



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

Name	Date of composition
<i>The Two Fiddlers</i>	1978
<i>Cinderella</i>	1979–80
<i>The Rainbow</i>	1981

Second period

Name	Date of composition
<i>The Great Bank Robbery</i>	1988–9
<i>Jupiter Landing</i>	1989
<i>Dinosaur at Large</i>	1989
<i>Dangerous Errand</i>	1990
<i>The Spiders' Revenge</i>	1991
<i>A Selkie Tale</i>	1992

Third period

Name	Date of composition
<i>The Hogboon</i>	2015

Name	Date of composition	Description and duration
<i>The Two Fiddlers</i>	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.
<i>Cinderella</i>	1979–80	Opera in two acts for children to play and sing; libretto by Davies; 50 minutes.
<i>The Rainbow</i>	1981	Music-theatre work for young children to play and sing; libretto by Davies; 25 minutes.

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

