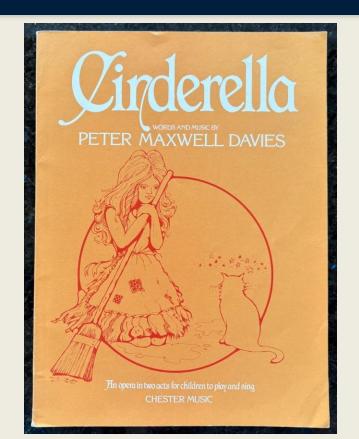


School of Music / Ysgol Cerddoriaeth



Composing Community:
Peter Maxwell Davies's
Operas for Children

Dr Nicholas Jones

RMA Conference 12 September 2025



Timeline



'I think the most basic thing about composing for young people is this: that there must be absolutely no difference in the essential quality of your work for children and your work for professionals and adults. Both must be tackled with absolute seriousness.'

Peter Maxwell Davies, 'School Music and the Contemporary Composer', seminar discussion with Wilfrid Mellers and Noel Nickson, Australian UNESCO Seminar on School Music, Sydney Teachers' College and University of Sydney, 20–29 May 1965 (Sydney: The Australian National Advisory Committee for UNESCO, 1965), 138

First period		Second period		Third period	
Name	Date of composition	Name	Date of composition	Name	Date of composition
The Two Fiddlers	1978	The Great Bank	1988–9	The Hogboon	2015
Cinderella	1979–80	Robbery			
The Rainbow	1981	Jupiter Landing	1989		
		Dinosaur at Large	1989		
		Dangerous Errand	1990		
		The Spiders' Revenge	1991		
		A Selkie Tale	1992		

The Two Fiddlers	1978	Opera in two acts for young people to play and sing; libretto by Davies based on George Mackay Brown's short story (1974); 50 minutes.
Cinderella	1979–80	Opera in two acts for children to play and sing; libretto by Davies; 50 minutes.

libretto by Davies; 25 minutes.

Music-theatre work for young children to play and sing;

Description and duration

Name

The Rainbow

Date of

1981

composition



Timeline

'I think no community is really alive until they not only make music, but they make and sing music created in their own community which is about their lives ... and the children are playing their parts. It's part of the local tradition and culture and music binds the community together; everyone participates. I've noticed particularly with the children's operas I've done here [Kirkwall, Orkney Mainland] and in Sanday and Hoy, the community comes together to help with everything. I'm happy to engage with the local community. When I do so I have to consider them and their, maybe limited, musical ability and do something that is demanding but gives them joy and pleasure. It's about writing to real-life situations of significance and not boring them. So the performance becomes an expression of that community.'

Peter Maxwell Davies, 'Making Music Together: Challenge and Celebration – a Conversation with Peter Maxwell Davies', in Joy Mead, *Words and Wonderings: Conversations with Present-Day Prophets* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2011), 137



'The music should be demanding enough to challenge its destined age-group, but not to the point of discouraging the performers; and it should sound right and fulfilling when it is well rehearsed. It should not over- or under-estimate attention spans: it should have dramatic intensity, no matter how "light".'

Peter Maxwell Davies, 'A Composer's Point of View (IV): On the Composition of "Light" and "Serious" Music', in *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings*, ed. Nicholas Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 232–3

