



Davies, Sir Peter (b. 1934)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Sir Peter Maxwell Davies is perhaps the most renowned living British composer, and certainly one of the most prolific, having composed over three hundred works encompassing virtually every genre of classical music. His music, which often incorporates influences outside of the Western musical tradition or pushes beyond the boundaries of established musical style, is regarded by some critics as iconoclastic. It is probably more accurate, however, to describe the "new music" Davies has created as a synthesis of many diverse musical forms.

"Max," as Davies is familiarly known, was born on September 8, 1934, in Salford (now part of Manchester) in the north of England. He studied piano as a child and subsequently began composing at an early age. At eight years of age, he made his musical debut, playing a piano piece he composed on a BBC radio program for children. As his school provided little in the way of music education, Davies independently sought out various sources of unfamiliar music, including scores from libraries and radio programs.

Davies began his formal musical studies when he was admitted to both the Royal Manchester College of Music and Manchester University simultaneously. He earned a master's degree from the University in 1956, after the completion of a dissertation on Indian ragas. In the same year, he received a degree in composition from Royal Manchester.

While at the College of Music, Davies, along with fellow students Alexander Goehr, Harrison Birtwistle, Elgar Howarth, and John Ogdon, formed New Music Manchester, a performing ensemble dedicated to avant-garde music. Davies subsequently embarked on further studies in Rome and at Princeton.

From 1958 to 1961, Davies was the music headmaster at Cirencester Grammar School. His experiences in musical pedagogy had a profound effect on his composition style, which became more theatrical and yet less complicated as a result of teaching children.

While at Princeton, Davies began performing his first opera, *Taverner*, based on the life of sixteenth-century English composer John Taverner and incorporating many elements of the earlier composer's music. Davies worked on this ambitious composition, for which he also wrote the libretto, for over six years, then had to reconstruct portions of it after the manuscript score was partially destroyed by a fire.

By the time of the opera's debut in 1972, Davies was already known for his daring, edgy works, particularly in musical theater, among which the most notable is *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969), in which the vocalist, portraying King George III in his late, insane years, sings and talks to his birds, represented by various instruments.

Because Davies and his colleague Birtwistle were displeased by performances of their works by traditional ensembles, they formed, in 1967, the Pierrot Players (reconfigured and renamed the Fires of London in 1971), an experimental chamber group of instrumentalists and vocalists specializing in the intimate-scale musical theater pieces that the two composers produced during the 1960s.

In order to be surrounded by a natural silence in which to create his works, Davies moved to the Orkney Islands, in the North Sea off the coast of Scotland, in 1970. In this setting, his compositions became less severe, much clearer in their harmonies, softer, and--inspired by the folk traditions of the islands--more upbeat.

In the decade following relocation, Davies produced a prodigious number of works in various genres. Perhaps the most notable of these are the theatrical piece *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* (1974), the chamber operas *The Martyrdom of St. Magnus* (1977) and *The Lighthouse* (1980), and his eight symphonies.

Although he continued to compose prolifically throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Davies has, since 1999, decided to compose less and focus primarily on works for chamber orchestra. His recent works include, nonetheless, an opera, *The Doctor of Myddfai* (1996) and the *Antarctic Symphony* (2001), the latter of which was inspired by the composer's journey to the South Polar continent.

Davies was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1987. While he is rather taciturn about his private life, he is quite open about being gay, and he is a patron of various gay causes, including the Lesbian and Gay Foundation (based in Manchester, his birthplace) and the Scottish Homosexual Rights Group.

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Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.