THE MUSIC OF PETER MAXWELL DAVIES

(The first of two articles)

In the mid-1950's a new desire for exploration and discovery was felt among young musicians in England. It was stimulated by the "opening-up" of Europe after the second World War which led to the discovery of much music that had never been heard before and more frequent and better-played performances of 20th century music in general, and in particular that of the 2nd Viennese School, which up to then had been little known here. Such institutions as the Bryanston (later Dartington) School of Music organised by William Glock, and the advent of the "Third Programme" (started in 1946 and to which Maxwell Davies has paid personal tribute for the wide range of artistic and intellectual pursuits which it fostered) were instrumental in promoting and encouraging this spirit, as, also, was the knowledge that vital new music was being created on the continent and, to some extent, the work of certain teachers in English music colleges.

The immediate problem was the assimilation of the styles and techniques of a great deal of 20th century music which had been denied to musicians in this country before 1945. There is the story of an excited group of young musicians at Bryanston (which included Davies) clustering round a tape recorder to hear Schoenberg's Variations Op. 31 for the first time. Such music had only previously been heard in this country in isolated and mostly inadequate performances, by players unversed in the idioms of the new music. The pioneer work of Walter Goehr in the late 40's led to a gradual rise in standards and frequency of performance and Michael Tippett at Morley College did much to encourage the performance of 16th and 17th century music as well as that of the 20th - a considerable broadening of scope. The outcome was a close study of, in particular, the "Viennese trinity" and Stravinsky and the music of immediate contemporaries on the continent and in America.

The result of this was that, around 1955, two groups of young musicians, including several composers, emerged from music colleges with a full assimilation of modern styles and techniques and particular promise that they would use this knowledge to good effect. One group had studied at the Royal Academy of Music and included Bennett, Cardew and the pianist Susan Bradshaw. The other came from the Royal Manchester College of Music and consisted of three composers, Alexander Goehr, Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies, and the pianist John Ogdon. The composition teaching of Richard Hall and the piano teaching of Gordon Green must be mentioned as having helped to turn this talented group into fine musicians who were able to develop their potential into remarkably individual musical styles and personalities. The four came to London calling themselves "New Music Manchester" and gave performances of contemporary music - the three composers have ever since been called the "Manchester School" although they soon developed away from one another in style and personality and later collaborations or

associations have been only "biographical" or practical. At the time Alexander Goehr (son of Walter Goehr) seemed to be the most forceful personality, but going on the basis of their overall output to date, I would submit that Peter Maxwell Davies has emerged as the most talented and original of the three, and I would not be alone if I made higher claims for him than just that.

Peter Maxwell Davies was born in Manchester in 1934 and educated at Leigh Grammar School and then, not only at the Royal Manchester College of Music but also at Manchester University. He made a special study of Indian music in addition to his more normal curriculum studies and wrote a thesis on rhythmic systems in Indian music which undoubtedly influenced the complex rhythms of the first composition which he now recognises, the Sonata for trumpet and piano (1955). This early interest in a wide variety of music from many different periods and cultures is symptomatic, for Maxwell Davies has been influenced by an astonishingly wide range of different music throughout his career and drawn many apparently incompatible elements into his own compositions.

Both the Trumpet Sonata and the Five Pieces for piano Op. 2 (1956) already reveal an accomplished technique and an intensely musical creative personality. The piano pieces owe much to Schoenberg, particularly expressionist Schoenberg, as the composer has himself said. All Maxwell Davies' work is strongly influenced by serial procedures but, even in these early works, it does not always adhere strictly to "classical" serial technique. The piano pieces, in particular, are characterised by complex textures, density of thought, and a certain violence and extreme intensity. This intensity is not merely youthful exuberance but has remained a strong feature of Davies' music. It comes partly from his continued adherence to expressionism, but it is also a feature of his own personality, clear to all in his performing manner - the quick entrance and exit, his fiery, piecing look, his short, abrupt acknowledgment of applause, his conducting gestures - and also in his manner of speech. (It is characteristic that he will not drive a car or own a T.V. or a telephone because they would stop him from working. His pace of living is intense, not only has he produced a large body of work to date (some involving much musical and extra-musical research e.g. the forthcoming opera "Taverner") but he is a regular conductor of his own and other music and makes frequent lecture-tours all round the world. He will read German Expressionist poetry in the bath!)

There is another side to his music, as to his personality, however, which is present even in the early piano pieces. This is a sense of calm, almost of meditation, which increased as Davies was drawn more and more into one of his most lasting pre-occupations - his interest in medieval music.

"Alma Redemptoris Mater" (1957) for wind sextet is one of the most characteristic, although not perhaps the most successful, works of

Davies' purely "medieval period". The last of the Five Piano Pieces is a theme with fourvariations in the form of a complex isorhythmic structure, but here Davies goes one step further and bases his short three-movement sextet on a motet by Dunstable. It is the first obvious indication of medieval influence in Davies' music - both in mood and details. The medieval plainsong which gives the title to both Dunstable's and Davies' works is taken as the point of departure and the chant is integrated into the texture in ways similar to that of the cantus firmus technique of medieval polyphony. The technique of parody (basing a composition on pre-composed material) is itself a medieval idea, but Davies uses not only the plainsong that Dunstable used, but also Dunstable's motet itself to determine both the details and the basic shape of the piece. This involves the evolution of a complex technique which owes much to both medieval polyphonic structures and 20th century serial procedures. In general mood the piece possesses both something of a medieval fervour, the intensity which was mentioned earlier, and a contemplative, gentle melancholy and calm resignation which is characteristic of much other English music (e.g. Dowland, the English "Romantics") and is also a typical medieval quality - a religious fervour combined with a calm certainty that the medieval contemplative possessed. Intensity is here partly achieved by gradual crescendi on long notes which, even if they drop back to subito piano, do not release the tension they have built up. Personally, however, I find that many of these qualities are better expressed in later works (e.g. Ricercar and Doubles, O Magnum Mysterium); this may be partly due to the executant and ensemble problems that even top players under the composer's direction seem to experience.

In 1957 Maxwell Davies won an Italian Government Scholarship and went to Rome to study with Goffredo Petrassi. During this period he completed two of his most ambitious works, the St. Michael Sonata for 17 wind instruments and Prolation for orchestra which won the 1959 Olivetti Prize and was performed at the I.S.C.M. Festival that year. While some of Davies' earlier chamber and solo works have received performances in recent years, the larger works have not; thus I have never had the chance to hear either of these two works.

Prolation is wholly derived from one thematic cell and is concerned with the re-interpretation of medieval metrical proportions. The composer's note reads as follows: "Prolation governed the relative proportion of minim and semibreve in the medieval rhythmic modal system. In the present work prolation is extended to cover greater and smaller proportions - from periods covering hundreds of bars, to the smallest "irrational" groups - also self-evidently to super and juxta-positions of a more complex nature than simple duple and triple metres. It follows that all metronome indications are to be particularly faithfully observed". The work can, in common with some others by Davies and other English composers, thus be seen to explore the

possibilities inherent in the rationalisation and serialisation of parameters other than pitch which occupied many continental composers during the 50's. Davies' medieval leanings, however, give his works a wholly distinctive, original and sometimes, as we have noted, a very English quality: his medievalism results not in a mannered archaism but is an important contribution to the formation of a vital and modern musical personality. Like some other English artists he is concerned with the conflict which faced Gothic man - "the conflict between the known and the unknown, between the light and dark sides of man's nature, between potential and fulfilment" (Robert Henderson in Musical Times, October 1961). The St. Michael Sonata finds temporary resolution in the "remarkable stillness of the central Adagio" (Henderson). Prolation turns inward on itself - its pre-occupation with its own material leads the work to close completely self-absorbed with a phrase derived from the all-pervading opening thematic-cell.

Between 1959 and 1962 Peter Maxwell Davies was Director of Music at Cirencester Grammar School, in which capacity he had phenomenal success. The freshness of approach of his methods of teaching young people to make music produced such successful results that his services as a lecturer have been much in demand since that time. His interest in children and education have been retained up to the present - in 1968 he made a series of schools broadcasts for BBC television.

Besides working with his characteristic ardour and enthusiasm at classroom teaching and school concerts (one of which consisted of a large part of Monteverdi's "Vespers of 1610" edited and arranged by himself) he also wrote music for performance at the school. This posed a problem - how to write good music within the capabilities of school children while refusing to compromise his own already higher individual style? This undoubtedly influenced his whole thinking as a composer, which resulted, not in abandoning his techniques of composition, but in a process of simplification and perhaps a greater concern for immediate expression and communication rather than a continuation of his highly lyrical and sometimes "distant" contemplative music, which one occasionally feels is "far removed" from the immediacy of an audience's physical presence and its need for direct communication .

Be that as it may, he composed two works within the capabilities of children which were immediately successful in performance and widely heard. Adults were almost shamed into comprehending what children had responded to so readily. These two works were "O Magnum Mysterium" (1960) and "Te Lucis ante Terminum" (1961); both are cycles of carols with instrumental sonatas. Both are written almost entirely for performance by children, although the former, which is the much larger work, concludes with a virtuoso organ fantasia. The vocal sections are written in a

simple, direct harmonic language. The instrumental interludes are in a more fragmented style and the two sonatas make extensive use of improvisation, but within strictly controlled limits. The improvised sections are played against a harmonic background which gives structural direction to the music.

Harmony is an important element in Davies' work and one to which he pays particular attention. Although much of his music is linear in conception, the vertical aspect also receives due consideration and is as carefully organised as all the other parameters - particularly in terms of harmonic tension and relaxation. Basic material is sometimes harmonic (e.g. St. Michael Sonata) and harmonic potential is often the first to be explored in a piece (e.g. Prolation). The simplification of Davies' music which began with his works for children was partly achieved by a deeper concern for harmonic clarity which led the composer to find a new meaning in simple diatonic chords and their function in a dissonant harmonic language. That even the clearest and simplest of Maxwell Davies' work has been misunderstood is particularly well illustrated by some of the remarks (which the magazine Musical Times later printed) that greeted the music supplement for October 1961 - Davies' carol "Ave Maria, Hail Blessed Flower". While several eminent critics praised it, other people had very different views. One said "I consider myself one of the younger generation, appreciative of sensible modern trends.... It is high time someone made a firm stand against this unnecessarily unpleasant music which has little interest in its melodic lines and altogether creates a hideous dirge." Another called it "an affront to God". Its serial or non-serial writing was hotly disputed, while one writer thought that it was a "gentle little piece of polyphony in A minor" and another, that it was in A major (on which chord the piece ends.) Some choirmasters doubted that any choir could hear, let alone sing, "so many major seconds" but Maxwell Davies himself said: "It must be easy to do, because our kids got it on one rehearsal". Somebody asked "Is this a hoax by the Musical Times?"

An important and under-rated work from this period is the String Quartet (1961) which also uses controlled improvisation. Free melismas in one part weave through the strictly ordered counterpoint of the other parts, since the melodic shape of the melisma is given but the rhythmic shape is left to the performer whose part is governed only by the exact rhythmic proportions of the other parts. This new flexibility is another aspect of simplification and the composer's desire to move away from an intensely inward to a more direct and immediate form of expression. The march that closes the Quartet and the florid vocal lines of the Leopardi Fragments (1961) would have been impossible in earlier works.

In 1962, Davies' First Fantasia on an In Nomine of John Taverner, commissioned by the BBC, was first performed at a Promenade Concert,

Along with many other young composers, Maxwell Davies benefitted enormously from the support and wide hearing of contemporary music that William Glock gave through the radio in the early 60's. Several of his compositions received broadcasts and helped to establish his reputation, which by now was considerable. His second Promenade commission came in 1969 when several members of the audience (mainly young people) showed their displeasure by walking out during the piece, which, since most of them had come for Belshazzar's Feast and Elgar's Cello Concerto, they considered "grotesque". The piece, entitled "Worldes Blis", fits into Davies' purely medieval period, since he used this commission to finish, or at any rate continue, work on a piece which he had started in 1966. The composer says: "In this work, I was particularly interested in the articulation of very large structures over a long time-span, by the most spare means - in relating events placed a long time apart in such a way that not only is the relationship clear, but that a tension between events is evident. The music, though a double bar-line has been drawn at the end, is 'incomplete': the generating potentiality of the transformation processes employed leaves a good two-thirds of the possibilities unexplored which I may, or may not, eventually work out in more movements". "Worldes Blis" is a 13th century monody- it is not heard as such in Davies' piece, but is used as "main filter" (the composer's own words). The idea of an "unfinished" piece which does not make use of all the possibilities inherent in its basic material is also to be found in the works of other contemporary composers (e.g. Harrison Birtwistle's idea of "revising" a composition is sometimes just to add more to it.) "Worldes Blis" consists basically of one enormous dynamic arch ppp < fff > ppp - it lasts nearly 40 minutes, much longer than the BBC or the audience expected! To me, it was a fine and intensly moving work; the long drawn-out diminuendo was essential after the long crescendo and the work combined Davies' medieval mysticism with a particularly strongly-conceived expressionism, which was aided by some strikingly original writing for heavy percussion (a very large orchestra is employed). This major orchestral work came as a surprise after Davies' pre-occupation with chamber music in recent years and his apparent abandonment of the contemplative, mystical side of his medievalism. It harks back to the earlier world of Prolation and the Taverner Fantasias, but its stark spare use of a large orchestra and its incredible clarity and luminosity betray his later pre-occupations. I believe it, admittedly on only one hearing, to be one of Maxwell Davies' best and most important works to date. This is the more surprising, since not only are many composers unwilling to write for a full symphony orchestra, but those who do quite often fail to produce a successful and characteristic work (e.g. Birtwistle's failure to do so in "Nomos" (1968) his Prom. commission). The reason for both of these facts is largely, of course, that the symphony orchestra in its present form came into existence to play a very different kind of music with completely different needs from that written today by, for instance,

Birtwistle. The formation of small, flexible chamber orchestras is fortunately meeting many composer's demands, but by manipulating the conventional symphony orchestra, especially by breaking it down into smaller components, the use of concerto-like textures and new groupings to produce clear textures, composers like Maxwell Davies still succeed in producing characteristic works that can be included in the symphonic repertoire. Such a work is "Worldes Blis" but there has been no second performance of it as far as I know. The composer is at present working on a new orchestral work for the New Philharmonia Orchestra which will be premiered in 1973.

In my second article I will discuss Davies' later music - in particular the Second Taverner Fantasia (1964) and the most recent music-theatre works. If possible, I shall also include the opera "Taverner" (based on the life of the 16th century English composer with whom Davies has had something of an obsession over the past ten years). This work, completed in 1968, but since re-written owing to a fire which destroyed the original manuscript, will be premiered at Covent Garden in July.

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