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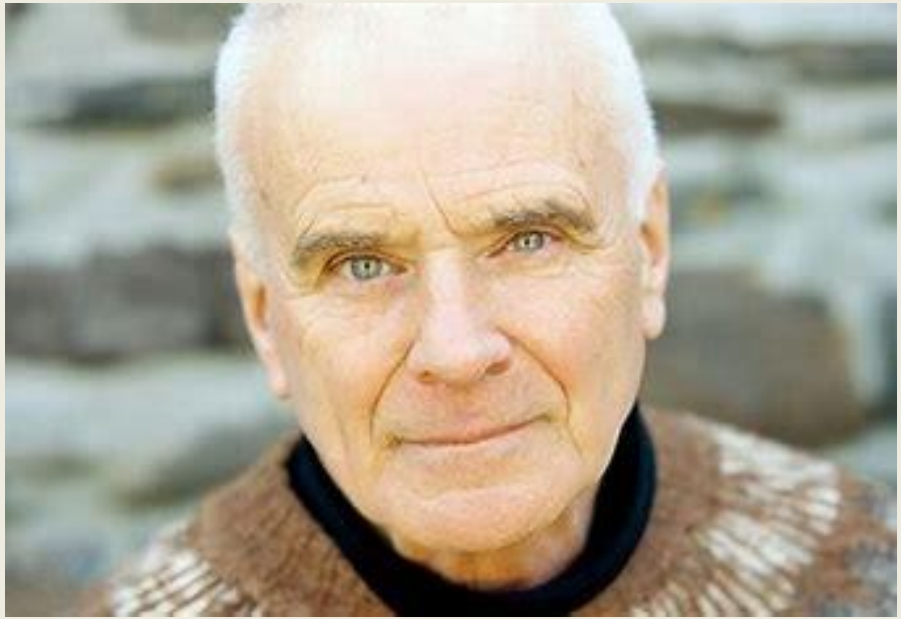

‘Peter Maxwell Davies’s Symphonic Imagination’

Music Department
Maynooth University
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CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
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The Symphony in Britain and Ireland Since 1900: A Critical History

ed. Nicholas Jones

Cambridge University Press, forthcoming

Key questions

- Why do Britain and Ireland have an enduring fascination with the genre?
- What is distinctive about this music?
- What similarities and differences are there between symphonies from the British Isles and those from elsewhere?
- What aspects of the music represent continuity and reinforcement of a tradition, and which characteristics indicate change and a challenge to conventions?
- How was/is this music received, both nationally and internationally, especially by audiences, scholars and critics?
- Why have certain composers been ignored and overlooked, and others privileged?
- What features should we listen for, and how should we listen?

Chapter 19: ‘Peter Maxwell Davies’s Symphonic Imagination’: overall thematic structure

- Introduction
- From Orkney to Antarctica: Environment and Place
- Historical resonances
- The Mahler-Sibelius symbiosis
- Architectural resonances
- Critical responses

Opus number	Title	Date	Forces	Duration	Commissioned by
Op. 71	Symphony [No. 1]	1973–6	Symphony orchestra	58 minutes	Philharmonia Orchestra
Op. 91	Symphony No. 2	1980	Symphony orchestra	48 minutes	Boston Symphony Orchestra
Op. 119	Symphony No. 3	1984	Symphony orchestra	50 minutes	BBC Philharmonic Orchestra
Op. 136	Symphony No. 4	1988–9	Chamber orchestra	42 minutes	Christian Salvesen plc for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra
Op. 166	Symphony No. 5	1994	Symphony orchestra	26 minutes	Philharmonia Orchestra
Op. 175	Symphony No. 6	1996	Symphony orchestra	50 minutes	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Op. 211	Symphony No. 7	1999–2000	Symphony orchestra	45 minutes	BBC Philharmonic
Op. 215	Antarctic Symphony (Symphony No. 8)	2000	Symphony orchestra	40 minutes	British Antarctic Survey and the Philharmonia Orchestra
Op. 315	Symphony No. 9	2012	Symphony orchestra, brass sextet (3 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba)	25 minutes	Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra
Op. 327	Symphony No. 10: *Alla ricercar di Borromini*	2013	Symphony orchestra, solo baritone, SATB chorus	42 minutes	London Symphony Orchestra, the Orchestra of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, and the Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra

‘Although [the first movement] has a ghost of a sonata form somewhere behind it, there is no first or second subject material as such, and any “development” consists of transformation processes’; and the lento that opens the second movement ‘changes into a kind of ‘scherzo’ (without the tripartite formal connotations of the name, except as a “ghost” in the form’s far hinterland).’

Davies, programme note, Symphony No. 1

Davies’s ‘greatest preoccupation’: namely, ‘to make harmony work – both in the short term, from phrase to phrase, and in the long term, so as to give, over an extended architectural time-span, the impression of an inevitable-seeming harmonic quest’.

Davies, *Selected Writings of Peter Maxwell Davies*, ed. Nicholas Jones, p. 299

‘Of all my symphonies, this is the most classical, with reference to, and dependency upon the music of Haydn. Over the last ten years I have done much orchestral conducting, including many symphonies by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. […] Although previously I had studied scores, read analyses, attended rehearsals and performances, and played the works at the piano, it was only by taking responsibility within an orchestra that I felt I began to understand the music in a creative way, from inside the structure. […] Much analysis of the classics is concerned with the unity of a work […] whereas what has fascinated me about them are the means by which composers achieve diversity within the given unity.’

Davies, programme note, Symphony No. 7

‘In a piece like my First Symphony, people are always going to be conscious of the ghost of what an orchestral symphony is, and that I like to work with as well: to impose on that my own particular imagining of what an orchestra is. [...] It becomes a great game in itself – one which I very much enjoy; I rather like the alertness that is demanded.’

Davies, in conversation with Paul Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies*, pp. 123–24