

## **SYMPHONY NO. 1**

When I started my job as manager of The Fires of London and as Peter Maxwell Davies's (hereinafter called Max) manager in October 1975, I had no idea of the complexity of either of these two positions. At that period of his life, Max was in the middle of a great struggle to find a way to write a work that had been on his mind for a couple of years. Max had written some large-scale orchestral works during the 1960s. There had been the *Second Fantasia on John Taverner's In Nomine*, premiered at the Royal Festival Hall in 1965, and then *Worldes Blis*. The first performance of this work had been at the Promenade concerts in 1969, and had caused a scandal which people to this day still talk about. The scandal was that hundreds of people had walked out during the course of the performance. Max, at that point, was an inexperienced conductor of orchestras, and had been called in at the last minute to conduct a very-unwilling BBC Symphony Orchestra, because the designated conductor, Sir Malcolm Sargent, had pulled out. In the programme, the duration of the work had been advertised to last for ten minutes. In the event, it turned out to be well over forty minutes. The audience was getting restless, and was wondering how much longer it was likely to go on. So it was not surprising that many left. The incident was reported on the front pages of many newspapers. Max was now gaining a reputation as a fiery rebel who wrote impossibly difficult music to play and to listen to.

Max had moved to live in Orkney in the 1971 and his perspective on his life and his music changed radically as a result of this move. Max gladly received the commission from the Philharmonia Orchestra for a new orchestral work in 1973, and he wrote one movement of it, but felt that it was incomplete as it was and that more needed to be done to it, and so he withdrew it and it was not performed. Over the next years, Max was trying to work out how this work should grow and become what it ought to be.

It was at this stage that I came into the picture. His new devotion to Orkney and its landscape had shown itself in some of his compositions in the early 1970s, including the orchestral work *Stone Litany*. Max was attempting to bring everything together in this new orchestral work. In the end it slowly emerged as a four-movement symphony. The fact that Max, for so long now regarded as the leader of the avant-garde should emerge with a work the title of Symphony, generally regarded in many circles in those days as old-fashioned and completely of keeping with the new modern times, sent shock waves around the classical musical world.

Gavin Henderson was the manager of the Philharmonia, and a date was set for the first performance which was to be in February 1978. Gavin asked Max to suggest a conductor who he would be happy to have him conduct this work. That in itself was a departure from the usual way of doing things, because composers were deemed to be lucky to have any kind of performance at all, and they should just have to accept whoever was designated. Many conductors don't want all the bother of having to learn new works, and especially a so-called 'difficult' new work. This had been the problem that had led to Max being rushed in at the last minute with *Worldes Blis* almost a decade earlier. Max was very uneasy about naming a conductor. Frankly, his experience with big-name conductors had been bad or even dire. However, he was at the Dartington Summer School of Music in charge of composer's class, and one day, when walking along the corridor, he heard someone playing the piano. The work was an orchestral work, and the person was playing the piano making his own reduction as

he went along. Max thought to himself that that person, whoever he or she was, really knew how to read a score. He peeped through a hole in the door and saw a very young man with lots of hair. It was [Simon Rattle](#). Max immediately suggested to Gavin Henderson that he would like Simon to conduct his symphony. Simon at the time was the assistant conductor of the BBC Scottish Orchestra. Simon wanted to have the chance to have an orchestra play Max's symphony prior to standing in front of the Philharmonia. An agreement was made between the BBC Scottish and the Philharmonia that a studio recording would be made a couple of months before the premiere at the Royal Festival Hall in February 1978. This recording would not be broadcast over the BBC until after the official premiere had taken place.

Thus it was in December 1977 that Max and I went to Glasgow to attend the recording of the Symphony. The BBC Scottish Orchestra, which was devoted to Simon Rattle, made very heavy weather of the *Symphony*. Throughout, Max sat well hidden behind some pillars in the studio. At one point, an enraged cellist came forward.

- "Who wrote THAT?"
- "I did"! Max said defiantly
- "Rubbish!" shouted the cellist

There was nothing to say. Despite these difficulties, I remember much good humour and giggling, especially when it seemed as if we had been locked out of our hotel, as we had arrived later than the prescribed time. But Simon had got what he wanted and needed, namely a musical feel on the piece.

The great day of the premiere arrived. It was clearly going to be a land-mark event in the musical life of the country. The excitement was enormous. Gavin had gone to town in advertising the event, and there were posters everywhere on the London Underground. The event was highlighted on the main news programmes. Simon delivered a cracking performance, although he himself deemed it as 'the best they could do at this time, and that it would another ten years to settle down'. Max's mother and father had come to London from their home in Dorset for the event.

The responses from the audience and from the critics were enthusiastic and universally positive. The mood among Max's admirers and many of his colleagues was considerably less bullish. Many of them felt that he had betrayed their cause by taking what they deemed as being such a backward step. This concert was Simon's first big exposure on a major London platform, and so it was a big event for him as well, although by that time his career had already started to take off in its vertical thrust. The performance by the Philharmonia, with Simon conducting was repeated at the Promenade Concerts that same year and then they took it to Ghent in the Flanders Festival a month later. The *Symphony* was then recorded by Decca on their Headline Series.

By now, word had spread, and a gap in the programme of the New York Philharmonic allowed [Zubin Mehta](#) to suggest filling the gap with Max's *Symphony*. Zubin Mehta had become familiar with Max as he had conducted *Eight Songs for a Mad King* in Israel, and had enjoyed the experience enough for him to back putting in the

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*Symphony* in New York in October 1978. There were four performances at the Avery Fisher Hall at the Lincoln Centre.

Max had had several performances of his works over the years in the United States. The American Orchestra appeared to be willing to tackle new music in a more positive way than their English counter-parts. Max particularly appreciated the way that there were never any problems with the trumpet players protesting about playing high notes. In America the jazz trumpeters always played high, and so it was nothing to them to sail upwards. The English and European trumpet players altogether, did not have this kind of experience, and so wilted and fainted when they saw the high notes in their parts. Max kept on repeating that he knew that all the trumpet players were able to play his parts, but that they didn't know it, and therefore made all kinds of fusses. The performances of *Symphony* in New York led to Max's reputation in America being much advanced and to the commission of his next symphony by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1981.

The *Symphony* did not have another outing for more than a decade until it came to be part of the Max Festival at the South Bank Centre in March and April 1990, when all three of Max's symphonies which had by that time been written, were performed during the course of that Festival by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. [Paul Daniel](#) conducted this first *Symphony*. Then again, in 1994, when Max had become the composer/conductor of the BBC Philharmonic in Manchester, he conducted several performances, and made a recording for Collins Classics which was the company with whom Max had a contract.