

BLACK PENTECOST

February 1978 saw the first performance of Peter Maxwell Davies's (hereinafter called Max) *Symphony No. 1* commissioned and performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Simon Rattle. Gavin Henderson was the manager of the Philharmonia and he had asked Max to suggest a conductor. One day at the Dartington Summer School Max had been walking through the corridors and heard someone playing an orchestral score on the piano. He peeped in and saw it was Simon Rattle, at that time a young unknown, sitting at the piano and reading the orchestral score and converting it straightaway in his head and into his hands on the piano. Max thought to himself 'now that person can really read a score' and he therefore suggested Simon to Gavin for the big date.

Meanwhile, the London Symphony Orchestra had also commissioned Max to write a work for its 75th anniversary in 1979. The work was to be a celebratory piece. When Max started to compose this work, he was completely submerged in the trouble that Orkney, where he lived, was experiencing with regard to the potential mining of uranium. The whole community was up in arms, and there were threats that people would lie down in front of the bull-dozers if they came in. Max's great friend, George Mackie Brown, the Orcadian poet and writer, had written a novel about life in Orkney called *Greenvoe*, which centres on the fate of a traditional Orkney village on the mythical island of Hellya. The natural rhythms of Orkney life are shattered when a mysterious external company, Black Star, suddenly arrives to buy out the islanders, and displace them from their homes. Max wanted to set some of this novel, under the title of *Black Pentecost*, concentrating on the element of what would happen when the external company takes over to displace the traditional way of life.

Max phoned me to tell me that the piece he was writing for the LSO was not at all celebratory, but just the reverse. I phoned Michael Kaye, the manager, to inform him about this, and he was most distressed. He then reluctantly said that if Max were to continue to write *Black Pentecost*, he would have to withdraw the commission. This is exactly what happened. Gavin Henderson immediately took up the commission for the Philharmonia, with a premiere date set for 1982, and Simon Rattle would conduct the work.

When Max had completed writing *Black Pentecost* there were two solo voices – a baritone and a mezzo soprano. The choice of the singers would go to Simon as the conductor. I went to visit Simon after he had received the manuscript, and he told me that he was going to give the mezzo part Elise Ross, who was his wife. I raised the proverbial eyebrow at this, knowing that Elise was a light soprano. I discussed Simon's wish to have Elise sing the mezzo role with Max, and he was considerably more concerned than I had been. He said that he had a particular mezzo quality in mind throughout the composition of the piece. I went back to Simon who told me that he was always very careful when he chose to work with Elise, for the obvious reason that he didn't want to be accused of nepotism. However, he had studied the work carefully, and he still felt that Elise was the best person to sing the part. Matters continued in this way for a considerable time. Simon was the person in the position to say what would happen, and he was not about to budge.

During this period, Simon had taken a sabbatical year off in order to spend a year at Oxford studying, as he felt he had jumped straight into his conducting career and wanted to enlarge his other horizons. I travelled to Oxford and went to visit Simon in the house in which he was staying. We went over the whole problem again, and I appealed to Simon to take Max's wishes into account. Simon gave me to understand in no uncertain terms, that he was not about to change his mind.

What was I to do? I decided to take the bull by the horns and to talk to Elise herself. In a somewhat sneaky fashion, I worked out when Simon would definitely not be at home, and I phoned Elise up. I asked her about the *Black Pentecost*, and whether or not she had actually seen it. She told me that up to that point she hadn't looked at the music. I then told her that Max had written it for a mezzo. "But I am not a mezzo – I am a soprano. I can of course sing the mezzo notes, but it is definitely not my fach. I can't possibly sing this role if Max wants a mezzo". That was it. She immediately withdrew, leaving the way for a suggestion as to who the mezzo might be.

Max put forward the name of Jan deGaetani and American mezzo who had sung in Max's 1974 work *Stone Litany*. She was engaged, along with The Fires of London's favourite baritone Michael Rippon, who had sung in the premieres of the operas *The Martyrdom of St. Magnus* and *The Lighthouse*. Simon duly conducted the first performance of *Black Pentecost* on 11 May 1982 with Jan and Michael. I think his anger against me rather than Max in all probability still persists to this day.

There was one rather amusing incident, namely that there is a misprint in the programme. The opening line should read "The Burn of Hellya rises over the hill", but in the programme it appeared as "The Bum of Hellya rises over the hill". It is very easily done.

During all the time when there were the problems with Elise going on, I had contacted Anthony Steel, artistic adviser at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, who was at that time working with Ernest Fleischman, who was the Chief Executive of the orchestra. Simon was starting to work extensively with that orchestra and Anthony was anxious to have the American premiere. And so the next performances of *Black Pentecost* took place with the Los Angeles Philharmonic with [Simon, Jan and Michael](#) in February 1983.