

SYMPHONY NO. 6

The route towards the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra performing *Symphony No. 6* by Peter Maxwell Davies (hereinafter referred to as Max) for the first time at the St. Magnus Festival in Orkney in 1996 was a long and roundabout one.

The first connection that Max had had with the RPO was in 1982 during a London Weekend Television documentary. Melvyn Bragg's South Bank Show had a weekly slot late on Sunday evenings, always featuring a cultural figure. When it was Max's turn, the director of the show was Bryan Izzard, a somewhat unusual choice as his work was deemed to be on the vulgar side, but in the event he was a delightful man to deal with, and he caught the upbeat side of Max's personality. I had much discussion with him as to the content. With Max, there is so much and so diverse, there is always a great choice. Bryan was able to cover a wide ground, including excerpts from the opera *Taverner*, the *Symphony No. 2*, the chamber music work *Ave Maris Stella*, The music theatre work *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*, the *Suite from The Boy Friend* and the children's music-theatre work *The Rainbow*. Some of the rehearsals were held in a room in Waterloo Station, which was weirdly totally deserted owing of a strike. There was a joyous atmosphere during those rehearsals, as Bryan kept everyone laughing the whole time, whilst being absolutely serious in what he was about. Then the rehearsals moved over to the LWT studios on the Southbank, and the canteens seemed to be full of people in monks' habits. Some of these monks were real monks and some of them were participants in the theatrical works. I had suggested to Bryan that he could use Max's own ensemble The Fires of London, and also the Royal Philharmonic for the symphony for the *Taverner* excerpts. Thus it was that Max came into contact with the RPO for the first time, and everyone certainly enjoyed the experience.

Very shortly afterwards, I was contacted by Ian Maclay, The RPO's manager. Ian told me that the orchestra was making plans to celebrate its fortieth anniversary in 1986 and he would like to invite Max to write a work for them for this celebration. I replied that Max would be delighted, having the LWT documentary in his mind. I also said that Max had been asked by the violinist Isaac Stern if he would write a concerto for him, and Max had said that in principal he very much would like to. So I suggested to Ian that the two could be merged together, and that the fortieth anniversary commission might be the violin concerto. Ian was very pleased with this idea. The new chief conductor of the orchestra was André Previn. The date was set for June 1986 and the premiere was to be at the orchestra's own annual festival it held at the Royal Festival Hall.

The years in between passed, but although the date remained the same, the venue for the premiere was dramatically changed to the St. Magnus Festival in Orkney. This festival had been founded by Max in 1977 as a way of giving back something to the community of Orkney where he had gone to live in 1971. The festival had started in a very small way,, and had gradually began to become more recognised both locally, nationally and internationally. An event such as a major London orchestra taking part in the festival had been made possible by the intervention of the Scottish Post Office

as a sponsor for the concert. The idea of such a high profile event with the super-stars of Stern and Previn coming to such a remote and out of the way place as Orkney caught everyone's imagination and the live television relay on the BBC from the magnificent twelfth century St. Magnus Cathedral did much to bring a much wider public's attention to the festival.

The next significant contact was not until the Cheltenham Festival in July 1991. John Manduell, the festival director, had invited Max to be the featured composer. In the years between 1986 and 1991, Max has worked extensively as a conductor, and had been the conductor/composer for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra for several years. So John Manduell felt quite at home inviting Max to come with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra as conductor, with one of the items on the programme, being that very same *Violin Concerto*, this time with György Pauk as the soloist. That concert was one of those very special events and one could feel the electricity running through the orchestra.

And so it was not exactly a surprise, but nevertheless a great delight, when Louise Badger from the orchestra phoned up after the weekend, and asked if Max would consider having a relationship with them. I then went to the offices of the RPO and had a meeting with Ian Maclay and Louise Badger to discuss what this relationship might consist of. There were to be two appearances with the orchestra each season as conductor, and performances of Max's orchestral works, and, most specifically, a commission for the orchestra's fiftieth anniversary, which was to be in 1996. Discussion about other works which Max might write would come later. Very shortly after this meeting, Ian Maclay left his post as managing director and went to work for another orchestra. Paul Findlay, who had been at Covent Garden as Director of Opera for over two decades, came in to take Ian Maclay's post.

During the years following Max being his position at the RPO, he did conduct several concerts, always including at least one of his own works, and one of these was *Worldes Blis* which was also commercially recorded. The orchestra had got to know Max and to appreciate him and his music.

In the mean while, The St. Magnus Festival now had quite a track record of inviting full-scale symphony orchestras. And there was also the fact that many of the orchestral members had fond memories of their previous visit ten years earlier for the *Violin Concerto*. But the RPO was, after all, a London orchestra, and the venue, which was to be the run-down Phoenix Cinema in Kirkwall, was not exactly the most glamorous and prestigious place which the RPO was used to. However, the event itself would overcome the drawbacks.

During the week in April 1996 while Max was drawing towards the end of composing the symphony, news came through that Max's great friend, the poet and writer George Mackay Brown had been taken into hospital and that things were very bad indeed. On 13th April, Max phoned me to tell me that he had finished the symphony. Ten minutes later, Max phoned to tell me that Archie Bevan, George Mackay's closest friend, had phoned to tell him that George had died. This was a terrible blow to everyone. George, from the start, had been the quiet, out-of-sight inspiration for the festival and for so much of Max's music since he first went to live there in 1971.

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The symphony is almost fifty minutes in duration and is on three movements. The last of these is tragic. That is the only word for it. Max says that he did not write this last movement with the shadow of George's possible death hanging over him, but that he might have felt those forces without actually knowing what would happen. He dedicated the symphony to George.

This concert was not to take place in St. Magnus Cathedral, as had been the case of the *Violin Concerto* with the RPO ten years earlier. The intervening years had produced another venue, one of an entirely different character. The local cinema was called the Phoenix, although the signboard on the outside had long ago lost its 'P' and it was always displayed as HOENIX. It was dowdy in the extreme, and had no back-stage facilities – not even one single toilet. Various essential facilities were to be found in a couple of buildings adjacent to the car-park alongside the stage door of the cinema. The main factor which spoke in favour of this building as a suitable venue for a live concert was that there was a platform on which the orchestra could sit, which was not the case in St. Magnus Cathedral, and, even more importantly, this orchestra was visible to the audience, as the seating was raked. It could hold an audience of some five hundred people, which was almost twice as many as the number which could be accommodated in the cathedral.

And so, from the unlikely commencement of the small three day festival in Orkney in 1977, the major event of the premiere of Max' Sixth symphony took place in the highly unsuitable venue of the Phoenix cinema in Kirkwall. The orchestra was in superlative form and pulled out all the stops. Max had dedicated the symphony to George, and the local population, still grieving from the death of their beloved poet, were aware that this was to be a special occasion on every count.

The orchestra repeated the symphony at the BBC Proms two months later at the Royal Albert Hall, and then again at the Barbican two months after that. Max also conducted the symphony in Geneva, Zurich, Basel, Manchester and Stuttgart.

Max continued his association with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra until 2000 – a period of nine years.