

Remembering Max

A personal tribute and reflection

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (1934-2016)

I had the great good fortune of enjoying Max as a personal friend and professional colleague for more than 30 years, during which time we worked together in orchestral and festival contexts all over Scotland, not least in Orkney, in London and abroad. I was able to experience at first hand his extraordinary impact within the world of music and on the world through music.

After arriving in Edinburgh to run the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in 1984, a time when orchestral ‘education’ and ‘social’ programmes, if conceivable, were in their infancy and new music was anything but the norm, I soon realised what – and who – was wanted. Returning to the real roots of the modern European orchestra, roughly four centuries ago (as distinct from its earlier ancestry in the ancient Greek theatre), the development of which had always been led and shaped solely by the composers of the day right up until the late 19th century, the SCO’s brand new role of Associate Composer-Conductor was created especially for Max. He immediately responded by writing his 4th Symphony for us and followed this up by offering to compose no fewer than 10 new Concertos with the orchestra’s leading players as the soloists. This led to the most significant chain of events in the SCO’s history, putting it firmly on the local and international maps, nurturing a new generation of young Scottish composers, who were drawn into the project at local community levels, and involving thousands of school-children in creative learning through composing as well as performing and listening to music. Max’s ‘Strathclyde’ Concertos – named for the Region which sponsored the 10 commissions, was Europe’s largest local authority at the time, educated half of Scotland’s children but, unfortunately, was abolished even before the composer’s ink had dried on the final pages – fundamentally transformed the fortunes of the SCO, in step with its artistic development, its wider social engagement and its burgeoning reputation.

Max’s role with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra was initially quite unique, the first of its kind in the modern era, and he rather enjoyed the idea of being a latter-day “Haydn”, directing his musicians and writing for them as a matter of routine, all the while drawing the audience into the new music by virtue of his engaging presence. It was not long afterwards that the Royal Philharmonic and BBC Philharmonic Orchestras also appointed him to composing-conducting positions, which proved similarly fruitful. These roles revealed important aspects of Max’s true nature as an artist and a human being: his pioneering ability to break new ground, sometimes to shock but always to touch the listener depended upon his deep knowledge, understanding and absorption of history, language and culture. He composed never for posterity’s sake – a vain path that can lead only to failure – but always for the here and now: for his local community in Orkney, for example, or his musical community of SCO players. Max’s understanding of the present and his vision for the future were always grounded in a profound comprehension of the past. Therefore much of his work will surely live on into posterity, as music with a recurrent and resonant presence, precisely because he set out to write for people who were present with him in time and place.

As a concluding thought about Max, the human being, he was famously prepared always to stand up and be counted for the many important causes in which he believed. Following his supposedly prominent part in the huge protest march through London against our country’s invasion of Iraq, and the political cover-ups that led to this catastrophe, I remember well his incandescent fury at the seemingly systemic ‘airbrushing’ of his presence out of the media coverage of this peaceful demonstration. It takes a special kind of artist to embarrass or get under the skin of a culpable and cowering establishment. Max, simultaneously the outsider and the insider, was just such a person: honest, courageous, passionate – and present.

Ian Ritchie March 2016

Max links:

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| 1984-93 | Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Managing Director |
| 1988-93 | St Magnus Festival, Orkney, Artistic Co-Director |
| 2003-12 | Choirbook for The Queen, Chairman of Advisory and Editorial Committees |
| 2004-05 | St Magnus Festival, Director |
| 2005-13 | City of London Festival, Director – Max: featured composer in 2009 |