

1 'A dark voice from within': Peter Maxwell Davies and modern times

Arnold Whittall

Aspiring, despairing?

The first part of my title, a quotation from Georg Trakl's *Offenbarung und Untergang* [Revelation and Fall] indicates a desire to pin down something fundamental in the aesthetic and cultural practice of Peter Maxwell Davies.¹ All artists for whom the societies and cultures of modern times are very far from ideal might be expected to make darkness a dominant image in their work. But dominant images do not operate by totally excluding alternatives, and the whole point of modernism, in art, is that tensions and dialogues between opposites are fundamental to both form and expression: tensions that may never fully resolve, dialogues that may never result in harmonious synthesis. In other words, darkness implies the coexistent presence of light – in a subordinate capacity, perhaps, but helping to support the claim that no significant work of art can (or should) leave an entirely negative impression.²

The phase of musical modernism that has unfolded since 1945 can be seen in terms of dialogues between many such opposites: the within and the without, the stable and the unstable, and so on. But no cultural commentator today can be content with such straightforward binary oppositions: the reductiveness of exclusive alternatives has been displaced by the network, the interactive continuum, with different shades of emphasis and degrees of intersection between contrasting elements. For a hint of what this can mean, we need look no further than Davies's note for the Fourth Naxos String Quartet (2004), and his comment that 'adult motives and implications, concerning aggression and war' impinge on the 'innocent childhood fantasy'

¹ This is a revised version of a paper given at the 'Peter Maxwell Davies at 70' study day held at Canterbury Christ Church College on 16 October 2004.

² Raymond Geuss, in his consideration of the relationship between Berg and Adorno, states that 'art by its very nature is affirmative. The very fact that an internally coherent,

aesthetically satisfying work has been produced tends to promote reconciliation with the world' (Geuss, 'Berg and Adorno', in *The Cambridge Companion to Berg*, ed. Anthony Pople (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43). Geuss has useful things to say about Adorno's problems with the 'nature' of art in this sense.

2 Arnold Whittall

of the games depicted in the Breughel painting – *Children's Games* – that forms part of the composer's background to this work.³

A large number of interpretative networks will be brought into play in this chapter, and the first moves between the national and the international. After 1945, there was a common perception that nationalism was not only politically perverse but culturally regressive. Yet, as several significant commentators have argued, it was an important feature of such 'Year Zero' enterprises as Book 1 of Boulez's *Structures* for two pianos that extreme textural fragmentation could be heard as acknowledging, if not actually representing, utopian social and political ideals.⁴ Many composers emerging during the early decades after the Second World War shared the aspiration to be both progressive and idealistic, and it is easy to detect an irony here, with brave talk of a new, genuinely anti-nationalist common-practice requiring the suppression of any suggestion that the essence of that style might be more Austro-German than truly supra-national.

In the 1950s it seemed easier for composers to distance themselves from Austro-German nationalism if the primary stimulus for progressiveness was Webern's post-expressionistic serialism rather than Mahler's late-romantic chromaticism. Yet Mahler proved to be as vital a source as Webern for late-modernist compositional initiatives after 1950: and that could well be because the presence of the unrefined vernacular alongside the elevated sophistication thought proper to high art was a fundamental feature of that Mahlerian fracturing of late-romantic organicism that had been central to musical modernism since early in the twentieth century.⁵ It is therefore not surprising that two British composers who owe much to Mahler – Britten and Davies – should have demonstrated such resourcefulness in exploring another important twentieth-century stylistic continuum, the high (or cultivated) and the low (or popular): both composers also embraced the culturally functional – especially in music for young people and amateurs – while playing off the international against the local.

Mahler, Berg, Adorno

In referring to stylistic as well as formal connections between Davies and Mahler, I am acknowledging a tradition in critical commentary that goes back

³ Peter Maxwell Davies, liner notes to Naxos String Quartet No. 4 (CD, Naxos, 8. 557397, 2005).

⁴ For example, see Mark Carroll, *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ben Parsons, 'Sets and the City: Serial Analysis, Parisian Reception, and

Pierre Boulez's *Structures Ia*', *Current Musicology*, 76 (2003), 53–79 and 'Arresting Boulez: Post-War Modernism in Context', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 129/1 (2004), 161–76.

⁵ See T. W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago University Press, 1992).

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[More information](#)

3 'A dark voice from within': Davies and modern times

at least as far as 1965, when Stephen Pruslin claimed that 'the relationship between the musical thinking of Gustav Mahler and Peter Maxwell Davies becomes ever more apparent'.⁶ This 'relationship' has been detected as early as the *Five Klee Pictures* originally written for Cirencester in 1960, and it was surely a factor in the composer's turning away from the kind of integrated, avant-garde progressiveness that his pre-Cirencester works display. One can well understand the appeal of Mahlerian polarities to a composer fascinated by the challenge of bringing the modality, flowing rhythms and conjunct voice-leading of plainchant and medieval music into meaningful confrontation with their post-tonal, fractured, expressionistic opposites. The result, as in the *Leopardi Fragments* (1961), is rather closer to the contemporary Italian lyricism of Dallapiccola's *Canti di liberazione* or Nono's *Ha venido* than to the more determinedly centrifugal textures of Boulez or Stockhausen. Pruslin saw the appeal of Mahler for Davies in the mix of cultural and musical factors; and (as Pruslin put it) a common concern with 'irony – not in its modern misuse as "cynicism" but in its original meaning of a sense of contradiction which is implicitly tragic'⁷ – promoted the kind of allusions to Mahlerian materials and moods that Pruslin was the first to illustrate in detail. These allusions took on 'a crucial importance' in the *Second Fantasia on John Taverner's 'In Nomine'* (1964): although, in 1965, Pruslin considered the final climax of the *Second Fantasia* more in relation to Beethoven than to Mahler, he later referred to the *Second Fantasia's* last section as a 'luminous Mahlerian *adagio*'.⁸

The Mahler association is important, and also long-lasting. For example, Roderic Dunnett, reviewing Davies's Seventh Symphony in 2000, claims that it 'contains as bewitching a Mahlerian *adagio* as any Davies has composed since the *Second Taverner Fantasia*';⁹ the composer himself has noted that 'a passage in the development of the first movement of Mahler's 3rd Symphony' has left traces on the structure, if not the style, of the Fourth Naxos String Quartet.¹⁰ But for me what helps to make the dark quality of the Mahler/Davies association as potent as its luminosity, at least in the works of the 1960s, is the way it suggests allusion to a further association, between Mahler and Berg. It is appropriate, then, that the version of Mahler proposed by Berg's pupil Adorno seems especially relevant to a consideration of this aspect of the Davies aesthetic.

⁶ Stephen Pruslin, 'Second Taverner Fantasia', in *Peter Maxwell Davies: Studies from Two Decades*, ed. Pruslin (Boosey & Hawkes, 1979), 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸ Stephen Pruslin, 'Nel mezzo del cammin – In Mid Flight', in *Peter Maxwell Davies*, ed. Pruslin, 4.

⁹ Roderic Dunnett, Review of St Magnus Festival, *The Independent*, 21 June 2000, 12.

¹⁰ Davies, liner notes to Naxos String Quartet No. 4.

4 Arnold Whittall

As always, Adorno underlines the link between compositional technique and political ideology: Leon Botstein claims that Adorno recognized in Mahler ‘the power of instrumental music to advance through its own material the cause of resistance to oppression: ... Mahler realized this power by foregrounding radical discontinuities, aborted expectations, and formal innovations’.¹¹ As Peter Franklin has understood, an even more basic aspect of that emphasis on discontinuity is pinned down in Adorno’s perception that Mahler’s ‘relentless quest after some sort of grounded certainty runs up against the spectre of its own wilfulness, its potential untruth. This results in a music that quite literally questions its own artfulness and thus progressively, modernistically presages its emancipation from myth and ideology’.¹² It is a music in which ‘joy remains unattainable, and no transcendence is left but that of yearning’.¹³ In such phrases, I think, it is possible to feel that Adorno might just as well have been writing about Berg, and I will return to the topic of Adorno on Berg later. First, however, I will discuss some of the potential relationships between Mahler, Berg and Davies’s opera *Taverner*.

Mahler, Berg, Davies, *Taverner*

A capsule representation of the chain of affinity between Mahler (Symphony No. 10), Berg (*Lulu*) and Davies (*Taverner*; 1962–8, partly reconstructed 1970) is shown in Exx. 1.1–1.4. In all three works, shown here in fairly drastic reduction, there is an anguished, aspiring melodic line, which rises rapidly through wide intervals without seeking to evade the basic metre. But there are differences as well as similarities. Mahler does not lose contact with tonality, and the thematic elements of his Adagio, however chromatic, remain within the voice-leading constraints of a musical world in which dissonance resolves onto consonance, and the melodic outlining of triadic intervals – not least the octave – is formally as well as expressively primary (Ex. 1.1).

Berg and Davies cross the great divide that separates Mahler’s essentially traditional voice-leading from motivic processes stemming from the full emancipation of the dissonance. I am not claiming that there is conscious, intentional allusion to specific passages in Mahler by Berg, or to specific passages in Berg or Mahler by Davies: and there are many other aspects to the dialogue between convergence and divergence in these examples which

¹¹ Leon Botstein, ‘Whose Gustav Mahler? Reception, Interpretation, and History’, in *Mahler and His World*, ed. Botstein (Princeton University Press, 2002), 24.

¹² Peter Franklin, ‘“... his fractures are the script of truth” – Adorno’s Mahler’,

in *Mahler Studies*, ed. Stephen Hefling (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 278.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 284. The reference is to Adorno, *Mahler*, 57.

5 'A dark voice from within': Davies and modern times

Ex. 1.1 Mahler, Symphony No. 10, first movement, bars 16–23 (woodwind parts omitted)

1 Adagio

The score consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The second system includes Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'Adagio'. The score shows a dynamic progression from piano (*p*) to fortissimo (*f*) with various crescendos and performance markings. The first system includes markings such as 'ma con molto calore', 'div.', 'poco d'arco', and 'unis.'. The second system includes markings such as 'poco cresc.', 'molto cresc.', 'div.', 'espr. molto cresc.', and 'poco d'arco'.

would need to be addressed in a full exposition of the subject. Nevertheless, I believe that this kind of stylistic affinity helps to create a special sense of affective affinity between Berg and Davies. Moreover, this affect, or mood, intensifies – and perhaps also distorts – the Mahlerian spirit. In both Berg and Davies, that Mahlerian spirit is loaded with additional irony and tension, in ways that are worth considering in a little more detail.

The Berg material (Ex. 1.2) is first heard in Act I, Scene 2 of *Lulu*. This traces the battle of wills between Lulu herself and Dr Schön, with the result that Schön's initial intention to end their relationship is overturned. The contest is played out against the musical background of a sonata-form

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6 Arnold Whittall

Ex. 1.2 Berg, *Lulu*, Act I, Scene 2, bars 622–6

a tempo [Lento]

622 *[poco f]*

Lulu
 Glaub - Sie, das ver - gißt sich? Wer au - ßer Ih - nen auf der gan - zen Welt hat

Orch.
[mf] *cresc.*

624 (Reprise der Sonate)
 subito quasi a tempo di allegro energico

Lulu
 je et - was für mich üb - rig ge - habt?

Dr. Schön
(zufahrend)
 Laß mich aus dem Spiel! Wenn Du...

Orch.
(cresc.) *f* *(Hn.)*

626

Dr. Schön
 — mir ver - pflich - tet bist, dann

Orch.
(Hn.)

Lulu: Do you think I can forget it?
 Who except you in the whole world
 has ever paid me real attention?

Schön: Leave me out of this!
 If you feel obliged to me, then ...

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7 'A dark voice from within': Davies and modern times

Ex. 1.3 Davies, *Second Taverner Fantasia*, bars 1089–98

[lento molto]

1089

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

2 soli

Db.

gli altri

1094

structure, and the passage in question provides what Berg calls the 'coda to the exposition', running into the sonata's reprise shown at bar 625. Dramatically, the music accompanies the moment where Lulu's strategy of forcing Schön to change his mind begins to take effect. In relatively rapid speech, as if impersonating a dedicated and submissive fiancée, Lulu explains exactly what she owes to Schön, implying that he alone has 'paid real attention' to her, and treated her with genuine affection.

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[More information](#)

8 Arnold Whittall

Ex. 1.4 Davies, *Taverner*, Act 2, Scene 4, bars 168–75

[*lento molto*]

168 [as bar 1089 in Ex. 1.3]

White Abbot

thought, do burn me for op-pos - ing it.

Orch.

172

I know our Church would

Berg's music for this passage does not preclude an interpretation that takes it at face value: as Douglas Jarman has written, 'above the intense and poignant Mahlerian Lento theme of the Sonata Coda ... Lulu voices her indebtedness to Schön'.¹⁴ But Jarman also notes that, 'on its reappearances during the course of the opera, the Coda theme will gradually acquire powerful, and ... disturbing associations': and what seems especially 'disturbing' is the sound of its poignancy and intensity at moments that are sordid and horrific, such as Lulu's fatal transaction with Jack the Ripper. For Jarman, Berg's strategy is aimed at making audiences 'feel pity for and identify not only with Lulu and Geschwitz ... but with all the characters helplessly trapped in this grotesque *Totentanz*'; 'the return of Schön's Sonata Coda theme ... as an accompaniment to the ... transaction between Lulu and Jack' underlines 'the difference between the luxuriant, elegiac music and the events on stage', producing 'an emotional disorientation that is deeply disturbing'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Lulu* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27–8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

9 'A dark voice from within': Davies and modern times

Nevertheless, Jarman believes, 'it can also, if we respond to the music and are prepared to give these characters the understanding and compassion that the humanity of Berg's score demands, be humanly restorative'.¹⁶

In another commentary on the *Lulu* Coda music, Judy Lochhead gets closer to the Mahlerian features of technique and style that underpin this dark, disorientating conjunction of the sordid and the elegiac. Lochhead notes Berg's use of 'triadic sonorities that have tonal associations, and appoggiatura-like melodic figures',¹⁷ and she concludes that 'the sound of the Freedom and Coda musics *parodies* a Mahlerian emotional content and undercuts any sense of an emotional authenticity that might attach to the dramatic situation'.¹⁸ In this rather extreme way, if we follow Lochhead, Berg's subversive music enhances what Pruslin (with reference to the *Second Taverner Fantasia*) defined as that 'sense of contradiction which is implicitly tragic'.¹⁹

Exx. 1.3 and 1.4 show parallel passages from the *Second Taverner Fantasia* and the climactic stages of *Taverner* itself, where the *Second Taverner Fantasia*'s Lento molto is overlaid with the White Abbot's tormented but not unstoical valediction. Here we might also detect the conjunction of tragedy and irony, since the Abbot accepts his fate from within the distinctive musical context of the composer Taverner's own powerful conflictedness. And just as, in *Lulu*, the sense of unease and disturbance depends on awareness of parodied Mahler, so, with *Taverner*, we can feel a very palpable sense of distaste at the way the Abbot's fate has come about. Luxuriant, elegiac music seduces the listener, and it also, if Jarman's Berg model applies, inculcates a sense of moral responsibility: a kind of ethical awareness in face of such pressing contemporary problems as religious fanaticism and intolerance.

Modernism: ethics and aesthetics

No commentator on *Taverner* has made this last point more eloquently than Mike Seabrook: describing the ending as 'deeply tragic, filled with pity, fear and lamentation', he sees the opera as asking the question: 'religious faith does this to people. Why?'²⁰ On the one hand, we might feel 'disgust at the spiritual repression at the heart of all religions made by men': on the other hand, we might feel that – as at the end of *Worldes Blis*, as Seabrook hears it – 'the violence and fury are always suffused and eased by a very Mahlerian

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100–1.

¹⁷ Judy Lochhead, 'Lulu's Feminine Performance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Berg*, ed. Anthony Pople (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 235–6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁹ Pruslin, 'Second Taverner Fantasia', 26.

²⁰ Mike Seabrook, *Max: The Life and Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (London: Gollancz, 1994), 139–40.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Arnold Whittall*

compassion'.²¹ My own view is that hearing Berg as well as Mahler at the end of *Taverner* gives the compassion embodied in the voice of the orchestra a darker, more ambivalent tone than it would otherwise possess: this darkness and ambivalence could seem even more salient if we believe that a musical style able to evoke love, sexual obsession, and all the complex resonances of personal feeling, is being used in a situation where feelings are primarily driven by matters of religion and politics.

Perhaps there is some common ground between *Lulu* and *Taverner* in the topics of courage and cowardice, the role of acts of betrayal and resistance in cultures that are in essence decadent. But however we hear it, the ending of *Taverner* seems to go farther than anything of Berg's – even the Violin Concerto – in underlining, rather than attempting to integrate or resolve, its disparate musical sources. What follows the Abbot's valediction embodies a shattering collision of styles and genres: the Lento's atonal expressionism, the chorus's modal chromaticism, and Taverner's own sixteenth-century modality are all involved, and the effect is rather like that described by Adorno in Schoenberg's String Trio, where 'a fully-constructed totality overlaps with the opposing impulse'.²²

Obviously enough, the question of whether the various significations we can infer in Mahler, Berg and Davies are plausibly conformant is complex and open-ended. But I feel there is a strong case for tracing that particular high/low, ancient/modern network of genres and styles through into the theatre pieces of the 1960s and early 1970s, with their confrontations between expressionistic lyricism and avant-garde fracturing. Then, in the later 1970s, and after, it is possible to sense a shift away from the expressionist Mahler/Berg continuum to a modern-classic Mahler/Sibelius continuum, as the impact of things Northern grows stronger, and the Antichrist is masked by Saint Magnus. But to do justice to this dangerously reductive notion, we need to step back and consider what that perception of a shift of direction has to do with modern times – with modernism.

Studies of the modern in contemporary culture often ground themselves in Nietzsche, who foresaw so much of what is essential to a proper understanding of art and life in our own time – and not least in relation to time-honoured questions about the relative roles of the transcendent and the everyday. According to a recent commentary by Matthew Rampley, Nietzsche believed that, although 'art raises its head where religion recedes', modern art in *his* time was 'corrupted by the dominance of

²¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

²² T. W. Adorno, 'Vers une musique informelle', in *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on*

Modern Music, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 279.