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Part-Books, c. 1530)



Self-portrait of Peter Maxwell Davies (1966)
London, British Library, Add. MS 71253, fol. 91r
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Echoes of the Past in the Present: Peter Maxwell Davies and the Legacy of John Taverner

Christ Church, University of Oxford
22 November 2025



Peter Maxwell Davies: b. Salford, 1934; d. Island of Sanday, Orkney, 2016

1956 – ‘The starting point [for the opera *Taverner*] was my involvement with Taverner’s music when I was a student at Manchester in 1956’ (*Tempo* 101, June 1972)

1957 – private diary entry (April ?): ‘I have a wonderful idea for an opera. This will be called TAVERNER, and concerns itself with the life of John Taverner the composer.’

All diary extracts © Peter Maxwell Davies Estate

1959–62 – Music Master at Cirencester Grammar School

1962 – Composes *First Fantasia on an 'In Nomine' of John Taverner*; awarded a Harkness Fellowship to study composition at Princeton University

1962–73 – no diaries exist for this period, but there are letters to various individuals

1962 – 6 November: the text for the opera is completed. Sends libretto to various people, including Michael Tippett and Roger Sessions

1963 – 20 September: Act I of the opera completed

1964 – Returns to UK (Wiltshire); composes *Second Fantasia on John Taverner's 'In Nomine'*

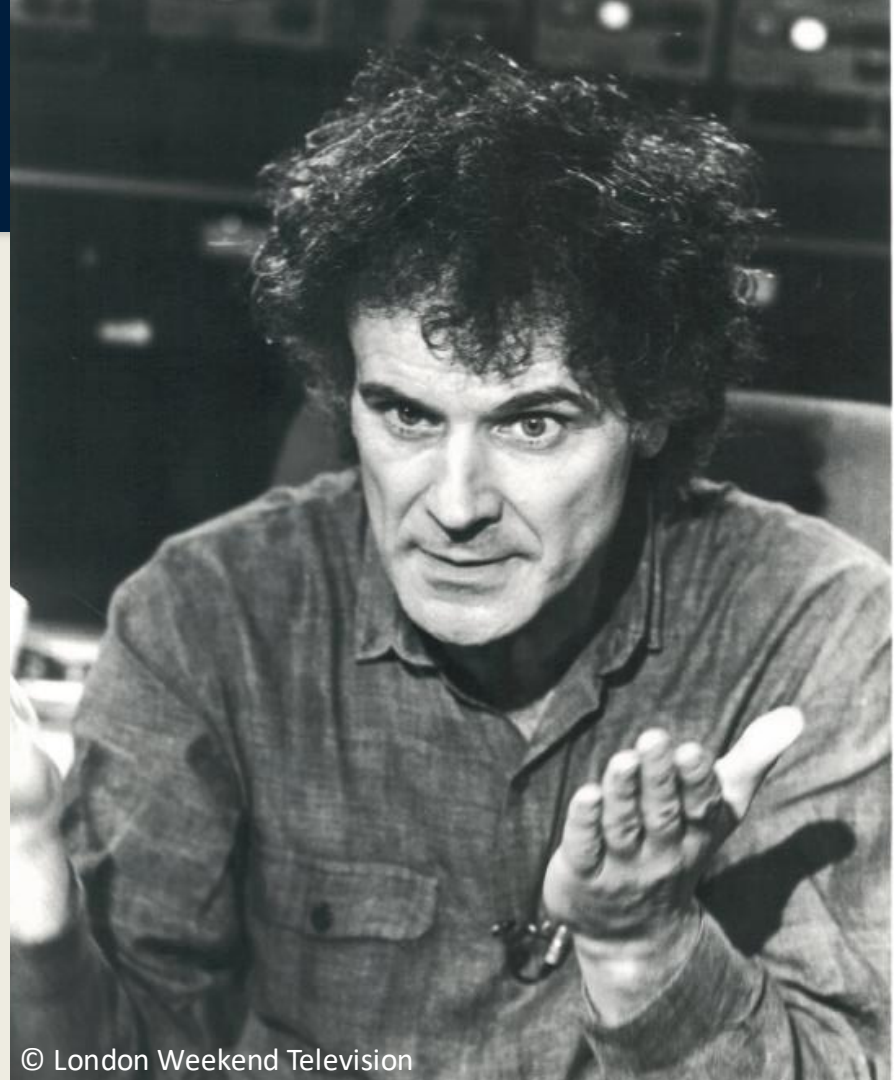
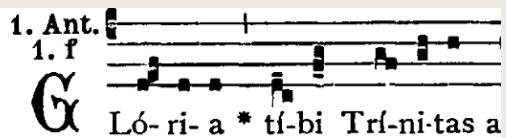
1965 – Moves to Dorset; composes *Seven In Nomine*

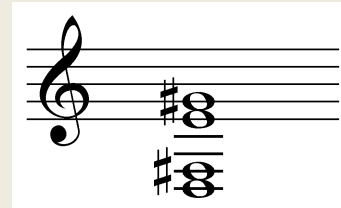
1968 – Completes Act II of the opera – however ...

1969 – House in Dorset is burnt down; the final two scenes of *Taverner* are lost in the fire and are rewritten from memory

1970 – Visits the Orkney Islands for the first time in July; 24 November: Act II of the opera completed

1972 – 12 July: premiere performance of *Taverner*, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (conductor: Edward Downes; director: Michael Geilot; designer: Ralph Koltai)





'Death' chord

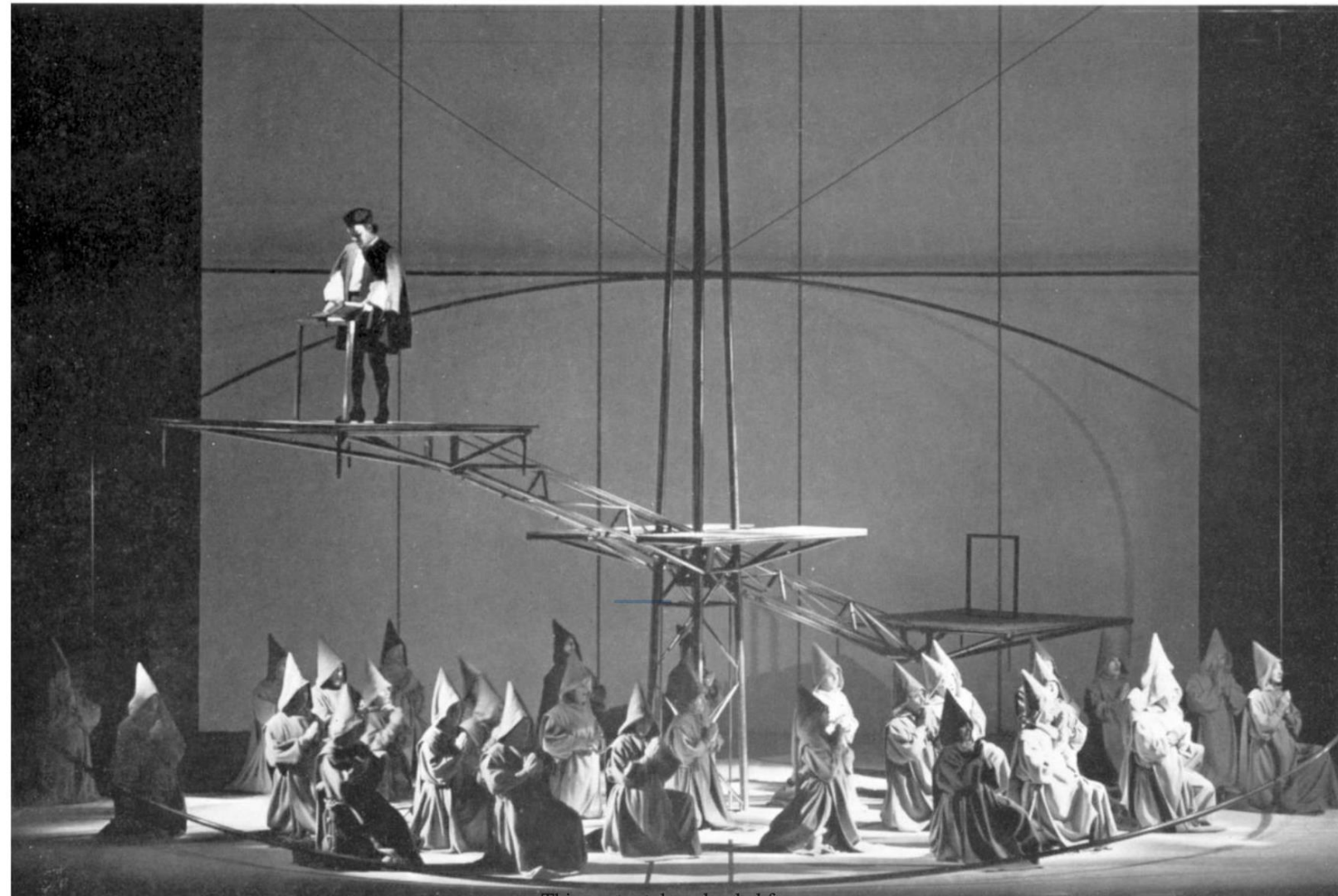
Taverner
Act I, Scene iv

JESTER (Death): John Taverner,
what does the Lord require of
thee?

TAVERNER: Death! a thief! I am
but a poor musician.

Taverner
The Jester as Death
© London Weekend Television





Taverner
(1972
production):
Act I, scene ii –
first chapel
scene

(Credit: Stuart
Robinson)

Peter Maxwell Davies, “‘Taverner’: Synopsis and Documentation’, *Tempo*, No. 101 (June 1972), 4–5

My opera *Taverner* projects onto the life and mind of the sixteenth-century English composer John Taverner certain perennial preoccupations of my own, notably with the nature of betrayal at the deepest levels. The ‘action’ is within Taverner’s mind; and so, despite constant references to sixteenth-century sources (mostly English), neither time nor place are treated realistically. [...]

The starting point was my involvement with Taverner’s music when I was a student at Manchester in 1956. The first sketches and the formal outline of the scenes date from that year. My source for Taverner’s biography was the now disputed introduction by Fellowes to the musical works in the *Tudor Church Music* series. I had no time to complete a text until I went to Princeton University in 1962, where I could draw on a multitude of contemporary sources – state papers, heresy and witch trials, individual studies of Tudor statesmen and clergymen, letters, sermons, religious pamphlets – but also on a background of late medieval lore-saints’ lives, devotional poetry, mystery plays, and imagery from religious art (such as the Wheel of Fortune which appears in Act II).

Peter Maxwell Davies, “‘Taverner’: Synopsis and Documentation’, *Tempo*, No. 101 (June 1972), 4–5

The figure of John Taverner is ‘real’ in the sense that he is named, and was a person in musical history. But the other two ‘named’ figures, his mistress and his father, are stylizations. Rose Parrowe was indeed Taverner’s wife, but in the opera she functions more as his source of inspiration, as Muse; and the father, Richard Taverner, is my own invention. The King is obviously based on Henry VIII, but is not named, and is not to be given the stage-appearance of any specific king. Likewise the Cardinal is obviously based on Wolsey; but his identity changes before our eyes into an Anglican Archbishop, who could be Cranmer. The other characters are not named or are stylized in other ways: there is a Priest (a counter-tenor) who becomes God the Father, a Boy of Taverner’s choir school, an Abbot, the archangels Gabriel and Michael, a military Captain, and, for a very brief appearance, Antichrist, as well as groups of monks, a legal council, demons, choristers and so on. Finally there is the Jester, who becomes Death, and then Joking Jesus, and who emerges eventually as the main character: the power behind the Reformation or Revolution, the master-puppeteer for whom all the other ‘characters’, including Taverner himself, are as marionettes.



‘The Monk’, Hans Holbein
(from *Der Totentanz*, 1523–5)
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Rijksmuseum

Taverner
Act II, scene iv (ending)



The market-place in Boston, Lincolnshire

CHORUS and CHOIRBOYS:

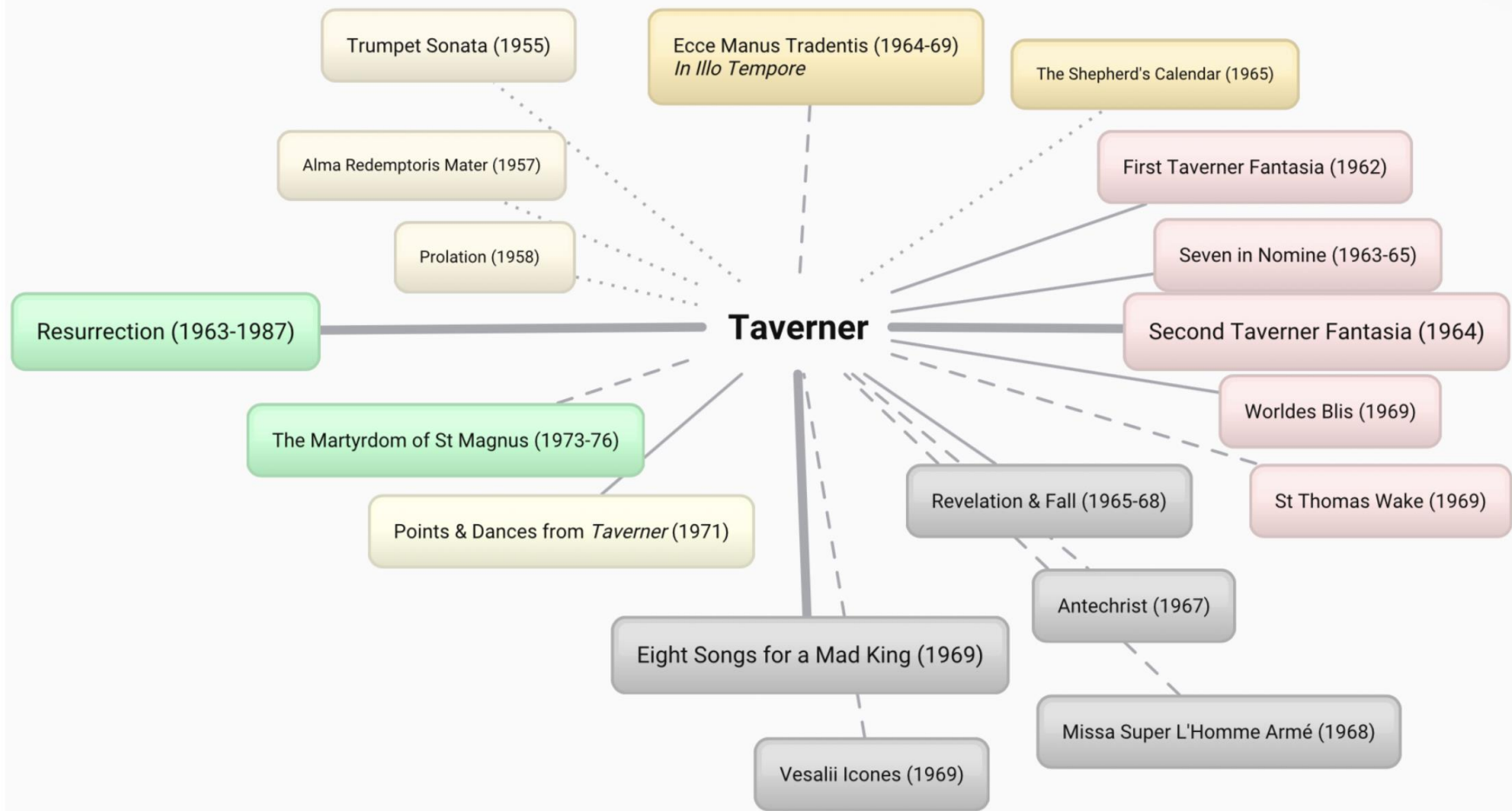
O God, make haste to save us,
O God, we cry from the mire, we cannot stand.
O God, our soul is drowned,
O God, have mercy upon us,
O help us in our darkness, O God.

ROSE PARROWE:

The Lord has led thee and caused thee to walk into darkness.
He has filled thee with bitterness. He has made thee a stranger, drunk with wormwood.

JOHN TAVERNER:

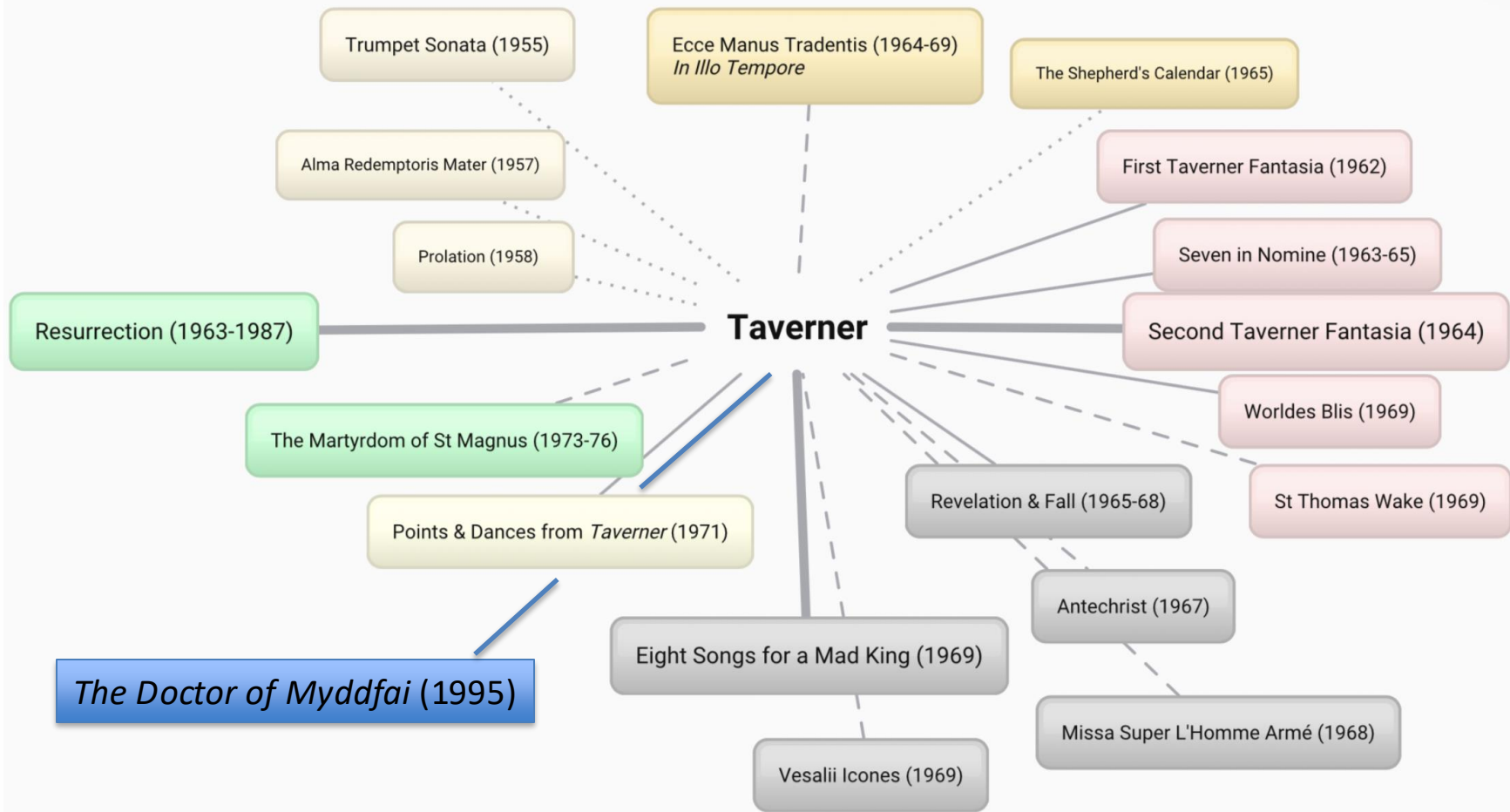
O God, I call upon thy name, out of the lowest dungeon.
Forsake not thy faithful servant.



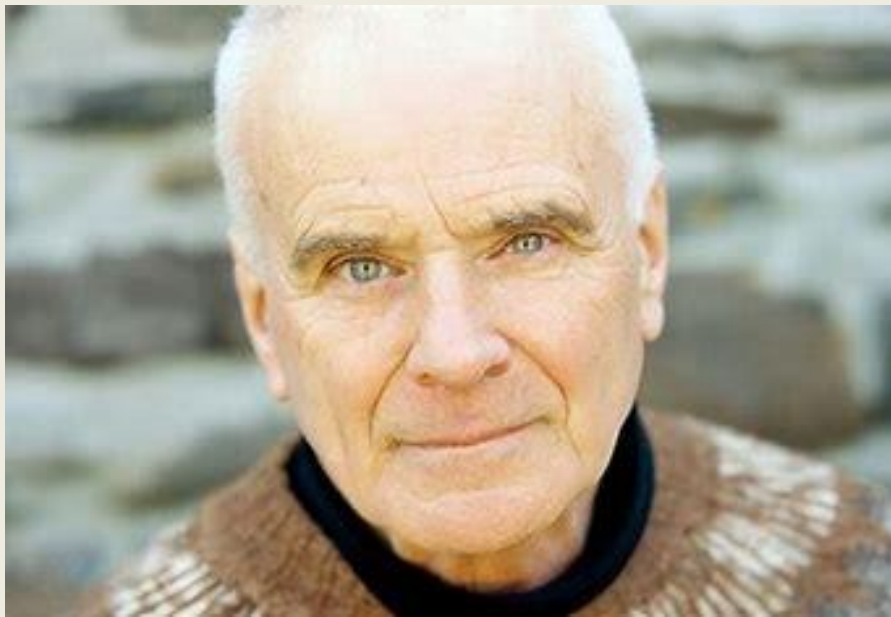
Simon Lord, “‘An Anatomy of Betrayal’: Metaphor, Method and Meaning in the opera *Taverner* by Peter Maxwell Davies’ (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 2021), Fig. 2.2, ‘The *Taverner* constellation’, p. 39

I remember, in a moment of insight 10 or more years ago, seeing a lifetime's work of 3 operas, Taverner, Resurrection, & a third one seen/heard from afar, taking place in something akin to, if not actually in, an enclosed order, in a musical condition of ever expanding & intensifying CONTEMPLATIO.

Peter Maxwell Davies, private diary, 1974



... and the 'Death' chord?



By the time of such works as the Ninth and Tenth Symphonies (2012 and 2013), the context had changed: it is 'now a different matter', Davies notes in his diary; the chord is 'a welcome friend', offering 'some kind of resolution, through a door into nothingness, or into the unknown, or, or? – but no regrets, no resistance' (diary entry, June [?] 2012).