

Unmasking Max: Peter Maxwell Davies Study Day

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School of Music, Cardiff University

Public Lecture and Concert

Incantations: Early Chamber Works of Peter Maxwell Davies

Dr Nicholas Jones

A concert of seven world premieres

Introduced and discussed by Nicholas Jones

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon and welcome – prynhawn da a chroeso.

This concert features early works by British composer Peter Maxwell Davies (1934–2016) – known to everyone simply as ‘Max’. It has the added distinction of showcasing *seven* world premieres. Five of these works date from the late 1940s and early 50s, when the young composer was in his teens – between the ages of 13 and 16, to be precise.

This concert is part of the School of Music’s Peter Maxwell Davies Study Day – a day of academic papers, including a keynote lecture and panel discussion.

The works will be performed by current students, alumni and friends of the School of Music – something that Max, a passionate champion of young composers and performers, would have been very pleased. Yihan Jin, our pianist this afternoon, is a recent graduate of the School and is currently studying for an MA at the Royal College of Music, London. The other works will be performed by members of the School’s Contemporary Music Group, directed by Dr Rob Fokkens, and our soprano this afternoon is Jana Holesworth. I would like to thank them all for their hard work and commitment in preparing and performing these works.

As this lunchtime concert is part of a one-day conference, and bearing in mind that none of these works has ever been heard in public before today, I am taking this opportunity to introduce them and put them into context.

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies was born in Salford (now part of Greater Manchester) in 1934. At the age of four his family moved to Swinton (a few miles from Salford), and it was there, in 1942, that he began piano lessons and started to compose shortly afterwards. Over the next ten years he was to produce nearly thirty works, the vast majority of which remain unpublished. Not all of the manuscripts for these compositions are currently available, but a good number of them have been deposited at the British Library in London. In a recently-published book, *The Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (Boydell & Brewer, 2020) I subjected these early works to critical scrutiny for the first time, and, for this afternoon's concert, I have transcribed and edited four of them from the original manuscripts and have edited them for performance.

The vast majority of the juvenilia were written for piano, including his first composition, *Early Morning Echoes* of 1942. These earliest compositions, unsurprisingly, were comparatively straightforward. However, as Davies became more proficient on the piano, and the more he listened to and studied scores of contemporary composers, his compositions became more adventurous.

The first works performed this afternoon by Yihan are a pair of linked solo piano pieces, *The Cloud* and *The River*, both of which were composed in 1948. *The Cloud* has something of a Chopin nocturne about it, or more accurately perhaps, Liszt's Consolation No. 3: both are in D \flat major and feature a flowing left-hand quaver figuration and a *cantabile* right-hand melody. There are, however, harmonic and melodic features of interest that liberate the piece from the confines of the nineteenth century. This fundamentally concerns the main 'cloud' melody and the harmonic context into which it is placed. Here we witness a pentatonic melody – wispy and elusive, like the cloud it is attempting musically to depict. The overall character is suggestive of an impressionistic soundworld – Max, perhaps, attempting to emulate Debussy or Ravel, or even John Ireland's *The Island Spell*.

The River possesses somewhat less sophistication than its companion piece, but by virtue of its minor key, its quicker tempo and its tempestuous character, provides an effective contrast. Following a short introduction, the opening A section – marked *Allegro con fuoco* – gives the impression that this is no calm, gently flowing river, but one in full vigour with churning undercurrents.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Yihan Jin on to the stage to perform *The Cloud* and *The River*.

Before we move onto the next pair of piano works, I'd just like to draw your attention to a certain rhythmic feature which can be detected in both *The Cloud* and, in particular, *The River* – the Scotch-snap rhythm [SHORT-LONG]. Folk tunes and traditional fiddle music of Scotland had a significant impact on Davies's musical language and style, and the Scotch-snap rhythm became a distinctive stylistic fingerprint in almost all of his works (and this includes those that are predominantly chromatic and dissonant in character). This Scottish influence was thought to have originated from his time in the Orkney Islands, where he lived from 1970 to 2016, but its appearance in these two early works suggests that this rhythmic quirk was part of his musical DNA from a considerably earlier age.

Let us return, though, to the late 1940s. Although composed a year earlier than *The Cloud* and *The River*, *Incantations* is much more experimental – no doubt motivated to some degree by the title's connection to the mysterious theme of necromancy (an incantation is a magic spell or charm). As a result, the work is characterised by a chromatic musical language, contrapuntal textures, and – as you shall hear – a highly peculiar soundworld. The work is significant because it also offers an early example of the composer's lifelong predilection for thematic manipulation – in this instance motivic transposition, inversion and imitation in various formulations.

The final work that we will hear from Yihan is a short piano piece written by Max on 6 July 1991 as a birthday gift for his close friend Shirley McVoy. I am very

pleased to say that Shirley and her family are with us here today. The title of the piece is intriguing: *The Lagavulin of Riberac*. Lagavulin is a small village on the island of Islay, Scotland, but for those connoisseurs in the know, it is also a rather splendid single malt whisky! Needless to say, Max was very partial to a tippie or two! The Riberac part of the title is a reference to the region in France in which Max frequently holidayed with Shirley and her partner Tony. The piece is in the style of a Strathspey – a tradition Scottish folk dance. Note here the use of dotted rhythms – the characteristic Scotch-snap that Max was so fond of.

Please welcome back Yihan to perform *Incantations* and *The Lagavulin of Riberac*.

From 1949 to 1952 Davies himself performed some of his own piano pieces on BBC radio's *Children's Hour*. But several works from this early period were also written for vocal and instrumental combinations. The standout vocal work from this time is the imposing *Stehn am Fuss des Gebirgs*, composed in c. 1950, for unaccompanied chorus – a setting, in the original German, of a fragment from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegy X*:

They stand at the foot of the mountains.
And there she embraces him, weeping.
He climbs alone, on the mountains of primal grief.
And not once do his footsteps sound from his silent fate.

The overall F minor tonality is enriched by an uninhibited and at times sumptuous harmonic language – recalling Mahler or early Schoenberg, perhaps – peppered with poignant and heart-wrenching dissonances. The second half of the setting presents a moment of effectively wrought imitative counterpoint which leads to the haunting conclusion, an ending that complements the innate melancholy of the text.

Please welcome to the stage the vocal members of the Contemporary Music Group and their conductor Rob Fokkens.

Like *The Lagavulin of Riberac*, our next work, the violin duo *A Little Thank You to Dave*, is – as you already may have gathered from the title – another work that was composed as a gift. Max was very fond of these ‘present pieces’, and there are numerous examples throughout his output. Composed in August 2005, *A Little Thank You to Dave* is a beautifully-constructed piece that captures, in miniature, the essence of Max’s harmonic language whilst also managing to make a deferential nod in the direction of Bartók’s 44 Violin Duos. Note here, in particular, the D-centred modality; the 2–3, dissonance–resolution, harmonic progressions; the much-loved interval of the tritone. Presumed lost, the manuscript came to light in February of 2021 in the archives of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

To perform this piece, please welcome to the stage Iona Frenguelli and Sky Ratcliffe

Let us now turn our attention back to the early chamber works. Before we conclude with our final work this afternoon, it is worth emphasising that Max’s juvenilia is a significant body of work and must be taken into account when discussing his development as a composer. Indeed, the compositional voice, I’m sure you’ll agree, is unmistakably Daviesian, and certain stylistic features – distinctive rhythmic, metrical, linear and harmonic material – can be traced in his mature music.

And so, we arrive at our final premiere this afternoon – the *Five Songs* for soprano, flute, clarinet, harp and string quartet. Composed in 1950, this work is a setting, in the original German, of five poems by Christian Morgenstern.

The cycle as a whole clearly demonstrates that Davies had a highly effective and intimate understanding of the instruments he was writing for, as well as an intuitive awareness of how they would sound in combination and with the voice. The cycle is also beautifully balanced, with each setting contrasting with each other in theme, sentiment and musical setting. These songs are exquisitely crafted. Davies would later write about the importance of compositional technique and

here we witness an assuredness and maturity of technique that belies his age at the time – remember he was just 15 when he composed these songs.

The musical language that Davies employs for the song cycle is a mixture of modality and tonality, enriched by dissonances and often unexpected changes of key or chord, all of which reflect and complement the texts.

The opening song, ‘Quiet Songs’, is rooted on A Aeolian. In the opening bars, whispering harp triplets, *pizzicato* cello and *sul ponticello* violin and viola set the scene for the entrance of the soprano on a high G natural: ‘I sing soft songs to you at night, / Songs that no mortal ear hears.’ The harmony becomes more adventurous in the middle part of the song, shifting to a number of different keys, before returning to A Aeolian for the final stanza. The notes of the soprano part move freely around in this tonal/modal space, using in the opening and closing sections, chromatic notes E flat, F sharp and G sharp to add expressive colour.

The second song, ‘Parable’, is centred on A flat Mixolydian. Listen out for the *portamento* slides from the cello, which lend a rather whimsical/ironic/parodic feel to the setting (an early example of 1960s Max, perhaps?!). The texture is not as busy as the first song, and more homophonic and ‘dance-like’. The flute is heard for the first time in the cycle and is used to double the soprano line in places – a technique that reflects the text, which describes couples dancing a polonaise. The text ruminates on how each couple moves through the dancers’ arm-arch and disappear out of sight, only to be replaced by another pair of dancers. The poet uses this as a metaphor for humanity – namely, ‘how she renews from old man to child’ and the game starts again.

The third song, ‘Sweet Persuasion’, is arguably the most ‘romantic’ setting in the whole cycle. The clarinet enters for the first time here, with the young composer taking full advantage of the instrument’s rich and dark chalumeau register. The song is in D flat major, with some ear-catching modal inflections in places – especially the final Mixolydian cadence.

The fourth song, 'The Butterfly', opens with a lively and active texture, the fluttering of the butterfly, as it moves from flower to flower, being represented with a delicacy of touch by harp, woodwind and *pizzicato* strings.

A butterfly flies over me.
Sweet soul, where are you flying to?
'From flower to flower
From star to star
Towards the sun'

In contrast, the final song, 'Nostalgia' or 'Longing' or 'Yearning', is sombre and shadowy, employing a slow harmonic rhythm to portray the poem's nocturnal, moonlit landscape and dreamlike quality. It revisits some of the tonal areas explored in the first song, but the overall tonality/modality is focused on D, with the D/Ab tritone prominent at the start and in the concluding bars.

Thank you all once again for attending this afternoon's concert. May I congratulate all of the performers for their highly committed and wonderfully insightful interpretations; and finally, a *massive* thank you to Rob Fokkens: quite simply, this concert would not have been possible without his generous dedication to this project and, of course, his expert musical direction.

So, please welcome to the stage our soprano soloist Jana Holesworth, instrumental members of the Contemporary Music Group and director Rob Fokkens.