

## **SYMPHONY NO. 5**

Peter Maxwell Davies (hereinafter referred to as Max), had been commissioned to write his *Symphony No.* by the Philharmonia, and it was first performed, conducted by Simon Rattle, at the Royal Festival Hall in London in February 1978. This was followed in 1983 by *Black Pentecost* for mezzo-soprano, baritone and orchestra, again commissioned by the Philharmonia and again conducted by Simon Rattle at the Royal Festival Hall. Max's third commission from the Philharmonia was the *Concerto for Trumpet*, with John Wallace, the orchestra's long-standing principal trumpet player as the soloist. The first performance of the concerto, conducted by Giuseppe Sinopoli took place in Yubin-Chokin Kaikan Hall in Hiroshima, on 21 September 1988. The Orchestra then asked Max if he would write a symphony to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 1994, and this became Max's *Symphony No. 5*.

By 1994, Max had been conducting orchestras himself for several years. He had positions as conductor/composer with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic and the Royal Philharmonic, as well as guest conducting widely elsewhere. So, for this fifth symphony, it was to be Max who would be conducting. The occasion was to be during the BBC Promenade concerts at the Royal Albert Hall. So whilst the orchestra had worked on Max's pieces three times over the years, this would be the first time the musicians would be working with Max himself. Max had built up a strong relationship with the orchestra, especially through his connection with two of the musicians. These were John Wallace, for whom he had written not only his *Concert for Trumpet*, and with whom he had worked extensively in his own ensemble The Fires of London, and also with horn player Richard Watkins, who had also played with The Fires. And certainly Max wanted to challenge these outstanding players, and to give the whole orchestra a chance to shine.

The concert was on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1994, in the midst of a long series of world-wide special events to celebrate Max's own sixtieth birthday on 8 September. The surprise here was that after four symphonies, each of four movements, and each lasting for fifty minutes or over, this new symphony was only twenty five minutes in length, and it played straight through in one movement. From a programming point of view, there is no doubt that shorter works stand more of a chance of being included than longer ones. There are more spaces into which they can be fitted.

Following its initial outing, this *Symphony No. 5* was able to be heard by audiences in numerous prestigious venues over a ten year period, including New York, Washington, Vienna, The Hague, Moscow, Düsseldorf, Berlin, Manchester and Budapest. Sometimes Max was conducting the BBC Philharmonic, but for the most part he was a guest conductor of the local orchestras. Particularly memorable was Max conducting the Wiener Symphoniker orchestra in the Musikverein in Vienna, which, for classical music, is by way of being the Holy Grail of concert halls.. The whole event was naturally terrifying for Max, as it was an all-Max programme, which showed the many sides to his musical personality. It was a sold out house, and once again Vienna, had responded most positively to Max. I think it is worth quoting this critic's verdict

*Symphony No. 5*

*'The Fifth Symphony is one of the most important orchestral works of our time. This one-movement Fifth of barely half an hour's duration is the work of a true mystic. It unfolds in ever increasing powerful waves of music; Gregorian phrases are transformed into the local idiom even as they sound. Glittering cascades of trumpets, glorious passages from the woodwinds, one moment massive, the next delicate almost to the point of fragility, powerfully singing melodies and ecstatic rhythms evoke the Easter celebration of the Resurrection. And yet this music, with its highly idiosyncratic tonality which is strongly tritonal, also depicts nature. There is the unmistakable call of seabirds before calm returns and the work opens out into complete tranquillity with a characteristically unadorned adagio passage - one of the most intense and moving to have been written this century. Perhaps this is a tone painting of that contemplation of nature, that union with nature which the composer has found on the Orkney island of Hoy, his home.'*

- Wiener Zeitung [Austria]