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Unicorn Kanchana

How to get the music into people's homes? That was the big question in 1975. There were only two answers. The first was that if there was a broadcast over the radio, then the music was available to a very large public. But once the transmission was over, that was the end of it, unless someone had made a recording at home on their own machines, and they would be able to re-play at any time of their own choosing. The other route was to have a commercial recording. In 1975 commercial recordings were long-playing vinyl records, which were sold in retail shops around the world. The market was dominated by the big recording companies, who had the monopoly of the major artists. The artists helped the recording companies, and the recording companies greatly assisted the artists in their popularity.

When I became manager for both The Fires of London and for Peter Maxwell Davies (hereinafter called Max), quite a number of his works had been recorded. *O Magnum Mysterium*, a set of carols with instrumental interludes and solo organ, written for the children of Cirencester Grammar School, had been an early success. In 1960 it had been recorded by Argo, which later also recorded other carols and the large orchestral work *Second Fantasia on John Taverner's in Nomine*. Grants by the Gulbenkian Foundation to L'Oiseau Lyre had made possible some of the chamber works for The Fires of London, such as *Hymn to St. Magnus*, *Missa Super L'Armé* and the *Renaissance Scottish Dances*. Ken Russell had supported the recording of Max's hugely successful dance music-theatre work, *Vesalii Icones* of 1969 on Unicorn, and they also brought out his other great hit music-theatre work of the same year *Eight Songs for a Mad King*.

But these recordings were deleted very quickly, and were therefore unavailable for the general public. I began to explore the possibilities of seeing which companies might even entertain the idea of recording Max's latest works for the Fires. My endeavours met everywhere with blank walls. One of the major companies informed me that they were seriously considering not continuing to record Bartok, so I should not even mention the name of Peter Maxwell Davies. The prospect looked hopeless.

Michael, my husband, and I went to Leicester to visit John Goldsmith, who was the founder of Unicorn. The company had, in the meantime, changed its name from Unicorn to Unicorn-Kanchana. As well as Max, other artists in whom the company specialised were the composer Bernard Hermann, whose scores for Alfred Hitchcock's films were universally admired and Andrzej Panufnik, the émigré Polish composer, and Carl Nielsen, the Danish composer, whose cycle of symphonies Unicorn were to be the first to record. John Goldsmith said that in principal he would be interested to record some more of Max's works, if funding could be found to pay for the artists.

Some years passed. Nigel Brandt was now in charge of Unicorn-Kanchana, and discussions began again. Max's supreme work for The Fires was *Ave Maris Stella*, a large-scale chamber piece lasting thirty-five minutes, featuring a marimba, and it was not conducted. The accepted way of performing any new music for five or more players, was that it should be conducted. It was so for all the Fires' pieces, with the exception of *Ave Maris Stella*. It had caused great consternation among the players initially, when they had to think themselves into a string-quartet playing mode, but they gradually became used to it, and were able to accommodate any new players into this new ethos as well. As *Ave Maris* had become the calling card for the Fires, it was essential that it should be recorded, and the players agreed to make the recording for Unicorn-Kanchana without fees, and in February 1980 we were able to go ahead with the recording at the Walthamstow Town Hall. At the same time, almost all of the arrangements of 'early' music by composers such as Bach and Purcell, that Max had written for the Fires were recorded. These works were issued on cassette, which had taken over from the long-playing records.

Over the following decade, Unicorn-Kanchana became Max's recording company. At first it was works for The Fires, chiefly *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot*, which was another of Max's music-theatre pieces, and then *Image, Reflection, Shadow*, which was the second uncondacted work, this time featuring the cimbalom. Then, when Max became composer/conductor of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, recordings were made of four of his works for chamber orchestra - *Into the Labyrinth, Sinfonia Concettante, Sinfonia* and *Sinfonietta Accademica*. The funding for these was found by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

Max had, by this time, written several works with a definite Scottish flavour, a reflection the fact that he lived in Scotland, culminating in the much loved *An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise*, written for the Boston Pops Orchestra, and several of these works, performed by different groups were issued by Unicorn-Kanchana under the title of *A Celebration of Scotland*. It had been difficult to think of a suitable context in which to place the recording of *An Orkney Wedding*, but then I thought up the idea of putting the music that Max had written over the Orkney years, covering several different genre, all together into one Scottish bundle. This turned out to be Unicorn-Kanchana's most successful CD.

The first two of the intended ten *Strathclyde Concertos* which Max was to write for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra were also on the Unicorn Kanchana label. Throughout I worked closely with Nigel Brandt and his assistant Siva Oke.

The Martyrdom of Saint Magnus was the chamber opera, written for the enlarged Fires of London, which opened the first St. Magnus Festival in 1977. The Fires ceased to exist in January 1987, but in March 1990, there were performances of the opera in Scotland, and at the Queen Elizabeth hall, as part of a two-week festival of Max's music at the South Bank Centre. These performances were given by Music-Theatre Wales combined with the players of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. It was this team that made the recording, conducted by Michael Rafferty of Music Theatre Wales that was made for Unicorn-Kanchana. Max paid for this recording himself.

By the end of the nineteen eighties, Unicorn-Kanchana had switched from cassettes to compact discs, and, bringing all the works they had of Max's together, from all the different periods, starting with those written in 1969, there were, in total, nine compact discs. In all cases, there had been financial assistance, emanating from different sources, to enable Unicorn-Kanchana to release the new recordings.

Meanwhile, where Max himself was not actually conducting, several of his orchestral works had been recorded, going through the phases of long-play, cassette and finally compact disc. These were:

Symphony No. 1 – the Philharmonia conducted by Simon Rattle (1978) – first brought out on the Decca Headline label

Salome – ballet in two acts – Danish Radio Concert Orchestra conducted by Janos Fürst (1978) – EMI label

Symphony No. 3 – the BBC Philharmonic conducted by Edward Downes (1985) – BBC's own label

Violin Concerto – Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Isaac Stern (violin), conducted by André Previn (1986). Sony label

Concert Suites from *The Boy Friend* and *The Devils*, and *Points and Dances* from *Taverner* - Aquarius conducted by Nicholas Cleobury. Collins Classics label
The first two suites were from the two film scores of the Ken Russell films in 1971 and both had originally been performed by The Fires of London. The *Points and Dances* were from Max's opera *Taverner* first produced at Covent Garden in 1972. The recording was made in 1989

Collins Classics

This last recording was on a new label called Collins Classics. The label was sponsored by Harper Collins, and was run by [Alan Booth](#). Alan was signing many artists. Compact discs were all the rage during the nineteen-eighties, and everyone was getting in on the act. Alan had heard a recording for a television documentary which Max had made featuring Mozart Symphonies with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

In November 1989, when I was in New York, exactly on the day that the Berlin Wall was falling, Michael phoned to tell me that Alan Booth wanted to sign Max for a recording contract for five years. He wanted to have a mix of Max conducting the classical repertoire and his own compositions. I was completely overcome by this suggestion, which surpassed anything I could ever have dreamed about. The contract was to be for a minimum of three compact discs each year for a period of five years. It was exciting beyond words. Max was the composer/conductor of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and had many new works, including the series of ten *Strathclyde Concertos* in the pipe line. But I could see that if this collaboration with Collins Classics were to work, Max would need to have some kind of association with a full symphony orchestra.

I contacted Nigel Brandt to inform him of what had happened, and he immediately said that there was no question that we should go ahead, because Collins Classics were offering what he was never able to do, and that was that they would pay for everything, and that there would be the security of the contract. This meant that the last eight of the ten *Strathclyde Concertos* would all be on a different label from the first two.

In July 1991 Max was appointed composer/conductor of two orchestras in addition to the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. These were the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London and the BBC Philharmonic in Manchester. This opened up the possibility of recording many of Max's orchestral works, which I had hoped for right from the beginning.

Things, however, did not go smoothly as far as Alan Booth was concerned. Dates, which had been tied to performances, and which were put into the diary, were cancelled at the last minute, Alan would phone up and say he was not able to do the recordings, which put everyone concerned out, since everyone's diaries were full to bursting, and it was almost impossible to re-schedule. Something had to be done to adjust the contract. Moreover, I felt uncomfortable about Max being a conductor of the classical repertoire on disc. It seemed to me to be a great waste that it should be the classical repertoire, and not Max's own pieces, that were being recorded. Alan Booth had obviously been having troubles with others of his artists, and indeed with Collins the publishers, and he was sacked, and his deputy, Anne Finnerty, was appointed in his stead.

Although it was Alan who had brought Max into Collins Classics, there was no doubt that Anne was far better at running the firm than Alan ever had been. Max's contract was re-adjusted as I had hoped that it would be, and thereafter things settled down. [Ann married James Rushton](#), who was the chief Executive Officer of Chester Music, which was one of Max's publishers, so it all felt very much within the family. I was able to talk everything through with Anne. She knew exactly what Max's composing schedule was, and what his conducting schedule was, and we were able to work out what should be done, and when it should be done.

Over the period of the five-year contract, which had specified a minimum of fifteen CDs, extra CDs were made, which had not been put into the basic schedule. The producer who worked on virtually every single one of the CDs was Veronica Slater. Veronica had been a long-time producer at the BBC. She had then worked with Max when he was the director of the Dartington Summer School of Music, where she organised and arranged all the concerts. So they knew each other very well, and Max completely trusted Veronica.

Max signed a second five-year contract with Collins. Along the way, Collins Classics sold out to a company called Pinnacle, which, in its turn, sold out to an American company called Zomba. It was in 1998, into Max's second five year contract, that it was announced that Collins Classics, as it was still called despite different ownership, was to close. Zomba had decided that it did not want to have anything to do with classical music. That was that. The company had to be run down. It was a sad time for everyone.

We decided that, rather than just let all the existing Collins Classics recordings slip into oblivion, it would be better if Max were able to have them himself to make use of, in whichever way in the future might be possible, and this was done. Max paid a considerable amount of money by instalments to Pinnacle.

Although the end of Collins Classics was sad, I can look back on the period as a whole with an enormous amount of joy. At the end, an impressive number of works had been recorded for Collins Classics, all of them orchestral works, unless otherwise specified:

BBC Philharmonic Orchestra:

Symphony No. 1, Symphony No. 2, Symphony No. 3, _Mavis in Las Vegas, The Beltane Fire, St. Thomas Wake, Cross Lane Fair, Suite No. 1 from the ballet *Caroline Mathilde*, Ojai Festival Overstore, The Lighthouse (chamber opera), Resurrection (opera)

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra:

Symphony No. 6, Worldes Blis, Time and the Raven, Piano Concerto, Piccolo Concerto, Suite No. 2 from the ballet *Caroline Mathilde*, Maxwell's Reel with Northern Lights, An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise

Scottish Chamber Orchestra:

Symphony No. 4, Strathclyde Concertos 3-10, A Spell for Green Corn: The MacDonald Dances

Scottish National Orchestra:

Trumpet Concerto

Philharmonia:

Symphony No. 5

CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra:

Job (oratorio)

Welsh National Opera

The Doctor of Myddfai (opera)

All the recordings for the BBC Philharmonic had been made in their wonderful Studio 7 in New Broadcasting House in Oxford Road, Manchester. The London orchestras recorded at various churches, whilst the Strathclyde Concertos were all recorded at the City Halls in Glasgow. *Job* was recorded at the brand new Chan Centre for the Performing Arts in Vancouver in Canada, the live performance of the work being the

very first one in the hall, with terrible teething problems with the acoustics, which had to be adjusted minute by minute.

Max had conducted all these recordings, with the exception of *The Doctor of Myddfai*, and, for the most part, had composed them during the period of the contracts. The importance of these recordings being available cannot be over-estimated, and in terms of giving future conductors of Max's pieces at least a concrete idea of how they should be performed. That does not mean that other conductors should slavishly adhere to what Max had done, but it could point them in the right direction.

The Naxos Quartets

Max's commissions during these years of the nineties were almost exclusively for large scale works, and Max was now longing to return to writing works for much smaller forces. Max's time with The Fires, from 1967-1987 had been one of writing for the six instruments of The Fires, or, in one or two cases, for the extended Fires. But now, looking forward into the millennium, Max's greatest urge was to write for string quartet. I had been approached by several string quartets for Max to write a work for them, but Max was not interested in writing just one work. He wanted to explore the medium thoroughly, and if there were problems which had not been solved in a particular work, then he would have the opportunity to go down a path in the next one, or the one after that.

So the idea of having a series of ten string quartets gradually formed. But getting such an ambitious project underway was very difficult indeed. I went down many highways and byways, and in every case, the people who I approached were extremely interested, but in the end were unable to go further, because they were unable to raise the money for the commission. I hadn't made this project as my top priority, but, as the decade wore on, the need became more pressing.

One day when I was browsing in a record shop in Germany, I came across one of the stands entirely devoted to one label that was called Naxos. I had briefly noticed this label on previous occasions, but what struck me this time was the price of the CDs. They seemed to me to be extremely cheap. True, I had not heard of any of the artists who were performing, but I certainly knew the works on display. I investigated further, and obtained a brochure, which declared that the policy of the company was to put the composer in the first position, not the artist. Moreover, its' policy was to only have one recording of each work, and not multiple recordings of the same work by different artists.

That seemed an eminently sensible point of view, for it always had appeared to me that CDs were sold on the basis of the fame of the artist, and not for the works themselves. On looking through the catalogue, I saw that there were virtually no contemporary composers featured. Still, I thought, this might be interesting. What about the idea of a record company commissioning the string quartets?

I broached the subject with Max, who seemed enthusiastic, and we decided that it was certainly worth trying. I ascertained that the boss of Naxos was called [Klaus Heymann](#), and that he lived in Hong Kong. In September 1997 I arranged for a meeting through Select, his agents here in the UK. Michael came with me, as he was always the one when there was any business to be arranged.

I put the proposition to Klaus, which was that Naxos would commission Max to write a series of ten string quartets over a period of five years, and that all these quartets would bear the name of Naxos Quartets. Almost the moment the words were out of my mouth, Klaus said “yes”. The response was so immediate and so unexpected, that I was more than a little taken aback. I was used to quite another form of reaction to what I had to say. People were, if not negative, overwhelmingly cautious. In the first instance, most people were not in a position to make decisions on their own, without referring either to higher authorities, or at least a committee which would back their input. But things were not like that with Klaus. He was the boss, and he was prepared to take his own risks, whatever they might be. We talked a little more, and we were told to get in touch with people from his office, which was in New Zealand. I was of course thrilled to pieces, Further discussions needed to take place, and Klaus and his wife, the Japanese violinist Takakao Nishizaki, came to dinner, and Michael and Klaus thrashed out financial matters.

However, things did not go at all smoothly after that. Although all the terms had been agreed as between Michael and Klaus, whereby Max would be paid only by royalties on sale, it took over two years for the contract to be signed. Then there was the extremely pertinent question of which string quartet would perform the ones that Max would write. Clearly Max would not be writing into the blue. A recognised Quartet had to be brought into the project.

Find the right Quartet was also proving difficult. Max had been very impressed by a young quartet which was attached to the Royal College of Music, and with whom he had worked during a couple of his visits there. It had not yet entered into the world outside the College, and at that point, I put their name forward to Klaus, who said that as long as Max liked them, we should go ahead. The Quartet was happy with the idea of having ten quartets written for them, and a meeting and play-through was arranged, and it seemed that at last things would move forward. But, just at that point, the Quartet, which was called the Belcea Quartet, was moving to another agent, and it was with this new agent I would have to deal. This proved to be one of the most frustrating experiences I have ever encountered. The lady steadfastly ignored me. She did not answer any of my phone calls or letters or e-mails. The reason for this was that the Belcea Quartet was having a vertical success, and it looked as if they were to have an exclusive contract with one of the big recording companies. In which case, they, or at least their agent, would not want to have anything to do with a budget label, and with contemporary music. It would have been much better if the agent would have refused me from the start, but clearly she did not want to do that, in case the deal with the big company did not come off. I finally contacted Klaus, and told him that it was absurd to hold on in this way, and that we should just drop the idea of the Belcea, and look for another Quartet. Klaus agreed with this, and left it to me and to Max, and said that it would be alright, so long as the chosen Quartet was not attached to any other company.

With Max living in Orkney, it was virtually impossible for him to get to hear a selection of Quartets that might fill the bill, so I bought a number of CDs of various possibilities, and sent them to Max for him to listen to. The choice fell on the [Maggini Quartet](#), which, by co-incidence, had made a large number of recordings for Naxos, of quartets by British composers. I forwarded this choice to Klaus, and he readily accepted Max’s choice. I contacted Sue Bailey, who was the Maggini’s

manager, and told her about the proposition, which she said that she would immediately convey to the Quartet themselves. This enthusiasm was a very marked difference from my previous experience with the Belcea's agent, which, I must say was like a breath of fresh air. The Quartet themselves came back with the idea of having a meeting, which took place at my office shortly afterward. This was in July 1999, almost two years from the first rapture of Klaus saying "yes". All the musicians of the Quartet were happy to go ahead.

The next hurdle to be addressed was the placing of the performances over the period of five years. Although Klaus was happy for Max to write the music, and for the Maggini Quartet (hereinafter called the Magginis) to perform it, and for the CDs to be made with the name of the Naxos Quartets on the cover, it did not seem right to any of us that this would all happen without any public performance.

More time passed until, in September 2001 I arranged, together with Michael and Sue Bailey, to see William Lyne who the Director of the Wigmore hall. Bill, as he was known, had been one of the people I had been to see originally about the commission, many years previously, but although he had loved the idea, he had not been successful in raising the necessary funds. On this occasion, however, things were different, as what we were offering him was the first performances, and he would not have to pay for the commission. What emerged from the meeting, was that the Wigmore Hall would have both the very first of the Naxos Quartets, and one every year thereafter, including the last of the series, making a total of six premieres.

So, almost four years since that famous "yes" from Klaus, the project was finally set up for Max to be able to write his string quartets. It had seemed like a long haul from the inception of the idea, to reaching this situation. Looking back on it, the time gap between seeing Klaus for the first time in September 1997 and the eventual first performance of the *Naxos Quartet Number 1* at the Wigmore Hall on 23 October 2002 was roughly the same as for many other compositions, but it had seemed much longer owing to the struggle to get there.

The recordings for the Naxos Quartets, two at a time, were made at Potton Hall near to the North Sea coast in Suffolk. It was a secluded place, far from everywhere, with no distractions of any sort, and Max and the Magginis were able to give the recordings their fullest concentration.

Naxos decided that they wanted to have a CD which was a portrait of Max and his music to introduce him to their buying public. I suggested that Roderic Dunnet should do the job. Roddy had known Max for a very long time, and had written many articles about his work. There were two CDs with 23 tracks of Max's music, with Max himself speaking, and a detailed essay by Roddy.

MaxOpus

Times were changing and people were finding new ways of acquiring the music they wanted to listen to. The word 'downloading' came much into use. Michael and I discussed the possibility of using MaxOpus, our own internet Information Web-site, as a site where Max's music could be purchased. What would we sell on this new

site? We would sell the old Collins Classics which we had purchased back from Pinnacle, together with other recordings gathered from all over the place. [Keith Marlow](#), who had been our computer expert for fifteen years, would construct the site. Keith was both brilliant and creative. He had a full time job, and was only able to attend to us very occasionally. Max liked the idea as of course, he was anxious to see all the recordings which had been made for Collins, become available again, and went along with the idea of having new recordings.

This massive new project took a very long time indeed to come to fruition. In 1998, when we had bought the copyrights to the Collins Classics recordings, purchasing things via the internet was virtually unknown, and nobody really knew how to do it.

Our idea was that the potential purchaser would have two choices. They could either buy a Compact Disc, which they would make up for themselves from the list of Max's works which were available, up to seventy-four minutes, or they could download a single work. The CD was then compiled by some magic which Keith made happen. Each CD was accompanied by a booklet, or liner notes as they are called in America, and despatched. The individual downloads also had their notes. Thus a purchaser could choose to have one short work of five minutes, or a long opera. Each CD was always at the same very accessible price. When people are trying something new, they might be more willing to fork out a small amount of money, rather than a lot of money, and then perhaps be disappointed. There were five prices for the downloads according to the duration.

The setting up of this operation took years for many different reasons, and many times I lost heart or hope that we would ever get there. I was determined that somehow we would manage in time for Max's seventieth birthday in September 2004. We finally made it by the skin of our teeth. From a technical point of view, we managed to launch without incident. Keith had made everything work. We decided that we would make new items available each month. I wanted to have a mix of the old Collins Classics items, together with new items.

At that point, I suddenly found that we had become a recording company. We would take advantage of performances which were happening, which we would record live. It was a whole new world for me. It was now my job to put everything together, and to arrange for the sound engineer and the editing and the compiling of the programme notes.

As well as taking advantage of existing performances to make recordings, we also thought that we would set up our own recordings. We would concentrate on the large number of works which Max had written for solo instruments, for duos and trios. These items were always difficult to get hold of to purchase. We needed to have one fell swoop, and to do them all together. I managed to obtain the hall at the City of London School at Blackfriars, due to the kindness of Michael Smedley, who was in charge of music there. These recordings took place over a period of three days, with the musicians coming in for their allotted time. Some of the musicians recorded two or three works. In many cases I was able to get the musicians, for whom the works had originally been written, but not everyone was available, and those who couldn't make it, were disappointed not to have been able to participate. The three days started on 6 July 2005, one day prior to the bombings on the London underground, which

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added much tension to the proceedings. Everyone turned up and we managed a large amount of recordings.

Overall, however, our MaxOpus recordings were not a commercial success from the sales point of view. Although the site got a lot of hits, this interest did not extend to people parting with money. When we had bought back the Collins Classics copyrights in 1998, Klaus Heymann at Naxos had been interested to purchase them, but we had thought we might go it alone. We were wrong.