

Peter Maxwell Davies: Three Early Pieces for Piano

Edition Schott (ED 14242)

PREFACE

Peter Maxwell Davies (1934–2016) began piano lessons at the age of 8 and started to compose shortly afterwards. Over the next ten years he produced nearly thirty works. Much of this juvenilia was written for piano – including his first composition, *Early Morning Echoes* (1942) – and between 1949 and 1952 Davies himself premiered a number of these pieces on BBC Radio’s *Children’s Hour*. These early compositions demonstrate an indebtedness to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century composers (such as Chopin and Liszt, as well as French and British stylistic influences) and an acute awareness of contemporary modernist composers (particularly Bartók, Stravinsky and Schoenberg). The compositional voice, though, is unmistakably Daviesian, and certain stylistic features – distinctive rhythmic, linear and harmonic material – can be traced in his mature music.

Unsurprisingly, the composer’s earliest compositions were relatively straightforward, typically employing textbook formal frameworks and diatonic harmonies. However, as Davies became more proficient on the piano, and the more he listened to and studied scores of contemporary composers, the pieces became more adventurous. *Incantations*, for instance, composed in 1947, employs a chromatic musical language and contrapuntal textures, and is characterised by a highly peculiar soundworld. The work is significant because it offers an early example of Davies’s predilection for thematic manipulation.

The River possesses somewhat less sophistication, but by virtue of its quicker tempo and tempestuous character, it provides an effective contrast to the pieces that bookend this collection. The opening section – particularly from *Allegro con fuoco* – gives the impression that this is no calm, gently flowing river, but one in full vigour with churning undercurrents. In the

calmer, march-like central section, the melody is coloured by the use of the E Lydian mode (e.g. bars 47–9) and given notable character by a Scotch-snap (short–long) rhythm (e.g. bars 54–8) – an intriguing early example of a stylistic fingerprint that was to become commonplace in the composer’s later works.

The Cloud has something of a Chopin nocturne about it, or more accurately perhaps, Liszt’s Consolation No. 3: both are in Db 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, including the main ‘cloud’ melody (which starts in bar 5 on the off-beat Eb). Here we witness a pentatonic collection (Db–Eb–F–Ab–Bb), lending this passage a highly evocative impressionistic soundworld – wispy and elusive, like the cloud it is attempting musically to depict.

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