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The Music of Peter Maxwell Davies. By Nicholas Jones and Richard McGregor. pp. 382. (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2020. £60. ISBN 9781783274833.)

To survey the output of Peter Maxwell Davies (1934–2016) is no trivial undertaking: in a career spanning some 60 years, Davies composed nearly 550 works. As long-established and leading scholars of Davies' music, Nicholas Jones and Richard McGregor are ideal guides for such an endeavour, and in this handsomely produced monograph they set about the task with relish. In their division of labour, Jones takes on matters of biography (Ch. 1), 'Form and architecture' (Ch. 4), 'Landscape and Place' (Ch. 7) and the late works (Postlude). McGregor tackles 'Compositional technique and process' (Ch. 2), 'Genre' (Ch. 3), 'Tonality and Texture' (Ch. 5), and 'Allusion, Quotation, Musical Critique' (Ch. 6). The text is liberally interlaced with Davies' own words (drawn from articles, interviews, programme notes and so on), and the authors benefit from 'privileged access' to sources 'currently under embargo by the composer's estate' (p. 3) and concludes with a length catalogue of works.

The 'sustained reference' to Davies' words, the authors argue, is part of a strategy aimed at shaping 'a discourse around his music' (p. 3). However, the ordering of chapters, to a greater extent, mirrors the historical trajectory of previous Davies' scholarship that Jones and McGregor trace in their introduction (pp. 1–2), moving from the study of compositional technique (an area spearheaded by David Roberts' ground-breaking 1985 thesis), via sketch studies (and with it an understanding of Davies' musical symbolism), through to a more recent focus on hermeneutic interpretation. (A similar motion structures Part I of Griffith's 1982 monograph *Peter Maxwell Davies*.) Rather than 'shape a discourse', I would argue that Jones and McGregor provide an extended overview and synthesis of well-established themes within the reception of Davies' music, supplemented with generous reference and acknowledgement to this prior work (including their own significant publications). If this leads at times to an uneven critical examination of such themes (see below), the authors undoubtedly enrich and expand current thinking about Davies through their welcome inclusion of less-frequently discussed works, including juvenilia and later pieces.

Thus, even if one is familiar with existing scholarship on Davies, frequent rewards are to be found. Both authors adopt a fluid stance to their sources, deftly negotiating the differing methodological demands of (for instance) sketch study, analysis, historical interpretation and hermeneutics to revisit, rethink and reappraise received ideas. A few examples will have to suffice in lieu of a more expansive list. In McGregor's hands (Ch. 2), for instance, the familiar tale of Davies' adoption of magic squares in the 1970s to generate pitch and rhythmic material is given new impetus. McGregor persuasively situates the squares as the fulfilment of a long-held aesthetic need to subject ideas to continuous transformation, in which the account of the pivotal role played by *Blind Man's Buff* (1972) as a stepping stone is particularly compelling (pp. 63–71). Welcome, too, is the acknowledgement given to the New Zealand-born composer Gillian Whitehead (b. 1941) – afforded only a single mention as a pupil of Davies in both Griffith's book and Mike Seabrook's *Max: the Life and Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (1994) – and her role in introducing Davies to magic squares (p. 72). Similarly, Jones is ever alert to the wider implications of the discursive practices with which he engages. His discussion of Davies' musical responses to landscape and place in Ch. 7 provides perhaps the most sustained critical reflection of the volume, situating Davies' music and thought against a broader scholarly background of landscape and music. His

concluding reading of the 1969 orchestral work *Worldes Blis* (pp. 297–302) – which brings together the influence of (amongst other things) Davies’ experiences of clouds on top of Lake District fells, the expansive vistas of Australia, nocturnal walks, Indian ragas and the bells of Rome – is a model of interpretative practice which sent this reader back to the piece with fresh ears.

Probing of this nature might always be extended further. When Jones and McGregor say that

‘[i]f our ultimate aim is to understand, as fully and as richly as possible, Davies’ works in all of their technical and symbolic complexity, and the ways in which they are received by the listener, then unlocking and opening these and other such doors – by revealed what lies *inside* a work – becomes a tremendously vital endeavour, even if, in doing so, the undertaking reveals many more closed doors beyond’ (p. 6), there lingers the suspicion that the choice over which doors are opened, and which remain closed, is influenced considerably by Davies himself. Davies was an inveterate self-mythologiser, both in public and (as excerpts that the authors cite from his unpublished diaries reveal) in private, and by placing his words centre stage, Jones and McGregor demonstrate the degree to which the scholarly discourse around Davies’ music is commensurate (if not complicit) with the composer’s own self-presentation.

It is notable, for instance, that Jones’ claim for the importance of biography in understanding Davies’ music (‘Davies’ life and music were tightly yoked together’, p. 42) is developed primarily with reference to those elements of *autobiography* familiar from Davies’ writings – place, references to people, and psychological crises. These have been covered extensively in the existing literature on Davies’ music, and carry with them the imprint of Davies’ authoritative presence. To be sure, there is only so much one can cover in a single volume (the authors as early as p. 2 acknowledge such constraints), but one might still rue the decision to focus on certain well-trodden routes through Davies’ music at the expense of those less well travelled. For instance, McGregor teasingly suggests the possibility that Davies’ homosexuality informs at the very least certain symbolic choices in certain works (pp. 224, 226, 234, and 241), but this, along with gay and queer readings of Davies’ work more generally in the scholarly literature, remains on the margins of the volume.

Another tantalising interpretative door left unopened stems from John Warnaby’s somewhat hagiographic claim (cited p. 103) that ‘no contemporary composer has demonstrated a deeper understanding of music history than Peter Maxwell Davies’. Whilst this leads McGregor to group Davies’ music into genres, it does not translate into a closer understanding of what such historically freighted genres such as the symphony really meant to Davies (McGregor notes that ‘a more detailed consideration than is possible here of the whole [symphonic] cycle is due’, p. 126). Nor do we discover how, in essence, works for children (for instance) differ from those for adults: McGregor, ever alert to gaps in the literature, notes that ‘there has been no attempt to explore the connections which [Davies] suggests exist’ between two operas written at the same time in 1979 – *Cinderella*, for children, and *The Lighthouse*, an altogether darker, more adult work – ‘possibly because the children’s works have never been thought of as being particular suitable vehicles for analytical exploration’ (p. 215). (Welcome analytical exploration of *The Lighthouse*, but not

Cinderella, ensues.) And where critical questions are raised, as when Jones briefly questions Davies' sincerity towards traditional models (pp. 154–6), answers are found through recourse to Davies' assertions about his music without necessarily weighing up such claims against the evidence of the music.

One such assertion can be found in Davies' evocation of tonics and dominants in his later music (discussed pp. 184–7). Here McGregor invokes Jones' prior research on, in particular, tonality in the symphonies to substantiate Davies' use of 'focal centrality', whilst acknowledging too the problems that such loaded terms have for listener expectations about the *audibility* of such procedures. Anthony Bye's withering critique (*Tempo* 177, 1991) of the imperceptible harmonic relationships in Davies' music is quoted 'in detail' (p. 187). Nevertheless, the substance of his argument is bypassed, and Arnold Whittall's notion of 'focused' and 'floating' tonalities (*Music Analysis* 13/2–3, 1994), in which specific tonal relationships are supplanted by far more audible (if generalised) harmonic contrasts, is offered instead as a way for the listener to engage meaningfully with Davies' tonal imagination. This is undoubtedly useful, but it leaves unresolved questions of the value of compositional techniques as a tool for Davies' writing process, and the value of the same techniques for the listener.

Take, for example, McGregor's analysis of the Strathclyde Concerto No. 6 (1991), presented as one of a sequence of case studies of compositional technique in Davies' late works (pp. 86–90). Early on in his account, McGregor concedes that 'the average audience member' would not hear ('immediately', at any rate) the intricate 'play-of-masks', 'alphabet codes' and 'musical undermining of all "mature statements"' (pp. 86–87). Elsewhere, with reference to *The Lighthouse*, McGregor notes that Davies 'wanted to make sure that the symbolism and symbolic gestures [of his material] were clearly embodied in the music at this point even if not immediately audible as such' (p. 219). The repetition of 'immediately' in both of these analyses is telling; Jones and McGregor alike present Davies' music as something that challenges the listener, that practically *demand*s engagement with its 'technical and symbolic complexity' (p. 6) and with it, repeated listening and apprehension of its details. Those that don't, as, for instance, when Stephen Johnson laments the lack of 'memorable music' in the music-theatre work *The No. 11 Bus* (1983–4), are not always treated sympathetically: 'this was not the first, nor the last time, that Davies would find critics unwilling or unable to look for deeper meaning in a work's symbolism' (p. 228). The tensions between Davies' evident intellectual virtuosity – a virtuosity that Jones and McGregor communicate on nearly every page – and the aesthetic qualities of the music that result, run through the volume. If this leads to a certain defensiveness of tone, it is because, perhaps, the justification of a work such as *Black Pentecost* (1979) on account of its environmental message and use of 'a 6- and 7-note magic square that are related to each other' (p. 238, paraphrasing Davies' advocate John Warnaby) is not, ultimately, an endorsement of the music.

And so we reach the thorny issue of the reception of Davies' music. A composer's death can often lead to a decline in interest in their music in performance, the recording studio, and academic writing. The timing of Jones and McGregor's book is such that it can help revitalise Davies in the public and critical imagination, and, perhaps, assist in distinguishing those works in Davies' copious output that might be preserved from pieces less deserving of such

an accolade. For this reason, the authors should be praised for flagging up from the outset 'the negative criticism of, and suspicion surrounding, Davies' compositional fluency and the scale and fecundity of his output' (p. 6). In practice, however, there is a reluctance to explore this particular elephant in the room too closely. Although criticisms of Davies' work are cited, especially that directed towards his post-1980 output (pp. 82–3; p. 128, p. 238), they are frequently left unexamined, or failures in the music attributed to factors beyond Davies' control (McGregor suggests that criticisms of the operas *Taverner* [p. 114] and *Resurrection* [p. 130] were more to do with productions than Davies' music). Most notably, a section headed 'The Price of Compositional Fluency' (pp. 205–7) quotes dissenting critical opinion in an opening paragraph, before nimbly side-stepping the issue to discuss other matters for the final two paragraphs of the section. One might argue that Jones and McGregor's spirited analyses of post-1980 works throughout the volume offer rebuttals to the critics that they cite, but, perhaps revealingly, the substance of the negative opinion is too often raised and left unchallenged.

The prominence given to Davies' writings might suggest that the book should be called *The Music and Thought of Peter Maxwell Davies*. But the authors demonstrate vividly that the two are inextricably linked, and offer a myriad of ways – too many to cover in a short review – that readers might navigate such complex conceptual terrain. The book stands as an elegant synthesis and re-examination of the dominant strands to be found in Davies scholarship, and hints teasingly at future directions that might be built on these solid foundations.