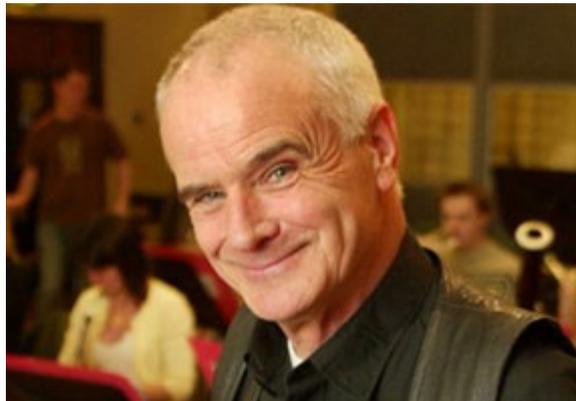


Another Pin Falls! (Peter Maxwell Davies 1934-2016):

A personal remembrance

By Andrew Glover-Whitley

“We interrupt this piece by Scarlatti to bring you the sad news of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies’s passing this afternoon from cancer. He had been a controversial figure who was.....”



This is how I heard of the great loss of the man who made me realise that I wanted to be a composer at any cost on BBC Radio 3 yesterday afternoon. He had been a figure in my life since I was 13 years old and through his uniquely individual music he came to touch me in a way no other composer had or has since touched me.

<https://youtu.be/5npBnlqnRdg>

“Eight Songs for a Mad King”

It was at this young age that I first heard, in 1971, his iconoclastic music theatre piece “Eight Songs for a Mad King”. I had never heard anything quite like it before and the impression was profound. It was life changing, an epiphany, the likes I have only ever had a very few times to music. Ligeti’s “Atmospheres”, Stockhausen’s “Gesang der Junglinge” and Birtwistle’s “Punch and Judy” being the other times. In this one piece of anarchy from a name I was to come to know very well I had found my musical home for many years to come. Even though I was to travel many musical roads, dark by ways and sun gladdened lanes of the music world it always bought me back to the works of Max (he was always known by this simple name).

His music over the years changed and not always for the better in some cases but most of his 330 odd pieces were always of a standard that was wrought with intellect, sharpness of musical focus and mind; and always humour when desired. Humour in abundance was one of the keys to his works. In the “Eight Songs...” there is fun and laughter but at the back of the work there is a dark hubris of certainty in the sadness he conveys of the kings mental state.

Over the years he produced ten Symphonies, ten String Quartets, countless Concertos, works for the stage, works for amateurs, works for his own ensemble, The Fires of London, as well as works in virtually every oeuvre known to the musical world. The first Symphony stunned audiences at its first performance in about 1976. No-one expected the enfant terrible of new British music to write such a conventional work and yet he did, side stepping the shock with a work that still remains one of his finest efforts in the genre, even though he wrote nine more, very closely argued, and superbly orchestrated works in this form.

<https://youtu.be/KrHnfhZHznQ>

“Symphony No.1”

He was not unused to controversy and peoples shock or ridicule over his work. In fact he happily courted it and with the premiere in 1969 at that years proms of his orchestral motet “Worldes Blis” he actually said that he was delighted at the sounds of slamming creaky seats as people exited the Albert Hall incensed at the music he had written. The *Enfant Terrible* had arrived!

He was a controversial musical figure and yet he was always writing music that would appeal to every type of music lover. His works were not only high-brow affairs but also music that could be hummed and enjoyed for their melodic elements, such as “Farwell to Stromness” and their sometimes almost “gallows” humour. Probably his most comedic work, and yet so well controlled and orchestrated in a way that we could all learn from is his amazing “Orkney Wedding and Sunrise”. Not the type of work you would expect from such a figure as Max and yet it has become one of his most popular works especially with the most unexpected, heart-warming and effective ending.

<https://youtu.be/kCeh6amXyYE>

“Orkney Wedding with Sunrise”

I first had a chance to meet Max just before I began my musical studies in earnest and he made a great impression on me with his few comments and quizzical and mischievous glint in

his blue/grey eyes. I got the chance to chat with him for a little while and no matter what you asked of him to do with his work he would always return it to what you are doing and how he may help.

I met him again at the farewell concert of The Fires of London in the Purcell Room, London on the South Bank a good few years later. He noticed me and made a B line for me. I never thought he could possibly ever remember me after all that time. Not only did he remember me, he even remembered my name and what I had been planning to do. His memory was formidable, as was his intellect and commitment to musical education and non-musical external concerns. He said that I should go and study on the summer course up at the St Magnus Festival with him, but alas I never did, and now I never shall have the chance.

I met him for the last time at the Dartington Music Festival where he was conducting the resident ensemble in a version of the "Eight Songs for a Mad King". At the end of the work the King grabs the violin from the violin players' hands and smashes it to pieces. Obviously the player has exchanged it for a cheap fiddle. If you know the work you expect it but if you don't it can be something of a shock. There were two ladies in the front row who were of the octogenarian age who obviously didn't know the piece. When the violin was smashed it was clearly heard by everyone in the hall as the one lady turned to her friend and said "Ooh Ethel he's smashed her violin!" This brought the house down with everyone bursting their sides with laughter. The players and the actor/singer were in fits of giggles. Max on the other hand kept a straight face and turned to the two women in question and when the laughter had subsided somewhat, then with a wry smile on his face said "Yes madam he smashed her violin". This of course set everyone off again. A wonderful memory to keep of a wonderful man.

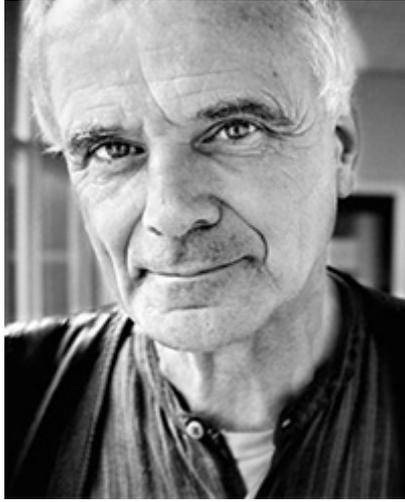
His legacy will last and his works will remain in the repertoire. Very few composers of now will ever get that epitaph when they "shuttle of this mortal coil". The world, and we, are a great deal poorer today for his loss. I have lost the soundtrack to my life, and a dear friend through his music. Rest in peace Max.

Someone on Youtube wrote about Max's passing yesterday:

"We are defined by our contribution to humanity. What a beautiful definition."

<https://youtu.be/zpJB-XXE9Xg>

"Farewell To Stromness"



(1934 - 2016)