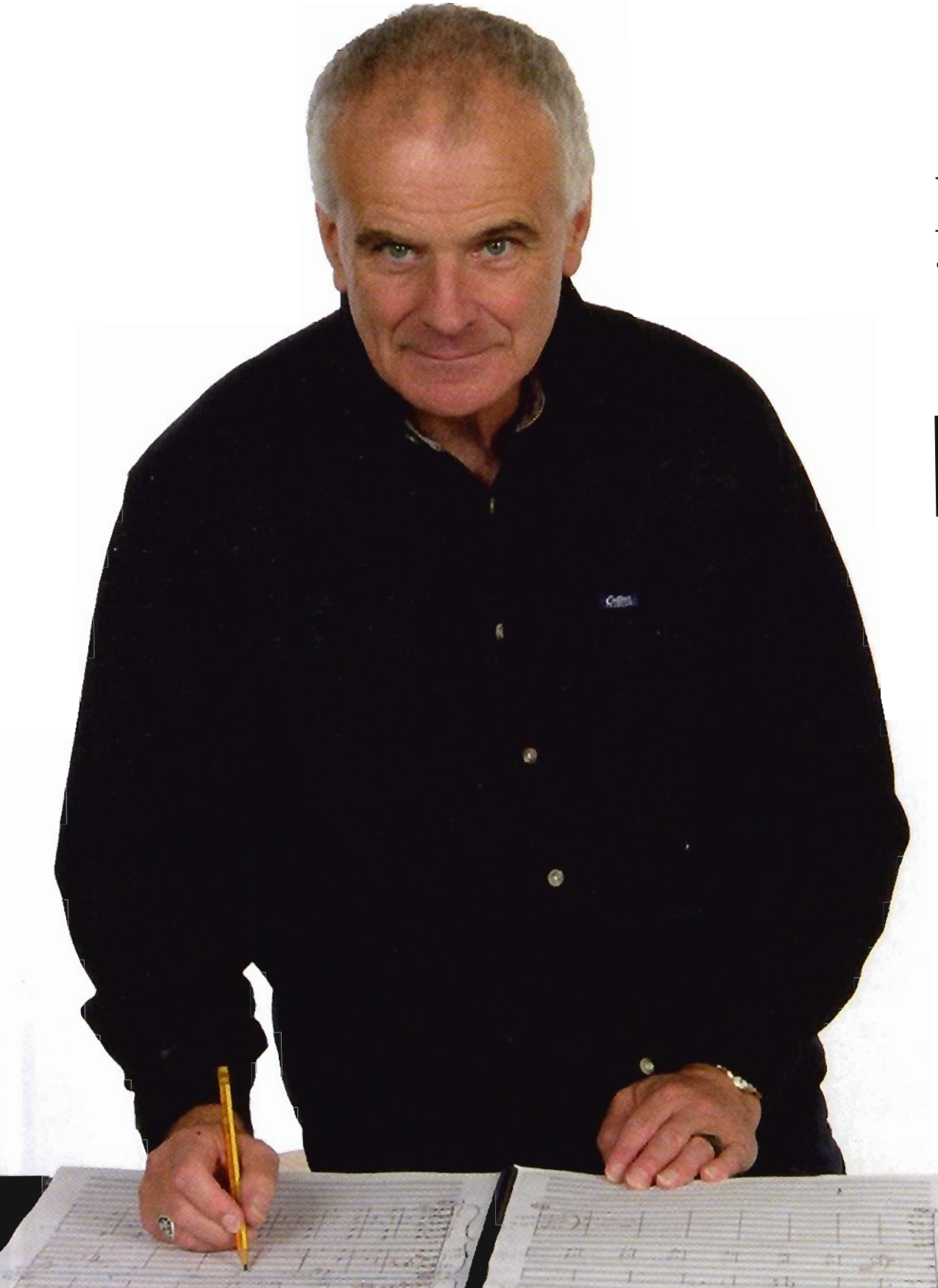


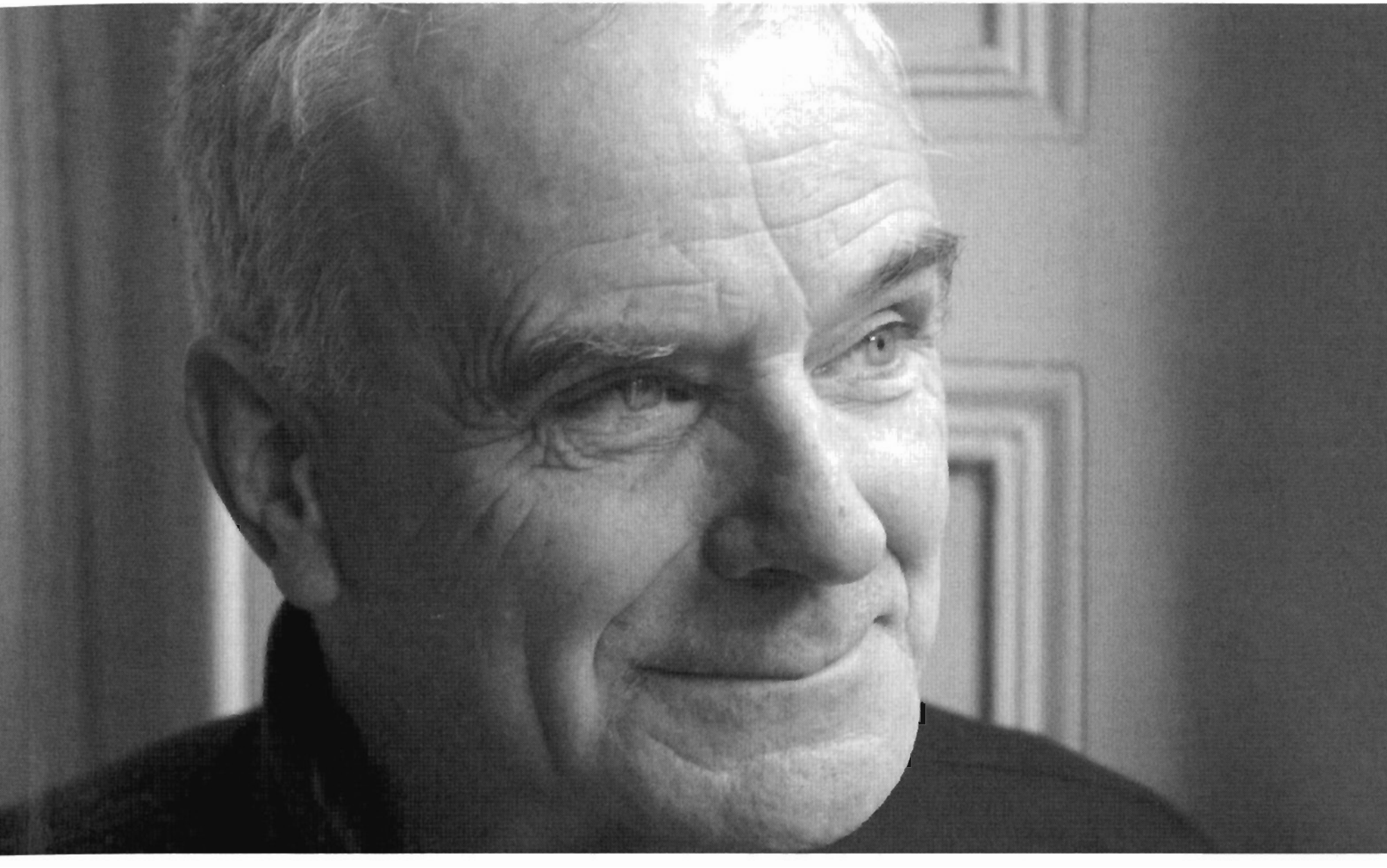
NAXOS

Peter Maxwell Davies

A PORTRAIT

His Works
His Life • His Words

A PORTRAIT
Peter Maxwell Davies



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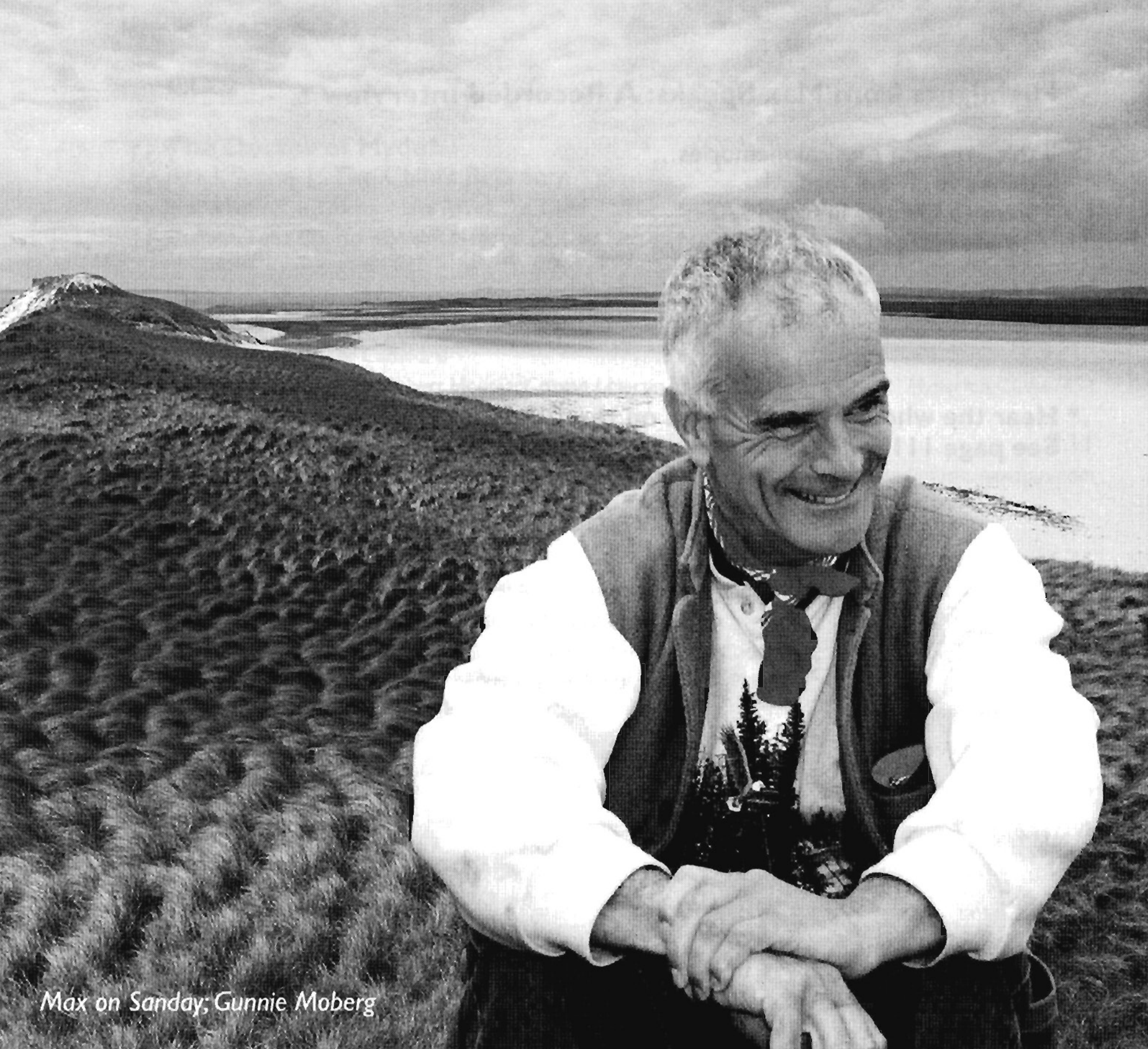


Max on Sanday; Gunnie Moberg

Peter Maxwell Davies: A Portrait

by

Roderic Dunnett

Introduction

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies is one of the most fascinating composers not just of our own time but, arguably, of any age. In terms of creative energy and formal innovation, it might not be too fanciful to regard him as the Beethoven or Sibelius of our era. His music is brilliantly crafted, exciting and imaginative, and embraces every important genre: opera and music theatre; ballet; symphonic works – eight of them bearing the title 'symphony'; more than fifteen concertos; song cycles, full-scale oratorios, large and smaller choral works, carols; music for children and young performers; and, most recently, an impressive flowering of chamber works, of which the most striking are the Naxos Quartets, ten string quartets commissioned by Naxos.

Wherever he turns, 'Max' – as Peter Maxwell Davies has been known since early childhood – has succeeded in making his mark and stamping his personality. Max is an engaged musician, who believes in leading from the front, getting involved and improving the opportunities for others. As a very active President of Making Music (the former National Federation of Music Societies), Maxwell Davies has helped to enrich the making of music by amateur performers. He has had possibly the most important single influence on the way music is taught in schools today, thanks to his pioneering lessons with pupils in Cirencester, his work with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and the wide range of music he has written for schoolchildren. And he has constantly spoken out where music is under threat, be it music's status in the school curriculum or the funding of orchestras and ensembles.

Peter Maxwell Davies is also, *par excellence*, a professional at his trade. He works quickly and efficiently, has no problem meeting deadlines and will never be found sitting around dreamily waiting for 'inspiration'. Rather, like a composer of the Baroque or Classical era, or like one of the medieval craftsmen he passionately reveres, he has honed his working methods so that the process of composition and the inspiration for it march together. His technique has been fine-tuned to the point where the almost ritualised patterns to which his music conforms generate their own fresh ideas and are constantly suggesting new ways forward. He is as intimate with his material as a sculptor is to his stone; he seems to have an endless array of tunes and melodies at his disposal, and endless ingenious methods of making them both varied and beguiling.

Yet while Maxwell Davies is now one of the world's pre-eminent composers, one of the grand old men of British (and indeed Scottish) music, a master of innovative structures who has breathed fresh life into the traditional forms of symphony, concerto and string quartet, he has ruffled feathers along the way. When he embarked on his composing career, Max's musical idols included not just such uncompromising 'Modernist' composers as Béla Bartók, Claude Debussy and Olivier Messiaen but the pioneering composers of the Second Viennese School, whose music was known but at that time still little played: Alban Berg, Arnold Schoenberg and – arguably, the most economical and uncompromising of the three – Anton Webern (1883–1945).

While Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* would have a significant impact on Max's

approach to composing his first opera *Taverner*, Webern's additional importance for Max was not merely that he (like Berg) had embraced Schoenberg's twelve-note series in the mid-1920s, but that Webern's most influential works were rooted in medieval music, especially that of the fifteenth-century Flemish composer Heinrich Isaac, court composer to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I and to Lorenzo de' Medici. It was Webern's obsession with medieval composers' ability to build a vast musical architecture (based, almost invariably, on tiny fragments of plainsong) that particularly influenced Max's music. Max's early works from the 1950s also underline his close interest in strictly organised serialism, a method whose seemingly uncompromising harmonic and almost anti-tonal aural impact has alienated (or puzzled) certain listeners for eighty years.

Maxwell Davies is not a traditional Christian believer or regular churchgoer, preferring to admire the deep-rooted imagery of Christianity while disapproving of its historic divisions and once rampant intolerance. But he has consistently drawn strength from the great Christian musical tradition – notably the lithe contrapuntal music of the Renaissance, a line of descent running through Machaut, Dufay, Ockeghem and Josquin Desprez, past Victoria and Palestrina and on to embrace the early Baroque. Claudio Monteverdi greatly influenced the young Max at a significant crux of his early career (1961–2), just before he embarked on *Taverner*.

Of particular interest to Max in the music of these Renaissance composers – little known, even as late as the 1950s – was the plainsong underlay to their

complex yet transparent music, and the techniques, such as isometric patterning and hocketing, by which they converted the basic plainsong culled from the *Liber Usualis* into great and splendid musical structures, devising ever more elaborate devices for decorating the basic plainsong melody or 'tenor'. Almost all of Max's music since the 1950s has sought to pay homage to and emulate these processes, while developing them, by fresh and original means, into a set of new technical procedures wholly apposite to music of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Max's own complex, fluent, often blazingly virtuosic elaboration of medieval techniques underlies every period of his musical output. It informs his earliest and student works, his violently Expressionist outbursts, the seven numbered symphonies (begun in the 1970s and continuing up to the millennium), their symphonic offshoots, their electrifying successor the *Antarctic Symphony*, all his major choral works over five decades, and several large-scale pieces penned recently in his role as Master of the Queen's Music, not to mention his vital series of string quartets.

So has his style really changed? Not entirely. The canvas has grown larger, and some of the anger of his violent 1960s Expressionism seems allayed by the explosiveness of its impact, as if Maxwell Davies were literally screaming 'avaunt!' to ghosts or demons of his own that cried out to be exorcised. With Orkney in the 1970s came serene new chamber works (the *Hymn to St Magnus* and *Ave Maris Stella*, for example), abetted by the most important advance in his compositional

method: the evolution of a complex system of single or interlocking 'magic squares' for managing the processes of selection and compositional 'set series' on which Max has been increasingly reliant since the mid to late 1950s. This system has some passing similarities to processes that Messiaen and Boulez, and some of their European and American counterparts, have employed to notable effect. In the 1970s Max withdrew, emotionally and geographically, from the late-twentieth-century avant-garde, but sought singlehandedly to advance their cause.

Max's views on 'tonality' in general (and especially in his major works) are important, and well worth bearing in mind:

> *I feel that tonality might be extended to furnish new methods of cohesion, provided it is understood modally, and not necessarily in relation to a bass line... Tonality is surely not merely a matter of using a major or minor triad on the music's surface; it is rather a system of organization, running through every aspect of a work, which enunciates it as a coherent whole, governing not only melody and harmony, but rhythm and architecture.*

Complexity often masks simplicity, but it does not always make for instant or easy listening. Listeners to Max's music, even new music 'groupies' and enduring Max fans, all learned early on that this was to be no cosy or easy ride. The thoughtful, open-minded first-time listener must approach Max's music with open ears

– Max may be working in two, three, ten, sixteen, even twenty-four layers at a time. He places invaluable aural signposts signs along the way – big paragraph markings, as it were – so it's helpful to keep an ear open for those. But you shouldn't try, on a first go, to 'follow' a piece of symphonic argument with your mind. 'Understanding' may be precisely the *wrong* thing to attempt.

Rather than over-engaging with Max's music at the start, it is far better to let the music do the work. Pick out and follow a line here and there, or, in vocal works, let the words sustain you. Listen for a glimpse, perhaps, of a new 'modal' tonality, but don't overwork that in the first instance (it may be there, but buried). Keep your nerve, think maybe of Bach (rather than of Mozart), or of late Beethoven. Let them, like benign deities, help Max's music to reach out to you, and to achieve meaning on your own terms.

Max's music dares to venture along its own fresh paths, and to approach its material in a constantly surprising and original manner. Listening to it always feels like embarking on a new, yet somehow familiar, journey.

In 1956, when Max was still a young music student, writing in the musical journal *The Score*, he made out a passionate case for insular Britain to engage with and embrace, rather than shun, the modern musical approaches pursued in continental Europe but largely ignored by mid-twentieth-century British composers.

With his brilliant ensemble The Fires of London (initially known as The Pierrot Players), Max set new standards for the presentation and performance of new

The Fires of London on tour in Hungary, 1977

music, and of music theatre, long before similar groups became common in other European countries. And through his career, be it with commissions for the St Magnus Festival, which he instigated in Orkney in 1977, or with the Hoy Summer School for composers, or more recently as a Professor at the Royal Academy of Music in London, Max has always encouraged younger composers.

Thanks to his association forged with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in the mid-1980s, he set a lead in bringing composers into the heart of practical music making and performance, subsequently working closely with three other orchestras: the Philharmonia and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestras in London; and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in Manchester.

Maxwell Davies is also one of the few composers of classical music to have a record label of his own. In addition to the string quartets on Naxos, a large number of Max's works – chamber, orchestral, instrumental, and also stage works – are now available as downloads from Max's own website (http://music.maxopus.com). In terms of classical music, this is almost revolutionary. Suddenly, a vast cross-section of Max's music, from the earliest pieces to the very latest, can be downloaded, explored and enjoyed by enthusiastic listeners all over the world.

And then there is Max the man. On one of his very early works, a piano piece composed when he was fourteen, the young Max, with his waggish sense of humour, wrote in the margin the words 'Hic iacet Maxius maduus' – schoolboy Latin doggerel for 'here lies mad Max'. Perhaps there was something 'mad' about the young Max, in the word's sense of wild, unusual, unpredictable or daring. Indeed,

many of those who encountered Max's music at London concerts in the 1960s thought that he was crazy too – and noisily stormed out of the concert hall.

Max is the most entertaining, indeed electrifying, company: he is far from daunting, with nothing of the withdrawn figure or 'ivory tower' composer about him, but cheerful, convivial – and with a twinkle in his eye. He displays a mischievous sense of humour and accompanies it by an infectious laugh that immediately sets you at your ease. He is outwardly modest, yet deeply confident within. Ever the life and soul of the party, preferably with a glass of good Italian wine in his hand, he has a gift for making you feel that *you* are the important figure, not he. Max is constantly buzzing with ideas, and is always prepared to take the time to listen. Fiercely protective of what matters to him, he is also capable of being petulant, and of fierce outbursts of rage when he sees a wrong being done, whether to himself or others; yet he also radiates an extraordinary sense of calm and a deep wisdom. He is someone who is fun to be with, and around; indeed, someone who lives life to the full.

Chapter 1
Salford Boyhood and Studies in Manchester

How did a young boy, an only child brought up in a working-class household near a major industrial city, make the journey to becoming one of the most important creative figures in the musical life of his country?

Peter Maxwell Davies – the son of Tom Davies (b. 1909), a precision instrument maker, and Hilda Davies (b. 1904) – was born into a family that valued music: his father sang in a local male-voice choir, his mother and grandmother both sang, and his paternal grandmother owned an upright piano, which family members regularly played, and which Max's parents later inherited. All the family enjoyed music. But there was little to suggest that the Davies family would produce a musical prodigy.

Part of the answer lies in the young Max's piercing intelligence, fierce determination, and refusal to take 'no' for an answer. He was born on 8 September 1934 in Salford, a town that lies just to the west of Manchester. Close by ran the Manchester Ship Canal, which brought trading ships from Merseyside to docks in the heart of the city. Salford's forlorn, grey-brown urban landscape of factories and cotton mills, on which the town's wealth was founded, was famously celebrated in the paintings of L.S. Lowry. Max's grandparents owned a newspaper shop, and at first Max and his parents lived with them over the shop. Max's father became highly skilled at making optical instruments.

As a small boy Max always took a special delight in trains; in adulthood he was to buy a cottage near Gillingham, Dorset, and at the foot of its garden was an embankment on which a railway line ran. The sound of regular passing trains he never minded, but he could not abide military jet aircraft, surging suddenly over the peaceful landscape and interrupting his train of thought. He wrote furious letters to the newspapers about them, and this was one of the reasons why he later moved to remote Orkney. He could not tolerate any intrusion on the natural sounds around him. His natural allies were to be the wind, the sea and the sound of birdsong.

One event that greatly excited Max as a boy was his being taken by his parents to a local performance of the operetta *The Gondoliers*, by W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan. This might seem an unlikely experience to launch a four-year-old on the path to becoming an ultra-modern composer, but its effect on this bright, highly impressionable boy was immediate and decisive. Max adored it, and announced, there and then, that he was going to be a composer. Very soon he started piano lessons with a local teacher, who was astonished at how quickly Max managed to grasp complicated details of musical theory.

But life was not all idyllic. Just as Max turned five, World War II broke out. Salford and Manchester were both heavily bombed by the German Luftwaffe. Local people's lives were in serious danger. Max remembers being cradled by his parents in the downstairs pantry, as explosions rang out around them. The bombs were terrifying, and the house next door took a direct hit; another just down the

road was destroyed. Later Max graphically referred to that traumatic experience in *St Thomas Wake*, an explosive masterpiece from his 1960s 'Expressionist' period, which makes direct allusion to the bombs falling on nearby houses.

By the time Max was seven, the music began to emerge – at this stage mostly music for piano. His first surviving piece ('Early Morning Echoes'), dating from 1942, reveals a clear sense of not only musical melody but also structural shape and pattern. Also from the same year is a piece bearing the significant title of 'Two-key Melody'.

It was at this time that Max's grandparents' piano was moved to his parents' house, giving him plenty of opportunities for practising, playing and composing. Various pieces followed; and some years later, in 1947, Max – who was by then at the nearby Grammar School at Leigh – composed a work to which he added imaginative suggestions for orchestration. His first song, a setting of an Irish poem 'The Birds', envisaged accompaniment not merely by a piano, but by an instrumental ensemble. Here were clear indications of the mature composer emerging: writing music for a compact instrumental ensemble, for chamber orchestra and for full orchestra was to be central to Max's output throughout his career.

There followed more precocious works, including a sonata forty minutes in length. *Parade*, the work with a mock adagio inscribed to the memory of 'mad' Max, bore fanciful titles: 'Green', 'Blue' and 'Red' Music, part of which is headed 'Tony Simpson: rubato in the manner of a drunken man'. Two other sections were facetiously marked 'in modo Béla Bartók' and 'Tempo di Valse de Maurice Ravel, in modo de

cheap ensemble de café'. Wittily mocking and irreverent, maybe, but they showed that the facetious young composer was already in touch with European trends. By his early teens Max was a weekly visitor to the local library, borrowing books and musical scores, and devouring them at home. He had a prodigious memory, and absorbed them all. Soon Schoenberg, Berg and Webern were added to the aspiring teenage composer's growing interests. Enthusiasm for literature blossomed, too: he eagerly read Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, and also European writers like Dostoyevsky, as well as Heine, Rilke, André Gide and Proust in the original; and developed a strong interest in medieval, renaissance and modern art.

It was hardly surprisingly that Max excelled in all subjects at school. He soon, however, found himself at loggerheads with the school's headmaster over exams. Max had decided he wanted to sit the Music exam as part of his School Certificate (equivalent to GCSE). The Headmaster, Mr B. Major, dismissed the idea as nonsense, claiming that Music was a subject for girls' schools. So this ambition was thwarted. But a measure of Max's resolve was that he later set about teaching himself for the higher-grade A Level exam, taking and passing it outside school (ironically, he sat his aural exam at the Manchester Girls' High School). And Max exacted a sweet revenge. For Leigh Grammar School's end-of-term concert in 1949 he composed and played a piano piece which he entitled 'Funeral March in B major (for a Pig)' – an allusion to the Headmaster's name (Major) and his nickname (The Pig). The young Max was certainly not to be crossed.

When Max was fourteen he successfully auditioned to appear as a young

performer on the BBC Radio programme, *Children's Hour*. Later that same year a piano piece of his was broadcast by Violet Carson (better known much later as Ena Sharples of Granada TV's *Coronation Street*), and soon he was making frequent appearances on the programme, playing many of his own early piano compositions.

One important decision played a key part in Peter Maxwell Davies's emergence as a fully-fledged composer. Rejecting the idea of study at Oxford or Cambridge, for which his prodigious gifts in mathematics and in modern languages might have seemed destined (to this day he regularly gives interviews in fluent German or Italian), he won a County Scholarship to study Music jointly at Manchester University and at the Royal Manchester (now the Royal Northern) College of Music.

All was not plain sailing at university, however. After a series of acrimonious exchanges he was ejected from the composition classes of his professor, Humphrey Procter-Gregg, who, as Max recalls, 'believed that modern music meant nothing later than Delius', and who had disparaged the complexity of Beethoven and Bach – composers whom Max revered almost as gods. To Procter-Gregg, Max's interest in Bartók and Stravinsky seemed almost blasphemous.

Yet while Max was studying at the Royal Manchester College with a distinguished lady piano teacher, Hedwig Stein (who, to Max's delight, insisted they both speak German), he was lucky enough to fall in with a group of outstanding student musicians. These were the erratically brilliant pianist, John Ogdon, the

coolly virtuosic trumpeter Elgar [Gary] Howarth and two immensely talented young composers, Alexander Goehr and Harrison Birtwistle, who was also a gifted clarinettist. Max's friendships with 'Gary' and 'Harry', and especially with 'Sandy' Goehr, and their shared interest in the meticulously structured music of the Second Viennese School and its successors, played a highly important role in his early development as a composer.

This group of friends was encouraged in its endeavours by an inspiring teacher, Richard Hall, who was himself a composer (albeit in a very different idiom). This was a crucial time, and it was now that Max composed the two most important works of his student years: his Five Pieces for Piano, which he wrote for John Ogdon in 1956, and, in 1955, the Trumpet Sonata, composed for Elgar Howarth.

This dazzling Trumpet Sonata really makes you sit up and listen. Max composed it for a trumpet in D, which is slightly higher than the usual trumpet in C, and makes a brighter sound. After a brief, cheekily assertive statement of the taut principal motif – a falling interval of a minor 3rd and then a rising interval of a flattened 7th (identical with the solo trumpet motif that opens Max's first opera *Taverner*) – the first movement of the Trumpet Sonata **(CD 1, track 1)** suddenly bursts upon you. Although marked *Allegro Moderato*, the exciting toccata-like display feels anything but restrained. The piano part thereafter is constantly on the move, while the trumpet responds with short, punchy figures and fiery trills.

For a moment the music seems to settle, but then cascades forth anew,

constantly adjusting its shape; always, though, a Prokofiev-like urgency is maintained, until with a sudden pull-up this energetic movement disappears just as abruptly and unexpectedly as it arrived. The work continues with a finely expressive, noble movement (*Lento*), then returns briefly to the bluster and thrust of the opening *Allegro* before a slow, intense build-up culminates in a sudden tumbling evanescence. The entire piece lasts a mere seven minutes.

Later in 1955 Elgar Howarth and John Ogdon unleashed this powerful sonata upon a Manchester audience at the University's Worthington Hall, and a few weeks later a packed audience in London was knocked for six on hearing it (the work's technical demands, however, saw it rejected by the Society for the Promotion of New Music).

Max chose to write his thesis, at Manchester University, on the obscure but fascinating subject of Indian music. Although its idioms have not significantly impinged on Max's music (in the way that certain works by Britten or Messiaen were directly influenced by Balinese gamelan music), Indian music did play a minor part in one or two very early works, notably the *Stedman Doubles*. It is possible that the expressive linear role of the sitar in Indian ragas, and the tabla's accompanying commentary of shifting rhythms, fused with Max's deep interest in medieval polyphony so as to exercise some *indirect* influence on the music Max was to compose years later, and in particular on the methodical patterns which have always been central to his music.

Another element central to Max's music was virtuosity. Both the Trumpet

Sonata and the Five Pieces for Piano had been composed for performers unafraid of 'difficult' new music. In these early days Max from time to time met with resistance on account of the demands his music made on orchestral players, and it was partly this need for daring instrumentalists to execute the challenging new works by him and by Birtwistle that led a decade or so later to the formation of the virtuoso instrumental group The Pierrot Players.

Chapter 2
Studies Abroad and Teaching at Home

During his period at Manchester Max began to spread his wings. In the mid-1950s he attended courses at Dartington Hall, in Devon, a seedbed of forward-looking ideas in English music. Here he encountered such key figures as Aaron Copland, who suggested that Max might study in the USA, and William Glock, the future Controller of Music of the BBC Third Programme (now Radio 3). Max also travelled to Germany, visiting Hamburg and later Darmstadt, at whose progressive festival of new music he met the influential avant-garde composers Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez. Max's Clarinet Sonata, originally composed for Birtwistle, received its premiere there, in July 1957 – and Dartington saw the first performance of his instrumental piece *Alma Redemptoris Mater* a month later.

After Manchester Max took the decision to study not in Paris with Olivier Messiaen (an option he seriously considered) but in Rome, with a leading figure of the Italian avant-garde, Goffredo Petrassi, on an Italian Government Scholarship. During Max's years there, 1957–8, he came to admire Petrassi immensely, and the two remained in touch until Petrassi died, aged ninety-eight, in 2003.

Regularly the two would meet at Petrassi's home, when the older man would go through Max's work-in-progress with him – 'leaning over my shoulder and asking the most searching questions'. Petrassi reinforced in Max his own

passionate belief that in the creation of meaningful music everything had to have a reason: there was no room for idle thinking, random additions or slovenly ideas.

Rome suited Max perfectly: here he was, in a city with a deep sense of history, a vibrant musical life, magnificent works of art, and – just as importantly – glorious food (Max remains a superb cook of lamb, pork, fish and pasta in the Italian style). He went to concerts and the opera, and to hear plainsong at the Benedictine monastery on the Aventine Hill. But above all, he drew strength and wisdom from the questions to which he was submitted by Petrassi, who encouraged his pupils to develop their own style of composing while insisting on firm discipline and intellectual rigour in the process. Here was the personal input Max so badly needed – teaching that was challenging, stimulating and rewarding, in contrast to his negative experiences in Manchester.

This valuable period in Rome helped to lay the foundations of working methods that have remained with Maxwell Davies for over half a century. In particular, his studies with Petrassi enabled Max to test out on a seasoned composer and masterly teacher some of the countless ideas that were fermenting in his brain. It also enabled him to seek help in fulfilling his vision of being not just another humdrum, rule-tied serialist, but a versatile musician who could, by endless hard graft, reconcile an insistence on the role of reason and causation in fashioning genuinely 'new' music – uniting the various ways of managing and processing set series – with the quest for newly defined tonal centres (which accorded with the music he had heard, probably since childhood, in his head).

Equally important are the copious devices suggesting allusion (sometimes illusion), psychological association or extra-musical meaning which have peppered his works. The hallmarks of his style, both auditory and technical, have remained constant throughout his career, with – despite assertions to the contrary – no falling-off in intensity and no relaxing of intellectual rigour.

What also impressed itself on Max, as it had at Dartington, was that, so far as Petrassi was concerned, teacher and pupil were equals, working together as one, exchanging ideas and approaching the task with a common purpose. It was something that Max would soon apply himself, once he returned to England. In the meantime, *Prolation*, his impressive but austere first orchestral work (and one of the compositions of his time with Petrassi), won the Olivetti Composition Prize, and was chosen to represent Britain at the 1959 Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

Its unusual title refers to what Paul Griffiths has aptly called the 'rhythmic engineering of medieval music', whereby different note lengths were set in relation to each other in specific fixed ratios. Max goes one further in carefully reflecting the proportions of *Prolation*'s smaller units to the overall design; thus macrocosm and microcosm are minutely matched. This kind of structural precision and inventiveness, which Max has always seen in almost hallowed terms as the essence of musical composition, has been typical of his music – both large- and small-scale – ever since. Students can learn a huge amount about proportion from Max, who remains a builder of musical cathedrals on an epic scale.

When *Prolation* received its premiere, in Rome in 1959, it caused something of an uproar. Shrill, dry, ascetic, with its passion smouldering mostly beneath the skin, it was like modern medieval music. Many felt appalled. Not for the first time (or the last), a work of Max's raised hackles and caused people to walk out.

Upon his return to England the immediate task facing Max was how best to earn a living. Although he now had a supportive publisher, Schott & Co., which paid him a modest retainer, this was not remotely sufficient for him to live on. Before he went to Italy he had wisely acquired a teaching certificate and done some teaching practice at Salford Grammar School. In 1959, therefore, he took the post of Director of Music at Cirencester Grammar School, in Gloucestershire.

The significant factor of Max's teaching, particularly at Cirencester, was his insistence on treating his pupils with respect, virtually as equals. Soon he had them composing their own music, setting down musical ideas that they then evolved into something more substantial, even into music-theatre works, which they later conducted with the school orchestra (formed by Max). Often these creative sessions would continue in Max's flat, in the loft of a converted barn. These eager young musicians were treated to much the same kindly, supportive advice as Max had received from Petrassi.

Max introduced his pupils to Renaissance music – works by Byrd and Palestrina, and by early English composers such as John Dunstable. Sometimes this took the form of arrangements that Max made for the school orchestra, or for smaller ensembles. These arrangements (one such is of Byrd's Three Dances) had

a wonderful way of bringing early music alive. And Max with his choir performed his arrangement of sections of Monteverdi's *Vespers* at a time when the work was almost unknown in Britain. As he recalled, 'I suspect I came a great deal nearer to the sound and spirit of the original, with an orchestration including clarinets and valve trumpets, than many a "pure" (or "authentic") version, discreetly and beautifully performed.'

Maxwell Davies's teaching methods won widespread admiration, and his inspiring approach to music-making soon bore fruit in a glorious carol sequence, *O Magnum Mysterium* **(CD 1, tracks 2–3)**, which was first performed at a Christmas concert at Cirencester, in 1960. The work is a modern setting of a series of medieval carols. The principal carol sets the enchanting Latin text which pictures the oxen in the stable gazing at the baby Jesus lying in a manger: 'O magnum mysterium et admirabile sacramentum ut animalia viderent Dominum natum jacentem in praesepio.' It evokes, as Max says, 'the wonder and promise of the nativity'.

The tender, medieval-sounding carol tune immediately entrances by the shy modality of its ascending chromatic motif, which rises to a flattened (diminished) 5th – an interval once deemed ugly, even evil, but which has always been a prominent feature of Max's music. The carol is sung three times, first as a solo, then – as heard here – in a charming two-part setting with a lower voice, and finally with a rich, clustering three- and four-part harmonisation.

In between come two other carols: first, the sprightly 'Haylle, comly and clene' and later the tender 'Alleluia, pro Virgine Maria' (also heard here), in which a

soprano solo, followed by upper and lower voices in delicate duet, appeals to the Virgin to 'purge us of our offences' ('Diva nata licia nostra purga vicina, ne demur ad supplicia'). This touching passage is interspersed with verses foretelling Christ's life and his death on the cross. The other two movements are exquisitely crafted instrumental interludes, based on the original carol: these are evolved using a modified form of the techniques (octave displacement and dividing the melody among various instruments, for example) that had been used in the Trumpet Sonata and in *Prolation*.

The work culminates in a massive Organ Fantasia based on the same material as the carols and interludes, and which requires considerable virtuosity. The Fantasia was played at the premiere by Allan Wicks, later the organist of Canterbury Cathedral and at that time organist of Manchester Cathedral. It was Wicks who had directed the performances of sacred works by Byrd, Tallis and other Renaissance composers that inspired Max in the 1950s, when he regularly attended Evensong at Manchester Cathedral.

The simple beauty and freshness of this charming, unostentatious work make it a landmark in Max's output. It is significant that both choral and instrumental sections of *O Magnum Mysterium* are perfectly tailored to the needs of young performers; most importantly, they avoid condescension, which Max resolutely refuses to contemplate when composing music for children.

Three other works which drew inspiration from Monteverdi's *Vespers* emerged during Max's Cirencester years: first, in 1961, a String Quartet of great

intensity and concentration; then in 1962 the *Sinfonia* – a small-scale chamber symphony which preceded his first work entitled 'Symphony' by some fifteen years; and finally, in July of the same year, the *Leopardi Fragments*, a striking setting of verses by the great Italian poet.

Max's exciting work at Cirencester drew praise from educationalists and the national press alike. Through his highly imaginative approach to music teaching, insisting above all that young musicians should be encouraged to compose, he helped to lay the basis for changes in the way music is taught today. Indeed, many orchestras' education programmes, inspired by Maxwell Davies's later pioneering work with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, today employ methods that he first advocated in the early 1960s. In those days, they were seen as little short of revolutionary.

As he approached the end of three years' teaching in Cirencester, Max followed up Aaron Copland's advice and applied for a Harkness Scholarship, to study in America. Copland was one of Max's referees; another was Benjamin Britten. He spent 1962–4 at the University of Princeton, New Jersey, where he attended private lessons and composition classes with, among others, Roger Sessions (1896–1985) and Earl Kim (1920–1998). Princeton was only an hour from New York by train, and on many occasions Max made the journey to hear music at the Carnegie Hall and other concert venues. In the summer of 1963 he also travelled across America and visited famous landmarks in Colorado, Arizona and California.

In America Max benefited from being able to devote himself to composition almost full-time. The work to which he applied himself most intensively was his long-planned opera, *Taverner*. Its story is set in the years 1528–36, during the reign of Henry VIII, and concerns the prominent Tudor composer John Taverner (c. 1490–1545), who abandoned composition at the time of the English Reformation and became instead a merciless agent of Henry's minister Thomas Cromwell. At the start of the opera – its compact, barbed text a skilfully condensed compilation of sixteenth-century source materials amassed by Max himself – Taverner is on trial as a Protestant heretic, who only escapes death thanks to the Cardinal's last-minute intervention. In the second half of Max's opera Taverner – now himself the inquisitor, having reneged on his principles – adopts towards others the same brutal methods that were applied to him.

It is in the hypocrisy of intolerance and intransigence that Max sees the 'betrayal' that is central not just to the opera's plot but to its music. Just as the action is full of unexpected twists, so the musical themes and motifs of this incredibly sparse and uncompromising sound world are corrupted, by processes of post-Lisztian 'transformation', as the opera grimly unfolds. The musical processes perhaps veer closer here to atonalism and 'pure' serial procedures than any of Max's other larger works (bar *Prolation*).

Once back in England Max chose to live in Dorset, and in 1965 bought a small cottage near Shaftesbury, not far from Harrison Birtwistle's home; he also rented a room in London, so as to have a base there too. His Dorset cottage was close to

Wardour Castle, on Cranborne Chase, where in 1964 and 1965 Maxwell Davies joined old friends Harry Birtwistle and Sandy Goehr to teach composition at a summer school organised by Birtwistle.

The fortunes of the opera *Taverner* were to be dramatically affected when in 1969 a fierce fire broke out in the Dorset cottage. Max's beloved cat died in the blaze, many precious personal items were lost, and such books as survived were appallingly charred. Large parts of the opera's finished score were destroyed, and much of the opera had to be rewritten from sketches. It was typical of Max's determination that the opera was rewritten, completed in 1970, and would finally enjoy a successful run at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in July 1972, conducted by Edward Downes. Stirring plenty of controversy, but recognised and acclaimed as a natural successor to Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* or Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, Maxwell Davies's *Taverner* was revived there, again under Downes's musical direction, in 1983. It was then staged afresh in Stockholm and Boston, and was later recorded by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Oliver Knussen, and broadcast in April 1997, drawing similarly wide accolades.

In 1964 there had emerged a significant orchestral work based on the music from the opera: the *Second Taverner Fantasia*. In effect a paraphrase from the opera's first act, in the manner of Berg, or Debussy, this symphonic piece drew major accolades when it was performed in 1965 at the Royal Festival Hall by the London Philharmonic Orchestra under John Pritchard.

Not everything Max wrote drew accolades, however. When one of his carols, *Ave Maria – Hail, Blessed Flower*, was published in 1961 in *The Musical Times*, some of the responses were violent ('grinding discords', 'melancholy, purposeless progressions', even 'an affront to God'). Today the carol, composed in much the same style as *O Magnum Mysterium*, could scarcely seem more beautiful and innocent – as a critic of *The Times* pointed out at the time. This gives an indication of how public attitudes to music or any of the arts change if one is prepared to wait for them to do so.

In 1967 The Pierrot Players came into being. This exciting new music ensemble was headed by Harrison Birtwistle, the brilliant clarinettist Alan Hacker and the keyboard virtuoso Stephen Pruslin, whom Max had met in Princeton. Formed with the purpose of performing works by Max and Harry, while promoting performances of new music by other composers, and commissioning new pieces, the group consisted of six gifted musicians, playing violin, cello, flute, clarinet, and a range of keyboards and percussion. The line-up was roughly modelled on that of Schoenberg's explosive music-theatre work *Pierrot Lunaire*, which the ensemble, with the soprano Mary Thomas, often performed to acclaim. Several players doubled on other instruments, while Pruslin showed his prowess on a wide variety of keyboard instruments. The range of percussion in the score (including the marimba, a xylophone-like instrument) enabled Max's compact ensemble to produce an astonishing array of sounds and timbres.

For more than twenty years, until its disbandment in 1987, the group remained

in the forefront of new music making not just in Britain but throughout the world, giving the premieres of numerous challenging new pieces by Max, as well as forty-two new works by other composers.

Chapter 3
Foxtrots, Fun and Fury: the 'Violent' Late Sixties

The years 1964–9, following his return from the US, proved an amazingly fertile period, and the impact of Max's music of this time established his name firmly as the leading British composer of his generation – alongside Harrison Birtwistle. Explosive works like *Revelation and Fall* (1965), *Antechrist* (1967), the *Missa super 'L'homme armé'* (1968) and *Ecce Manus Tradentis* (1964–9) gave clear evidence of Max's preoccupation with sinister parody. This he expressed by using elaborate processes of musical transformation, by which a passage of plainsong (or other declared or underlying melody) gradually alters its contours by stages so that it transforms into another. Very often it can be felt to metamorphose into not just its musical but its psychological opposite, coming to mean something quite different.

Such musical tricks and surprises exist in Beethoven and Haydn, but new here was Max's giving a black meaning to them. He used the transformation process to suggest evil, and by disguising his thematic material he meant to indicate the unreliability and falsification of things we assume or take for granted.

Maxwell Davies used such musical processes to suggest a process of corruption. The parody 'Mass' also specified a peculiar effect: a 78 rpm recording of an eighteenth-century chamber organ, played on a wind-up horn gramophone. The deadly serious, anti-establishment message of some of these works amounts

to a rumbling musical protest, pointing to some unpalatable home truths.

Max could also turn these technical devices to witty purpose, thus revealing another side of himself: the comedian. *Purcell: Fantasia and Two Pavans*, first performed by The Pierrot Players in January 1969, displays his gift for parody, but in a wholly entertaining and flippant guise. Max makes some pertinent points about this immensely lively piece:

> *I have long been fascinated by Purcell's music, but utterly bored by well-meaning 'authentic' performances, which convey no sense of Purcell's intensity of feeling, sense of* fun *and sheer* outrageousness. *I feel the profoundest respect for the 'great' composers of the past, but have no feeling of slavish reverence towards them. Musical purity in these matters is about as interesting as moral purity. I am sure that many people will consider my Purcell realizations wholly immoral!*

Whereas Max's 'arrangement' of Purcell's fantasia starts from Purcell himself, and is presented in a cheerful, lilting 3/4, a bit like a mock-'authentic' performance of, say, Bach's *Musical Offering*, he presents the two pavans **(CD 1, tracks 4–5)** in a very different guise from the poised seventeenth-century dance form of the originals. The harpsichord is swapped for an out-of-tune upright piano, and Max disguises the pavans, or dresses them up, as foxtrots. This riotous 1920s and 1930s dance form made an intense impression on Max when he was a small boy.

He remembers hearing foxtrots reproduced on a wind-up gramophone which played 78 rpm records (some of which he still possesses). A sound like an old gramophone being cranked into action emerged as one of the many memorable effects of Max's ironic 'parody' music of the late 1960s.

The first Pavan, which is almost lulling, has the distinct feel of a sleazy slow dance, and a definite tinge of Stephane Grappelli to the violin part. A slightly unctuous exchange develops between the cello and violin, before this gradually unravels. The second Pavan is launched by the violent blast of a railway guard's whistle – another of the armoury of special effects drummed into play during Max's Expressionist period. Clarinet and violin lead off, there's the feel of a honky-tonk piano, and the piccolo has some cheeky interjections. It is all joyously lightweight, yet also like an echo of some ancient past era: a kind of eerie *danse macabre*.

The ending of the *Fantasia and Two Pavans* is as unexpected as its beginning: the second Pavan just peters out, as if the wind-up mechanism has run out of puff, or the record needs changing; indeed, the side drum's soft farewell sounds strangely like a needle scratching around in the centre of a record. As one critic commented, 'Too often at avant-garde concerts we sit in frigid solemnity. Here, Maxwell Davies conspicuously asks us to laugh with him, or at least to share his exuberance.' These amusing arrangements, far from being sacrilegious, are rather a refreshing, cheerfully outrageous treatment of the original. As Max observed, his Pavans are, after all, only 'a case of the reinterpretation of one "dead" dance form in terms of another'.

Undoubtedly 1969 proved to be the turning-point of Maxwell Davies's career. That momentous year saw the premieres of a number of major works, which remain landmarks in Max's output. British music has not been quite the same since.

Eight Songs for a Mad King was premiered at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London on 22 April 1969 by Roy Hart (speaker) and The Pierrot Players, with Max conducting. This sensational music-theatre work has as its source the eight tunes of a miniature pipe-organ, once owned by King George III, and later by the eminent historian and antiquarian Sir Steven Runciman. It was with this delicate instrument (now owned by Max) that George III, during his periods of insanity, had made bizarre attempts – so it is said – to teach caged bullfinches to sing. Maxwell Davies was also inspired by some of the weird and dotty phrases the king supposedly uttered, as recorded by Fanny Burney in her diaries. A third inspiration for the work was the phenomenal vocal dexterity of the original performer, the actor Roy Hart, who could somehow produce with his voice a series of unnatural-seeming sounds, including chords.

The eight poems forming the work's libretto were composed by the Australian poet Randolph Stow, who had met Max in America (and later in Australia in 1966, when Max briefly taught at the University of Adelaide), and had introduced him to Steven Runciman, who showed Max the pipe organ at his home in Scotland.

Max seized his chance to explore further the 'parody' devices and instrumental effects he had utilised in *Missa super 'L'homme armé'* and *Purcell: Fantasia and Two*

Pavans. *Eight Songs for a Mad King* is a fascinatingly brilliant and inventive score, Expressionistic in its bold dramatic gestures, grotesque in its violent mood-swings, and its colourful and at times sinister pastiche of a wide range of composers' styles. Yet the music and the staging are not intended to 'mock' the poor monarch; Max instead invites his audience to identify with and share in the madman's tragic loneliness.

The king himself utters a host of strange sounds: barking, cooing, whining, yelping; weeping at his distracted state, then suddenly bursting into life. Sometimes he is full of wild optimism, imagining himself to be promenading, floating on the Thames, or 'comforting' his people (to echoes of Handel's *Messiah*, a favourite of George III's, from which the king is known to have actually sung passages to himself during his madness). It is a very fine line that Max draws between sheer exuberance, bitter irony and biting parody.

The first section **(CD 1, track 6)**, entitled 'The Sentry' (tune: *King Prussia's Minuet*), begins with a frightening instrumental outburst, followed by a percussive 'ticking' effect to the accompaniment of jittery, eerie string glissandi. The music seems to be feeling its way in the dark, before an ominous solitary drumbeat heralds the lurching entry of the king. Amid groans and wails (echoed by the shrieking clarinet) he greets the sentry at the gate, requesting the key (at the words 'The kingdom' the music clearly echoes that of 'the kingdom of this world' from the *Messiah*); the king is preparing to walk out into the countryside, and promises to reward the soldier with a cabbage from the royal vegetable garden.

The king is distressed, however, on realising that he is not to be allowed out through the gate, and breaks down, begging that he should not be imprisoned, and that his key be restored to him. This touching exchange with the impassive sentry ends with the plaintive and heartrending request, 'Pity me. Child, whose son are you?' The religious overtones only strengthen the feeling of the king's helplessness.

Throughout the eight sections of *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (each is allocated a mocking dance-title, such as 'Miss Musgrave's Fancy'), the prating monarch conducts imaginary conversations with the individual caged 'birds' (the instrumentalists at The Pierrot Players' performances were actually penned in cages). The crux of this deeply disturbing series of exchanges comes in the work's seventh section, 'Country Dance' (another ironic foxtrot), where the king, screaming and ranting against sin and vice, seizes the violin and violently 'snaps' it. At that moment, it is as if his heart breaks ('It is night on the world'); his insanity finally gains the fatal upper hand. In the last section, the king, seeming to change person, movingly announces his own death.

King George's alternation between noble regality and screaming paranoia is one of the extraordinary, affecting ingredients of this powerful work. There are moments when we could almost believe him sane, and many more when we do not. This uncertainty is constantly disconcerting, and our identification with his dilemma poses the question: is the king's 'madness' somehow a metaphor for man's hapless state? And is there perhaps a bit of the mad king in each of us?

Eight Songs for a Mad King acquired a special notoriety, and stirs up controversy to this day. Having had numerous performances around the world, it remains one of his best-known and popular works.

Soon afterwards, in June 1969, came the premiere of *St Thomas Wake: Foxtrot for Orchestra*, a work whose associations reach back to Max's childhood memories of World War II, and to the terrifying experience of hearing German bombs falling on the house next door. The element of irony in Max's music gains a new dimension here: the foxtrots, played by a small onstage band, seem to carry on regardless as the bombs crash around, suggesting a frivolity wholly at odds with the deadly seriousness of events in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. Beneath the violence, exaggeration and musical splintering of this threatening work lies a criticism of the naivety of those who failed to foresee the war and the holocaust to which the 1930s were inexorably leading.

The next major work of 1969 was *Worldes Blis*, subtitled 'Motet for Orchestra': a work whose magnificent scope and compelling power indicated the direction Max's symphonic music would take over the next two decades. Dedicated to Max's teacher at Princeton, Earl Kim, it was first heard in August 1969 at a Proms concert in London's Royal Albert Hall. That memorable performance, by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer, occasioned perhaps the most dramatic walkout by large numbers of the audience of any work Maxwell Davies composed during the 1960s.

A good proportion of the audience – and some critics – were clearly

discomfited by the piece, which makes few concessions and requires an intense feat of concentration from its listeners, even today, if it is to yield up its rich rewards. Yet at the time its undoubted weight and import was clear, and it is fair to say that it moved British music onto a new plane.

The tune on which the piece is founded, the thirteenth-century secular song 'Worldes Blis', appears only near the close, on bells and glockenspiel, and even then it is heard only subliminally, being buried deep within the orchestral texture; up until then, the melody is disguised, and the whole work, more than forty minutes long, is a brilliantly sustained meditation upon it. Indeed, *Worldes Blis* can be viewed as a piece of music in search of its own 'lost' melody, which it finally reaches, or re-encounters like an old friend, towards the end of the work.

The text underlying *Worldes Blis* is a strikingly gloomy one, and this accords with the air of pessimism that had pervaded much of Max's recent music – a sombre mood that would be transformed, in part, by his first visit to Orkney the following year, and eventual move there in 1974. 'Worldly joy,' it says, 'is transitory, and does not endure. Care, sorrow and ill luck attend it. It leaves man impoverished, weeping and groaning.'

The techniques Maxwell Davies employs to disintegrate, pare down, transform and restore the original tune are similar to those of his other Expressionist works of this period, but *Worldes Blis* unfolds on a much larger scale and at a deeper level. Throughout, the melody is in a very gradual process of transformation and modification. Its contours – melodic, rhythmic and harmonic – change slightly at

each new statement. *Worldes Blis* was also, Max has said, 'a conscious attempt to reintegrate the shattered and scattered fragments of my creative persona… It moves slowly, in long, extremely carefully articulated time-spans, with no "orchestration" as such, but a minimal presentation of the material in such a way as to make the structural bones of the music as clear as possible.' In it, also, are the seeds of later works that emerged during the early years in Orkney, such as *Stone Litany* and the First Symphony.

The latter part of the work centres on four 'development' sections, in which first harps, then unpitched percussion, next divided strings and trumpets, and finally high strings, woodwind and organ are given prominence.

The impressive concluding section **(CD 1, track 7)**, heralded by a violent compression of the material of the earlier development sections, is an awesome orchestral *Lento*; it harks back to the work's spare beginning, but is now very thickly scored. Both the tensely struggling string line and the assertive, questing brass recall the working-out of a slow movement by Mahler (most especially that of his Ninth Symphony, it has been suggested), as well as the concluding movement of Max's *Second Taverner Fantasia*. Indeed, *Worldes Blis* amounts virtually to a huge, multi-sectioned one-movement symphony; 'It bears,' Stephen Pruslin has observed, 'the scars of struggle even while beginning to transcend it.'

As the section progresses, the fragments of what has gone before gradually fall away, and the 'Worldes Blis' monody can be discerned for the first time, the shy, delicate chime of the bells peeping almost inaudibly through the gleaming

orchestral textures. The struggle lasts right to the end, however. The thunder of drums yields to a chord, faintly heard in the distance like a distant foghorn – this ambivalent chord of two superimposed major 3rds (incorporating Max's trademark diminished 5th, or augmented 4th), played softly by flutes and clarinets, eerily suggests, by its indeterminacy, that there is perhaps more to be said.

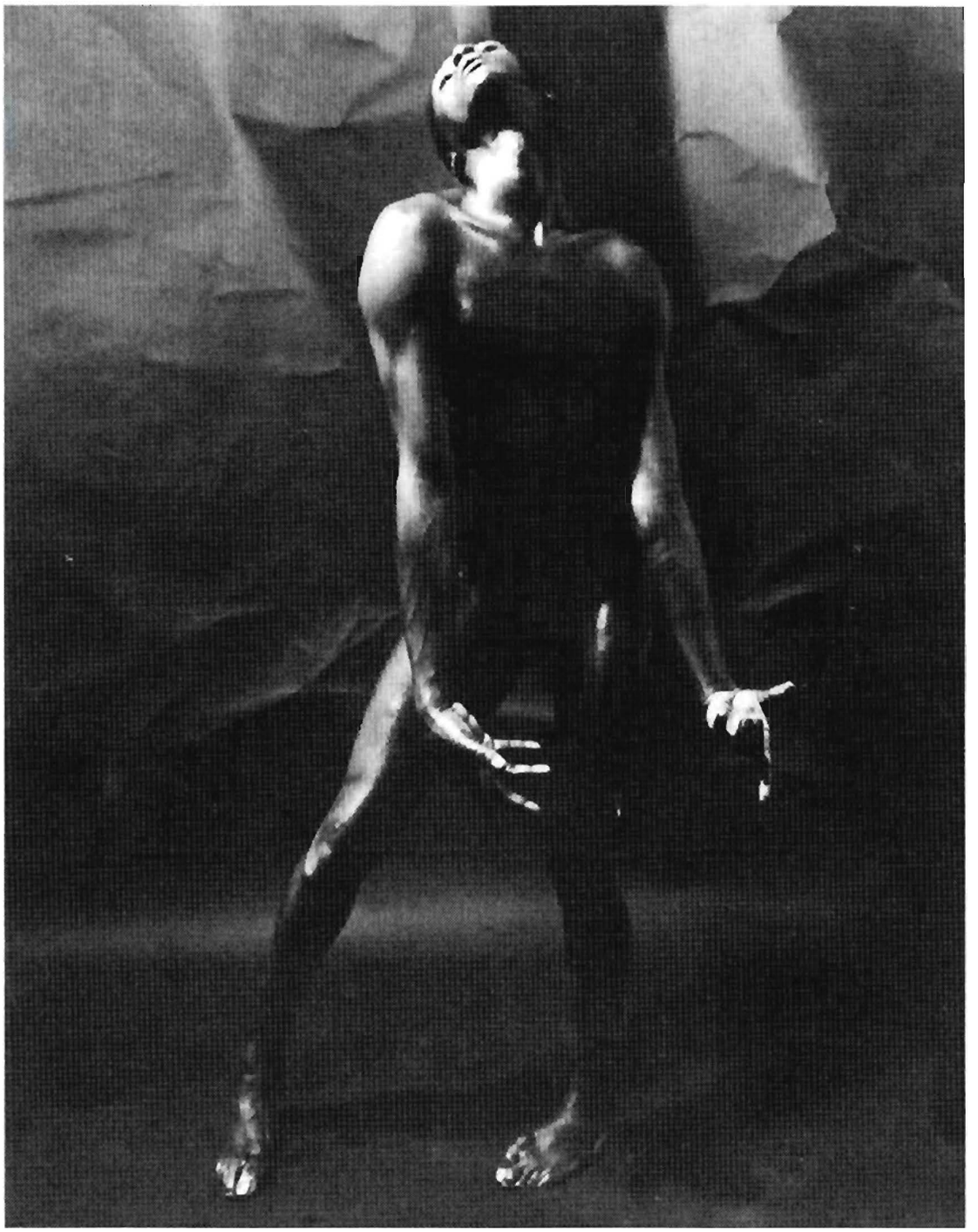
Max has compared *Worldes Blis* to taking a walk in a treeless landscape, where cloud, light and the sea, and its reflection, constantly modulate, or affect, the view one has. 'Orkney's wildest island,' he adds, 'seems to be a natural extension and a living-out of the territory explored and cartographed in *Worldes Blis*' – a work which he identified with 'a feeling of enormous space, distance, vast perspectives, a sense of solitariness in a large landscape'. This gripping final section alone is sufficient to give the feeling that *Worldes Blis*, with its concentrated intensity, may be considered not just a personal triumph for Maxwell Davies but one of the most impressive orchestral achievements of his time.

Chapter 4
New Horizons: Hoy, Mackay Brown and a New Symphonic Cycle

By the end of 1969, following the premiere by The Pierrot Players of his electrifying solo dance work *Vesalii Icones*, Max was a composer badly in need of a good rest, and a new beginning. Although, after the fire, he had purchased another Dorset cottage, Eccliffe Mill, near Gillingham, his need for a new spiritual home and a fresh start was impelling him towards a move far more dramatic.

During 1970, Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle sat for a joint portrait by David Hockney. Then in the summer of the same year, Max and his Australian friend James Murdoch, the manager of The Pierrot Players, took a holiday in Orkney. They visited the historic sites on the mainland: the Standing Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brogar, and the extraordinary circular chambered tomb known as Maeshowe. Not far away, at Skara Brae, lay the remains of a Neolithic Age settlement, which had been miraculously revealed by a great storm in 1850. Orkney is a place where history speaks through the stones.

In Stromness, Orkney's picturesque, second town, Max discovered a new book, *An Orkney Tapestry*, by the Orcadian poet and writer, George Mackay Brown. Mackay Brown's poetry has a special quality: the burr of Orcadian, the lilt of the Western Isles, a hint of his mother's Sutherland accent and the hard consonants and guttural vowels of the Norse sagas all seem to nestle together in his crisp verse. His lines have a gentleness, but are also direct and succinct. Depictions of



William Louther in the Fires of London production of the dance work Vesalii Icones, *1969; Anthony Crickmay*

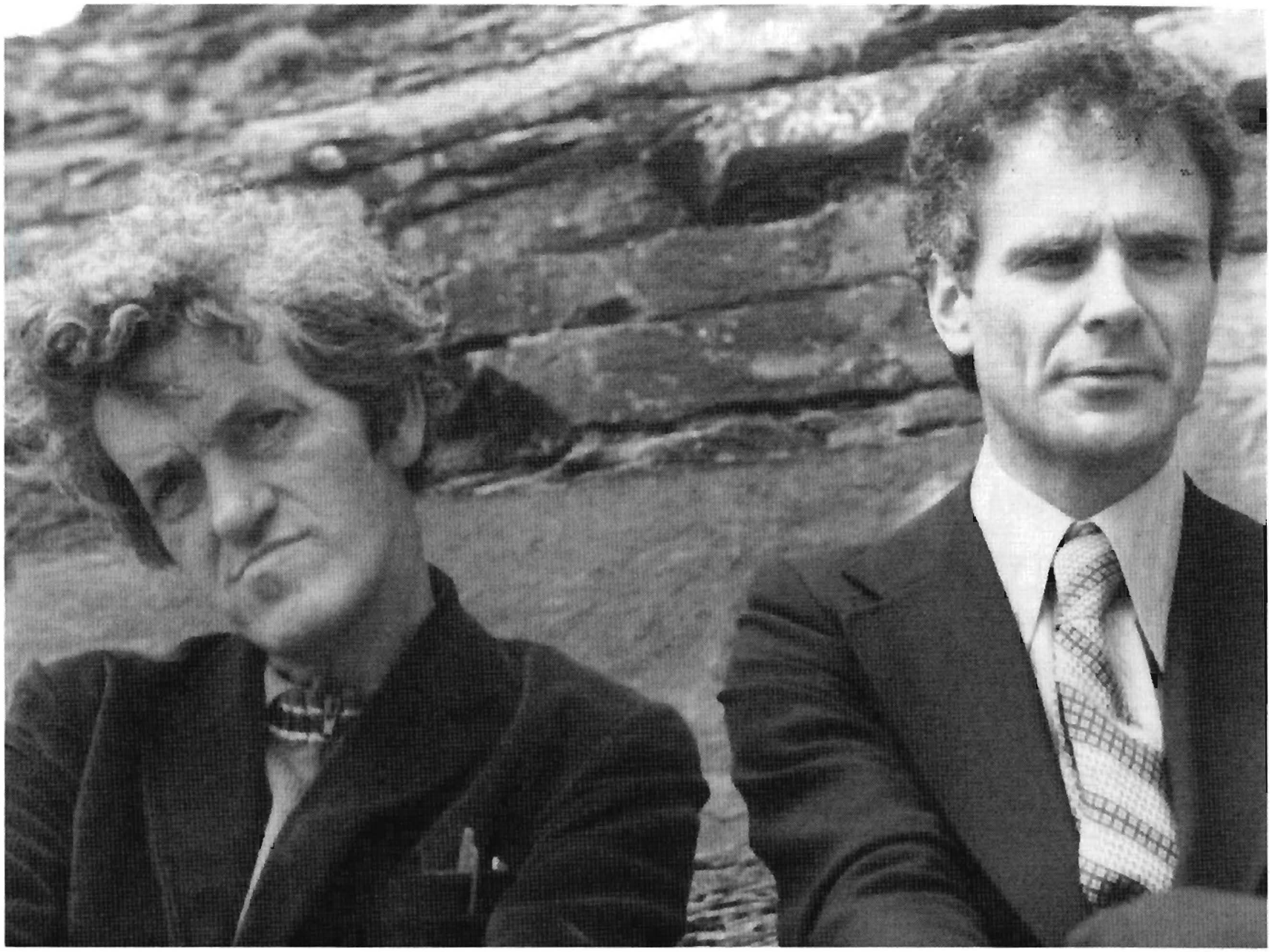
ordinary folk are always sympathetic, and he was invariably on the side of the poor man. His poems and stories capture ordinary, free-spirited Orkney people down the ages.

In *An Orkney Tapestry*, Mackay Brown traced the many layers of Orkney's history, from prehistoric times through the violent period of the Norsemen and on to the present day. Max was so enthralled that he stayed up all night reading the book. The section that most fired his imagination was the tale of the Viking Earls, Magnus and Hakon, and the bloody outcome of the two cousins' rivalry.

Max travelled the next day across the sound to Hoy, the second largest of Orkney's islands; its great foreland, St John's Head, towers more than 300 metres above the Atlantic, close to the stone stack known as the 'Old Man of Hoy'. But Max's destination lay five miles across the island, beyond glowering Ward Hill: a wide cove, formed during the Ice Age by the murrain forcing its way downhill so as to shape the green, open valley of Rackwick. Much of the rest of the island is bare, or coated in rough peat; Rackwick, on the other hand, is like a verdant oasis.

Nobody had lived there for years, apart from a local farmer, Jack Rendall, whose sheep grazed in the valley. Few of the houses were habitable, although one, Muckle House, near the stony sea front at the foot of the cliff, was used as a weekend holiday home by a doctor from Stromness.

It was here that Peter Maxwell Davies met George Mackay Brown, the very day after *An Orkney Tapestry* had so gripped his imagination. Here was the man who was to be Max's close collaborator over the next quarter-century, the poet



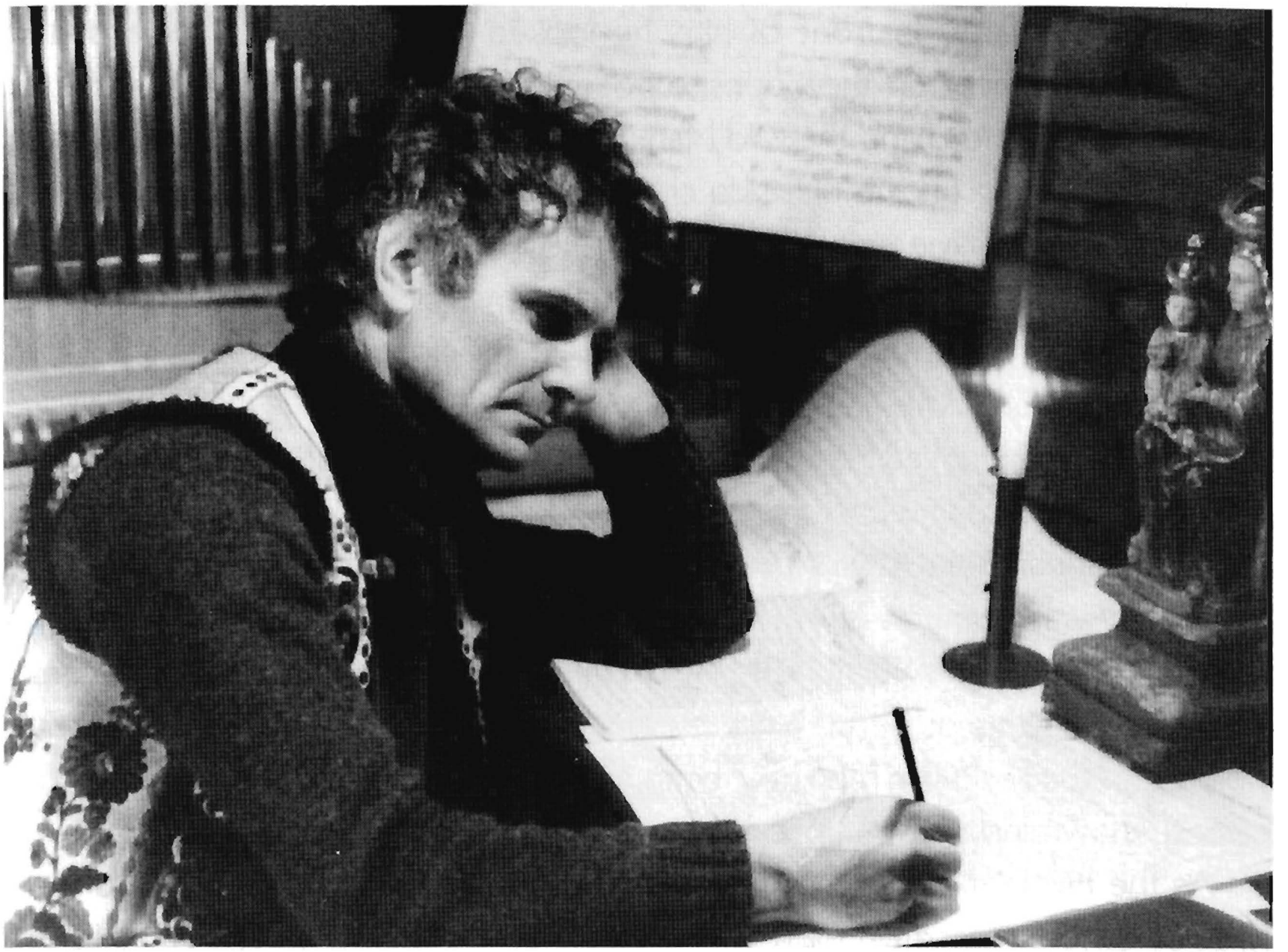
Max with George Mackay Brown. Stromness, Orkney, June 1977

with whose verses Max's music was to become inextricably entwined. Max also met George's friends, Archie and Elizabeth Bevan, whose Stromness home would become a welcome haven for the composer.

Already Max was forming the idea that Rackwick could be the place he had been looking for. Windswept Orkney was the very landscape for which he seemed to be reaching out in the 'vast spaces' of *Worldes Blis* – a place that would lift his spirits, and give him new inspiration.

Max's attention focused upon a solitary, roofless cottage, high up the cliff, open to the skies and for years the demesne of sheep and sea birds. 'Bunertoon', it was called: 'Above the town'. Max spent part of the next two summers renting a cottage nearby while overseeing the renovation of Bunertoon. And towards the close of 1974, this isolated croft became Max's home.

Bunertoon was scarcely a luxurious dwelling: far from it. But by the time Max moved in, it had acquired a roof, and the built-up walls below it were thoroughly pointed to keep the rain out. Orkney cottage walls are thick and strong, so Max's new house was at least snug and cosy. There was no electricity, however, and oil lamps were the order of the day. The furniture was sparse, but did include his wind-up horn gramophone. Supplies of food and fuel had to be lugged up the long slope from the solitary road, which ended at Jack Rendall's farm almost a mile away. Otherwise the wood for Max to burn consisted of driftwood, which the tides of the Pentland Firth, the famously perilous straits between Orkney and Scotland, washed up on the shore of the small cove below.



Max pictured at his croft in Rackwick Valley, Hoy, Orkney; Ross Drinkdate, The Sunday Times

It was here that Peter Maxwell Davies set up his desk, laid out his precious manuscript paper and pencils, and began to work afresh. Through the small window immediately in front of him, he looked out onto the Candle of the Sneuk, a massive cliff on the opposite side of the bay. Round the corner to his right were Rora Head and the Old Man of Hoy. And below, beneath the colonies of seabirds nesting on the nearside cliff face, the daily tides and plashing waves, the sea and the spume wove their regular and irregular patterns; the roar of the ocean pounding the cliffs could be heard, the times of day brought their varied light-textures, and the shifting seasons unveiled their myriads of shifting colours. For Max, a new era was beginning.

In 1971 The Pierrot Players were renamed The Fires of London, following Harrison Birtwistle's departure, and were now under Maxwell Davies's sole direction. One important work Max composed for them at the time of his move to Orkney was *Hymn to St Magnus*, a powerful meditation based on a twelfth-century Orkney hymn in honour of Orkney's martyred patron saint (Max has suggested that this powerful work evokes 'the violence of martyrdom and the violence of the sea'). The medieval hymn itself is notable for containing one of the earliest-known instances of music moving in 3rds.

As the *Hymn to St Magnus* proved, by no means all of Max's music for The Fires of London based on early music, or his 'arrangements' of Dunstable, Byrd, Buxtehude, Bach and so on, developed into wildly abandoned foxtrots. The motet *All Sons of Adam* **(CD 1, track 8)**, from 1973, is a beautifully delicate

The Fires of London at the Wigmore Hall, London 1982
(left to right: Rosemary Furniss, Jonathan Williams,
Gregory Knowles, Stephen Pruslin, Philippa Davies, David Campbell)

treatment of an anonymous Scottish tune dating from the sixteenth century. Part of its appeal and freshness lies in the highly original instrumentation Max has chosen for it: in particular, his use of not just a celesta, but also a guitar and a marimba (already heard in *Stone Litany*), along with the distinctive deep register of an alto flute.

The Scottish melody is heard at the outset, exquisitely picked out by bell-like celesta and guitar. Soon, however, the tune gets tossed around the group, and gradually begins to shed its recognisable shape. As Max explains, 'The original melody is occasionally shown in clear focus, but the discourse of the piece concerns material derived from it, which slowly transforms the tonal contours of the original.' The mood grows darker as the melody seems to break up and to slide away into a murky abyss, while marimba and other instruments tease out faint echoes of the tune in lower registers, as if summoning up strange, distant memories. Time and rhythm become distinctly furry, rather as if one were viewing a painting by Salvador Dalí. The work ends quite suddenly, with an air of uncertainty, as if the bedazed tune were left awkwardly hanging in the wind.

All Sons of Adam, in its treatment of the ancient Scottish tune, is a very clear example (in miniature) of the often complex transformation processes that were now part and parcel of Max's musical armoury.

Shortly before this Max had written a strikingly evocative work for voice and full orchestra, which clearly betrayed its Orkney origins. This was *Stone Litany*,

the title of which relates to Maeshowe, Orkney's stone monument 35 metres in diameter and 7 metres high, which dates back almost to 3,000 BC. The exterior resembles a large round barrow or chambered tomb, and was designed so that the sun illuminates its inner chamber on one day of the year only: the winter solstice. Maeshowe's later visitors included the Vikings, who left inscriptions on its walls, and Max incorporated five of these into the work, sung by a mezzo-soprano solo as a beguiling vocalise (hence the 'litany' of the title).

Stone Litany, first performed in Glasgow in September 1973, is an atmospheric, haunting piece, and the first of Max's orchestral works in which the ghostly sighings of the wind and the feel of remote, wide-open spaces so peculiar to Orkney make their appearance. In the work Max attempted, he said, 'to evoke something of the timeless mystery of Maeshowe itself and the haunted landscape around it'. As one critic perceptively put it, 'Echoes of the past impinge on a troubled present; you hear the faint clash of swords and always the enigmatic silences of a timeless landscape.' Passages for orchestra alone are interleaved with settings of the Viking runes, the first of which, a listing of the runic alphabet, seems to suggest the struggling birth of human language itself.

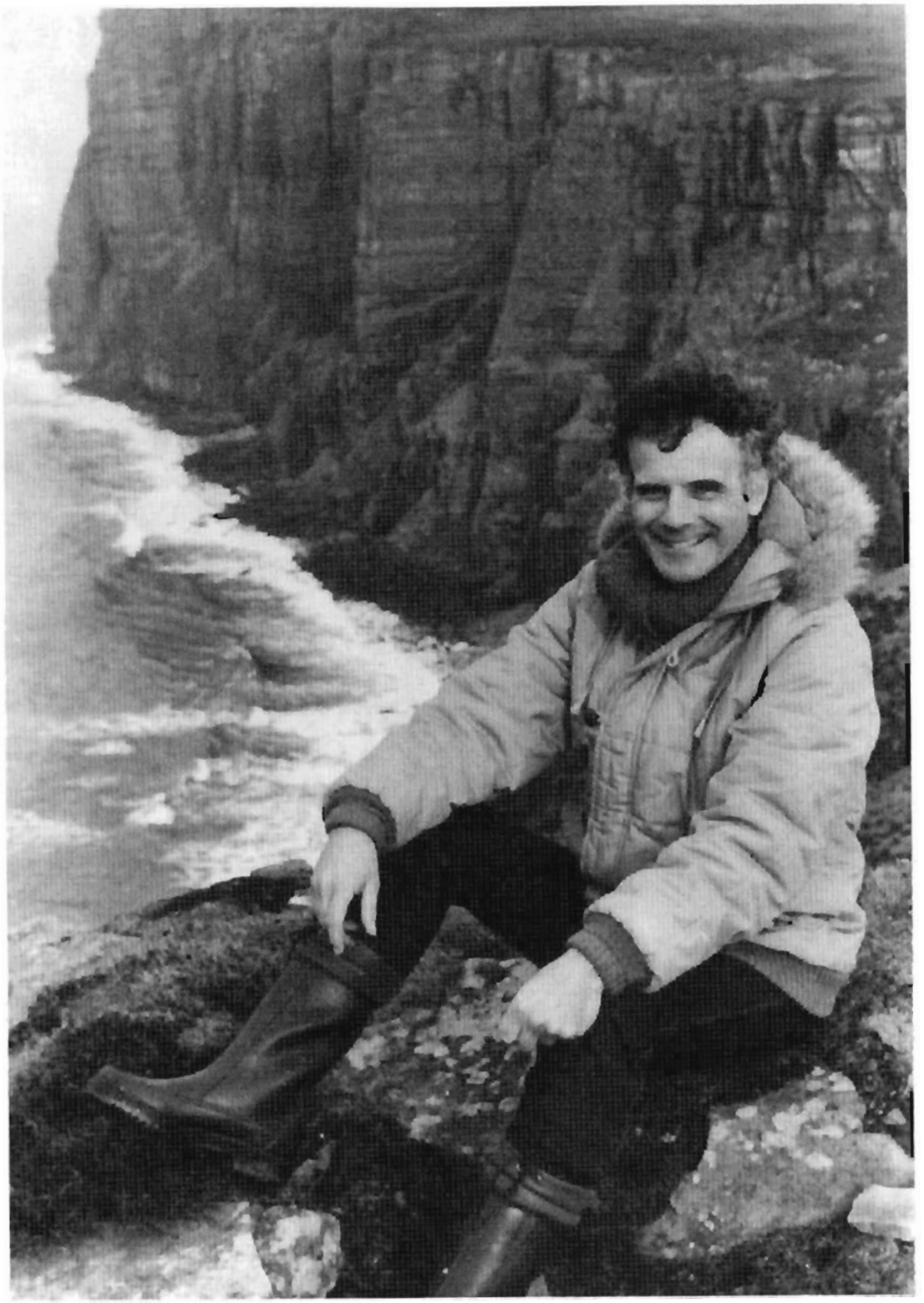
The third section, 'Crusaders broke into Maeshowe' **(CD 1, track 9)**, is a highly dramatic declaimed vocalise for the mezzo-soprano soloist over nervy and fretful outbursts from the orchestra; it ominously alludes to the brutal figure of Earl Hakon, the cousin and murderer of Saint Magnus, and also to Lif (or Lifolf), the butcher whom the Earl forced to carry out the execution. There is a sense

of threat in the air which clearly prefigures the execution scene of Max's opera *The Martyrdom of St Magnus*.

This contrasts with *Stone Litany*'s serene last section, in which over a background of strings, harp and marimba Max wryly adds the words (sung by the soprano solo) 'Makus mattr raestrunar thaesar' – 'Max the mighty carved these runes', in effect signing his signature, somewhat similar to a Renaissance painter including a small portrait of himself in a crowd scene. The music then dies away, to the eerie echo of two ringing brandy glasses, tuned a minor 3rd apart. It is as if Max is saying, 'I too now belong to Orkney; perhaps even to its history.'

A significant work to emerge at this time was *Ave Maris Stella*, an extended piece written for The Fires of London and one of the most powerful and compelling of Max's compositions. The nine sections of *Ave Maris Stella* all relate to a kind of 'magic square', on which a sequence of notes is charted, with the notes appearing in various orders, and from which options of pitch can also be deduced. Some of these magic squares were associated by the Renaissance writer Cornelius Agrippa with the sun, moon and stars, and *Ave Maris Stella* makes use of the magic square that Agrippa associated with the moon, which has nine rows and columns.

This was a process new to Max's music (although he had been working towards it), and from this time he made increasing use of these patterns, or magic squares, as a basis for his works, and as a systematic means of 'transforming' plainsong. Magic squares, which also provide a method of evolving larger



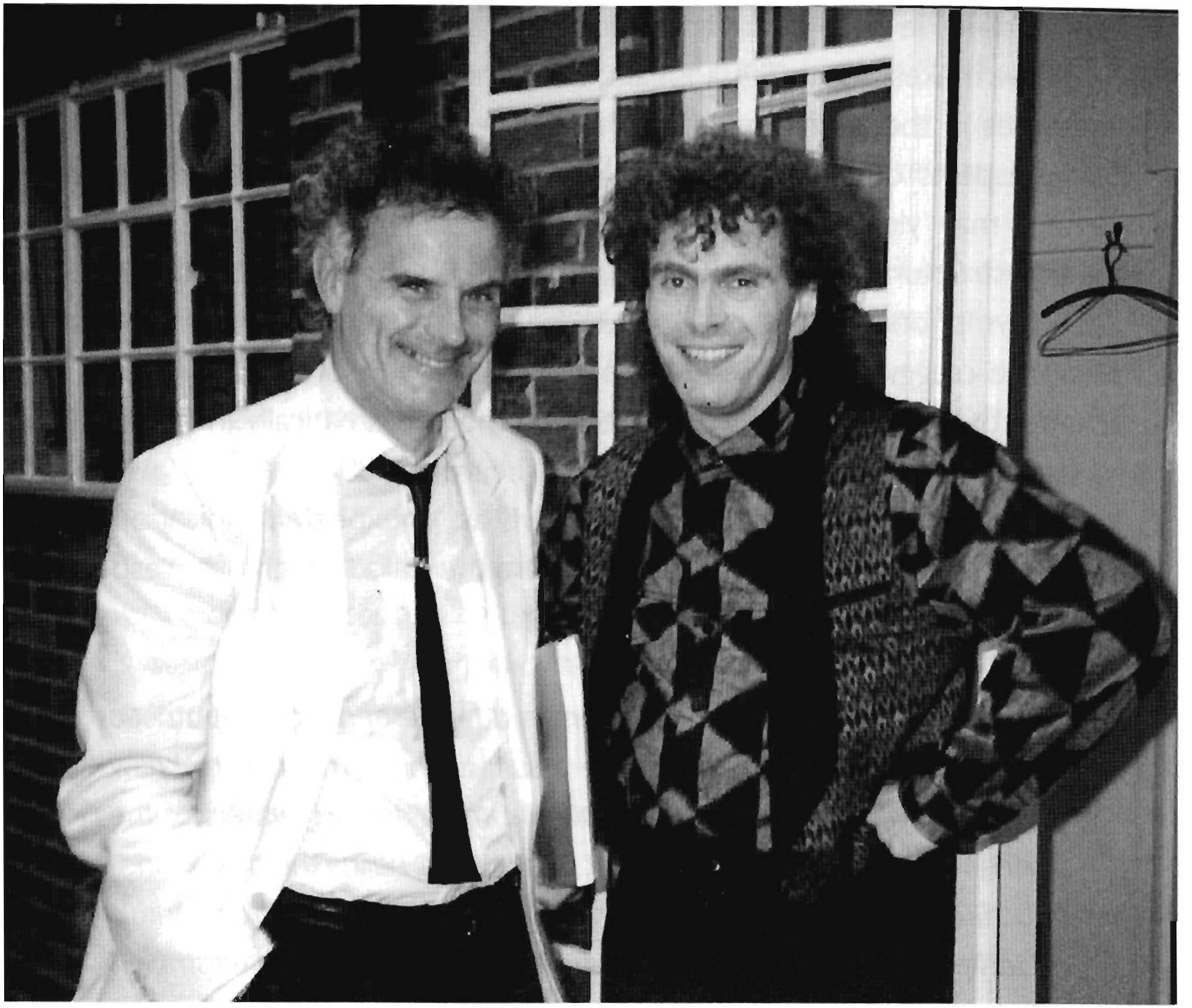
Max on the rocks of Hoy, Orkney.

structures, were to play an important role in virtually all of Maxwell Davies's symphonies, concertos and string quartets.

In the mid-1970s another unexpected development in Maxwell Davies's output was poised to manifest itself: his First Symphony. The mere idea that Max would compose a work which he would feel impelled to class as a 'symphony' will have surprised many, whether those who knew his works of the late 1960s, or those others who believed, around 1970, that the symphony had no future. Yet here was Britain's major avant-garde figure flaunting the very opposite of what he had previously flaunted – and, what's more, in a sensationally good performance (on 2 February 1978) by the Philharmonia orchestra under the brilliant young conductor Simon Rattle.

Yet Max has practised paradox almost as long he has unnervingly depicted it. He is a master of the unexpected, and thrives on contradiction. But in fact, Max had already produced at least three works which merited the title of 'symphony': the *Sinfonia* (1962), the *Second Taverner Fantasia* and *Worldes Blis*. More recently, the magnificent, parody-filled *Roma Amor* (2000) stands firmly in the line of Maxwell Davies's proxy-symphonies.

Quite apart from its imaginative formal intricacy and richly brilliant instrumental decoration, the First Symphony evokes sound pictures of the view from Max's cottage window at Bunertoon – the playful movements of the waves of the Pentland Firth (which were to play an even more specific role in Max's Second Symphony), the passage of wind and clouds, the flight paths



Max and Simon Rattle at Glyndebourne Opera, Sussex, May 1989

and the distinctive calls of birds (a plaintive curlew, often heard calling in the valley below, makes a stunning appearance in the First Symphony, and reappears several times in the later symphonies, including the Fifth).

Some aspects of the First Symphony's structure, by which elements in one movement may yield whole new developments in another, owe a profound formal and structural debt to Sibelius, as Max himself has pointed out. Indeed, all the seven symphonies in the cycle (which 'pivots' around Symphony No. 4) share some of the craggy intensity and icy panoramic sweep of Sibelius's music. Not surprisingly, this 'iciness' would resurface even more dramatically in Max's chilling, darkly resplendent Antarctic Symphony, first heard in 2001.

Introducing his First Symphony, Max gave an unexpected indication of the multitudinous layerings and decorative paraphernalia which lie, respectively, beneath or on the surface of his symphonies:

> *Perhaps it would help to put listeners in a frame of mind sympathetic to at least the intention, if not the result, of this symphony, to know that possibly the creative artists I admire most are two writers of the thirteenth century, whose language, to my mind, builds the only sound-structures parallel to the statement made by the medieval cathedrals – Dante Alighieri and St Thomas Aquinas. To their vision and example I owe a great deal of what might be positive about my efforts towards a musical logic.*

Structural similarities to the 'classical' symphony stop at the conventional symphonic plan of having four movements. For there is no hint of sonata form or traditional development and reprise, and Max's approach is – unsurprisingly – quite different, as the following quote (from later, in 2002) reveals:

> *In those of my works where the parameters allow this, I am always keen to have the material in a constant state of transformation, where the literal reprise or recapitulation has no part to play. This is not, I hope, a glib reaction against the music with which I was brought up initially – but has to do with a very basic shift in the perception of things. The self-confident state of mind whereby a return to a previous place or condition in a work could be assumed feels quite out of step with realisations concerning the transience of all things – that nothing is 'solid', but that all is in a constant state of becoming, of change, indeed of transformation.*

Max has suggested that in his works one should not expect to hear a traditional 'harmonic' bass line at the bottom, as would be the case in a typical Classical symphony. The listener should instead concentrate on the most prominent melodic line, similar to picking out the 'tenor' line in medieval music. What you hear throughout is the evolution and transforming of the melodic line, which is constantly varied or rearranged, and the tensions between one line and another.

Peter Maxwell Davies had come to feel very much at home on Orkney, and his next tribute to his adopted islands was a chamber opera, *The Martyrdom of St Magnus*, written for members of The Fires of London and five vocal soloists. The composer wrote the libretto, and based the text of its nine compact scenes on a newly published novel by George Mackay Brown.

It was while reading George Mackay Brown's *An Orkney Tapestry* on his first visit to Orkney that Max had become fascinated by the character of St Magnus, who was cruelly martyred in around 1117 AD. George's novel *Magnus* outlined in greater detail the dramatic events that led to Earl Magnus being lured by his cousin and co-ruler, Earl Hakon, to a parley on the holy island of Egilsay and then cruelly put to death.

George's book has an additional dramatic twist, for at the scene of Magnus's execution he updates the story unexpectedly to the twentieth century: the torturers appear strikingly like modern Fascists, and the martyred St Magnus in the novel strongly recalls the Christian pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or other courageous believers executed by the Nazis.

In the early part of *The Martyrdom of St Magnus* we meet the character Blind Mary, a humble beggar who is praying to St Magnus for the return of her sight (it is miraculously restored at the opera's close). Later we witness Earl Magnus in battle, depicted as a man of prayer rather than a man of action; and we see him being tempted. The seventh scene is full of wild rumours about the rival cousins' parley on Egilsay, as newspaper reporters

rush around the stage, urgently filing their reports.

Forming the opera's heart is the eighth scene, 'The Sacrifice' **(CD 1, track 10)**, in which Earl Magnus offers up his last words and is brutally executed by hanging; in legend his head was cloven with an axe.

The scene opens in terrifying, sinister vein, with Hakon transformed into a modern military officer, bullying a chef named Lifolf into acting as executioner of the 'political prisoners'; the cook pleads to be spared such a task, but his request is sneeringly refused by the ruthless Hakon. Once Lifolf is duly cowed and agrees to conform, the victim is brought in, to a serene single line from a solo cello. Magnus is not resisting, but gladly taking leave of this life so that the kingdom of Orkney may not be riven like a garment. In a moving and lyrical soliloquy Magnus laments the evil now abroad in the kingdom, 'a dance of the deadly sins, a withershin rout', and pronounces a beatific blessing. At the scene's close, to a terrifying outcry from the orchestra, he is abruptly hanged.

The Martyrdom of St Magnus was a significant work in more ways than one. It was this gripping and compelling opera which opened Orkney's first-ever St Magnus Festival, when it was performed by The Fires of London in St Magnus Cathedral at Kirkwall, in June 1977. Max conducted just a few feet from the spot where St Magnus's cloven head lies interred in a red sandstone pillar.

The St Magnus Festival set out to embrace the whole community, enabling people there to enjoy the benefits of cultural activities appealing to a wide cross-section of the Orkney community. Getting the festival started had proved no easy

Brian Rayner Cook, Michael Rippon and Neil Mackie in the premiere production by The Fires of London of The Martyrdom of St Magnus *at the St Magnus Festival, Kirkwall, Orkney, June 1977, Gunnie Moberg*

matter: there was a certain initial reluctance, and some people said they could see no need or call for such an event. However, a small, loyal band of enthusiasts, including Norman Mitchell, then organist of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall and director of music at Kirkwall Grammar School, and Archie and Elizabeth Bevan, managed to get the festival off the ground, successfully overcoming some initial local opposition. They were joined (from 1979/80) by Glenys Hughes, who succeeded Max as the festival's Artistic Director in 1987 (along with Archie Bevan and Ian Ritchie, then General Manager of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra), and by her husband Richard Hughes, Norman Mitchell's successor, who sadly died in 1996. Glenys Hughes continues to the present day as the St Magnus Festival's immensely capable sole Artistic Director.

From humble beginnings, just four events in the first year, the festival gradually expanded into a five-day event, becoming Orkney's principal musical occasion. Many major works by younger composers, such as James MacMillan and Judith Weir, have received premieres there, and countless operas for young performers enjoyed. Isaac Stern, Evelyn Glennie and Vladimir Ashkenazy are among the international artists who have visited the festival, which continues to flourish thirty years after its inception. Max directed the festival until 1986 and, as its President, he remains extremely close to it.

In 1979 Max produced a work of devastating power. *Black Pentecost*, a piece for orchestra and two singers, owes its chilling impact to the last section: here Max draws on Mackay Brown's novel *Greenvoe*, in which life in an Orkney-like

community, Hellya, is painted as hard and tough, yet also idyllic and untainted. Life in Hellya, however, is destroyed by unscrupulous exploitation of its natural resources. *Black Pentecost* – in effect, a four-movement symphony – is a terrifying evocation of the cynicism and viciousness that can blight a living community.

Mackay Brown's book was indeed prophetic, for scarcely had it been published than Orkney was faced with the serious threat of large-scale mining of uranium. By way of a response, Max mounted in Stromness a cabaret show, lighthearted yet pointed in intention, called *The Yellow Cake Revue* ('yellow cake' being a derogatory term for uranium ore). Two short piano interludes from that 1980 revue – *Farewell to Stromness* and *Yesnaby Ground* (the underground seam of uranium ore was located between Stromness and Yesnaby) – have survived in their own right. Indeed, *Farewell to Stromness* has become perhaps Max's best-known piece, and is regularly played on Classic FM. The piece has also been arranged for solo guitar and for numerous other instruments, and a version for strings was played at the service of prayer and dedication following the marriage ceremony of HRH Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, in April 2005.

Chapter 5
Ghoulish Images, Ghastly Apparitions / Identities

Although Max continued to write music for the younger inhabitants of Orkney (his *Kirkwall Shopping Songs* was composed for local primary school children), it was another opera which now preoccupied him. *The Lighthouse*, first performed in 1980 at the Edinburgh Festival, is a terrifying, claustrophobic work, based on a true story. Three lighthouse-keepers, the sole occupants of a remote island in the Outer Hebrides, simply vanished on one mysterious day. No explanation for their strange disappearance has ever been found. What Max's opera does is to explore the flawed personalities of the three men, and to offer some suggestion of what might have happened. This tense, concentrated work is a particularly unnerving chamber opera: its sending of shivers down the spine may have something to do with allusions Max makes, both in the text and through the music, to the medieval tarot. The men in fact go mad, and Max's music, with its terrifying transformations that bear a concealed relation to certain cards of the tarot, seems to offer clues as to why. Just like the ominously ticking updating of time in *The Martyrdom of St Magnus*, the effect he creates is ghostly and truly terrifying.

The premiere of Max's Second Symphony took place on 26 February 1981 at Symphony Hall, Boston. The work had been commissioned for the Boston Symphony Orchestra's centenary, and it is a measure of Max's international standing by this time that he was commissioned by so prestigious an orchestra.

Michael Rippon, David Wilson-Johnson and Neil Mackie in the premiere production by The Fires of London of The Lighthouse *at the Edinburgh International Festival, September 1980; Alex Tug Wilson*

The performance, conducted by Seiji Ozawa, was a particularly fine one, and the calibre of the American brass did full justice to the symphony's sweeping gestures and dramatic outbursts. At the premiere, Max was asked by a lady if he was the new work's composer; it turned out that he had been given the very seat occupied by Bartók and other composers of works being first performed.

Even more than its predecessor, Max's Second Symphony is an evocation of Orkney and the fretful waters of the Pentland Firth pounding beneath his window. Detailed wave patterns, which can vary quite dramatically, play an important role in the symphony's unfolding. Max also explores the use of tonal centres (B, F and B flat are given prominence), and uses magic squares to generate both linear and vertical material from plainsong (in this case a plainsong honouring the birth of the Virgin Mary – which fell on 8 September, the same day of the year as Max's birth). The composer recalls that just as he finished the symphony, with its final drum-strokes, 'there was a tremendous crash and a thunderous rock-fall from the cliff at the other side of the bay, opposite my windows. I was very shaken.'

In 1981 Maxwell Davies received a CBE at Buckingham Palace for services to music (one of many honours he has received in his lifetime). Soon after this he again turned to composing an instrumental piece for The Fires of London. *Image, Reflection, Shadow*, first performed in August 1982, at the Lucerne Festival, is a by turns serene and exuberant three-movement piece in which the cimbalom, a Hungarian stringed instrument beaten with hammers rather like a dulcimer, is the

solo percussion instrument. The work's appealing title comes from a poem by the runic scholar Charles Senior, part of which reads:

Image: *content in still air.*
Reflection: *true upon still water.*
Shadow: *living on still weed and rock.*

The title also relates, Max explains, to the 'unfolding' of the music itself, during which a given 'image' (or musical contour) often appears simultaneously in inversion (the 'reflection'), while a composite of both patterns of notes acts as a third layer (the 'shadow').

The central movement, marked *Allegro*, is a lively and substantial scherzo **(CD 1, track 11)**. Launched cautiously by the woodwind, the music soon becomes busier and more energetic: the strings cheerfully join in and the piano gradually assumes a dominant role, as if it were prodding the rest of the ensemble into even brisker exchanges. By stages the music becomes more frenetic, before making way for an expressive, cadenza-like dialogue between the cimbalom and piano, to which the bass clarinet and flute both impishly respond. Thereafter the music becomes more jagged and its rhythms more jerky and syncopated.

As the string instruments rejoin the others, the tension rises and the movement builds to a sequence of ever more intense climaxes, then reaches a remarkable, sudden point of stasis. What follows is strange and mysterious: notes

are recalled rather like fast-fading memories, as the music seems to break up and evanesce – bit by bit fading away in an alluring coda. The final word belongs to pizzicato strings, bass clarinet and, right at the close, a high-soaring flute.

Personally, the early years of this decade were difficult for Max. His parents were living down in Dorset, at the picturesque mill he had bought near Gillingham, and were getting advanced in years. First his father was taken ill, and subsequently died; and then his mother suffered a stroke, becoming seriously unwell and infirm. Max spent a lot of time making regular trips to Dorset to remain in close touch. His parents had always encouraged him in forging his unexpected chosen career, and Max felt a great debt of gratitude towards them.

Yet the music was still gestating. Max's Third Symphony, completed in 1984, was commissioned by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. In it he went even further than before in exploring the idea of 'perspective' in music, drawing inspiration from architecture (here, the large-scale Renaissance interiors of Brunelleschi, and the alternative perspectives from which the architect's designs can be viewed), just as he earlier took inspiration from art in works such as *Vesalii Icones*. The four-movement symphony, Max says, 'articulates the same architectural outline in four different ways'. Once again, plainsong (related to St Michael) underlies the symphony, and the constant variation of his material by magic squares provides the spur for the work's development. The symphony has two scherzos, and the pronounced Mahlerian element widespread in Max's larger-scale works is there once again in the symphony's highly dramatic

finale. That this movement, which conjures up a dream-like, trumpeting image of the angel of death, was composed when Max knew that his parents' lives were over only adds to the work's remarkable intensity.

The Brunelleschi comparison is apt, for large-scale design continued to exercise Max's attention throughout the evolution of his symphonic cycle, and in all the substantial orchestral works he undertook at the same time and afterwards. In his later works is the coming to fruition of the structural elements he started to explore in works such as *Worldes Blis*, and which he further evolved in the 1970s with *Ave Maris Stella* and *Stone Litany*. The groundwork laid down in the early years provided the bedrock upon which his symphonic output is founded. Some plainchants recur (Archangel Michael and Veni Sancte Spiritus are two such), plainsong being material that he has returned to repeatedly.

One particularly delightful piece by Max was written for a special occasion: the birth of a daughter, Lucy, to Jack and Dorothy Rendall, in 1981. Jack, who farmed the land of Rackwick, was one of the first friends Max made when he arrived on Hoy. *Lullaby for Lucy* is a beautiful setting of an acrostic poem specially written by George Mackay Brown: the first letters of the poem spell out the name 'Lucy Rendall'. The occasion was all the more touching because Lucy was the first infant to be born in the depopulated valley for thirty-two years.

Also in 1981 Maxwell Davies wrote his charming children's song cycle *Seven Songs Home* for the International Kodály Society, in celebration of the Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály's centenary; it was first performed in Budapest by a

Max at the first performance of Lullaby for Lucy *with Lucy, her parents Jack and Dorothy Rendall, and the choir of St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney, June 1981*

Max leading a group of children in Orkney; The Sunday Times

young Hungarian choir. Especially striking is the way Max echoed the distinctive style of Kodály's own music for younger choirs while preserving his own recognisable identity. The seven unaccompanied songs, mostly in three parts, but occasionally in four, are also great fun to sing. They describe, Max says, 'events and adventures experienced by an island child between leaving school and arriving home for tea'.

In 'At the Shore' **(CD 1, track 12)** the children's voices cleverly mimic the mysterious swish and whoosh of the sea, as they dream of the riches they might find aboard sunken pirate ships, but also fearfully imagine how ghosts of drowned men may haunt these wrecked vessels. 'Home', the last song in the cycle, is a delightful picture of the children returning home for a cooked tea, then homework and television, before yielding to the welcome onset of sleep and happy dreams.

Apart from the remarkable tour-de-force of his music-theatre work *The Medium*, Max had not produced an important adult stage work since *The Lighthouse*. However an opportunity now arose to carry through a project that he had long cherished. This was to pen a savagely satirical opera based on a libretto he had written while studying in Princeton (1963–4). It was commissioned by the State Theatre of the German City of Darmstadt, whose music festival Max had attended in the 1950s, and which was the spiritual home of the European avant-garde.

Maxwell Davies entitled his new opera *Resurrection*, and its music, completed in

1987, proved to be a dazzling and spectacular return to the wild and unorthodox antics of his Expressionist period, yet also informed by the much more elaborate transformation techniques that Max had since evolved. The opera, in its turn, paved the way for the subtle and expressive transformation processes of Max's Trumpet Concerto (1988) and Fourth Symphony (1989).

Resurrection is a devastating critique – being satire, it is both very funny and very savage – of the detrimental effect that a stuffy, over-prescriptive society can have when it expects its youth to fit into a straitjacket of social norms and sexual conformity. First we witness the young victim (depicted as a dummy, so effectively has he been silenced) being indoctrinated by 'upright' members of society. Later he is operated on, his vital organs removed – in order to make him conform. At the end he resurrects, terrifyingly and grotesquely, and turns a machine gun on the people who have so appallingly maimed and sanitised him.

As a protest statement *Resurrection* could scarcely be more graphic, and Max's inclusion of a blaring pop group, use of a plainsong relating to the Massacre of the Innocents and his basing elements of the opera's design on Albrecht Dürer's apocalyptic woodcuts only add to the underlying savagery.

In 1984 Max composed his entertaining showpiece *An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise*. This medley of immensely enjoyable Scottish tunes depicts a celebration at which the participants become increasingly wild and intoxicated; it culminates in the entry of a highland bagpiper in full regalia through the audience. One of Max's most popular pieces, *An Orkney Wedding* was written for the centenary

of the Boston Pops Orchestra, and could scarcely have supplied a more riotous birthday card for their celebrations.

Chapter 6
Retrograde: Strathclyde to Salford (again)

Maxwell Davies's concerts conducting the Edinburgh-based Scottish Chamber Orchestra – for which he had written a handful of works – were a huge success, and in 1985 he was invited to become its Composer-in-Association. This was a groundbreaking development in British orchestral life: composers had hitherto been kept more or less at arm's length by orchestral managements. The idea that a composer might work closely with an orchestra, conducting it regularly and getting to know the players – both as musicians and personally – was virtually unheard of. But this was a splendid co-operation which would lay the foundations not just for Max's subsequent close links with the BBC Philharmonic and Royal Philharmonic orchestras, but also for other orchestras to form similar associations with younger British composers (among them James MacMillan, Judith Weir and Mark-Anthony Turnage). It would be fair to say that in the mid-1980s Max and the SCO helped to transform orchestral life in Britain.

With his Sinfonia Concertante, composed in 1982 for Sir Neville Marriner and the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields, and the Violin Concerto of 1985, written for Isaac Stern and notable for its beautiful slow movement, Max had proved that he had a marked gift for writing concertos or concertante works. He now proposed something that went much further: to write a series of as many as ten concertos for members of the SCO, providing an opportunity for the orchestra's

Max with violinist Isaac Stern and conductor André Previn,
in discussion about the premiere of the Violin Concerto, June 1986

principal players to appear as soloists with the orchestra. Indeed, two would turn out to be concertante-type works (Strathclyde Concerto No. 5, for violin and viola, and No. 9, for six wind instruments), and would supply, in effect, a very Scottish answer to Bach's Brandenburg Concertos.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of the orchestra's manager, Ian Ritchie, and the commitment of a forward-thinking local authority, the Strathclyde Regional Development Council, not only was the idea given the go-ahead, but a new education project developed. Young composers were signed up to go into the schools and explore aspects of the new Strathclyde Concertos with children, encouraging them to react to the music and to compose their own musical responses. This was nothing short of revolutionary: the hands-on approach Max had used so many years ago to encourage young composers at Cirencester was now part of the official rubric.

The Strathclyde Concerto No. 4 is for the clarinet – an instrument for which Max has shown a special affection since he first composed his Clarinet Sonata (originally conceived for Birtwistle) and a series of works for The Pierrot Players' clarinettists, Alan Hacker and David Campbell. In earlier pieces, such as *Hymnos*, he had demonstrated the instrument's versatility, writing music that tested the extremes of its range, and cleverly using the dextrous virtuosity of the clarinet to suggest emotional extremes as well.

One striking feature of this concerto is that – rather than developing material introduced by a main theme – the music in fact progresses towards

the main theme, which makes its astonishingly beautiful appearance only at the end (recalling the very late emergence of the medieval melody in *Worldes Blis*). The concerto's pentatonic melody bears the name of its nineteenth-century composer, who was called 'Morrison' – which happens also to be the name of the SCO's principal clarinettist, Lewis Morrison, who gave the work's premiere at the City Halls, Glasgow in November 1990.

In a darkly glowing slow introduction the solo clarinet seems to emerge from a murky underworld; a fast allegro and a questing adagio follow, before the fourth section **(CD 1, track 14)** begins. This is a perky 'cadenza' (following a calm introduction), during which the clarinet performs lively pirouettes and fretful gymnastics above a series of sustained chords in the strings. As the cadenza progresses, however, the clarinet starts to feel its way, or reach out, almost as if it were searching to locate the missing tune. There are a few moments where you can hear the intervallic and rhythmic 'distortions' emerging more clearly. (This becomes more evident if you listen to the cadenza once again, after having heard the elusive tune played at the end.)

After several minutes, in a glorious revelation that feels like a mist magically dissolving, the 'Morrison' tune emerges, calm and serene, on the clarinet, to provide one of the purest, gentlest, most exhilarating conclusions to any concerto in the repertoire. The beautiful, haunting melody is literally borne away on the wind.

A work of even greater importance composed for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra just one year earlier (in 1989) was the intense Fourth Symphony,

which Max dedicated to the memory of the orchestra's former leader John Tunnell. Alone in Max's symphonic cycle, the Fourth acquires a special intimacy by being written for chamber orchestra – and just as the First Symphony forms both the culmination of Max's orchestral writing up to then (1973–7), so Max's music for chamber orchestra reaches its fullest expression in this highly concentrated yet colourfully scored Fourth Symphony, which was first heard at the BBC Proms in 1989.

In discussing this symphony with Stephen Pruslin, Max made the following comment regarding tonality in his symphonies and concertos:

> *I think it's very rare, these days, to hear a piece where you feel from one bar to the end that you're going through some kind of harmonic odyssey, and that your life is that much richer when you come to the end of it. I hope that this is something which eventually will become a possibility in large-scale symphonic thought again; and I try when I'm writing a piece to at least open doors in that kind of direction.*

Pruslin himself has pointed out some of the ways in which this harmonic 'odyssey' is achieved, and explains that in Maxwell Davies's work, 'multiple "tonics" and "dominants" move kaleidoscopically between cooperation and opposition while three-dimensional time-space [is made to] appear right side up, upside down and even inside out.' Max points out that:

Surface detail exists on the surface of the page, but behind that, inside the music, one is creating a multi-dimensional time-space, which one exploits. And, having set out on a particular harmonic road, one hopes that the rest of the work is going to either fulfil – or, more constructively – positively contradict the expectations which are set up. I hope very much that [without people necessarily] being able to articulate it in words… they will have an aesthetic experience when they hear the pieces I'm writing which begins to sound as if the harmonic background thinking has got the same weight as Mahler or Mozart, and can be taken for granted in the same way – so that one is not going to be distracted by a surface so dense that penetration down to the real musical substance becomes meaningless and fruitless.

In 1987 Max had been knighted for his extensive services to music. At around the same time, his collaboration with the Danish choreographer Flemming Flindt on his first staged ballet, *Salome*, led on to a triumphant new project. *Caroline Mathilde*, completed in 1990, is a ballet of startling beauty and elegance, which tells the story of an English princess, the fifteen-year-old sister of King George III, who arrives in Copenhagen to marry the epileptic and practically insane young King, Christian VII, but is instead caught up in the terrifying intrigues of the Danish court. The ballet drew from Max music of great tenderness, and *Caroline Mathilde* continues to be hugely popular in Denmark. It was first staged

there at Copenhagen's Royal National Theatre.

In the early 1990s Maxwell Davies found himself drawn back to his native Salford and to Manchester – largely in connection with his appointment as Composer/Conductor-in-Association with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. In a burst of creative nostalgia, Max was inspired to compose a number of pieces which provide sound pictures of the industrial area in which he grew up.

Chat Moss (1993) evokes the boggy ground and treacherous quicksands that lay to the west of Manchester, near to Leigh, where Max attended school as a boy. In this tone poem Max explored anew a genre beloved of one of his most important models, Sibelius, and breathed fresh life into it by invigorating it with a new musical language and an additional sense of pastiche and fun. *Chat Moss* vividly brings back his boyhood memories of that notoriously gloomy area.

Hot on the heels of *Chat Moss* Max composed a cheerful, comic work that paints a very different sound picture of his Salford boyhood. *Cross Lane Fair* is a wonderfully impish suite: it consists of a series of linked vignettes, in which Max, as a small boy aged four or five, visits the booths and side-shows at the local fair near his home in Trafford Road. The happy small visitor is depicted by the sardonic and characterful sound of the Northumbrian pipes, along with a bodhran (Celtic drum). There is a ghost train, a juggler, and two 'curiosities': a bearded lady and a five-legged sheep. One can imagine the fascination such bizarre goings-on must have had for this canny wee lad.

The sequence of nine short movements graphically evokes the various

entertainments of Cross Lane Fair **(CD 1, tracks 15–17)**: first the Northumbrian pipes make their appearance, as the visitor surveys the busy scene. Then, to breezy oom-pahs from the brass, the assorted noises of the fairground take over, including the sound of a wheezing steam organ, tinkling in the background. Young Max (depicted by the pipes) then enjoys his first 'treat' – a hair-raising ride on the Ghost Train, during which he is assailed by ghoulish and unnerving noises, before alighting and racing off to visit the next side-show.

In the 1990s Max produced more large-scale choral works: *The Three Kings*, *Job* and *Canticum Canticorum* are all substantial pieces exploring different biblical themes, while *The Jacobite Rising* has a distinctly rousing, Scottish flavour.

The exciting, dramatic Fifth Symphony, cast in one movement without a break, was commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary of the Philharmonia Orchestra, an orchestra with whom Max has had a long-lasting love affair, both as composer and conductor. If one thing is instantly apparent from the icy passages early on in this symphony, which was first performed on 9 August 1994 at the BBC Proms, and which Vienna's *Wiener Zeitung* called 'one of the most important orchestral works of our time', it is that Max began writing 'Antarctic' music a long time before he visited Antarctica in 1999. His ability to conjure up a feeling of vast expanses – of a kind that could only be associated with wide-open spaces, inhospitable seas or desert wastelands – stems from many sources, but naturally has much to do with the Orkney landscape.

There is the sense in Max's music of the slow passage of time, of one season

folding into another, of an awed silence punctuated by strange, unearthly calls (the sounds of seabirds and curlews, so astonishing in his First Symphony, are again evoked here, and recur frequently in his more recent symphonic music). This seems also to reflect something of the spirit, of the inner self, of the tension within, and the peace and tranquillity that a turbulent spirit seeks. Is this constant dialectic – found especially in the symphonies of Sibelius and before him, Beethoven, and before him, Haydn – a metaphor for our times? Music has a great advantage: without saying anything, it can say everything, said the Russian writer Ilya Ehrenburg, with the example of Shostakovich before him. Max's Fifth not only sounds like Shostakovich in places but actually echoes the Russian's stance. Shostakovich, like Max, was careful to encrypt his message; in his case he had to, whereas Max just has so many things to say that he has to devise an intense musical shorthand to say them.

Inner calm came to Max only once he settled down in Orkney in 1974, or so it seemed. There was a turmoil to be exorcised, and the four works of 1969 – an explosive outburst of pent-up energy – had achieved that. But just possibly the calm had been there from the start, in part at least, in the deeply absorbed young boy who found that books and music meant more to him than anything else.

In speaking of the next symphony, the Sixth, comparisons with Mahler come once again to the fore. The symphony was commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra to celebrate its own fiftieth anniversary, and is dedicated

to the memory of George Mackay Brown. It received its premiere in June 1996, in the Phoenix Cinema, Kirkwall, at the 20th St Magnus Festival.

In the symphony's first movement a certain initial bleakness alternates with long passages of peaceful reflection and volatile hyperactivity expressed in strident drumming and sad brass outbursts; these latter acquire a new force at the start of the second movement, where violent drum strokes intersperse a sadly unfolding chorale. These dramatic assaults are as unnerving and bleakly pessimistic as those in Mahler's Sixth Symphony.

The last movement of the Sixth Symphony **(CD 1, track 18)** presents a very different world. The orchestra embarks on a particularly beautiful passage for strings, which has the distinct feel of a Mahler adagio (perhaps the famous Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony). The lyricism is emphasised by a series of evocative exchanges between solo strings, with a violin and a cello solo, and later paired violins and viola also accorded prominence. Gentle rising and falling glissandi seem almost to suggest the flight of seabirds outside Max's window in Rackwick, and as the strings gather strength and intensify, the Mahler comparison seems all the more apt.

With the entry of the brass, woodwind and percussion, the atmosphere becomes more charged: increasingly the brass insist on having the main say, until the strings magnificently begin to reassert themselves, and solo strings usher back the enraptured mood of the opening. It is as if a vision of some ethereal world beyond were striving to take hold; and as the movement unfolds, for a moment,

to the slow and eerie mutterings of tuned percussion, it almost seems that time stands still. This last movement is one of finest, most expressive passages in the entire symphonic cycle.

In 1995 Max turned once again to opera (a form at which he is undoubtedly a natural), but this time, for *The Doctor of Myddfai*, he took the unusual step of collaborating with a librettist. The text for the opera produced by David Pountney, former Director of Productions for English National Opera, tied in strongly with Max's own preoccupations: the grimness of totalitarianism, the dangers of the encroaching state, the environmental threat to the planet, the conflict between nature and authority, and the need for some sort of ritual 'purging' of society. The bitter cynicism of works like *Black Pentecost* and *The Martyrdom of St Magnus* seemed to be surfacing afresh.

Pountney's story is set at some unspecified future date, a time when a grey, totalitarian government is in power, rather like in George Orwell's *1984*. The opera describes how a terrible plague (which spreads only when it is raining) afflicts the people of Wales, and how a mysterious doctor, who has inherited the gift of magical healing powers, emerges from a small Welsh village as the people's champion, and boldly confronts the country's dictatorial ruler with his culpability for this terrible affliction. In the end, the doctor is himself crushed and slain by the victims of the disease, becoming in effect a scapegoat, sacrificed for the ills of the suffering people. But his young child survives, and thus provides continuity for the inherited art of healing.

The opera's first scene **(CD 2, track 1)** begins with the eerie sounds of percussion: a rainstick and maracas, suggesting the ominous descent of rain. The Doctor is telling his eight-year-old child the story of how their ancestor, a Welsh shepherd, came to be granted his miraculous healing powers, by correctly selecting one of three beautiful maidens emerging from the lake. In the background, the chorus mournfully recalls how the dreadful affliction has come to affect the race.

Gradually the father seems to become distracted, as if he can hear the offstage lament of the suffering people; and as the chorus intones a hymn of prayer in Welsh, the Doctor vows that he will go to the officials who ignore the people's plight, and demand of the Ruler – a strange, lonely and isolated figure – that action be taken to cleanse the political corruption that has brought about the plague, symptomatic of the wrongs committed by the 'unnatural' state. At the first scene's close, the great hymn of the despairing Welsh people surges to a climax before the music dies away to the sound of pastoral woodwind.

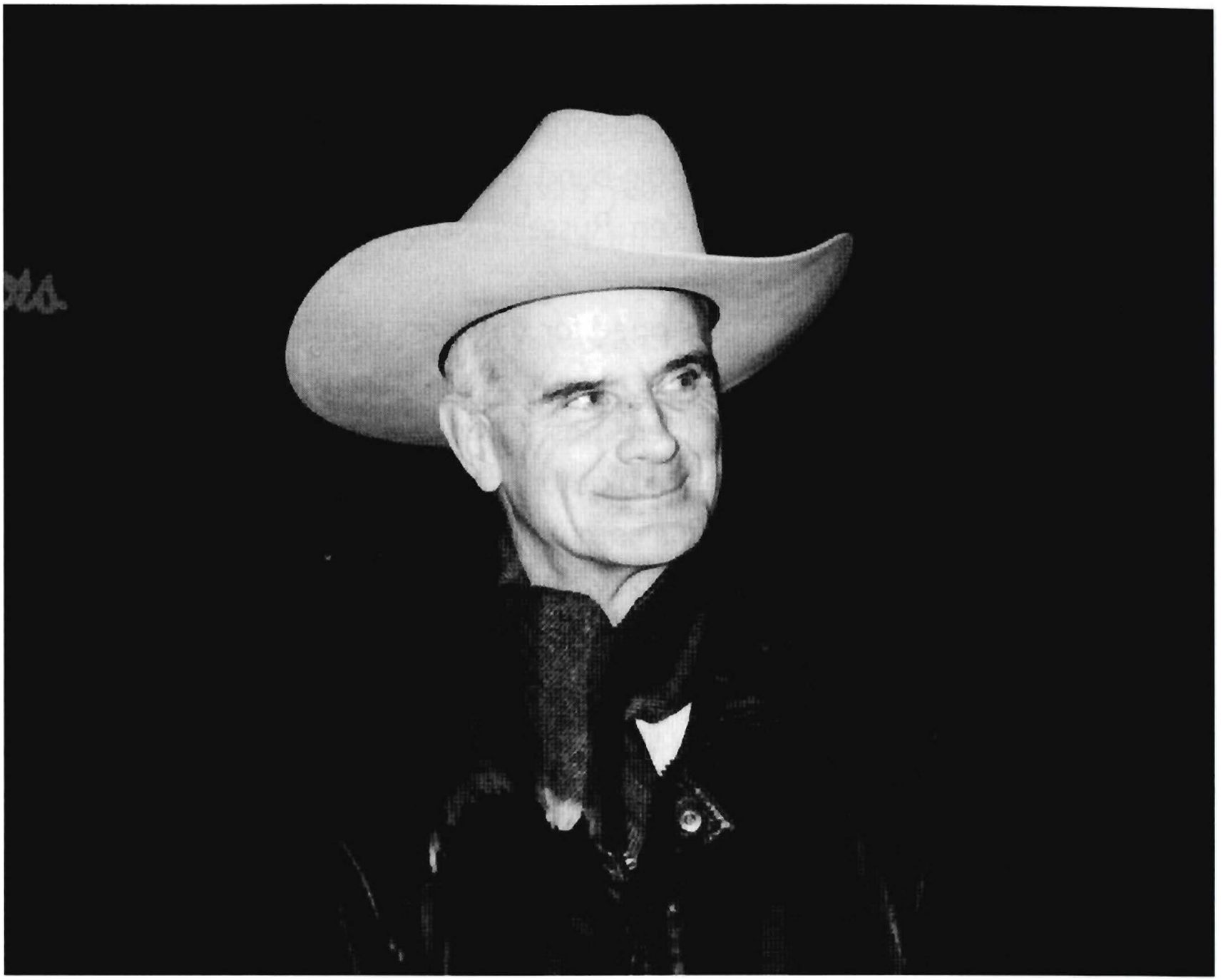
Some particularly powerful choral sections hammer home the work's political and environmental messages, and were brilliantly designed for the magnificent large chorus of Welsh National Opera, who gave the first performance in 1996.

Chapter 7
Church, Queen and Country

As conductor Max often toured abroad during the 1970s and 1980s with the Fires of London, and later conducted orchestras from a variety of countries. He has also promoted his latest new music with the British orchestras with whom he has been most closely associated.

From his experience both as a schoolmaster and as a fellow performing musician Max gained an insight into and intuitive understanding of people, and he has always understood their individual talents. His music is a real challenge for players – so why do they so enjoy working with him? Partly it is a matter of chemistry; partly it is the respect that he shows for them as a composer – stretching them to the limit but still knowing exactly what will work, and making relevant rather than pointless demands upon their virtuosity. When he conducts Mozart, Haydn or Beethoven, he regards himself as being on a learning curve, like the players. It is as if they are all making chamber music together.

During a visit to the USA in 1995 with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, during which he shared the conducting with Yan Pascal Tortelier, Max was inadvertently booked into the Flamingo Hilton Hotel, in Las Vegas, as 'Mavis', following the condensing of his name due to a computer error. This caused endless misunderstandings, and such an amusing slip could not go uncelebrated. So Max composed a splendid spoof of a piece, full of glitzy, ironic pastiche,



Max wearing a cowboy hat in Las Vegas, USA
during the filming of Mavis in Las Vegas, *February 1998*

and with a cheerful nod to Elvis Presley, Liberace, Caesar's Palace and even (finally) the famous 'Volcano'. *Mavis in Las Vegas*, a theme and irreverent set of variations for orchestra, is a dazzling, glittering, deliciously absurd, tongue-in-cheek showpiece, with the jazzy swing of big-band dance music – echoing, no doubt, Max's splendid arrangements for Ken Russell's riotous film of Sandy Wilson's musical *The Boyfriend.*

In the late 1990s a new era beckoned for the ever-youthful Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. He moved out of Bunertoon, and headed for an equally remote, exposed foreland on Sanday, one of the northernmost Orkney islands. Here he purchased a rather more ample farmhouse and outbuildings, named Airon, which soon turned into a most welcoming and accommodating building. It has a large sitting room, decorated in the light pine wood of which Max is particularly fond, and a spacious kitchen. Thanks to the talents of Max's partner, Colin Parkinson, a skilful builder, the outbuildings have now been restored as well. New rooms have been added, including an ample new study in which the composer can work with some extra degree of comfort – although Max's love of sparse furnishings and sombre décor will probably never leave him.

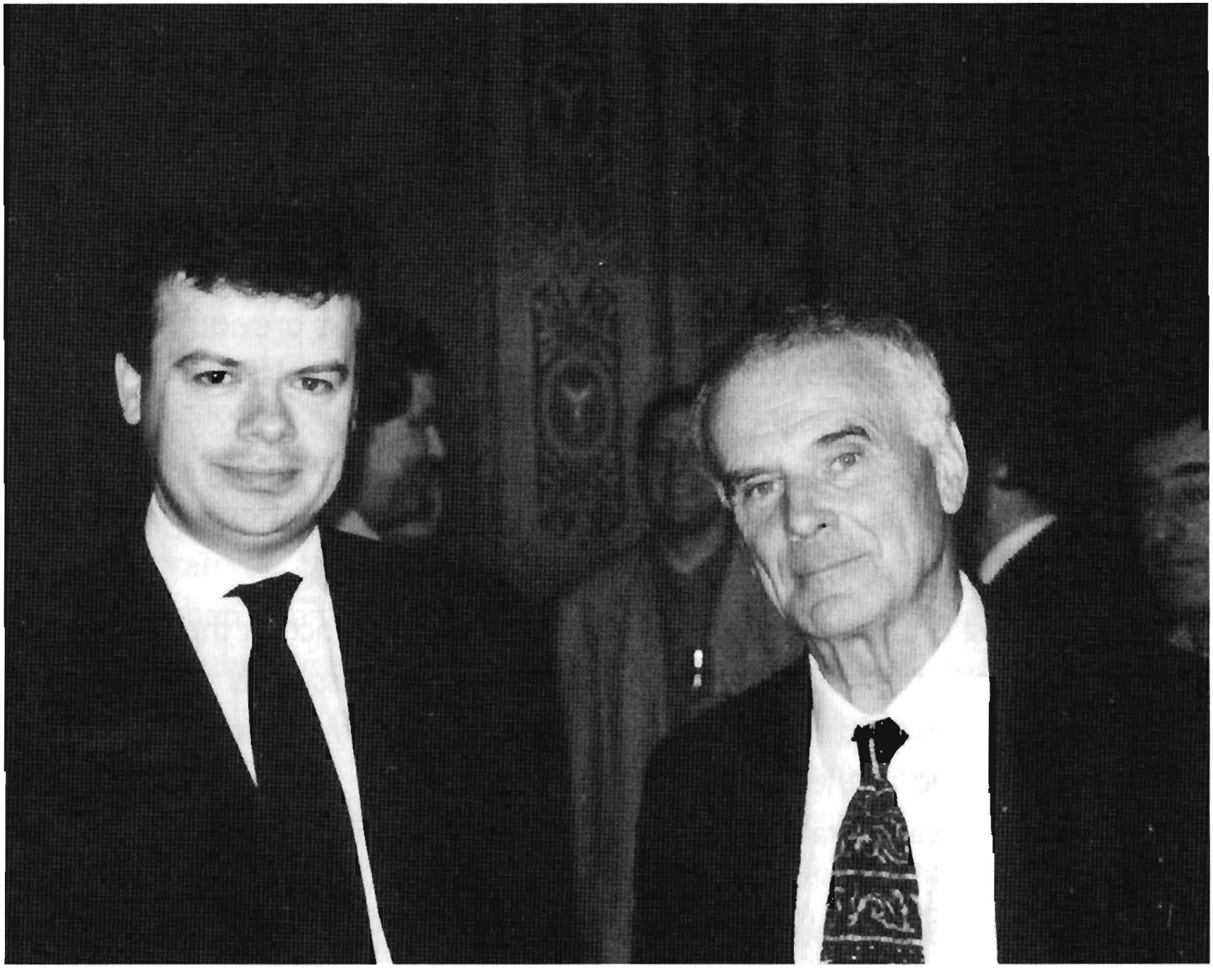
This decade saw Max sitting for a number of colour portraits. One, by John Bellany, which hangs in the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh, is quite Expressionistic in background, and depicts a relaxed but confident Max – slim, sharp-featured and intense, and with his famous piercing look. Two others, by Fred Schley, show him white-shirted, in pensive mood, with the Old Man of Hoy

in the background, and also at his work desk in Airon with, aptly, a portrait of Monteverdi on the wall behind him and a postcard of Sibelius in front of him on the desk. The painting also captures something of the self-imposed austerity that has been a part of Max's life for many years, as do several perceptive sketches by Milein Cosman (wife of Max's old friend Hans Keller) which span several decades.

Although Maxwell Davies had composed liturgical works previously (including a setting of the *Jubilate Deo*) and frequently made allusion to plainsong associated with particular feast and saints' days, his acceptance of a commission to set the words of the Mass themselves was a significant departure, especially as he had never shied from making known his objections to many aspects of Christian history and practice.

Max's setting of the Mass was composed for performance in the large space of Westminster Cathedral, for whose choir it was commissioned in memory of Patricia and Dennis Ambler. The work is therefore a setting of the Latin text, and was first performed at the Pentecost Service on 19 May 2002, when Mass was celebrated in the cathedral by the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor.

The entire work is founded on two Pentecostal plainsong melodies, 'Veni Creator Spiritus' and 'Dum complerentur dies Pentecostes'. Max was strongly influenced, he says, by the lean and strict Renaissance polyphony he heard while a student in Manchester, by his experiences of hearing plainsong Mass intoned



Max with Martin Baker, Master of Music at Westminster Cathedral, after the premiere of the Mass, May 2002

when studying in Rome and by the examples of Vaughan Williams and Britten, both of whom composed Masses for Westminster Cathedral.

The opening Kyries build impressively to eight parts, and feature not just modal writing but, perhaps inevitably, Max's trademark interval of the diminished 5th. There was something extraordinary about this. Was this not the *diabolus in musica* – the once-execrated 'devil in music' – being introduced, not incidentally but prominently, into the musical language of the church itself?

In the Gloria **(CD 2, track 2)**, which starts boldly in a major-sounding key, Maxwell Davies introduces the cathedral's second organ to add its own elaborate coloratura comments, while the plainsong is clearly audible in the pedal part. The music at 'Et in terra pax' slowly unfolds, the organ appending a brief chordal meditation before the joyously assertive 'Laudamus te'. 'Propter magnam gloriam tuam', by means of a fast-moving canon, deliberately suggests the sound of chattering voices, as if the singers were indeed, like Jesus' disciples, infused with many tongues.

After a toccata-like keyboard interruption, the section 'Domine Deus' is led in by the men canonically, the textures opening out into six-part, then eight-part, harmony, until at 'Domine Fili unigenite' a series of cascading appeals leads to an exciting climax, which is immediately replaced by a strange, unnerving diminuendo. This heralds a graphic and suspense-filled passage, representing the invocation of Holy Spirit, with the second organ adding elaborate, almost violent gestures, like licking tongues of fire, as the 'Veni Creator Spiritus' plainsong reappears in the

pedals. By contrast, the music at 'Tu solus altissimus' is almost elusively serene, before the choir's lively 'Cum Sancto Spiritu' leads on finally to a unison, then harmonised, Amen.

Writing choral and chamber music increasingly occupied Max's time, yet he did not neglect composing for larger forces. His Seventh Symphony was first performed on 19 June 2000 in the brand new Pickaquoy Centre in Kirkwall. It is one movement forty-five minutes in length and full of astonishing invention – not least in its dancing minuet and trio, which is followed by a slow movement whose Mahlerian proportions and serene unfolding rival that of the epic Sixth. It is a remarkable symphony, the full splendour of which has yet to be grasped.

Sibelius's Seventh Symphony, similarly, was the last of a series spanning roughly twenty-five years, but Max's Seventh tops that by rounding off his epic cycle both harmonically and emotionally. All of his symphonies were planned and completed in Orkney (six of them on Hoy and the last on Sanday) between 1976 and 2000, and may be seen as in effect a diary of his time on Hoy.

A performance of the symphonic cycle as a whole is now surely called for: few British composers have produced anything on this scale in the past half-century, and moreover this is a cycle described by Paul Griffiths as the most important since that of Shostakovich.

More was still to come. A remarkable achievement in symphonic terms around the time of the millennium was Maxwell Davies's *Antarctic Symphony*, which he composed following a spectacular journey with his manager, Judy Arnold,

to Rothera Station on the Weddell Sea at the edge of the Antarctic Peninsula. The resulting symphony – which lies outside the cycle, and serves as a dramatic harbinger of Max's most recent works – is not merely an attempt to mimic the sounds of the frozen wasteland (although there are plenty of splittings, crackings and deep roarings in the work itself). It is, rather, an evocation of the whole life cycle of the Antarctic, including the extraordinary slow processes that attend evolution there, the translucency of the place, and its eerie silences.

Of Max's recent works, *De Assumtione Beatae Mariae Virginis* is one of the most expressive and beautiful. Making use of a large ensemble (fourteen instruments), it recaptures some of the luminosity of pieces such as *Image, Reflection, Shadow*, as well as sharing the brooding intensity of the *Antarctic Symphony*.

Maxwell Davies took as inspiration for the work the chapter title 'De Assumtione' – concerning the Assumption of the Virgin Mary – from the medieval *Legenda Aurea* (*Golden Legend*), a compilation of highly colourful lives of the saints by the Dominican monk Jacobus de Voragine. Max remembered Pope Pius XII's official proclamation, in the 1950s, that belief in the physical assumption (or ascension) of the Virgin into heaven was now an article of Catholic faith. Max's readings of Jung alerted him to one consequence of this 'elevation' of the Virgin: the Holy Trinity in effect became a 'Quaternity'. The doctrine implied, in Jungian terms, that the church was at last giving proper recognition to the female principle, or *anima*. The final adagio of Max's work is no less than a graphic depiction of the Virgin rising serenely, as if on golden wings, into the heavens.

Much of the piece's elaborate workings consist in adaptations and subtle transmutations of the original plainsong melody ('Quae est ista, quae ascendit?'), modified by magic squares. On this occasion **(CD 2, track 3)** the plainsong is stated in its entirety at the outset by a sad, wan solo trombone. Gradually the other instruments enter, folding in almost tentatively; and only with a lot of mutual nudging does an allegro slowly develop, with many spirited solo contributions – not least from the percussionist, playing the marimba.

A lively conversation ensues, with each instrument insisting on having its say: the flute and bass clarinet (and later, the trumpet) prove especially vociferous, and there are lulling and mysterious underlying whispers of tuned percussion. These lively solo contributions evolve into a florid scherzo, with flute, solo violin and bassoon each breaking loose to perform individual, insect-like pirouettes, as if magically freed from some long sleep.

Soon after *De Assumtione*'s premiere in 2002, by the Danish ensemble Athelas Sinfonietta, the London Sinfonietta received from Max the ensemble piece *Crossing King's Reach*. This work celebrated the reopening – following the cure of the notorious 'wobble' – of Lord Norman Foster's Thames footbridge, the Millennium Bridge, connecting St Paul's Cathedral and the historic City of London with the Tate Modern Gallery, on the south bank. In Max's version, even the music develops a rickety 'wobble'[1]

Max has always been able to compose 'occasional' music (for example, *The Barns of Brugh*, *Tenebrae sopra Gesualdo* and *Sir Charles, his Pavan* are sombre,

elegiac works written in memory of various friends), and this was one of the many talents that made him the obvious candidate when Buckingham Palace needed to find a new Master of the Queen's Music. His appointment early in 2004 as Master of the Queen's Music, succeeding his old friend Malcolm Williamson, CBE, was for a fixed period of ten years. Max was graciously received by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, and immediately gave clear indications that he intended to make an energetic contribution to royal and public occasions, and to mark events of national importance, wherever the occasion required it.

It didn't take him long to prove it. *Commemoration Sixty* from 2005 is a fascinating, full-blooded choral and orchestral cantata, which officially celebrates the end of World War II sixty years earlier. In the first part of *Commemoration Sixty* a series of triumphal 'anthems' can be heard: at the outset these seem to be doing battle with one another, as each vies for supremacy. However, here **(CD 2, track 4)** the tone markedly changes, as the chorus enters with a great hymn of peace that echoes the words from Isaiah used in Handel's *Messiah*, envisaging a day when enlightenment will dawn and the instruments of war will be reforged as the implements of peacetime.

In the work's final section, Maxwell Davies sets a text from the thirteenth-century Goliard poets, a joyous Latin invocation of Spring, 'Salve ver optatum', which looks back to his early piece, *The Shepherd's Calendar*. A children's chorus joins the adult chorus in a rapturous vision of a positive and co-operative future, free of the ills of war, which draws finally to a tumultuous close – although not

without a questioning glimpse of Max's trademark diminished 5th, just before the end of the work.

Thanks to a bold commission by Naxos, something of a landmark in the history of modern music occurred with the premiere by the Maggini Quartet of Maxwell Davies's Naxos Quartet No. 1 at London's Wigmore Hall on 23 October 2002. For rarely since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Haydn was in the court of Count Esterházy and Beethoven produced his Rasumovsky Quartets for the Russian ambassador to Vienna, has a patron or sponsor had the imagination to commission a composer to write not just one string quartet but a whole cycle of them.

Although each string quartet that has appeared since the First travels along its own road, the quartets – ten of which are planned – are conceived as a cycle, and the design and musical structure of each fits into a larger architectural plan spanning the entire series.

Another significant feature is that each quartet has been written for the members of the Maggini Quartet, whose particular sound and playing qualities Max has come to know intimately since they played his First Quartet. He has thus been able to tailor each subsequent quartet to the players' individual skills and virtuosity, and to their collective flair, just as he has shown an instinct for relating his orchestral works to the gifts of the orchestral players involved, and matching his ensemble pieces to the unique talents of the members of The Fires of London.

Max with the Maggini Quartet, November 2001; John Batten

This exciting project is now nearing completion, and is likely to result in a series on a par with not just the quartets of Tippett or Britten, but perhaps those of Bartók and Shostakovich too. The importance of the Naxos Quartets lies above all in Maxwell Davies's uncompromising determination to explore and extend musical form, to branch out into new, unexplored territory, and by processes of transformation to lead his music into new and fascinating directions, both melodic and harmonic. These quartets pay due respect to tradition, but are in no way hidebound by its example.

From the First Quartet the debt to Haydn is apparent, and Orkney too is very much in evidence: the third movement was suggested by 'a strong breeze through heather'. The superbly sustained Second Quartet reveals how deeply Max has assimilated the music not just of Classical Vienna, but of his twentieth-century predecessors, notably Debussy, Bartók, Janáček and, once again, Mahler. Mahler also lends impetus to the eerie march of the Third Quartet; this is a direct and forceful protest against the Iraq War, which Max saw as illegal and a political betrayal. And Max's preoccupation with architecture led him to new levels of profundity: while the Third Quartet draws inspiration from Bach, it is founded on four interrelated magic squares, compositional devices which Max has compared to 'an ever-fruitful vine, copiously bearing new grapes'.

By contrast, Maxwell Davies's Naxos Quartet No. 4 has a visual source: a picture by Pieter Brueghel entitled *Children's Games*. Outwardly the quartet is playful, but later it acquires a more serious tinge, while making formal allusion to

Mahler and Schoenberg. The two-movement Fifth Quartet bears the characterful title 'Lighthouses of Orkney and Shetland', a reference in part to the contrasting timings of the various searchlight beams that Max can descry from Airon, and these play a part in the quartet's rhythmic development.

Whereas the substantial Seventh Quartet, dedicated to Archie Bevan on his eightieth birthday, is a long, slow and meditative work in seven movements, all of which are marked *Lento* or *Adagio*, and draws inspiration, like the Third Symphony, from architecture (the church interiors by Borromini which Max got to know while in Rome), the Naxos Quartet No. 6 is initially much more lively. It is cast in six movements, of which four are sprightly, two of them being energetic scherzos. The first scherzo features some mysterious, spectral pizzicato, while the second is notable for its dancing syncopations and forceful interjections, offset by a beautiful, singing slow central trio section. The other movements are an intense adagio (again with vigorous interjections), much the longest movement, a gentle carol based on a Christmas plainsong (just as the first scherzo is founded on an Advent plainsong), and a brisk finale.

The first movement of the Sixth Quartet **(CD 2, track 5)** launches out at an energetic, scurrying pace, with all four instruments contributing to the hurly-burly of the debate, but is soon slowed down by mysterious, distant-sounding chordal interruptions, which seem to suggest material being gathered together, as if the music seeks to establish its own modus operandi. Max has said that a study of Beethoven's late quartets played a part in this work in particular, and

one can certainly sense this, whether in the unexpected contrasts of tempi, which are quite frenetic, or in the cantabile quality of the quiet chords with which the faster sections are interspersed. Gradually, however, the chordal passages have a braking effect on the brisker exchanges, and the movement becomes more serene, with only faint surviving echoes of the nervy undercurrent, and even a hint of traditional diatonic consonance. The entire movement, like the quartet as a whole, is highly expressive, and the mood, while busy, is almost confidential.

Before long Maxwell Davies's sequence of ten Naxos Quartets will be complete. What next? As always with Max, it is almost impossible to predict. There will doubtless be new choral works, fresh chamber music, perhaps additional concertos, certainly music for children, maybe some kind of music-theatre piece, perhaps even another opera. His role as Master of the Queen's Music has already led him in exciting new directions, including composing music for brass band; his latest choral work *The Golden Rule*, to a striking acclamatory text by the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, received its first performance in St George's Chapel, Windsor in April 2006, in celebration of the eightieth birthday of Queen Elizabeth II.

Although now in his seventies, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies remains as uncompromising and energetic as ever, his zest for work undiminished; there will be no quick fixes. He has, hopefully, plenty to say yet. But whatever musical paths Max chooses to tread, they will bring fresh challenges both for him and for his audience.

Max in audience with Her Majesty The Queen, 2004

The Greek historian Thucydides called his mammoth history a *ktema es aeis*; the ten Naxos Quartets, the Strathclyde Concertos and numerous other works are very much of that ilk. Designed to stand the test of time, they deserve to become classics, and already the signs are that they will succeed.

Max Speaks: A Recorded Interview

Two hours of compelling reminiscences by the composer are contained on the CD-ROM element of CD 2.

From Max's earliest musical memories around the age of four, we are taken through his school years; his encounters in Manchester with such kindred spirits as Alexander Goehr and Harrison Birtwistle; his propensity for literature (even persuading, at the age of fourteen, his local library to lend him Joyce's *Ulysses* when he was ruled underage for such shady material…); his culinary skills; his compositional influences; his move to the middle of nowhere; his joy at writing music for children; his meeting the Queen; and many other compelling tales and insights all the way up to his most recent work on the Naxos Quartets and his outlook on the future.

How to access Max Speaks:

Insert CD 2 into a computer and the CD-ROM will automatically start.*
The audio file is in MP3 format, which may be heard directly from the CD-ROM or downloaded onto an MP3 player.

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Max Speaks: A Recorded Interview
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Interview conducted by Roderic Dunnett
Engineer: Norman Goodman
Editor: Daniel King, One for Level
Producer: Genevieve Helsby
Music: 8.557396 Naxos Quartet No. 1, mvt 1: Adagio–Allegro
8.557398 Naxos Quartet No. 5, mvt 1: Largo
8.557398 Naxos Quartet No. 5, mvt 2: Lento
8.557398 Naxos Quartet No. 6, mvt 6: Allegro

With special thanks to Judy Arnold for her support throughout this project.

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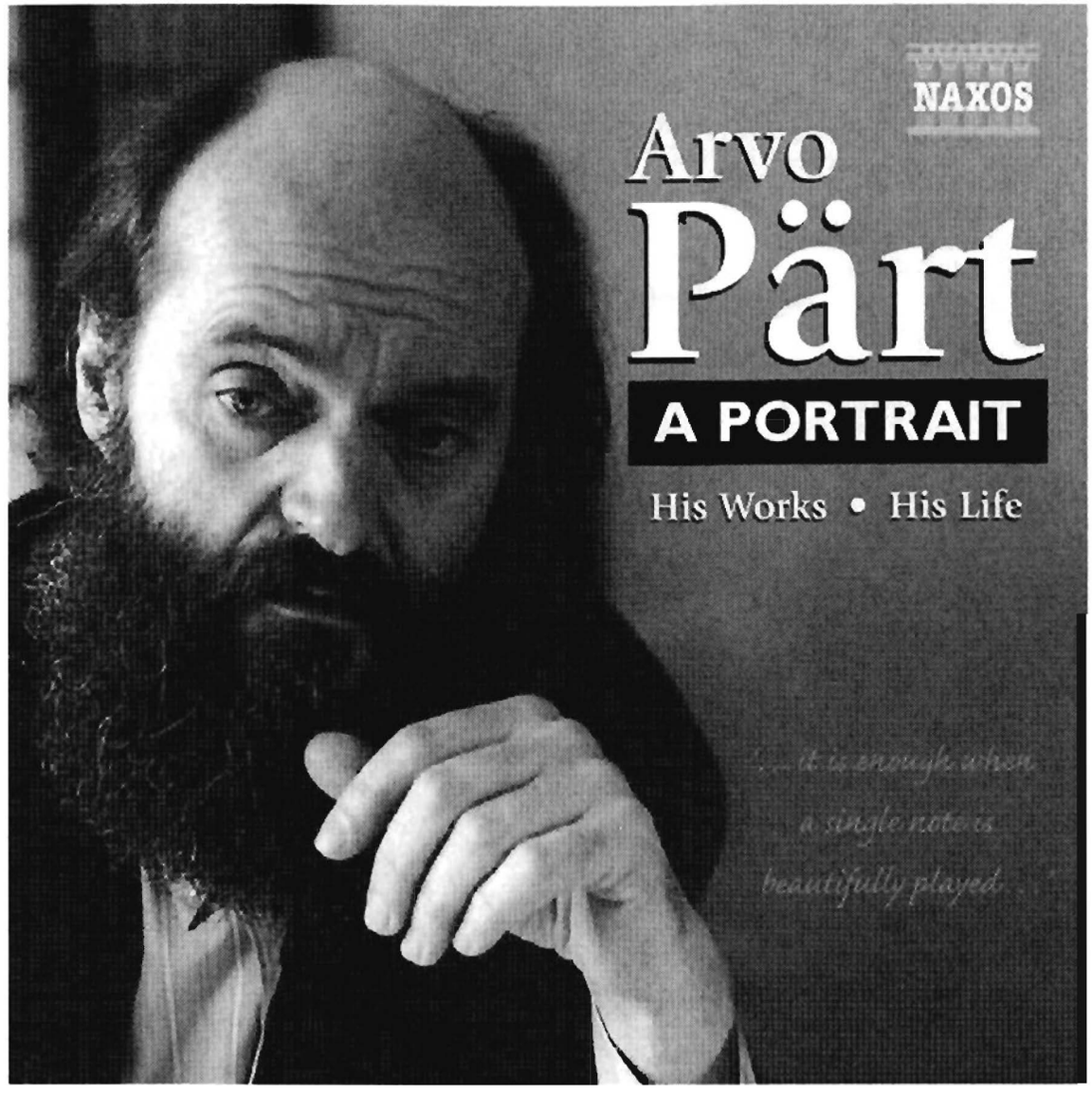

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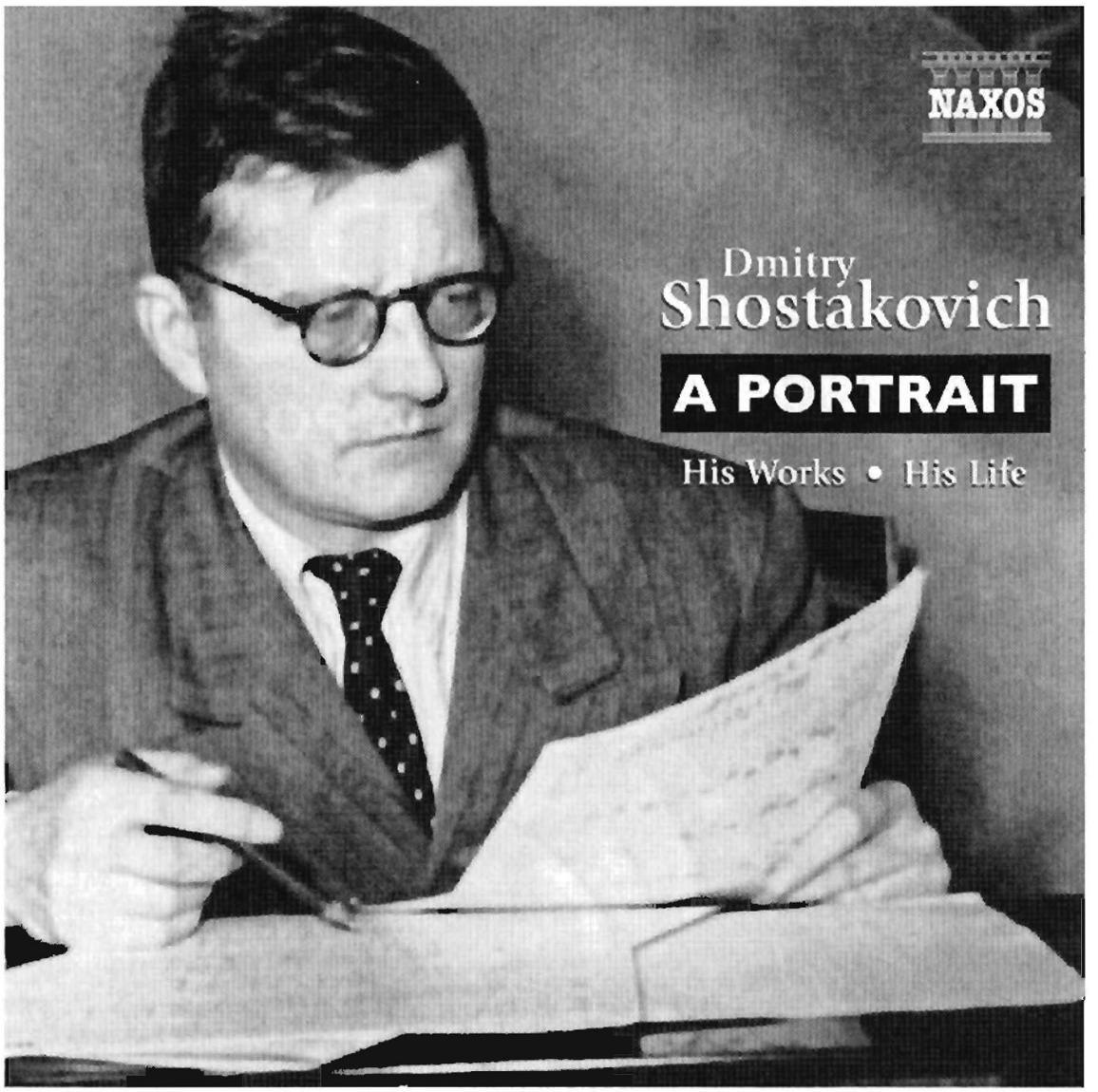

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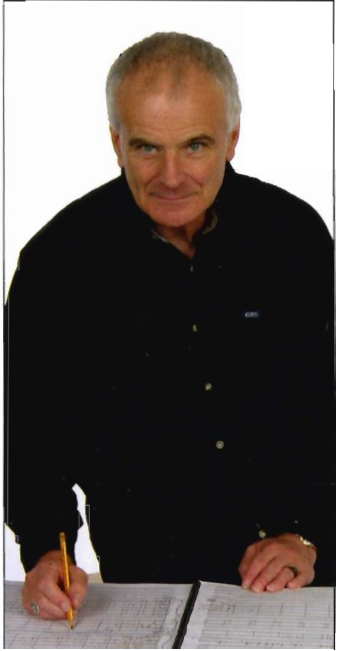
A PORTRAIT

Peter Maxwell Davies

A PORTRAIT



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