work I write relates to what I wrote before – there must be thousands of cross-references – but, more significantly, it relates to – consists of – the life I lead. It is one long, extended "reference", in that this music is a distillation of – is – my real life, even including its inadequacies and mistakes.'

¹⁰ Item 38 – an interview for *Gay News* – is the only item in the book that is not 'authored' by Davies, but given its date and socio-cultural context, has been included for its historical significance.

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mentioned in the text. There are seventy-four items in total and each one is annotated (where appropriate) with footnotes and source information. This chronological framework enables strong links to be forged between items in different formats and at different stages of Davies's life, the intention being that readers can dip in and out of the book, inspecting individual items, but also trace the development – the 'narrative thread' – of Davies's thoughts, ideas and arguments on a particular topic or topics over a given period.



1 Item 73, first page of Peter Maxwell Davies's original handwritten script