

**“An Absolute and Infectious Integrity”:
Parallels Between Peter Maxwell Davies and Judith Weir**
Saturday 7 May, 2022; prior to 7pm concert

Judith Weir is widely celebrated for a highly distinctive musico-dramatic language, which began to emerge in the mid- to late-1970s. Around this time, Peter Maxwell Davies, along with Harrison Birtwistle and others, spearheaded new approaches to writing music drama in post-war Britain, in ways that Weir and many others could not fail to acknowledge. In my talk today, I will examine whether, and if so how, Davies’s music theatre is relevant to Weir. Another obvious parallel between Weir and Davies is their close attachment to Scotland, its landscapes, communities and folksong. In Weir’s case, she was born and educated in England but cultivated close ties to Scotland through her Aberdeenshire family. I’ll end my talk by considering ways in which Scottish musical traditions have influenced Weir’s music, in particular the piece performed in this evening’s concert, *Blue-Green Hill*, from 2013.

Weir has composed widely across all genres but is perhaps best known for her stage works, including five operas, and for her extensive catalogue of vocal works. Story-telling is intrinsic to all of her music. My focus is on the early music dramas, composed up to 1979, where Davies’s relevance is most apparent. **[SLIDE 2, WITH MULTIPLE REVEALS]**

In recent years, the association between Weir and Davies has been quite public, especially since the turn of the millennium. **[SLIDE 3]** In 2007, Weir received the Queen’s Medal for Music, an award established in 2005 at Davies’s behest, when he was Master of the Queen’s Music. At the time of her award, Davies, who chaired the Queen’s Medal Board, commented **[REVEAL]**:

[Weir] is a composer of the most striking originality and freshness who communicates on the broadest level with the public, not only with dedicated and intense skill, but with absolute and infectious integrity.

[REVEAL] In 2013, Weir was herself invited onto the board for the Queen's Medal for Music.

[REVEAL] And in 2014, Weir succeeded Davies as Master of the Queen's Music, presumably with Davies's support.

How far back does this relationship extend? In an interview in 1997, Weir commented

[SLIDE 4, REVEAL]:

I suppose I would have been in my mid-teens when Maxwell Davies had his group The Fires of London, and I was very aware of [his] pieces. I liked that they were put on very simply, and that he wrote them very quickly, and that new ones would appear all the time.

[REVEAL] In the same interview, Weir acknowledges the influence of *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot*, from 1969 and 1974, respectively. She doesn't, however, say specifically what she owes to these works. Nor does she say – and this is typical of Weir's modesty – that in 1976, when she was a third year undergraduate at King's College Cambridge, she received a commission from Davies's ensemble The Fires of London, which, according to Mike Seabrook, was 'at Max's direction'.¹ And this was followed shortly after by a second commission. [SLIDE 5] Suddenly we can see the arc of Weir's career underpinned, at its very beginning and in its full maturity, by Davies's support. [REVEAL] The first piece Weir composed for The Fires was *Twenty-Five Variations*, premiered at the St Andrew's Festival in 1977, then at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. 1977 was the founding year of the St Magnus Festival, at which Davies's *The Martyrdom of Saint Magnus* was premiered. It seems likely that Weir attended this event because arguably *The Martyrdom* is more relevant to her own early music dramas than any other piece by Davies, as I will explore in a moment.

Twenty-five Variations was Weir's first foray into Scottish folklore, setting ballads from Orkney and Islay that refer to mythological creatures known as 'silkies', seals that shed

¹ Seabrook, *Max*, 163.

their skins and assume human form when they come on land, seducing unsuspecting villagers. (Davies wrote his own response to this folk myth in his children's music theatre work *A Selkie Tale*, composed in 1992). Weir's *Variations* fits the Davies/Fires of London mould neatly: it is a theatrical, experimental score. Only the first and last of its five movements include the singer, which highlights Weir's interest in the ways that purely instrumental music can comment upon and develop a narrative or dramatic idea by itself.

The overall sense is of Weir stepping into Davies's world, striving for a broader, expressionist palette with richly varied textures, albeit on her own terms. [SLIDE 6] The work is highly restless, with remarkable attention to detail, as if Weir felt the need to produce a complex-looking score, or feared the performers might not feel sufficiently challenged. She later complained that it included too many different kinds of percussion but actually this approach clearly mirrors the range of percussion used in *Eight Songs* and *Miss Donnithorne*. What Weir seems to have taken away from this experience is a fastidious attention to detail and a determination to pursue composition as a career.

Her second Fires of London commission, the instrumental *King Harald Sails to Byzantium*, from 1979, is similarly challenging, deploying rapid moving streams of material, a technique lifted from Ligeti and Berio, combined with touches of West Coast minimalism, in a manner that clearly moves away from the Davies model. The subject matter, however, which draws on 12th-century Icelandic sagas, is directly linked to the world of *The Martyrdom of Saint Magnus*. [SLIDE 7]. Indeed, it is in Weir's 'Grand opera' for solo soprano, *King Harald's Saga*, also from 1979, that we find a close affinity to Davies, both to the *Martyrdom*, in terms of subject matter, and to *Eight Songs*, in terms of the virtuosic demands placed on a solo singer – in this case, a woman (the piece was composed for Jane Manning) – and the requirement for that solo singer to explore a range of contrasting voices and characters. This piece narrates the Norwegian invasion of England in 1066 by King Harald 'Hardrardi', which ended in defeat at

the Battle of Stamford Bridge, nineteen days before the successful Norman invasion at the Battle of Hastings.

The principal difference between Weir and Davies is Weir's interest in approaching dramatic subjects from a distance, objectively. Her two models for this are Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* – literally estrangement, but most commonly translated as the alienation effect. Whereas *Eight Songs*, *Miss Donithorne* and many passages in *The Martyrdom* are raw and direct, designed to shock and disturb the listener, to have them feel and experience the psychological anguish and confusion of their subjects, Weir stands back from the personal, adopting a formal, stylized approach that draws attention to the artificiality of performance. When emotions are portrayed they are exaggerated, caricatured. Her principal *modus operandi* is retrospective narration, which is chronologically removed from the actions being reported.

Of course, there are important models for this approach in Davies's work, notably the narrator-like figure of Blind Mary in *The Martyrdom*, who stands outside the action and comments upon it, and who ends that opera by confronting the audience, challenging their complicity in the bloody deeds depicted. And in scene seven in *The Martyrdom*, where reporters describe the negotiations between the pacifist Magnus and his rival, Earl Hakon, who subsequently murders Magnus.

Weir clearly shares Davies's hatred of war, totalitarianism, and human suffering, and, as with Davies, there is often a moral message of some kind behind her works – although at times she parodies the premise of the cautionary tale, as in *The Black Spider*, her children's opera from 1984. The brutality in Weir's approach lies in its ruthless economy: *King Harald's Saga* is a 10-minute opera for solo soprano who depicts eight roles, including the entire Norwegian army. The brutality exists in her ruthless selection, from her 12th-century Icelandic source, of what she deems 'essential' to the drama, often down to the choice of single words

to depict action – as in Tostig’s Aria in Act I: ‘Hail, Take, Kill, Win, Sail, Fight, Go.’ And, following Stravinsky’s dictum, when describing his approach to *Oedipus Rex*, Weir is more interested in the person of the fate than the fate of the person.

In other words, her narration-based approach is focused more on the twists and turns of the story, rather than the development of her characters. In fact, the characters in her music dramas are often archetypes or caricatures of the kinds of characters found in the Grand operas of Wagner and Verdi. And there is more than a suggestion that what lies behind the vocal challenges in *King Harald’s Saga* is not only a response to the kind of virtuosity found in Davies’s music theatre, but also an understanding that parody lies at the heart of his works. Indeed, Weir’s piece itself treads a fine line between seriousness and parody of Davies’s modernist mode of expression. It has been remarked, by Paul Griffiths, that Weir’s music ‘cannot be trusted’, but in this sense she is merely continuing Davies’s extensive use of parody, allusion, pastiche, quotation and irony.

PLAY TOSTIG’S ARIA

But Weir’s experience of *Eight Songs* and *The Martyrdom* didn’t lead immediately to *King Harald’s Saga*. Her earliest musical dramas drew on children’s literature, or were conceived for school children. In this again she shares a common interest with Davies, that of placing considerable value in educating the young through music. [SLIDE 8] Indeed, as this picture highlights, in the early 1990s, Weir frequently acted as Davies’s co-teacher at his Hoy Summer School for young composers. Her first job, in fact, upon leaving university, was as Artist in Residence for the Southern Arts Association, which required her to collaborate with school children and amateur groups. During this time, between the premieres of *The Martyrdom* and *King Harald’s Saga*, she composed two important, but little-known, music dramas. The first of these was *From Our Island* composed for a High School on the Isle of Wight, to celebrate the school’s opening. The richly detailed score suggests that Weir relished composing this

ambitious project, although she withheld it from her publishers. Scored for orchestra, piano, chorus, tape, slide projector, and mimes, it presents eight snapshots of the island's history, including the arrival of monastic settlers, invaders, smugglers, and Queen Victoria. There is a section for the present, represented by a *musique concrete* produced by the children, made from local sounds, and the final part depicts archaeologists in the future discovering late-twentieth-century remains. [SLIDE 9] Here the objective, forensic Weir is exemplified by the serious tones of the archaeologists, who must, according to Weir's directions, 'speak slowly and grandly, pausing at the ends of clauses and sentences', and by the music, seen here, which recapitulates the sound of the waves heard at the start of the piece, the chorus singing the refrain 'Grind the rock to sand', emphasising the layers of time her piece has uncovered.

Keeping this idea in mind, I'd like to end with some brief remarks on *Blue-Green Hill*, which will be performed this evening. This is an ensemble work for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano, commissioned by Boston Musica Viva. Whilst Weir's musical surfaces are often relatively familiar and inviting, they are also full of instabilities and surprises, with off-kilter rhythms and structural twists and turns, beneath which the music is richly detailed with numerous allusions. Similarly, Weir's approach to melody is episodic and underpinned by the principle of theme and variation. In her 'Composer Note' to *Blue-Green Hill* Weir describes the piece as follows: [SLIDE 10]

Blue-Green Hill is a three-part suite in which several original melodies (suggested by the twists and turns of Scottish fiddle tunes) are transformed through continuous variation into increasingly complex textures.

Normally, Weir states quite openly what folk tunes she uses, but here she merely alludes to 'Scottish fiddle tunes'. But which ones? Weir's sketches reveal her sources. The opening cello melody, which returns in varied form in the third movement, is based on the Scottish fiddle

tune ‘The Devil in the Kitchen’. **[SLIDE 11]** Sometimes described as a Strathspey reel, this melody, familiar to many ears, is characterised by the drop of a fifth from E to A, then back up to E, followed by a rise of a minor third to G. **[PLAY]**

Weir began by sketching three versions of this melody. **[REVEAL]** In her third version, she approaches the sustained melodic E first from below, then from the F# above, before developing a new melodic contour, also anchored by repeated Es. **[REVEAL]** Aurally, the final version does not bear enough resemblance to evoke the source tune without prior knowledge on the listener’s part. The falling fifth in the original, from E to A, is reversed in Weir’s version, and the pattern of fast-moving notes around sustained ones is more pibroch-like, the Scottish bagpipe form in which a slow melodic line of sustained notes is elaborated by fast moving ornamental flourishes, which become more extended with each variation. Indeed, Weir’s changes bring the source melody into line with several of her other pieces.

[SLIDE 12 and PLAY the examples]

The second movement provides a jazzy, dance-like contrast to the first, followed by a return to the main theme in the third movement. The sketches for the second movement reveal two new source melodies and also the meaning behind the work’s title. It transpires that the title is a translation of the Gaelic fiddle tune ‘Tullochgorum’. Described by Robert Burns as ‘the first of songs’, this appears at the head of *The Book of Scottish Song* compiled by Alexander Whitelaw, published in 1866. Earliest records of the tune date back to 1734, when it may have originated on the bagpipes. Lyrics were added around 40 years later by the Reverend John Skinner. **[SLIDE 13]**

The text appears to convey a message of unification, calling on Scots to ‘put aside old divisions’ – a reference to ancient conflicts between Lowland and Highland Scots. There’s no antagonistic reference to England, either, which suggests some kind of accord with the notion of British identity. And the song even calls for political differences to be put aside – ‘Let Whig

and Tory all agree’. It seems too much of a coincidence that Weir composed this piece in the build-up to the 2014 Scottish referendum, the year in which she became Master of the Queen’s Music. In her earlier years, Weir frequently expressed in public a strong conviction that she was Scottish, not English. But being born and educated in England complicates this narrative, despite strong connections to her family in Aberdeen, and by 2003 she had begun to speak of feeling ‘British’.

Although Weir arguably declares this message of unification through the title of her piece, the sketches reveal that the source melody is so fragmented and subject to variation a listener is unlikely to spot the reference. Moreover, the tiny snippet Weir derives from the ‘Tolluchgorum’ tune is combined with another, even smaller, snippet from another tune, whose Gaelic title translates as ‘Keep it up’ – shown here in the bottom half of the slide. **[SLIDE 14 – and PLAY BOTH TUNES]**

Weir’s jazzy, slightly drunk-sounding second movement begins with a one-bar cell in the piano left hand, which draws on two aspects of the source tune, as shown at the bottom of this slide. **[SLIDE 15]** The rhythm is a modified form of the short-long, short-long bouncing Strathspey of the ‘Tullochgorum’ melody, and the melodic contour is based on the second to fourth notes of the tune: a falling third, rising fifth, and falling fifth. From this Weir fashions a swinging, off-beat pattern. **[SLIDE 16]**. But that pattern is abruptly knocked off kilter in the second bar by a lurch into a regular triplet motion and an emphatic G to F descending second, most likely extracted from the ‘Keep it up’ tune, which is characterised by a lower voice-leading motion from E to D. **[SLIDE 17]** The piano chords and melodic cells are then distributed using an abstract scheme that seemingly further buries any possible melodic associations for the listener, although the notion of ‘keeping up’ a united front is conveyed more generally by the piano’s apparently frantic efforts to develop its opening melodic idea,

continually disrupted by the ‘out of breath’ panting of the interrupting triplets. **[BACK TO SLIDE 16 and PLAY]**

There’s much more one could say about this gem of a piece. Suffice to say that the rhythmic and melodic invention, as much as it takes inspiration from Scottish folk music, is very much Weir’s own. Often instruments are used to add resonance to unfolding melodic lines, in a manner that recalls Stravinsky and Bartok. Weir also alludes to medieval organum, and employs forms of thematic transformation, after Liszt, effectively hiding the fact that contrasting sections are derived from the same melody. And in the third movement, there’s a wonderful moment, announced by a screaming clarinet, when Weir introduces an allusion to a fourth Scottish melody, a pibroch, which brings the ensemble together ‘in mirth and glee’, to quote from the ‘Tullochgorum’ verse.

Whilst Weir’s music and music dramas sound quite different from Davies’s, they are comparable in as much as they reflect composers steeped in multiple musical traditions, blending, adapting and molding found musical objects into related but distinctly new, intricate and richly detailed forms.