

UNUSUAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

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Introduction

Down the years I have had to deal with quite a number of instruments which are out of the ordinary run of those found and played in a regular orchestra. This was usually in response to hearing a particular musician playing the instrument, or to the sound of the instrument itself

Marimba

Max's ensemble, The Fires of London, had been going since 1967 and he had written a large number of works for the six members, but it wasn't until 1975 that he wrote a piece which they would be able to perform without a conductor. This work was *Ave Maris Stella* which was written for viola, cello, clarinet, flute, piano and marimba. To feature a marimba within the body of a chamber work in this way was extremely unusual. For the most part the percussionists, and their instruments, are kept well behind the other members of an ensemble, who are always in a closely knit semi-circle, and they are there to add colour rather than to be integrated into the fabric of the work, along with the other instruments.

The percussionist of the Fires at that time was Gary Kettel, and it was his talents that Max felt inspired to compose this work. Initially the group had considerable difficulty in getting into the piece, main due to the absence of a conductor, and they were just not used to this. Max always saw the ensemble as a group of musicians, like a string quartet, who would find their own way of coming together rather than through the guidance of a conductor, and, with *Ave Maris Stella*, he was able to fulfil his dream.

Ave Maris turned out to be a great success and was in demand and there were a lot of performances. It was one of the works programmed for the tour of the USA and Canada in 1976, but by this time Gary Kettel had left The Fires, and the acting percussionist for the tour was Terence Emery, who categorically stated that he certainly would not take a marimba on tour, and that the venues would all have to provide one. Luckily both the USA and Canada are countries in which obtaining a marimba is not a problem.

However, in 1977 The Fires were to make a tour in Latin America where the circumstances would be quite different, and there would be no guarantee that a marimba would be able to be provided in every venue. After the American tour, we had been lucky enough to purchase a marimba through the donation of a gift from Marie Currie.. whom was a friend of Max's. As *Ave Maris* would definitely be on many of the programmes, we would have to take a marimba with us. This was a daunting prospect from every point of view, but the fact that the tour was

being entirely sponsored by the British Council who would be with us every step of the way was certainly very comforting in the circumstances.

The newly appointed percussionist was Gregory Knowles, who was fresh out of the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, and apart from being brilliant as a performer, most especially in *Ave Maris*, he had no experience professionally. The tour was to take place in March and April 1977, and some weeks prior to the commencement of the tour, I called for the whole group to get together, with all their instruments, so that we all knew what we were doing. Greg turned up with the marimba in its flight case. The trouble was that the case and the marimba was huge, and that it took at least four people to pick the case up. Something needed urgently to be done. Greg went away and said he would fix it it. He returned a couple of weeks later with three flight cases. The marimba was now broken up and put into these three cases. This was an excellent solution as far as moving the marimba around on flights. The trouble was that on arrival at each venue, the marimba had to be put together, and this was a long job. It was also a job which needed two people. Greg was not able not do this on his own. Enter Judy Arnold. I was always on hand to assist Greg with dismantling the marimba at the end of each performance, and then putting it together prior to the following one, wherever that might be.

Cimbalom

In 1981 Max and I were on a visit to Budapest and we went to a restaurant where a cimbalom was being played. Max had often made mention of the fact that he loved this instrument, and on this occasion he was enraptured by it, and he stated that he absolutely must write a work for Greg (Knowles) featuring the cimbalom. By 1981 Greg had become a much-loved member of The Fires and Max was anxious to write a work especially for him, which would show off his supreme talents. The trouble was that the cimbalom was not an instrument which Greg played. He did not even possess one. But Max had made his mind up, and Greg, always willing and anxious to rise to a challenge, agreed to go along with the plan.

People who can play a cimbalom, outside of Hungary, are very rare. Instruments are even harder to come by. Greg found someone in Blackpool who would make a cimbalom for him, and Max wrote the new work. It was intended to be the companion piece to *Ave Maris Stella* that is to say, a chamber work which the six players of The Fires of London would play without a conductor. Max asked me to arrange for Greg's cimbalom to be brought to his London flat where he could spend time with it and get to know it, so that he could write his piece. I went to Greg's flat to look at the cimbalom. The moment I saw it my heart sank. I saw in a flash that this instrument was going to cause me even more logistical problems than ever the marimba had done. For a start, it would take a six-man team to move it out of one building onto a moving vehicle, and another six-man team to extricate it from the van into another building at the other end. No long distance tours, such as across the Atlantic or to Australia could be envisaged with this instrument.

Max duly wrote the work which was entitled *Image, Reflection, Shadow*, The first performance was to be at the St. Magnus Festival in Orkney in June 1982. It turned out that the part for the cimbalom which Max had written was one of extreme virtuosity, which would have been all well and good, had Greg been a long-standing virtuoso on the cimbalom. It was as if a person learning the violin was asked to play some Paganini *Caprices*

But Greg had only acquired his cimbalom a few months previously and was learning how to play it, and Max, unusually, delivered the piece very late in the day. There simply was not enough time for The Fires to prepare properly. They could only manage the first of the three movements in Orkney. The second arranged performance was at the Dartington Summer School of Music in Devon in July 1982. The group valiantly pressed on, but still were not able to put together the whole work. This time they played the first two movements. The

whole piece had still not performed. Max offered to help the players by conducting them, even though he wished for it not to be conducted. But the players vigorously refused this offer, stating that they could and would manage it on their own, given more time.

The third performance was to be at the Lucerne Festival in Switzerland in August 1982. This gave the players some more time, and they were ready. The concert was a morning one, and it was to be broadcast live. Another drawback, or problem, or whatever word one wants to use connected with the cimbalom, is that it needs a very long time to tune it correctly, and that it goes out of tune very rapidly. So a lot of extra time needs to be built into any kind of rehearsal schedule to allow for the tuning.

It was a glorious day and, finally, and at long last, The Fires of London played all three movements of *Image, Reflection, Shadow*. We all celebrated by taking to the lake in several rowing boats. Greg and all the players had triumphed and risen to the exceedingly tough challenge which had been given to them, and they were all feeling very pleased with themselves.

Image, as we all called it, went on to be the new calling card of The Fires. It always remained the same problem regarding transport and numbers of hands on deck to move it around, even though Greg eventually bought another cimbalom made in Hungary, which was considerably more manageable than his original one from Blackpool. After Greg left The Fires, his successor, Mark Glentworth, did not play a cimbalom and did not want to learn how to, and so *Image* was quietly retired from The Fires' repertoire.

Keyboard Carillon

When Max was composing the chamber opera *The Martyrdom of St. Magnus*, in 1976, he decided to use an instrument housed in a small case which was owned by Keith Harding, who had an extensive collection of unusual musical instruments and automata, which he later turned into a museum. The instrument is the Keyboard Carillon, which has a bell-like sound, and which is played on a keyboard, exactly as the name of the instrument indicates. The instrument was used to accompany Magnus whenever he had a solo. As this instrument is very rare, Max gave an alternative a Celtic Harp, which is also rare, and therefore not available, or the part can be played by a celeste and harpsichord. But the sound is quite different, and doesn't produce the same atmosphere. Keith used to arrange to bring the Keyboard Carillon to our rehearsals which we took to the performances, and then retrieve it later.

Didgeridoo

Max spent a year in Australia teaching at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide in 1965-6 during which he became very interested in indigenous Australian culture. The very ancient wooden trumpet, as it is sometimes called, which varies in length, but is generally around four feet, intrigued him very much. When he came to write his music-theatre work *Eight Songs for a Mad King* in 1969, with a libretto by Max's Australian friend, the writer Randolph Stowe, Max was happy to have an opportunity to include the [didgeridoo](#).

Hand bells

Max was very fond of hand bells, and he used them when he in 1968 wrote *Missa Super L'Homme Armé*. When I became the manager of The Fires of London in 1976, we always had to hire them from the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, which is a very old company in the East End of London dating from 1570. We used to hang them on a clothes wrack, and Stephen

Pruslin, our keyboard player, always used to play them even though, technically, they are classed as percussion instruments because the bells are struck.

Out-of-Tune Pianos

Around the years 1968 and 1969, Max wrote three works which included an out-of-tune piano. The three works were *Missa Super L'Homme Armé*, *Vesalii Icones* and *St. Thomas Wake, Foxtrot for Orchestra*. People might be more familiar with the name of honky-tonk piano, which evokes a sleazy sound

What this meant was that one asked for an upright piano to be provided by the people putting on the concert, and then, ask for the piano-tuner to work on the piano to render it slightly out of tune. This was not always easy to achieve, as the piano tuners took great pride in bringing the pianos up to tune., and were not at all anxious to do something which might bring their professional aptitude into question.

Highland Bagpipes

It was on the Boston Symphony Orchestra's tour in February 1981 of Max's *Symphony No. 2*, written for the orchestra's hundredth anniversary, that Max met the film composer John Williams. John Williams had recently been appointed as the conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra, which is exactly the same orchestra as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but without the principal players. The Pops perform in May and June, which is after the main orchestral season, and before the orchestra moves to its summer residence at Tanglewood.

Max's symphony had gone down very well with the orchestra, and he had been with them for the rehearsals and at all the performances on that tour. So when Tom Morris, the General Manager of the BSO, phoned me to ask whether Max might consider writing a work for the Boston Pops, I was not unduly surprised and neither was I when Max agreed to do it. It was to be for May 1985. When Max was considering what he would do with the piece, he phoned me and asked me to ask Tom Morris if they would have any difficulty in acquiring someone who played Highland Bagpipes. Tom asked me to leave it with him and that he would come back to me. He returned quickly and told me that it would not be a problem.

Max wrote *An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise* in December 1984 at an extremely difficult time in his life. His mother had had a stroke some months earlier and was in the hospital which she never left until her death in 1986. His father had died one day before Christmas 1984. And yet *Orkney Wedding* is one of Max's most joyful works, depicting the wedding of his neighbour on the island of Hoy in Orkney where he lived at the time.

Max was spending six months teaching at Harvard, which is in Cambridge Massachusetts, which is just across the river from Boston. John Williams had attended some of Max's classes.

I went to Boston for the first performance.. I was delighted to revisit Symphony Hall where which I had enjoyed so much at the time of the *Symphony No.2*. The orchestra has one whole floor for its administration. As I walked along this floor, I met John Williams who was clutching Max score close to him, and he told me how much he loved the work.

It had not been easy to find the piper because although there are a lot of them around, virtually none of them had played with an orchestra. The piper who Tom found was Nancy Tunnicliffe.

For the Pops, all the rows of seats in the stalls are removed, and in their stead are placed numbers of tables with chairs. The audience sits at these tables, and eat and drink there. It is as if they are at an open air Beer House in Bavaria. When the orchestra plays, the audience is quiet but not entirely. There is still much tinkling of glasses. The music is definitely not the main item at these events.

I sat with Max and Tom Morris at one of these tables. I was of course prepared for the great surprise at the end, but the audience was not. When the bagpiper is brought on and progresses through the audience, there was an audible intake of breath. Nobody could have expected this. The ‘Sunrise’ of the title is depicted by the Highland Bagpipes in all its glory.

I made a personal recording. I was so thrilled that I kept playing it to myself the whole of that night which I spent at Max’s apartment at Harvard. Two days later I was in the Boosey & Hawkes office in New York to discuss this new work. I suggested that this could be a real hit, and asked them if they could circularise orchestras around the USA about the work. They had a policy that they would not make any special effort on behalf of any one particular composer, which is most certainly the right attitude, as otherwise they would be overwhelmed, but somehow my pleading on this occasion brought success, and they did contact the orchestras with huge success.

In the UK, the first performance was given at the Brighton Festival, whose artistic director was Gavin Henderson, and it was broadcast on the BBC programme on Radio2, which is not the usual BBC station for Max’s music, concentrating as it does on light music. The piper on that occasion was George MacIlwham, who was a flute player in the BBC Scottish Orchestra in Glasgow, but who also played the pipes. George went on to be invited to perform the piece on numerous occasions.

As interest in *An Orkney Wedding* reached into Europe, I realised that it would be necessary to find a piper who lived in the heart of Europe, so that it he, or she, would be able to quickly reach wherever it was that the work would be performed. I asked Hilary Bartlett, who was a friend and who worked for many years at the British Council in Berlin, to help me find someone, and she came up with Gunther Hausknecht, who stepped forward willingly, although very nervous at first, and he became the pipe who was called upon.

Any problems which an orchestra might encounter if they do not have a local piper who can immediately be called upon have, over the years, been entirely obliterated as *An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise* remains one of Max’s most enduring and beloved work.

Northumbrian Smallpipes (1)

In 1991 Max became the composer/conductor of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in Manchester. One day, when walking down the corridor at the BBC’s studios in Oxford Road, he heard one of the musicians playing an instrument with which he was not familiar. The player was [Mark Jordan](#), a clarinettist in the orchestra, and the instrument was the Northumbrian Smallpipes. Max was enchanted with what he heard and began to ask questions about the instrument. Mark explained that it was an instrument of the North East of England, and that there were very few people who played it, but he was one of them, and it was a very particular love of his. Max decided he would love to write a work for Mark to play his pipes, and asked Brian Pidgeon, the manager of the orchestra, if he could. Max was writing many works for the orchestra at the time which related to memories of his childhood in Manchester and Salford. and this one would be one of them

The title of the work was *Cross Lane Fair* and the work relates the story of when Max was taken as a small boy by his parents to the fair of that name, and his experiences. It is another of Max’s light music works. It was first performed by the BBC Philharmonic, with Max conducting at the St. Magnus Festival in 1994. Mark Jordan’s talents were not confined to the Northumbrian Smallpipes, but extended to juggling as well, and so the work developed into some kind of one-man show, which was very endearing. When Mark played the work he was of course able to do the juggling, but when other musicians took the piece up, they were, of

course, unable to do this. The Northumbrian Smallpipes players are few and far between which is a considerable limiting factor for performances.

Nothuumbrian Smallpipes (2)

It was in 2003 that Tony Sargent, the General Director of the Sage Centre in Gateshead, contacted me. I had known Tony over many years, working with him in his several jobs which had been newly created for him. He said he had an idea for a work which he, at the Sage, would like to commission Max for,, and it was connected with Kathryn Tickell. He explained that Kathryn Tickell was the very famous local girl in North East England around the Gateshead/Newcastle area, who was a star performer on the Northumbria Smallpipes. He obviously knew that Max had already written *Cross Lane Fair*. Max said he would need to hear her play, and Tony quickly made an arrangement for Kathryn to visit Max. Max was absolutely thrilled with Kathryn and stated that he would love to write a work for her. It was a chamber work for Cor Anglais and String Quartet together with the Northumbrian Smallpipes, and it was called *Kettletoft Inn*.

Celtic Harp (Clarsach)

Max used the Celtic Harp, or Clarsach as it is called in Scotland, in, *The Beltane Fire* (1995) which is an orchestral symphonic suite of dances which Max called a choreographic poem . The story is Max's own, and is based on Orkney lore. He used it again in his opera *The Doctor of Myddfai* (1995) with a libretto by David Pountney which is based on a Welsh legend. The stories of both these works have strong folk elements in them.

Bodhran

The Bodhran is the traditional Celtic frame drum. It has a rich deep sound. When Max wrote *Swinton Jig* for the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, I happened to be going to Ireland, where they specialise in these instruments, and I bought one and gave it to Rob Lea in the orchestra, and he played it, as a soloist, in the work