

SYMPHONY NO. 2

There was a significant change in the public's perception of Peter Maxwell Davies's (hereinafter called Max) music after the performance by the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Simon Rattle Peter Maxwell Davies's *Symphony No.1* at the Royal Festival Hall in London in February 1978. Up to that point, Max had been known, initially, as an educator through his works such as *O Magnum Muysterium* for the children of Cirencester Grammar School when he was in charge of music in the late nineteen fifties. Then in 1969 he became known for his ground-breaking music-theatre works, such as *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and *Vesalii Icones*, written for his own small ensemble The Pierrot Players, later to become The Fires of London. Max had written large-scale orchestral works in the sixties, and it was his *Worldes Blis* in 1969 which had caused a scandal at the BBC Promenade Concerts when a large proportion of the audience had walked out during its premiere.

But the *Symphony No. 1* was different. It was a symphony. The very title heralded the change, both in Max's own style of composition, but also how the audience regarded his work. There was a quick follow up to the UK performances of the first symphony in the U.S.A. with the New York Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta in October 1978. Max's symphony had been noticed on the other side of the Atlantic.

I brought attention to this state of things to one of my friends, [Michael Steinberg](#). Michael had been the long-term music critic of the Boston Globe, and then he himself had a change of career, and moved over to work for the Boston Symphony Orchestra as artistic advisor to their Music Director [Seiji Ozawa](#). At that period, the BSO was making its plans to celebrate its centenary, or, that they say in the USA, its centennial, in 1981. These plans were to have a series of commissions of varying sorts and sizes. The commission which came to Max was for a symphony. Max had not the slightest hesitation in accepting the commission.

In September 1979 Max and I were in Edinburgh to discuss the opera which the Edinburgh International Festival had commissioned for 1980. This was to be *The Lighthouse*. The Boston Symphony was in Edinburgh at the same time and it was arranged that Max and I would meet Seiji Ozawa and Tom Morris, who was the Chief Executive of the orchestra. It was a memorable meeting. Max was able to talk music to Seiji, although, at that time, Seiji's command of English was limited. I was able to talk about practical matters to Tom.

The premiere performances had been fixed for February 1981. I say performances, because in the United States the orchestra have subscriptions, which is virtually unknown in the UK. This means that every concert is repeated to each different subscription audience, depending on how many subscriptions there are. Some orchestras have two, some have three, and, in the case of the major orchestras, they have four. All this sounded like paradise as far as I was concerned, being used to the one and only first performance with no repeats.

Tom told me that in addition to those first four performances in Boston, the orchestra was intending to take the new symphony on its tour of the United States. This was to be its special centennial tour. Better and better. The orchestra would perform the symphony in San Francisco, in Los Angeles and finally ending up in Carnegie Hall in New York. I tentatively enquired about making a recording. Tom sighed, and said that this would be difficult, if not impossible, but that it would be looked into when the time came.

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Max was well aware that the publishers always had a great deal to do at every stage once the manuscript had been handed to them, and so he kept to the schedule, and handed in his scores in good time. Max always wrote his composition movement by movement. This means that when he had finished, say, the first movement, he would then consider it to be finished, and would move on to the second movement. He would then deliver it to me for me to pass on to Boosey & Hawkes, Max's publishers, for them, in turn, to start all the various processes to be gone through in preparing the material to be passed on to the organisation which was to perform the work.

Max duly composed this Boston Symphony, movement by movement, totalling four movements in all. I, in my turn passed on each of the four movements. I did this by delivering each of the four separate manuscripts to the part of Booseys which dealt with this. The head office was in Regent's Street, but the department which dealt with processing all the parts was at The Hyde on Edgware Road in Hendon. All my communications with the team at The Hyde was excellent. I would phone up and they would always accommodate me in whatever I requested.

Then, one day in January 1981, I received an urgent communication from the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It said that the orchestra had only received the first score of the first two movements. I was astonished. This was less than two months before the performance. I had delivered the whole symphony many months previous to this, and yet, somehow, two of the movements had not been passed on. I was frantic. Max was apoplectic. When I phoned Booseys to enquire as to the reason why the second two movements had not been passed on to Boston, I was informed that Max's original had been handed over to the person who was making the parts, and that this was the only copy, and that seemed to them to be more urgent than making another copy to let Seiji Ozawa have a good look at it in good enough time.

Well! This whole matter became a very serious issue between Max and Booseys, with me heading the charge. Here was the situation where Max had done absolutely the right thing in finishing the composition in very good time, but that the key matter of the conductor having the whole work in his hands to be able to study it, had simply not happened. Booseys explained to me that that it was their practice to always send the score and the parts together at the time when the orchestra would need the parts. This is all well and good, but it totally leaves out the factor of making a complete score available for the conductor to be able to study in enough time. A complete score for Seiji was immediately sent to Boston, but relations between Max and Booseys had fallen to an all-time low. To such an extent that Max asked me to send a message to head office to say that under no account was any of staff of Booseys to appear in Boston at the time of the premiere. Oh dear, oh dear – this was bad. I was not enjoying this confrontation one little bit.

Max and I went to Boston to be there in time for the very first rehearsal. We were greeted by the team who I now regarded as friends, namely Tom Morris and his number two Gideon Toeplitz, who I had also met earlier at the Edinburgh Festival a year or so previously. There was much talk about what had happened with the late delivery of the third and fourth movements of the symphony, but then everyone quickly got down to the business of rehearsing. Seiji worked well with the orchestra, but, as was frequently the case with musicians who were new to Max's music, there was considerable grumbling that it was all very difficult. Delegations were sent to Gideon to ask why this work had been programmed in so many of the towns which were to be visited.

All of this made Max very nervous indeed. The new critic of the Boston Globe came to interview Max. This was Richard Dyer, who had recently taken over from Michael Steinberg, who had been the person who had suggested Max for the commission. Max himself knew quite a few people in Boston because a number of his chamber works had been performed by some of the smaller

groups, and indeed Seiji himself had conducted one of these – *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* – which was one of the reasons why Max was persona grata in Boston.

Max and Michael (my husband) and I were staying at the Colonnade Hotel, which is a ten minute walk from Orchestra Hall. It was a good feeling to be able to walk backwards and forwards to the hall without having to go in a taxi. Symphony Hall is definitely my favourite hall in the United States, and perhaps even in the world, at least as far as large halls are concerned. It somehow welcomes you with open arms. The whole concept of an orchestra having its own hall where all its activities took place was unknown to me. This was not how things worked in London. The Royal Festival Hall was the London concert hall which was used by most the London orchestras. The exception was the BBC Symphony Orchestra which did have its own permanent residence at the Maida Vale Studios, but their concerts were also given at the Royal Festival Hall. So the idea that there was a building which was totally dedicated to the organisation which was the orchestra was entirely novel, and equally overwhelmingly delightful to me. There was the auditorium itself, in all its glory. But there was also a whole floor in which the administration operated. If someone in the management wanted to have a word with any of the musicians, they only had to step downstairs and button-hole him or her at the interval or at the end of a rehearsal. Each musician had his or her own locker in which they could leave items, such as clothing or music, on a long-term basis, without having to keep transferring them around from one venue to another. The music director had his own suite with his own grand piano, which, in effect, was rather like to a private apartment. Meetings with soloists, musicians from the orchestra and members of the administrative staff could be held in the quiet comfort of these surroundings. It was into these circumstances that Max was welcomed during those days of the rehearsals. But it wasn't only the hall. It was the traditional of the Boston Symphony itself. The years when Serge Koussevitzky had been the chief conductor had brought the orchestra to the top of world renown, and the years with Charles Munch cemented that status. The orchestra also was famous for the composers which it commissioned, including, for its fiftieth anniversary, Prokofiev, Respighi, Hindemith and Stravinsky with his *Symphony of Psalms*. Max was going to step into a very large pair of shoes.

Various friends were arriving from England and Scotland as well as many critics from the British nationals, were gathering for the big day. Max's edict that no one from Booseys, or their American subsidiary – Boosey & Hawkes Inc. – should attend, had not entirely been obeyed. It would have been an enormous slap in the face for Booseys if they had been unrepresented at this, surely one of the most prestigious events for any publisher at any time. The moment had now arrived. The other work in the programme, at the Boston performances, was *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky. Max and I took our seats. The woman who was sitting next to me, lent across me and said to Max "are you the composer?" to which Max replied, with a faint voice "yes, I am". The woman said "I thought so. That is the composer's seat. That is where Bartok seat." Max, who had been convulsed with nerves the entire week, was now reduced to saying absolutely nothing.

Seiji and the orchestra came through brilliantly. The difference to how things had moved up many notches from what had been happening at the rehearsals was palpable. It was as if the orchestra had decided themselves to back the symphony and to go with it all the way. The response from the public was joyous. I had no comparison as to how an American audience, and one in Boston to boot, would welcome a new work, but to me it seemed as warm and welcoming as could be. Richard Dyer wrote an exceptionally marvellous review, commenting not only on the symphony but on Max's place in the world of writing new music at this time. Perhaps the most gratifying comments came from the players themselves, as a new delegation now formed asking why it was that this work had not been programmed throughout the upcoming tour, as it was the best possible way of showing off the numerous talents of the orchestra. Quite a change from how things had

been during rehearsals. As far as I myself was concerned, I remember feeling very shy with Max and could hardly speak to him during those first days when I realised what a huge and significant baby had been delivered.

The next stop was Carnegie Hall in New York. The *Symphony No. 1* had been performed in the Avery Fisher Hall in the Lincoln Centre, and so to have his new symphony played in Carnegie Hall was a special treat for Max. . The night before the Carnegie Hall concert, there was a party at Ronald Wilford's home. Ronald Wilford was the boss of the concert agency Columbia Artists Management Inc. always known as CAMI, who were touring the orchestra, and he was Seiji's manager. It was at this party that Max told everyone while they, that is all the orchestra, were moving on to their various other performances, he, Max, would be crossing the American Continent on a train, to meet up with them all in San Francisco, where the next performance of the symphony would take place. Everyone was quite astonished by this, as nobody ever took long train journeys in those days. A trip from Boston to New York or from New York to Washington on Amtrak down the east coast was the most anyone would take on a train. When Max had been in America on his Harkness Scholarship in the nineteen fifties, he had crossed America by car, and he was wanted to see more of the continent, but this time by rail.

The programme for the rest of the tour of the symphony had been changed and, Joseph Silverstein, the long-standing concert-master of the Boston Symphony, and who had been so very helpful both to Seiji and to Max throughout the rehearsals and performances, was to play the Tchaikowsky *Violin Concerto*. We sat in a box with Aaron Copland, who had been Max's sponsor for the Harkness Scholarship, and [Roger Sessions](#), the senior American composer, who had been Max's teacher during the time he was at Princeton on that Harkness Scholarship, and with Elliott Carter, Also a prominent American composer, who had always been very supportive of Max, and whose music we had performed a great deal in *The Fires of London*. Max was still as nervous as anything. Every audience is a new challenge. But it all went off well, and Max was particularly happy that those older composers, who were sitting in the box with him, seemed very appreciative of the outcome.

After the performance, there was another, very celebratory, party, this time at Essex House Hotel facing Central Park. This party was given by the Bell Telephone Company for the orchestra to celebrate its centennial. It was this company which was sponsoring the tour. A vast cake with one hundred candles on it was wheeled in on a trolley. Seiji made a speech, in which he linked Max to Tchaikowsky, the two composers of the evening. He said that these composers had something in common, and that was the fact that neither of them had a telephone. I should point out that in those days in the early nineteen eighties, Max living on Hoy was famous for the fact that he did not have a telephone, and that he was notoriously difficult to reach. Seiji, in those days, was still struggling with his English, and this joke, which brought together the various elements so eloquently, went down particularly well.

When Max went off on his train, I had several promotional meetings across the country, and then met up with Max and the rest of the orchestra in San Francisco, which was the venue for the next performance of Max's symphony. The orchestra, which was also the Boston Pops on some occasions, were to give a concert, as the Pops, in Los Angeles, and they did their rehearsal for that concert in San Francisco. The Boston Pops, which gave concerts in Boston every year in May and June, had very recently appointed the composer John Williams as their new chief conductor, and they were to introduce him in Los Angeles. Of course John Williams was very well known in Los Angeles and the composer of such films as *Jaws*, the *Star Wars Series*, *Indiana Jones*, but here the public were going to have a chance to actually see him in action. The concert was in the Louise M.

Davies Hall. There were great discussions as to how Max was to get from the box where he would be sitting during the concert onto the platform at the end to take his bow with Seiji. During the rehearsal, I was given detailed instructions as to how this journey was to take place. I decided I would do a recce first, and then go through it with Max himself. It was exceedingly complicated, and involved going along corridors, and into lifts, and then further manoeuvrings. When I started to explain all this to Max, he stated, with great firmness that there was no way he was going to go through all that palaver, and that he would sit in the stalls, and get onto the platform from there. It was gently pointed out to Max that there were no steps from the stalls onto the platform, and that it would therefore not be possible for him to sit in the stalls. Max said that it didn't bother him at all that there were no steps, as he was quite able to jump up onto the platform. The story that had put him off completely about sitting in the box and getting to the platform from there was that of how the Japanese composer, Toru Takemitsu. He had been in that same box and making his way to that same platform, and had pressed the button in the lift and found himself in the car park, and he never made it to his destination on to the platform.

On the night prior to the San Francisco performance, Seiji, who had spent some years in San Francisco as music director of their orchestra and who knew the town well, invited the whole orchestra for a meal in a Japanese restaurant. Max and I did not go to this as Max didn't like Japanese or Chinese food and he excused himself. But, later on that evening, Seiji invited a chosen few to a haunt of his, and Max and I were in that select band. The others were Tom Morris, Gideon Toeplitz and John Williams. Of all the circumstances in which I had found myself, I can't think of any which were stranger than this one. I don't know how to define the place, but the nearest I can get to is a strip joint. Ladies would come and go to our table. Seiji did not sit at the table with us, but was energetic in the club. The rest of us sat grimly round the table. Nobody was enjoying themselves. The fame of this visit spread far and wide. Somehow word had got out about it, and thereafter I was forever being asked to tell people about it.. As you can see from this account, I found it all very embarrassing for everyone concerned.

Then the orchestra moved on to Los Angeles and the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. That was the home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and also the place where the Oscars were handed out. I found it very thrilling to visit all these concert halls, but Boston always remained my favourite. This period of the rehearsals and performances of the *Symphony No. 2* had all seemed as if we were in a bubble. The wonderful playing and co-operation of the players, and Seiji's close attention enabled the delivery of magnificent performances. Thus it was that this time in the USA riding on the enchanted chariot of the symphony came to an end. I felt as if we had been totally spoiled. If this was how things were, then it certainly felt very good. I was also aware, however, or the other side of the coin. Those artists or composers who were not the flavour of the month fared very differently. No fuss was made of them. In fact, conditions were harsh. The encouraging point had been the turn around by the players from their antagonistic attitude at first to their willingness to pull out all the stops, and top show off the virtuosity which Max had written into the piece. I realised that things might not work out so well on future occasions if the conductor did not have matters in hand.

I had thought it advisable to be in contact with Robert Ponsonby at the BBC to tell him how things were going during the tour. The UK premiere symphony had been programmed for the Proms to be performed the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, who was its chief conductor. I asked Max to tell me how many rehearsals he thought it would be necessary for the Prom, and he said that six would just about do it. I communicated this information to Robert, who said he would act upon it, which indeed he did and the six rehearsals were duly written into the schedule for this concert.. However, in the event, things didn't turn out as that way.

Rozhdestvensky was famous for his daring and outstanding interpretations, but he was not over-fond of rehearsing. He always brought the orchestra to their best pitch on the night. But this was on the basis of the sure foundation of the players knowing their ground. But what would happen when the language of a work was unfamiliar to the players? The BBC Symphony was a great orchestra and its reputation in performing new music was second to none. But even these players needed to feel comfortable with the basics of what they were performing. Rozhdestvensky did have the six rehearsals. That is to say, he started at the correct time, but less than half way through each of the reversals, he sent the orchestra home. Nobody complained. Everybody likes to feel they have been granted an unscheduled holiday, and this was what was happening all through that period. The lack of a satisfactory amount of attention to the symphony resulted in a lack-lustre performance in July 1981. It would seem as if the audience were unable to understand what all the fuss over the symphony in the U.S.A. had been about. I found it bitterly disappointing. It was a brilliant opportunity which was missed, because nothing in the UK has as much clout and echo as a live Prom performance.

But there was a silver cloud on the horizon. This came in the shape of the BBC Northern orchestra. This was the BBC's own orchestra in Manchester – Max's own home town. Up to that point in Max's career, very little interest in his music had ever been shown. But now there was to be a performance of the symphony to be conducted by its chief conductor, Edward Downes. Downes had been the person who had pushed through and conducted Max's opera *Taverner* at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in 1972, and he was well disposed towards Max. It was a very exciting time for Max when in September 1981 he went to Manchester to attend the performance in their Oxford Road studios, home of the BBC Northern Orchestra prior to the public performance at the Free Trade Hall three weeks later. Down the years Max had been so battered and upset by the attitude of the players towards his music, that it came as a great surprise and delight when there was a positive response. The attitudes can largely depend on the conductor, and Edward Downes was just the man to encourage the orchestra to their best. The fact that this performance took place in Max's own beloved Free Trade Hall, where he had spent his youth getting to know the repertoire, made the occasion even more special.

After the concert, we sat in the lobby of the Midland Hotel, just round the corner from the Free Trade Hall. The head of music at the BBC Northern was Davie Ellis, himself a composer and an old colleague of Max's from his student days. David had been very thrilled with the symphony, and he asked Max if he would consider writing a symphony for his own orchestra. Max replied instantly that he would be very happy to do that. David Ellis then said that of course the premiere would have to take place in London, because that was where the action was and nobody took any notice of anything that happened outside of London. I replied that under no circumstances was the premiere of a piece written for the BBC Northern Orchestra to take place in London, and that it should and must be at the logical place, namely the Free Trade Hall. David Ellis was somewhat taken aback by how strongly I had spoken out, but he agreed, and so the deed was done. Max would write his third symphony for the BBC Northern Orchestra, and it would be conducted by Max's long-time supporter – Edward Downes.