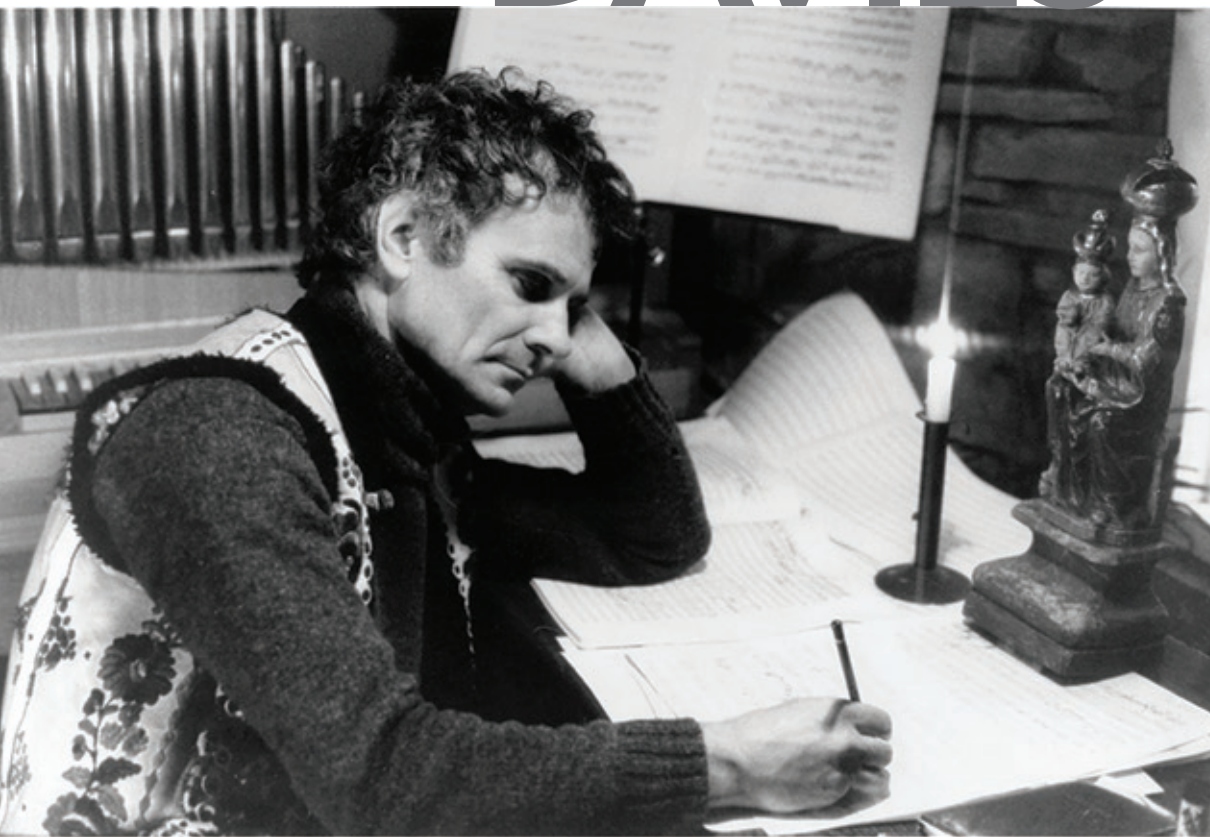


THE MUSIC OF  
**PETER**  
**MAXWELL**  
**DAVIES**



Nicholas Jones and Richard McGregor

THE MUSIC OF  
PETER MAXWELL DAVIES



**THE MUSIC OF  
PETER  
MAXWELL  
DAVIES**

Nicholas Jones and Richard McGregor

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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# PRELUDE

Nicholas Jones and Richard McGregor

## CONTEXTS, AIMS, METHODS

The status of Peter Maxwell Davies (1934–2016) as one of the leading international composers of the post-war period is widely acknowledged and celebrated. This pre-eminent position is, for the most part, a direct result of six decades' worth of high profile commissions, recordings and performances of his music; but it is also a reflection of Davies's wider contributions to the world of music, culture and society through his work with music education and the teaching of composition, and his activities as conductor, as public commentator and speaker, and as Master of the Queen's Music (a position to which he was appointed in 2004 for a ten-year period). This prolific, protean composer left behind a highly significant body of work that, as the Catalogue of Works at the end this book demonstrates, comprises almost 550 compositions in every major genre, including art song and ballet, sonata and string quartet, mass and oratorio, symphony and concerto, music-theatre and opera, as well as music for children and amateurs.

It is, then, perhaps surprising that there is no recent, extended study of his music. Paul Griffiths's book, *Peter Maxwell Davies*, was published in 1982 and therefore does not reflect the development of Davies from that point, and Mike Seabrook's 1994 book, *Max: The Life and Music of Peter Maxwell Davies*, was chiefly focused on matters of biography with very limited detailed discussion of the music itself or the technical means of its construction.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Davies's compositional technique has been discussed by a number of writers, one of the

<sup>1</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies* (London, 1982); Mike Seabrook, *Max: The Life and Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (London, 1994).



first authoritative studies being David Roberts's doctoral thesis of 1985.<sup>2</sup> The approach adopted by Roberts was fundamentally analytical and score-centric, with its focus on pitch-class matrices and magic square derivation. In the 1990s this approach was allied with the study of Davies's sketch material.<sup>3</sup> In the last twenty years or so, there has been a steady shift from this broadly positivistic approach to one that also embraces context and a wider sense of interpretation. This characteristic can be seen, for instance, in the work of Arnold Whittall, who critically engages with various aspects of Davies's music predominantly through the lens of modernism; but it can also be witnessed in a number of other seminal publications, including journal articles that examine specific works, in the essay contributions to two multi-authored volumes devoted exclusively to Davies's music, and, most recently, in Philip Rupprecht's 2015 book on post-war British musical modernism, a study which offers 'interpretive readings' of selected works of Davies's from the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, this current book is the first of its kind to provide an encompassing, global view of Davies's entire output. The structure of the book is thematic, being based on themes drawn from the compositional practice of the composer: these themes include compositional technique and process; genre; form and architecture; tonality and texture; allusion, quotation and musical critique; and landscape and place. Each chapter focuses on specific major works from across Davies's output and offers general discussion of other selected works. Thematic organisation also allows, where appropriate, different aspects of a particular work to be discussed over several chapters. Given Davies's prodigious output, and the word limitation imposed on this volume, it has not been possible or practicable to be completely comprehensive: examples and selection of works

- 2 David Roberts, *Techniques of Composition in the Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (Ph.D. thesis, Birmingham University, 1985).
- 3 Peter Owens, 'Revelation and Fallacy: Observations on Compositional Technique in the Music of Peter Maxwell Davies', *Music Analysis*, 13/2–3 (October 1994), pp. 161–202; Richard McGregor, 'The Maxwell Davies Sketch Material in the British Library', *Tempo*, 196 (April 1996), pp. 9–19, and *Tempo*, 197 (July 1996), pp. 20–22; Nicholas Jones, "'Preliminary Workings": the Precompositional Process in Maxwell Davies's Third Symphony', *Tempo*, 204 (April 1998), pp. 14–22; Rodney Lister, *Steps Through the Maze: Image, Reflection, Shadow and Aspects of Magic Squares in the Works of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies* (Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis University, 2001).
- 4 Richard McGregor (ed.), *Perspectives on Peter Maxwell Davies* (Aldershot, 2000); Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones (eds), *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies* (Cambridge, 2009); Philip Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism: The Manchester Group and their Contemporaries* (Cambridge, 2015): 'interpretive readings' appears on p. 27. For a comprehensive list of writings on Davies's music, see the Select Bibliography at the end of this book.

are, by necessity, indicative and representative, and employed to support and enhance specific arguments under discussion.

Sustained reference is made throughout the book to Davies's writings and spoken-word pronouncements. These items – which include articles and essays, speeches and lectures, interviews, radio broadcasts and programme notes – are significant primary sources and have been used to shape a discourse around his music, to help illuminate the composer's practices and approaches, and to determine certain aesthetic underpinnings of his musical expression. In addition to focusing on specific compositional concerns and other music-related issues, they address subjects as wide ranging as art and architecture, literature, popular culture, education, religion, politics and the environment. A number of these items were selected and edited by Nicholas Jones and published in 2017.<sup>5</sup>

In several chapters, *The Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* also draws upon the composer's private journals and diaries. Davies started writing his first journal in October 1948, a practice that remained a constant throughout his life right up until a few weeks before his death. Totalling over seventy volumes, Davies's journals and diaries are predominantly written in English, but they also feature passages written in German, Italian, Greek and Latin – and, fascinatingly, words written in his own invented alphabet. This alphabet – which was deciphered by Richard McGregor in the late 1990s<sup>6</sup> – also appears in the composer's sketch materials, which, together with the journals and diaries, have been deposited in the British Library. The latter items are currently under embargo by the composer's estate. However, the current authors were given privileged access to these items when carrying out research for this book.<sup>7</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Davies's works, in spite of their diverse stylistic 'masks', display a remarkable technical fluency and underlying continuity. Davies's compositional technique

5 Nicholas Jones (ed.), *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings* (Cambridge, 2017).

6 Richard McGregor, 'Reading the Runes', *Perspectives of New Music*, 38/2 (Summer 2000), pp. 5–29.

7 Davies individually numbered the diaries and journals from 1948 to 1961 from 1 to 33; the volumes after this time were left unnumbered. At the time of writing, the whole collection is awaiting to be officially catalogued by the British Library. As a result, when a diary is cited in the text, reference details are given in the footnotes as full as is currently practicable, and in the following format: Davies, diary entry, 23 July 2013 (Vol. 'April to November 2013').

is the focus of Chapter 2. This chapter discusses, among other aspects, how lines of thematic argument are generated by serial-related processes, from the ‘classical’ serialism of the Sonata for Trumpet and Piano (1955) through to more distinctively individual procedures, including thematic transformation processes using sets of varying lengths, and magic-square-derived thematic material, both of which usually originate from fragments of pre-existing material, typically plainsong. The methodology behind these and other processes is revealed, for the most part, by close inspection of Davies’s sketch material, and this chapter – and the book as a whole – makes reference to the sketches, particularly with regard to precompositional workings and their relationship to the finished product.

One of the book’s overarching premises is that Davies’s works are not created in a vacuum, but are intimately connected to, and are a reflection of, ‘the past’. This deep engagement occurs on a number of levels, fluctuating and interacting with the composer’s own predominantly modernist idiom and evoking a chain of historical resonances. Two of the main ways in which Davies demonstrated this deep connection is through his engagement with musical genres, a topic that is explored in Chapter 3, and through his use of formal designs that have a specific classical ring to them. This practice is examined in Chapter 4, especially in connection with sonata form, which was a favoured structural device of Davies’s throughout much of his career. This chapter also discusses other musical and extra-musical influences on Davies’s formal thinking: the Indian *rāga*, the architecture of Filippo Brunelleschi and Francesco Borromini, and the architectural principle of *übergreifende Form*.

Another way in which Davies engages with past musical traditions and practices is his relationship with tonality, a theme that is explored in Chapter 5. It was around the time of the First Symphony (1973–6) that Davies started to think seriously about the possibility of a work establishing ‘its own harmonic rules’.<sup>8</sup> Up to that point, large-scale harmonic organisation in his works – of the type found, for instance, in the two orchestral *Taverner Fantasias* (1962 and 1964) and *Worlde’s Blis* (1966–9) – was not classified by the composer at the time as being analogous to a tonal procedure. But it was the identification by Davies himself of ‘tonics’ and ‘dominants’ in his music from the mid-1970s that marked the inception of a ‘tonal’ practice that developed to become an integral part of his compositional rationale. In addition to large-scale harmonic organisation, another means by which Davies conveys his musical argument is through sudden

8 Davies, quoted in Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies*, p. 128.

changes of texture at strategic points. This idea is further explored in this chapter and extended to include a study of the role of texture in Davies's music more generally and how this practice relates to the gestural nature of the music.

Chapter 6 discusses the presence of allusion, quotation and musical critique in Davies's music. It examines how these three aspects interact with each other in specific works, and explores the different ways in which they evoke musical and extra-musical associations and symbolic connotations. At the heart of the chapter is a study of the much performed, but hardly analysed, music-theatre work *The Lighthouse* (1979), with its complex allusions to the Tarot and Death, and surrounding this are discussions of other works in relation to the significance and symbolic allusion of plainsong, the idea of parody and the topic of betrayal.

Chapter 7 focuses on a theme that was exceptionally important for Davies but has received surprisingly little serious scholarly attention: his preoccupation with landscape and place and the ways in which these extra-musical aspects were translated into his own works and musical language. The composer's move to Orkney in the early 1970s had a profound impact on his own stylistic development, and Orkney's landscape and seascape acted as powerful and compelling agents that exerted their own influence on Davies's creative imagination. Stimulation also came from the natural world more broadly and from specific places. This chapter argues that Davies's approach in general was characterised by his phenomenological encounter with the natural environment of Orkney. This final chapter also reflects on Davies's affection for, and engagement with, non-Orkney landscapes and places.

## LIFE, MUSIC, PERIODS

Although the tendency in musicology is to construct 'periods' into which a composer's output is situated, in Davies's case this is somewhat problematic as his stylistic evolution is not always straightforwardly linear; a case in point concerns the 1960s, where any semblance of stylistic identity can shift from one work to the next. However, as Chapter 1 demonstrates, some specific phases can be identified: juvenilia up to 1952; student works written in Manchester and Rome; the 1960s; works written on Hoy, including symphonies and concertos; and works written on Sanday, including chamber music and choral works. In relation to this final phase, the Postlude proposes the notion of a 'late style'. This overall framework does not always indicate precise changes of style in his output, but it does reflect crucial turning points in his life. This fact is of

some significance – indeed, for Davies, his life and music were intimately and resolutely interconnected:

It's to do with bearing witness. Bearing witness to my experience by interpretation, if you like, of what I've gone through, experienced in every way, on every level, and a reaction to political, to environmental, to every which thing in life. And somehow, if you're a composer, that all goes in and is transformed into real live music.<sup>9</sup>

And in one of his final interviews, he asserted that:

[L]iving with music in a creative way is for me almost a physical necessity. And although, over the years, I haven't written as much music as I would have liked to write, I feel that what I *have* written has an intensity which validates, in a funny kind of way, the experiences of my life.<sup>10</sup>

The first part of Chapter 1, therefore, outlines the composer's biography and stylistic development simultaneously, and provides a firm foundation for what follows in Chapters 2 to 7. The intention here is not to offer comprehensive coverage of all aspects of Davies's life and works; rather, the discussion introduces the reader to key moments in the composer's biography and relevant selected works along the way. This strategy enables specific themes and works to be taken up and discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. Consistent elements that underpin changes in style, such as compositional technique, are also highlighted and taken up in subsequent chapters – and this includes the negative criticism of, and suspicion surrounding, Davies's compositional fluency and the scale and fecundity of his output. The final section of this opening chapter addresses the strong ties that often bind certain works to specific moments in the composer's own biography. This autobiographical bond can sometimes be obvious, but at other times more complex and concealed. However, if our ultimate aim is to understand, as fully and as richly as possible, Davies's works in all of their technical and symbolic complexity, and the ways in which they are received and interpreted by the listener, then unlocking and opening these and other such doors – by revealing what lies *inside* a work – becomes a tremendously vital endeavour, even if, in doing so, the undertaking reveals many more closed doors beyond.

<sup>9</sup> Davies, interview with Paul Morley and Christopher Austin, *The Art of Composition with Paul Morley* (online), July 2009, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh8FQer0u0A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh8FQer0u0A).

<sup>10</sup> Davies, in Andrew Palmer, *Encounters with British Composers* (Woodbridge, 2015), p. 332.

## CHAPTER 1

# BIOGRAPHY, STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT, AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Nicholas Jones

Writing in 2000, Peter Maxwell Davies declared that his music offered no ‘ready solutions’,

only reports along a tough and seemingly endless quest in search of enlightenment and understanding, with no ‘morbidezza vellutata garantita’ [velvety softness guaranteed]. [...] I make no claims for lasting qualities or wider significance – it is one person’s effort to come to terms, with no compromise or surrender, and, in the first instance, to make the very continuation of my own life possible.<sup>1</sup>

Humility and humour are two of the fundamental character traits commonly associated with Davies, but as this quotation foregrounds, it was his gritty single-mindedness – an unyielding determination to ‘*bear witness*, under whatever circumstances’<sup>2</sup> – that is absolutely key in enabling us to understand his *raison d’être* and comprehend the vastness of his output. Without doubt, Davies was possessed, come what may, with an obsessive compulsion – a dogged inner impulse – to *compose*. ‘The urge to write, the fascination with sound worlds in music’, he once wrote in his diary, is ‘too urgent to resist.’<sup>3</sup> The result of this endeavour ensured that a rich vein of music flowed ostensibly unabated from

<sup>1</sup> Davies, ‘A Composer’s Point of View (III): On Religion’, in *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings*, ed. Nicholas Jones (Cambridge, 2017), p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> Davies, ‘Bearing Witness’, in *Selected Writings*, p. 280 (original emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> Davies, diary entry, December 2012 (Vol. ‘Late 2012’).

the composer's creative imagination – 'in a hot crucible, very fast'<sup>4</sup> – throughout his working life. Davies composed primarily at the desk, away from the piano. 'I am still a paper and pencil man', he remarked in 2008: 'there is *such a joy* in the physical sensation of pushing a pencil across a piece of blank music manuscript, which I've *always* loved, always enjoyed that as a real, sensuous experience all through my creative life and I wouldn't be without that.'<sup>5</sup>

## EARLY YEARS AND JUVENILIA

Davies was born in Salford (now part of Greater Manchester) on 8 September 1934. At the age of four his family moved to Swinton (three miles northeast of Salford), and it was there, in 1942, that he began piano lessons and started to compose shortly afterwards. Over the next ten years he was to produce nearly thirty works. Not all of the manuscripts for these compositions are currently available, but a good number of them have been deposited at the British Library.<sup>6</sup> Davies's juvenilia has not been subjected to any critical scrutiny before now, but these early works offer a fascinating insight into how the composer's compositional style and technique evolved during these crucial formative years; they also demonstrate Davies's awareness of contemporary composers and a willingness to absorb their influences.

The vast majority of the juvenilia were written for piano, including his first composition, *Early Morning Echoes* (1942). These earliest compositions, unsurprisingly, were comparatively straightforward, typically employing homophonic and homorhythmic textures, textbook formal frameworks and diatonic harmonies. Example 1.1 offers an example from the opening of the *Moderato in E♭* (c.1942). However, as he became more proficient on the piano, and the more he listened to and studied scores of contemporary composers, his compositions became more adventurous. *Incantations*, for instance, composed in 1947, is characterised by a chromatic musical language, contrapuntal textures, and a highly peculiar soundworld (Example 1.2 (a)). The work is significant because it also offers an early example of Davies's penchant for thematic manipulation – in this instance, motivic transposition and inversion

4 Davies, 'Foreword', in *Perspectives on Peter Maxwell Davies*, ed. Richard McGregor (Aldershot, 2000), p. viii.

5 Davies, in conversation with Sandy Burnett, July 2008 (podcast downloaded from [www.intermusica.co.uk](http://www.intermusica.co.uk) on 1 March 2018, but currently unavailable).

6 Add MS 71435 and MS Mus 1405.

## BIOGRAPHY, STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT, AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**Moderato**

Piano *p*

5

Repeat Treble 8ve Higher

*cresc.*

Example 1.1 Moderato in Eb, bars 1-8

**PART ONE**

**Adagio**

Piano *pp* *tranquillo*

5

*tr*

[etc.]

Example 1.2 (a) *Incantations*, Part One, bars 1-8

(here set against an irregular, five-note ostinato: see Example 1.2 (b)) and imitation by rhythmic diminution (Example 1.2 (c)).<sup>7</sup> Another piano work, *Das Ausgebildete Geschöpf*, composed three years later, is noteworthy by its use of quartal harmonies (Example 1.3) – a feature that swiftly disappeared from Davies's harmonic language.

7 It is interesting to note that Part Two of *Incantations*, though scored for piano solo, is annotated with suggestions for future orchestration.



thematic inversion: E $\flat$ -D-C-B $\flat$  to E $\flat$ -F-G-A $\flat$

**Lento**

Piano

*p*

thematic transposition up a perfect 5th

*sfp* *sfp* *sfp*

5-note ostinato

Example 1.2 (b) *Incantations*, Part One, bars 26–34

**PART TWO**

**Più mosso**

Piano

*mp*

*cresc. poco a poco*

8

*sf*

Example 1.2 (c) *Incantations*, Part Two, bars 1–12

Example 1.3 *Das Ausgebildete Geschöpf*, bars 1–8

From 1949 to 1952 Davies himself premiered a number of his own piano pieces on BBC radio's *Children's Hour*.<sup>8</sup> This included part of the highly ambitious *Parade*, composed in 1949, which, according to Davies himself, included 'so many things' that were 'absolutely crucial to everything that I wrote in the next ten or so years. [...] The piece has lots of rhythmic quirks, lots of use of linear and harmonic material which recurs and recurs in the music of that period.'<sup>9</sup> The musical language and soundworld of *Parade* is a continuation of that explored in *Incantations*. But in the later work the musical canvas is much broader, the scope more remarkable. Cast in four movements, and taking just under half an hour to perform,<sup>10</sup> *Parade* exudes self-confidence, and possesses an impressive technical and structural assurance, as well as a seemingly inexhaustible creative abandon. One of the most extraordinary passages in the whole work occurs in the final movement, entitled 'Red Music' (Example 1.4 (a)). The work as a whole is permeated by a 12-note set (Example 1.4 (b)), but unlike a standard Schoenbergian, fully chromatic note row, Davies uses 8 pitch classes in total (three are repeated: C#, D and G). In the first movement, the set is

8 See Mike Seabrook, *Max: The Life and Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (London, 1994), pp. 25–7.

9 Davies, in Nicholas Jones, 'Peter Maxwell Davies in the 1950s: A Conversation with the Composer', *Tempo*, 254 (October 2010), pp. 11–12.

10 The work has been recorded by Richard Casey, *Peter Maxwell Davies Piano Works, 1949–2009* (Prima Facie, PFCD017/018, 2013).

[12-note set (see Example 1.4 (b))]

**Moderato**

Piano *p*

26

8<sup>th</sup>

27

*cresc.* *f* *mf*

(8)-----J

29

*rit.*

**Più mosso, ben rhythmico**

*p*

31

[12-note set]

Example 1.4 (a) *Parade, 'Red Music', bars 26-31*

Example 1.4 (b) *Parade*, 12-note set

presented in its entirety from the end of bar 8; this statement is then followed by ten variations and a coda, the latter being based on a remembrance of the movement's introductory material – music that appears at various points and in various guises throughout the work. In addition to music in Davies's 'own style', there are several passages that are pastiche-like in character, references to composers he was listening to and studying at the time, such as Bartók and Ravel, and allusion to 'popular' music, such as quasi-Parisian 'ensemble café' music and quasi-jazz (boogie-woogie style at bar 30 in Example 1.4 (a)); there are also written references, above certain passages, to people that Davies knew at the time – an autobiographical feature of his music that is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Several works from this early period were also written for vocal and instrumental combinations. Two of these, *Birds* (1947) and *Five Songs* (1950), together with the piano pieces *The Cloud* and *The River* (both of 1948), were inspired by poems concerned with nature and landscape, and as a result are discussed in Chapter 7. Arguably, however, the standout vocal work from this time is the imposing *Stehn am Fuss des Gebirgs* (c.1950) for unaccompanied chorus – a setting, in the original German, of a fragment from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegy X*:

Stehn am Fuss des Gebirgs.  
 Und da umarmt sie ihn, weinend.  
 Einsam steigt er dahin, in die Berge des Ur-Leids.  
 Und nicht einmal sein Schritt klingt aus dem tonlosen Los.

Example 1.5 offers two extracts from the second half of the work: (a) a moment of effectively wrought imitative counterpoint and poignant dissonances, and (b) the haunting conclusion, an ending that complements the innate melancholy of the text (which depicts the poet – the composer? – climbing alone on the 'mountains of primal grief').

Davies's early interest in German literature – which included Thomas Mann, Hans Carossa and Christian Morgenstern as well as Rilke – and the German language was further stimulated by a school exchange visit to Hamburg and

# THE MUSIC OF PETER MAXWELL DAVIES

20 [Langsam]

S. 

A.   
Ein - sam steigt er da hin,

T.   
Ein - sam steigt er da

B. 

24   
Ein - sam steigt er da hin,

  
da hin, [etc.]

  
hin, da hin,

  
Ein - sam steigt er da hin, da hin,

Example 1.5 (a) *Stehn am Fuss des Gebirgs*, bars 20-27

Bremen in 1951.<sup>11</sup> In addition to German and British literature, as a teenager Davies also acquainted himself with Plato, Freud, Jung and Indian poetry, the writings of Arthur Rimbaud and André Gide (such as *Corydon*, which he read in the original French), and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which became a recurring

11 It was on this trip that he attended a Russian orthodox service 'out of interest' and was particularly impressed by the music (see Seabrook, *Max*, p. 34); he also encountered the work of the German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker, whose life and work was celebrated some fifty-five years later in Davies's *Das Rauschende der Farbe* for orchestra (see Chapters 5 and 7). Davies made subsequent visits to Hamburg in 1952, 1953 and 1957. Diaries exist for all four trips: Vols. 13a and 13b (1951); 16a and 16b (1952); 19 (1953); and 25 (1957).

## BIOGRAPHY, STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT, AUTOBIOGRAPHY

[Langsam]

*pp*

S. Und nicht ein - mal sein Schritt

A. Und nicht ein - mal sein Schritt

T. Und nicht ein - mal sein Schritt

B. Und nicht ein - mal sein Schritt

36

klingt aus dem ton - los - en Los.

klingt aus dem ton - los - en Los.

klingt aus dem ton - los - en Los.

klingt aus dem ton - los - en Los.

Example 1.5 (b) *Stehn am Fuss des Gebirgs*, conclusion, bars 33–8

source of stimulation.<sup>12</sup> But in all truth, the young Davies was a voracious reader, consuming anything that crossed his path – a practice that would eventually lead him to the writings of (among many others) Dante, St Thomas Aquinas and St Augustine; Leibniz, Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche; and

<sup>12</sup> Joyce's *Ulysses* was particularly influential on some of the works from the 1960s, such as *Revelation and Fall* and *L'Homme Armé*; see, for instance, *Selected Writings*, pp. 79, 82 and 221. Christopher Austin (personal e-mail, 17 November 2018) has suggested that the title of *Parade* is most likely a reference to Rimbaud's poem of the same name; if this is so, then it follows that the titles of three of its movements – 'Green Music', 'Blue Music' and 'Red Music' – are references to another Rimbaud poem, 'Voyelles'. It is also worth noting that there is no indication that Davies was a synesthete.

Shaw, Dostoevsky, Proust, Georg Trakl, Giacomo Leopardi, Isaiah Berlin and Siegfried Lenz.

During this early period, Davies experienced several pivotal moments in his own biography. The earliest of these was an outing, at the age of four, to see Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers* at the Salford Central Mission, with the Pleasant Sunday Afternoons Orchestra conducted by Mr Lane – a moment of epiphany that had an intense impact on him and on his desire to be a composer.<sup>13</sup> He also experienced, first-hand, the horrors of the Blitz, including witnessing a neighbour running up the street on fire and bodies being dug out of the rubble. During the early stages of the war, a bomb exploded next to Davies's family home in Wyville Drive, Swinton: 'my parents flung themselves on top of me on the sofa under the front window as the glass (and the whole world!) shattered.'<sup>14</sup> This traumatic event left an unwelcome physical imprint, an aural distortion that would have an adverse affect on his hearing, and sometimes balance, at various moments throughout his life; however, this affliction later influenced an idiosyncratic aspect of his compositional technique: the doubling, normally at the fifth and/or ninth, of a melodic line, as seen, for instance, in *Seven in Nomine* (1963–5), *Fantasia and Two Pavans after Henry Purcell* (1968) and the Second Symphony (1980).<sup>15</sup> Also during the Blitz, in the pantry under the stairs, Davies would frequently listen to foxtrot and Charleston records from the 1920s and 1930s – memories that shaped, nearly thirty years later (as discussed below), the composition of *St Thomas Wake: Foxtrot for Orchestra on a Pavan by John Bull* (1966–9).<sup>16</sup>

As a teenager Davies attended the Hallé chamber concerts: in 1948, at the age of thirteen, he heard Bartók's String Quartet No. 5, recalling later that it was the most exciting thing he had ever heard and he had found it difficult to sit still on his seat.<sup>17</sup> From 1949 he devotedly attended the main Hallé concerts conducted by John Barbiroli – a musician whom he 'worshipped'<sup>18</sup> – and heard Bartók's

13 See, for instance, his interviews with Paul Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies* (London, 1982), pp. 101–2, and Sue Lawley, *Desert Island Discs*, broadcast BBC Radio 4, 30 January 2005.

14 Davies, diary entry, December 2012 (Vol. 'Late 2012').

15 See Davies, 'A Composer's Point of View (II): On Parody, References and Meaning', in *Selected Writings*, pp. 223–5. This is also discussed further in Chapter 7.

16 Davies's wartime experiences also played their part in the first movement of his Naxos Quartet No. 9 (2006): the programme note mentions 'air-raid sirens, the "glissandi" of falling bombs, the tearing apart of crashing buildings' (CD, Naxos, 8.557400, 2008).

17 Davies, 'Remembering Darmstadt', in *Selected Writings*, p. 172.

18 Davies, in conversation with Michael Berkeley, *Kaleidoscope: Works in Progress*, broadcast BBC Radio 3, 4 September 1987, British Library Sound Archive, B2704/4. In

Concerto for Orchestra and Stravinsky's Symphony in Three Movements, as well as the complete cycle of Sibelius's symphonies. He borrowed scores of Mahler and Schoenberg from the Henry Watson Music Library in Manchester; he read – in the original German, with a dictionary to hand – Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* and Berg's analysis of Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony; and he listened attentively to a wide variety of classical music on the radio and through the family's record player, including Mahler's Ninth Symphony and *Das Lied von der Erde*.<sup>19</sup>

It was also around this time, whilst walking with his parents on Helvellyn in the Lake District, that Davies experienced an intense 'aural vision': as the mist descended on the mountain, in the distance he heard, as it were, the music that he was eventually going to write.<sup>20</sup> In a diary entry from many years later, he explained that he had 'no idea' at the time 'how to realize such sounds – but it sustained me (through *Parade*, &c–) to the devastating reality of the music itself'.<sup>21</sup> The 'music itself', as discussed in Chapter 7, was an orchestral work written twenty years later.

Another formative experience that was to stay with him for the rest of his life was an interest in the visual arts, especially in the creation of his own artworks. In conversation with Christopher Austin in 2013, Davies traced this interest back to when he was three or four years old. Davies explained that he would often draw furniture, a house or a train set 'in the air', and would tell his mother and father off for walking through the room and knocking over an imaginary signal box. He also remembered drawing 'tomb stones with angels' when he visited Southern Cemetery in Manchester.<sup>22</sup> In the manuscript for *Parade* there

the same interview, conducted in the composer's London flat, Davies played the opening bars of his Strathclyde Concerto No. 2 on a clavichord that once belonged to Barbirolli.

<sup>19</sup> See Davies, in conversation with Nicholas Jones, 'Renaissance Architecture, Symphonic Precedents and Historical Resonances', in *Selected Writings*, p. 184; and Jones, 'Peter Maxwell Davies in the 1950s', p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Walking was an activity that Davies enjoyed throughout his life. According to Seabrook (*Max*, pp. 18 and 24), at the age of eight or nine Davies developed a liking for long, solitary walks, a pursuit that emphasised his 'otherness'. When he moved to Orkney, walking became part of his compositional process (see Chapter 7).

<sup>21</sup> Davies, diary entry, December 2012 (Vol. 'Late 2012').

<sup>22</sup> Davies, in conversation with Christopher Austin, London, 10 March 2013, personal e-mail; also see Seabrook, *Max*, p. 15, which discusses Davies's imaginary railway system, but laid out in the garden. Davies's mother, Hilda, was a gifted amateur painter herself. There are two paintings by her – one of Davies when he was fourteen years old and one of his grandmother – in the Sanday Heritage Centre.



are colour drawings, humorous and caricature-like,<sup>23</sup> and later in life Davies produced a number of drawings, paintings and sculptures in conjunction with specific musical works, many of which are among the sketch materials housed at the British Library. These include, for instance, a self-portrait (*Revelation and Fall*), three seascape paintings and drawings (Symphony No. 4), an abstract painting (*Roma Amor*) and a seascape drawing (*Otter Island*).<sup>24</sup>

## STUDENT YEARS: MANCHESTER AND ROME, 1952–9

The 1950s was a particularly important decade for Davies. It was the period when he established the fundamental elements of his compositional technique; the decade in which he composed his first acknowledged works; and a time, coinciding with his emergence as a composer of substance, when he travelled to Darmstadt (in 1956 and 1957), Paris (in 1955 and 1956) and Rome (in 1955 and 1957–8). It was also the period in which his interest in early music, serial technique and Indian classical music began to influence his own compositional thinking and resulting works.

In 1952, Davies was awarded a Lancashire County Scholarship to read music at the Royal Manchester College of Music (now Royal Northern College of Music) and Manchester University. The *Allegro Vivace* for String Quartet – later published in 1985 as *Quartet Movement* – was the composer's first work written as an undergraduate and served as another fundamental stepping stone in Davies's stylistic development. Despite its brevity, the movement pulsates with inventiveness and manages to pack a great deal in to its two and half minutes. It is built around four main elements: (1) theme I, initially presented on violin I in E major, the work's 'tonic', and (2) a scalic, semiquaver accompanimental figure, initially shared between violin II, viola and cello on G# Phrygian (see Example 1.6 (a)); (3) a repeated-note ostinato figure, first heard in the cello at bar 22 (see Example 1.6 (b)); and (4) theme II (based on theme I, bar 7), first heard in the viola at bar 80 (Example 1.6 (c)). Despite the fact that the music is notated in 2/4 throughout, Davies imaginatively ensures that – as Example 1.6 demonstrates – the music is never experienced by the listener in such a steady,

<sup>23</sup> A colour facsimile edition of the manuscript was published by Schott in 2009 (ED 13322).

<sup>24</sup> *Revelation and Fall*: Add MS 71253, fol. 91r; Symphony No. 4: MS Mus 1402, fols 89v, 107v and 112v; *Roma Amor*: MS Mus 1444, fol. 1r; *Otter Island*: MS Mus 1495, fol. 1r. Davies also created artworks for Naxos Quartets Nos. 2 and 3: these are discussed in Chapter 7.

**Allegro vivace** ♩ = 144

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vlc.

*pp*

*quasi  $\frac{7}{16}$*

*pp*

*sim.*

*pp*

*quasi  $\frac{7}{16}$*

*sim.*

*pp*

*quasi  $\frac{7}{16}$*

*sim.*

Example 1.6 (a) Quartet Movement, bars 1-8

**[Allegro vivace]**

Vlc.

*mp*

*p*

*pp*

*quasi  $\frac{9}{16}$*

*sim.*

[etc.]

Example 1.6 (b) Quartet Movement, bars 22-4, cello only

**[Allegro vivace]**

Vla.

*pp*

*quasi  $\frac{9}{16}$*

[etc.]

Example 1.6 (c) Quartet Movement, bars 80-83, viola only

straightforward manner; indeed, rhythmically, the music sounds disarmingly 'off-kilter', as if in a seemingly futile quest to discover a clear, regular pulse.

It was in Manchester that he first met fellow composers Alexander Goehr and Harrison Birtwistle, pianist John Ogdon and trumpeter and conductor Elgar Howarth – a group of students (in Davies's own words) 'totally against the University and College establishment'.<sup>25</sup> In 1953, together with cellist John Dow, they formed the New Music Manchester Group. Two years later, at the Arthur Worthington Hall at the university, Ogdon and Howarth gave the premiere of Davies's Sonata for Trumpet and Piano (1955), the composer's 'breakthrough' work,<sup>26</sup> and meaningfully assigned the appellation 'Op. 1'. This work effectively demonstrated a synthesis between a fully chromatic serial technique and a rhythmic language indebted to Indian classical music, a topic on which he wrote his undergraduate thesis.<sup>27</sup> The work certainly made a strong impression at the time – especially at the group's iconic follow-up concert at St James's Square, London, on 9 January 1956 – and secured Davies his first publishing contract, with Schott & Co. If Davies's Quartet Movement was written under the influence of Bartók and Stravinsky, then the Trumpet Sonata, and also the composer's Op. 2, the Five Pieces for Piano (1955–6), clearly demonstrate not only a continuation of his lifelong predilection for contrapuntal textures, but also the powerful impact that Schoenberg had made on Davies's musical language and technique. According to the composer, the Five Pieces for Piano were written at a time when he was 'very much – very *intensely* – under the influence of Schoenberg's early music. Piano Pieces Nos. 4 and 5 are very much in the nature of recitatives in which the piano style comes very close to the singing style in early Schoenberg – the *Sprechgesang* style.'<sup>28</sup> However, both the Trumpet Sonata and

25 Davies, in Jones, 'Peter Maxwell Davies in 1950s', p. 14.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

27 *An Introduction to Indian Music*, 2 vols (Mus.Bac. thesis, University of Manchester, 1956). Extracts from this thesis can be found in *Selected Writings*, pp. 24–8. The influence of Indian classical music is discussed in Chapter 4.

28 Davies, *Meet the Composer*, broadcast BBC Radio 3, 21 July 1969, British Library Sound Archive, NP1464W and NP1465W. The first three of the Five Pieces for Piano were written when Davies was in Italy in the summer of 1955. It was on this trip that he wrote the three-movement *Burchiello*, an unpublished work for 16 percussion instruments. According to a diary entry at the time (late September [?] 1955 (Vol. 22, 'Rome 1955')), he was asked to write the work for an American university ensemble – 'Illinois I think', he records. When asked by the author in 2009 if Davies remembered this work, and whether he could shed light on the work's title, Davies replied that he had no recollection of it. We are therefore left to speculate whether the title was inspired by fifteenth-century Italian barber-poet Domenico di Giovanni (c.1404–49), generally known as 'Il

the Five Pieces for Piano also clearly exhibit the influence of the continental avant-garde, especially Messiaen and Boulez. As Philip Rupprecht argues:

The Sonata was a self-consciously 'modernist' work for the 20-year-old Davies, a departure from the manner of the Bartókian Quartet Movement (1952), or the woodwind Octet (1954), whose lively counterpoint retains traditional periodicity of bar-lengths and phrase rhythm. The Octet's parodistic tone, sending up Ländler topics ('Alla Austriaca') and even, in its 'Americanismo' finale, a swaggering blues episode, does not carry over into the Trumpet Sonata. Here by contrast are additive rhythms – notated in bars of ever-changing lengths, lacking time signatures. The music is exuberant, but entirely serious. Davies has adopted the manners of the avant-garde.<sup>29</sup>

This seriousness of intent is also reflected in Davies's writings during this period. In his first published essay of 1956, 'The Young British Composer', he sketches out a rather grim and depressing picture of music education in mid-1950s Britain. Adopting a direct and pugnacious writing style, he argues that:

The challenge to the young British composer is the same as it always has been since Handel. He must study music, and treat it seriously. This is difficult in a country where almost nobody has the courage to face up to the fundamental problems involved in musical composition, or, to put it really bluntly, where music, with depressingly little exception, is composed, taught and practiced in an amateur, and not in a professional manner.<sup>30</sup>

Davies also introduces, in this essay, a key theme that became something of an obsession in his writings of the 1960s, namely the nature and scope of compositional technique:

Burchiello', or by a lavishly appointed Venetian barge, the Burchiello, a number of which were used, especially during the eighteenth century, by the upper classes of Venice to reach the city from their villas in the countryside.

- 29 Philip Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism: The Manchester Group and their Contemporaries* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 12–13. Also see Rupprecht, "'Something Slightly Indecent': British Composers, the European Avant-garde, and National Stereotypes in the 1950s", *Musical Quarterly*, 91/3–4 (October 2008), pp. 295–302.
- 30 Davies, 'The Young British Composer', in *Selected Writings*, pp. 22–3 (originally published in *The Score*, 15 (March 1956), p. 85). Davies's writings from this period are discussed in Nicholas Jones, 'The Writings of a Young British Composer: Peter Maxwell Davies in the 1950s', in *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies*, ed. Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 21–44; and Rupprecht, "'Something Slightly Indecent'", pp. 275–9.

His [the young British composer's] technique should come from exhaustive analysis of the music of not only the greatest composers, but as many of the others as he can manage. Most young composers are familiar with at least the most superficial aspects of Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky, etc., – perhaps even of Messiaen or Stockhausen – but they know surprisingly little about more ancient composers – their training has led them to take for granted that they know all there is to know about them.<sup>31</sup>

The reference to 'ancient composers' here is significant, particularly when one bears in mind that aspects of his own compositional technique were – precisely at this time – being shaped and influenced by early music, an attitude that set him apart even from his Manchester contemporaries.<sup>32</sup> The first composition that explicitly acknowledges the example of early music was *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, a wind sextet written in 1957. The 10-note set on which the work is based is derived from the plainsong Marion antiphon that Davies sourced from the *Liber Usualis*<sup>33</sup> – a strategy that was soon to become a permanent fixture in his compositional technique. However, as David Roberts has pointed out, the method by which the plainsong itself is transformed into the set is by no means as characteristic as it was to become in his later practice, arguing that: 'It is perhaps more productive to observe that the set and the opening of the plainchant are unified by four ordered trichords held in common.'<sup>34</sup> The work also uses the *Dum Compleréntur* plainsong and, according to Richard McGregor, Dufay's *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, a work that Davies sourced from the *Historical Anthology of Music*.<sup>35</sup>

Davies's interest in plainsong was chiefly threefold. Firstly, it was purely a case of affection for the melodies themselves. For instance, when he was a student in Rome in 1957–8, he would go several times every week to Sant'Anselmo, the Benedictine Monastery on the Aventine Hill, with his own copy of the *Liber*

<sup>31</sup> Davies, 'The Young British Composer', p. 21 (in *The Score*, p. 85).

<sup>32</sup> As Davies recalled in interview with Richard Bolley: 'I remember even my colleagues, Birtwistle, Goehr and Ogdon being very suspicious of my liking for [early] music' ('Ancient and Modern 3', *Early Music*, 8/4 (October 1980), p. 3).

<sup>33</sup> *Liber Usualis*, 273. The *Liber Usualis* (Tournai, Belgium, 1953) is a book of commonly used Gregorian chants, compiled by the monks of the Abbey of Solesmes, France.

<sup>34</sup> David Roberts, 'Alma Redemptoris Mater', in *Perspectives on Peter Maxwell Davies*, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> McGregor, 'Peter Maxwell Davies's Sources: Reflections on Origins, Meanings and Significance', in *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies*, pp. 153–4. Davies also sourced material from the *Musica Britannica* in several other works from this and later periods. A comprehensive list of the source material used in Davies's works from 1957 to 2006 can be found in Richard McGregor's Appendix II, in *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies*, pp. 242–54.

*Usualis*: 'I just sat there, enjoyed it, and realized that this was the best music I'd heard in my life. And, of course, you'd never get to that state of purity, but it can influence you very, very strongly. And there's no entertainment; it just is itself. And you're either with it or you're not, but there's something beyond entertainment: it really goes into the very core of one's own existence.'<sup>36</sup> Secondly, he was attracted by the 'inner glow' of plainsong: 'When I was still a student I particularly liked this idea: that a lot of those plainsongs, they've gone through so many composers' imaginations and they've been used in such a way as, say, an icon is used – a visual icon – that people have been appealing to for help, if you like [...] and it seems to have something more than either its pure painted surface or, in the case of the plainsong, the notes of which it consists – it's got an inner glow.'<sup>37</sup> And thirdly, as discussed in more detail below, he was attracted by the symbolic potential that plainsong could offer in relation to his own music.

In 1957, Davies was awarded an Italian Governmental Scholarship to study in Rome with Goffredo Petrassi. *St Michael – Sonata for Seventeen Wind Instruments* was the first of two works that Davies wrote under Petrassi's watchful tutelage; the second, *Prolation*, was Davies's first orchestral score.<sup>38</sup> In *St Michael*, Davies once again used plainsong from the *Liber Usualis* (the *Dies Irae*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*),<sup>39</sup> but he also employed many early music techniques: his programme note, for instance, makes reference to – among other devices – isorhythm, hocket, *cantus firmus*, vocal contrapuntal techniques, canon and mensural canon.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, *Prolation* did not cast its referential net so widely and is primarily governed by the proportions of a 5-note set, both at a macro and micro level. The title, in fact, takes its name from a medieval procedure, which distinguished the relationship of semibreve to minim: 'major prolation' denoted values of 3:1 and 'minor prolation' values of 2:1. According to David Roberts, 'the principle [in Davies's case] is not so much an extension of prolation as an analogy with it. [...] [F]ar more than an acknowledgement of a particular technical indebtedness, the title is an expression of Davies's

36 Davies, in Jones, 'Peter Maxwell Davies in the 1950s', p. 19.

37 Davies, in conversation with Stephen Johnson, 'Sir Peter Maxwell Davies at 75: *A Reel of Seven Fishermen*', *Discovering Music*, BBC Radio 3, 29 November 2009.

38 See Davies, 'Studying with Petrassi', in *Selected Writings*, pp. 247–8 (originally published in *Tempo*, 225 (July 2003), pp. 7–8).

39 *Liber Usualis*, 1810, 1814 and 1815.

40 Davies, programme note for *St Michael*, in *Selected Writings*, pp. 37–8 (originally published in the 1959 Cheltenham International Festival of Music booklet, pp. 28–30).

commitment to a pre-modern world-view.<sup>41</sup> Roberts supports this claim by quoting a passage from an interview that Davies conducted in 1963:

The whole of medieval art and its association with medieval life interests me, especially, I think, because the two are related closely in a way in which they no longer are today. Today the artist tends to work in isolation away from everything with spiritual or practical meaning. I have a certain nostalgia for the medieval period, where life had very deep levels of meaning and symbolism, without being in the least self-conscious.<sup>42</sup>

The ‘deep levels of meaning and symbolism’ also penetrates to the very core of Davies’s interest in the medieval world: namely, his obsession with numbers. In a private letter to Gerard McBurney in October 1991, Davies explained that, for him, numbers were

qualitative rather than quantitative, with inherent and inseparable features which manifest themselves thus in nature, in natural forms/growths – & in our minds, our aesthetic sensibilities. And, I would claim, in the music I write. No more than nature herself do I think of numbers in the change-counting sense – better to use a computer for that – numbers are, rather, dynamic, full of daemon, physical, and assume their own orders & relationships.<sup>43</sup>

The scoring of *Prolation* owes much to Webern and his divided polyphony, where the main line of argument is dispersed through many of the orchestral instruments at a rate of two or three pitches at a time, and the musical language is greatly influenced by the continental avant-garde. But *Prolation* was very much a product of its time and somewhat unrepresentative of Davies’s music written before and after it. Nevertheless, the score contained features that pointed to the future: the use of pitched percussion, which looked forward to the Orkney works of the 1970s; the emotional weight being given to the strings, which became a characteristic feature from the *Second Taverner Fantasia* onwards; and, as is especially evident in the opening 11 bars, the single-note *crescendo* – a distinctive gesture that presages its use in the First Symphony. Furthermore, its structure is influenced by extra-musical matters – by Gothic

41 David Roberts, *Techniques of Composition in the Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (Ph.D. thesis, Birmingham University, 1985), p. 173.

42 Davies, in interview with Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview* (London, 1963), pp. 173–4.

43 Davies, letter to Gerard McBurney, October 1991, p. 3, British Library, MS Mus 1779.