



(Credit: Stephen Lock)

Resurrecting the 'mouldering corpse'? Peter Maxwell Davies and the Symphony

Symphonic Music after 1945
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***The Symphony in Britain
and Ireland Since 1900: A
Critical History***

ed. Nicholas Jones

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The symphony has long stood as one of music's most prestigious and enduring forms, yet in Britain and Ireland its story since 1900 remains surprisingly underexplored. This volume offers the first comprehensive account of the symphony's trajectory across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, revealing a rich, multifaceted tradition shaped by an extraordinary diversity of voices, styles and contexts.

Amid this broader landscape, few figures exemplify the vitality and evolution of the modern British symphony more vividly than Peter Maxwell Davies.

My own chapter: 'Peter Maxwell Davies's Symphonic Imagination'

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	<i>Antarctic Symphony</i> (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: <i>Alla ricerca di Borromini</i>	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

‘1969 had been the year of *Eight Songs*, *St Thomas Wake*, *Vesalii Icones* and *Worldes Blis*, and I felt scattered and thoroughly disintegrated, knowing that from purely technical causes, if I were to survive on any level whatsoever, thought, language and living had to be re-integrated. I realise that many think that the move was an act of self-betrayal on every level, epitomised by some of my colleagues in my outrageous, treacherous, decadent, retrogressive, irresponsible attempt to resurrect the mouldering corpse of the symphony! But, quite simply, I stand by it.’

Davies, ‘Indivisible Parameters and Spirit-Stirring Amalgams’,
in Nicholas Jones (ed.), *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings*, 304.



Historical Resonances

Davies's music reveals a deep engagement with musical history and the past. This connection occurs on several levels and interacts with the composer's own predominantly modernist idiom.

(Credit: George Newson)

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

'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 [...]. 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

Environment and Place



Rackwick Bay, Hoy, Orkney (Credit: Simon Butterworth)

Compositional inspiration for Davies came from various aspects of the natural world, including landscape, seascape, the weather, and the soundscape of environment and place. The natural environment became the place in which Davies could contemplate, ruminate and think meaningfully and productively about his music and the way in which it was constructed. The landscape itself became an integral part of the compositional process. Such an embodied approach reveals a phenomenological-focused composer, profoundly connected to his natural surroundings.