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STEPHEN PRUSLIN IN *TEMPO*: A RETROSPECTIVE TRIBUTE

Stephen Pruslin (1940–2022) was a superb pianist, whether in ensemble with the Fires of London or as a soloist, and a writer of fascinatingly elaborate texts. Perhaps the most extraordinary of these was his libretto for Harrison Birtwistle's first opera, *Punch and Judy*; Gordon Crosse's review of the premiere praised Pruslin's achievement 'in providing the initial stimulus, in helping to shape the form of the music, in providing many memorable phrases calling out to be set, in outlining the "world" in which the opera is to move'.[1]

But it is as a contributor to *TEMPO* that he is remembered here. Pruslin wrote a series of articles on the music of Peter Maxwell Davies that so authoritatively framed the analytical and critical discourse around Davies' work that they were compiled and published in 1979 as a book. This retrospective traces the way in which, between 1965 and 1985, Pruslin developed a critical vocabulary that was sufficiently robust to encompass the very significant stylistic changes in Davies' work during this period.

One of Pruslin's most characteristic strategies is to find parallels between Davies' music and that of earlier composers, often setting his arguments within more general observations about musical syntax; indeed, for readers today it is these latter observations that may well be more interesting. In his first article for *TEMPO* he considers Davies' Second Taverner Fantasia, the work that established Davies' reputation as a composer of orchestral music.

The mentalities of Mahler and Davies are both ultimately concerned with irony – not in its modern misuse as 'cynicism' but in its original meaning of a sense of contradiction which is implicitly tragic. The related domain of the grotesque became a basic way of viewing existence as far back as Dürer and Brueghel in the visual arts, but is a comparatively recent sensibility in music. The validity of such a sensibility, however, is not a function of the literal-mindedness of those who misconstrue it, but rather of how fully it can serve currently vital expressive ideas. The sense of grotesque is effected mainly through distortion and the creation of illusions, and in the present work, these are completely related to the musical techniques.

Technique is the ultimate indicator of the state of mind of a musical work, and this state of mind is primarily an attitude about the structuring of time. Davies has always been particularly concerned with those aspects of time that can be represented spatially. His alleged 'medievalism' is a sty in the eye of the beholder except on this one issue. The idea of music defining, examining, and gradually filling a space arises in medieval music and is strongly related to architecture. This music, and later music which defines its time-field as a fixed space has been mistakenly called 'static' because of a tacit demand that music flow constantly forward in time.

[1] Gordon Crosse, 'First Performances: Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*', *TEMPO*, 85 (1968), p. 26.

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The two basic viewpoints on this issue are set into relief by comparing the technique of variation in Mozart and Beethoven. Mozart rarely changes the internal structure of the theme during the course of a set of variations, with the result that each variation is equally related to the theme, as points on the circumference of a circle to the centre. The theme defines the total space in which the work will move, and the variations fill in and examine this space without changing key. When by analogy the space is considered as a space of time, continuous linear development is obviously not the main concern. In Beethoven, the extent of the 'field' often is not decided until the end of the work. The last movement of the 'Eroica' Symphony is a development towards the theme, not from it. The variations develop the bass of the theme, while the theme itself appears only as a transitory element in different keys until the 'molto andante', where the tonality and the identity of the theme are established. This explains the psychological weight of the 'molto andante' and also is the reason why Beethoven's music is described as 'dynamic'.[2]

Twenty years later Pruslin wrote his final *TEMPO* article, '"One If by Land, Two If by Sea": Maxwell Davies the Symphonist' (the quotation in the title is taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1860 poem 'Paul Revere's Ride').

Symphony No. 2 (1980) opens out from landscape into seascape. La Mer, *a favourite work of Davies's, is there in the B minor 'tonality', with some of the texture and figuration of Debussy's 'Jeux des Vagues' palpable in the symphony's scherzo. But waves are present on more than the poetic level: the reciprocal relationships of stasis and movement between wave-shapes and water provide a powerful focus for the work's technical procedures in both the small and the large. Welling and surging from within, the Symphony No. 2 embraces a content even more turbulent than that of its predecessor and, perhaps to contain this, resorts to more obviously 'formal' procedures.*

The last movement is a passacaglia, and though it does gradually undergo a character change, its function as a finale is never in doubt. Likewise, the scherzo of No. 2 suggests the full, stable article, complete with trio characteristics, while that of No. 1 lacks such stability and is heard as the outgrowth of the attempted slow movement from which it arises. The slow movement of No. 2 is also more formal, being a set of 'doubles' on a theme announced at the outset, and it is, again more traditionally, placed second. The tension between intensity of content and the formal 'conceits' through which that content is expressed gives the Symphony No. 2 its special character. In other respects, it can be heard as an enrichment of the concerns of No. 1, with a 'gamelan' of tuned percussion again intrinsic to its soundworld. In the journey from the Second Taverner Fantasia *to the First Symphony, Davies turned his attention from the Mahler tradition to that of Beethoven and its subsequent re-evaluation by Sibelius. Beethoven wrote his first two symphonies in the wake of Mozart and Haydn but, in the* Eroica, *sounded his own authentic note to a degree that separated the work from its predecessors as by a chasm. Sibelius also used an immediately preceding style, that of 'nationalist' romanticism, as the context for his first two symphonies, and like Beethoven, really found his own voice with the Third. But there, the roads diverge: Beethoven worked his way up to the* Eroica, *while Sibelius used the Third to hone his style down to a new point of purity and concision.*[3]

[2] Stephen Pruslin, 'Maxwell Davies's Second Taverner Fantasia', *TEMPO*, 73 (1965), p. 3.
[3] Stephen Pruslin, '"One If by Land, Two If by Sea": Maxwell Davies the Symphonist', *TEMPO*, 153 (1985), p. 3.

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It's striking how successfully Pruslin is able to link the Second Taverner Fantasia with Symphony No. 2 and at a time when many people, the composer included, were suggesting that his newer works were a sort of making good after the modernist excesses of the earlier music. The works that Davies created in the mid-1970s, of which *Ave Maris Stella* is perhaps the most ambitious, negotiate this transition and here, too, Pruslin delights both in finding connections and in mocking their 'pretentiousness'.

If one were seeking a metaphor for Ave Maris Stella *from among one's familiar musical experience, all the signs would point to a late Beethoven quartet. Of course the analogy between a string quartet and a sextet of mixed timbre is not literal, while the comparison of a work not yet two years old with some of the most visionary pieces ever written could be misconstrued, even if one swore it was only for analytical purposes as one was dragged screaming away to serve a five-year term for pretentiousness. But fortunately real affinity among composers and between pieces of music is not a function of our historical neuroses, and there are encouraging signs that sensitive and aware listeners can hear that it is not. One such friend of mine, having just heard* Ave Maris *for the second time, remarked that the first hearing some months earlier had thrown him into a kind of '2001' outer space, while at the second hearing he realized he was listening to an absolutely classical piece of chamber music. In fact, as we will see, his two statements are very far from antithetical. At any rate, there is every reason to hope that such a listener, given a finite number of further hearings, would himself make the jump from 'an absolutely classical piece of chamber music' to 'a late Beethoven quartet' without any difficulty.*[4]

This is music that Pruslin knew from the inside and the conclusion of the article strikes perhaps the most personal note of his *TEMPO* contributions when he describes how the final moments of *Ave Maris* 'leave players and listeners drained and silent'. Other members of the initial Fires of London line-up have told me that although the group's biggest hits were Davies' music-theatre pieces, especially *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, these works were not very rewarding to play. Perhaps the remark about *Ave Maris* eschewing text and theatre and yet coming 'closer than any other Davies work to bursting into speech' is a veiled allusion to this.

Defining the spiritual programme of a work can be difficult and even dangerous, but we can at least point a direction. It is not impossible to see in Ave Maris *a 24-hour cycle, beginning with a luminous dawn and progressing, though not always in clock order, through the other important points in the physical and spiritual day until it reaches the Hour of the Wolf – the symbolic time between night and day when nocturnal sounds have ceased and the sounds of dawn have not yet started. It is a time when the universe seems to hang in the balance, and is reputed to be a time when many births and deaths take place. Very few people who have heard* Ave Maris *would want to disagree that its climactic ninth movement represents a state of spiritual night out of which, in the coda, arises a piercing cry of birth and death – a moment that has never yet failed to leave players and listeners drained and silent.*

Ave Maris *is about the human cry made articulate. It refutes Caliban's statement about the curse of language in that, unlike the wolf, we can use*

[4] Stephen Pruslin, 'The Triangular Space: Peter Maxwell Davies's "Ave Maris Stella"', *TEMPO*, 120 (1977), p. 16.

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language both to cry and to speak about the fact. Relying on neither text nor theatre, this absolutely pure and 'abstract' piece of chamber music nonetheless comes closer than any other Davies work to bursting into speech. It implies regeneration, because in living through its state of night, the work becomes circular and finds the way back to the dawn of its opening.[5]

Returning to Pruslin's *TEMPO* articles is in some ways like visiting a museum. *TEMPO* is still a place for both the close reading of musical texts and for the spinning of speculative critical webs but the journal is no longer engaged in the promotion of a particular publishing house's composers. Nor do developments in the music of Peter Maxwell Davies seem quite as urgent as they did 50 years ago. But it is worth hearing Stephen Pruslin's voice one more time and being reminded how the performers of his generation brought new standards of virtuosity to the realisation of new music in Britain. In 1975 the pianist Peter Hill had written an article[6] about Xenakis' piano music in which he suggested that because some passages were 'impossible'[7] players should 'approach the music in such a way as to *minimize inaccuracy*'[8]. Pruslin wrote to the editor to express his 'alarm'.[9]

Not only have I found it possible to give numerous performances of Herma *over the past five years without resorting to octave transposition (and at a tempo at least respectable enough to lead score-carrying members of the audience through quite a paperchase, according to various eye-witnesses), but the idea that a piano work is a kind of piano reduction, and that one plays outwards from the effect to the notes, is suspect even in principle.*

The letter finished with a cri de coeur that resonates to this very day.

Composers agonize just as much over extreme registers as any other ones, and when one's ear is sensitized to contemporary harmony, a wrong note bothers just as much as it would in classical harmony, even if it is very high or low. A player must be ready and able to cope with the vicissitudes of a particular performance, but to found a whole theory of performance on a premise of compromise is not only dangerous, it also gives ammunition to the idea that as a performer of contemporary music, one's whole art needn't be as precise, honest, or caring as, say, the art of someone who chooses to spend his time in the service of 17th-century performance practices – an idea which I and a number of my colleagues have spent a considerable amount of time in recent years trying to correct.

[5] Ibid., pp. 21–22.
[6] Peter Hill, 'Xenakis and the Performer', *TEMPO*, 112 (1975), pp. 17–22.
[7] Ibid., p. 19.
[8] Ibid., p. 20.
[9] Stephen Pruslin, 'Letters to the Editor', *TEMPO*, 115 (1975), p. 54.

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