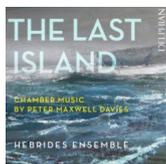


The Last Island – Chamber Music by Peter Maxwell-Davies (2017)

Written by bluesever

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1 *The Last Island* (2009) [15:41] 2 *A Postcard from Sanday* (2012) [3:10] 3 *String Trio* (2008) [10:02] 4 *Two Nocturnes* (2010) [1:46] 5 *Nocturne No 2* (1997) [0:47] 6 *Lullaby* (1991) [3:34] 7 *Oboe Quartet* (2012) [16:12] 8 *A Birthday Card for Jennifer* (1997) [0:47] 9 *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (2008) [18:05] 10 *String Quartet Movement* (2016) [4:42]

Hebrides Ensemble: Zoë Beyers – violin, violin 1 (tracks 1, 3–7, 9, 10) Sarah Bevan-Baker - violin 2 (tracks 1, 10) Catherine Marwood - viola 2 (track 1), viola (tracks 3–5, 7, 10) Jessica Beeston - viola 1 (track 1) William Conway - cello (tracks 1, 3–7, 10), artistic director Christian Elliott - cello 2 (track 1) Emanuel Abbühl - oboe (track 7) Philip Moore – piano (tracks 2, 4–5, 8, 9)

Peter Maxwell Davies's later music powerfully evokes the isolated majesty of his Orkney island home, yet it also bears witness to his talent for friendship – to his associations, both personal and musical, with friends and supporters in Scotland and further afield. Among the warmest was with William Conway, whom Davies first encountered as principal cellist of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and for whom he wrote the demanding solo part of his second Strathclyde Concerto. And it was for the Hebrides Ensemble, founded by Conway in 1991, that Davies wrote several of the most impressive and personal works to arise from his late engagement with chamber music – a genre in which he had previously worked rarely, here revealed as the 'last island' of this remarkable and prolific composer's output. On its second Delphian album, the Ensemble reciprocates Davies's friendship with definitive performances of works from his last decade, including the single completed movement of a string quartet left unfinished at his death. ---prestoclassical.co.uk

Peter Maxwell Davies, who was born in 1934, died last year - in March 2016. His long career

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produced work in many genres; one of which seemed often to inspire or lead to another. The highly accomplished Glaswegian, William Conway, was the cellist with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra during the ten year period (1987 to 1996) during which Maxwell Davies wrote the ten Strathclyde Concerti for the SCO. Conway subsequently formed the Hebrides Ensemble, which has consistently championed Max's music. Indeed, it can plausibly be claimed that it has played a central role in much of that music which can be said to constitute the composer's 'late' style.

That 'late' style has three characteristics: it is centered around the islands of Scotland (chiefly Orkney, of course) which Max knew and loved. And the Highlands cannot be understood without appreciating that Scotland's many islands are not only an integral part thereof, but also a microcosm of the island nature of all Britain. These recent compositions also reflect a happy liaison between composer and specific musicians, indeed, musicians like those from the Hebrides Ensemble. Lastly, Maxwell Davies' late work emphasises chamber music. But not as a distillation, certainly not a miniaturisation or diminution; rather a happy concentration, which seems actively to complement Maxwell Davies' many large scale and sweeping symphonic works.

The players on this excellent and appealing CD, though, do bring a majesty and breadth to the music. It is certainly not small scale, but music of weight and significance that invites us to consider - to reconsider. One of the three lengthier works on the CD, The Last Island itself from 2009, for the whole Ensemble, is oddly far-ranging and invites us in its tonalities and changes of tempo to seek a resolution which appears elusive. But such is the depth of understanding of the idiom which the Hebrides Ensemble possesses that we realise at the end that our understanding of how immersion in the piece's textures and shifting harmonic directions has affected us in ways that are completely consonant with what Max intended. The String Trio (written in 2008) is remarkable in that its three instruments have an attack, a presence, and - above all - a richness of texture as much akin to a full chamber orchestra as to three soloists. The music is varied, exciting and generous.

The other two longer works are the Oboe Quartet from 2012 and the violin and piano sonata dating from 2008. Perhaps more here than in any of the other works do we sense the struggle against illness which Maxwell Davies waged throughout the later stages of his life. Neither is a happy work; nor are they gloomy. Rather, determined and forceful. Indeed, the initial use of the higher registers of the oboe reinforcing the strings in the Quartet suggests courage and acceptance, rather than pity.

The Sonata is angular - angry almost. The violin has long semi-lyrical passages as if soaring around and contrasting with an absorption by the piano in life's thornier bushes, knowing it can't

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escape. Again, there's a sense of nightmare. Interruption and distress seem to predominate. Yet the players do nothing to aid such emotions with spurious effects. Perhaps the most difficult moment is three quarters of the way in, when the piano sounds as though Max has suddenly jumped to one of his more folk-based tunes (like the hypnotic 'Farewell to Stromness') but he hasn't, and has in fact invited us to see intensity from another side altogether. At the same time, the sinewy and taut playing style of every member of the Hebrides Ensemble blends the rawness of emotion which is called for with technical drive and reflection. The music always seems to be going somewhere. There is nothing for mere effect.

Of the other works, the two Nocturnes (both written in 2010) are equally eventful and rich in texture and invention without being lush or overblown. The Lullaby is the oldest work on this CD, dating from 1991; it has to be listened to more than once to find anything soporific in it. It's more like a fairy tale than a sleep song as such.

One way to understand this is to think of the ways in which dreams can be as animated as they can reflect relaxation. There is often a sparse and pared-down economy to much of this music. Almost as a sound world of which Webern would have approved. The members of the Hebrides Ensemble are completely in accord with such restraint. Yet not for one minute do they omit or smear the necessary passion and heightened sense of reflection or drive which Max demands: nowhere is this truer than in the Oboe Quartet, which is perhaps the highlight of the CD for its embodiment and endorsement of latent enthusiasm in the face of the composer's sense of (his own) mortality.

The final single movement for string quartet [tr.10] was being worked on when Maxwell Davies died. It's just the generous side of 'aggressive' - full of energy and directness, yet with a sweetness and humanity that characterises Max's entire output. As you listen to it, you realise what a remarkable composer he was. Not merely for his variety and abilities to work in so many types of music. Nor just for his courage in the face of adversity and the unusual circumstances of location and lifestyle. But for the sheer versatility and inventiveness, which were all so effective. Those familiar with Maxwell Davies' music will want these works which are so expertly, sensitively and persuasively played. Those new to his world and wanting to hear some of its best will not be disappointed. None of these works appears to be otherwise available.

The acoustic is warm and spacious. Indeed, perhaps a touch over reverberant, which may to some ears add undue atmosphere, when Maxwell Davies' music has always thrived on appreciation of its precision and integrity: the score is paramount. In the booklet Brian Morton's and William Conway's commentaries and notes on the context and substance of the works and their place in Maxwell Davies' life are valuable and have some useful correctives... of the notion

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that the composer was a musical 'hermit', for example. He was not. ---Mark Sealey,
musicweb-international.com

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