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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Roberts, David. 1982. 'Peter Maxwell Davies by Paul Griffiths'. *Contact*, 24. pp. 23-25. ISSN 0308-5066.

PETER MAXWELL DAVIES by Paul Griffiths
Robson Books, 1982 (£7.95)

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This book, together with a volume on Tippett by Meirion Bowen, is the first to appear in a new series, *The Contemporary Composers*, under the general editorship of Nicholas Snowman. Mr Snowman contributes an Editor's Preface which outlines the missionary ambitions of the series: 'to be representative of what exists, and to supply the listener who stumbles across a new piece at a Prom or on record with the essential facts about its composer — his life, background and work'. This does sound ominously like the kind of popularising slogan that is all too often the excuse for shallow thought and third-hand ideas, but Griffiths has written a book that has value both for the contemporary music specialist and for the general musician. How much of the book will be of use to the absolute beginner I find hard to judge, but someone who really needs to rely on the often inadequate and misleading definitions of the glossary (which defines such terms as 'coda', 'ensemble', and 'timbre') will have to give up on large chunks.

The structure of the book is interesting. Griffiths begins with a brief account of Peter Maxwell Davies's career that reveals nothing substantially new (10 pages) and follows this with a reasonably full discussion of his music (74 pages). Next comes an interview (31 pages) between the author and Davies that is useful, though the composer is not pressed to disclose a great deal more than one has heard him say before. There follows a collection of the composer's programme notes (40 pages). In the last 22 pages there are to be found the glossary, a list of works with publication and recording details, a bibliography, and two indexes. A number of half-tone illustrations, mostly photographs of music-theatre productions, are indifferently reproduced.

The most original and interesting portion of the book is that on the music. Griffiths makes a spirited attempt to give us something more cogent than the mixture that (with a number of honourable exceptions) has so far passed for discussion in print of Davies's work — a compound whose principal ingredients are anecdote, speculation, and bluff. In particular, Griffiths's three 'Interludes' — analyses of the String Quartet (1961), *Antechrist* (1967), and *Ave maris stella* (1975) respectively — which together account for nearly half the pages in a section that otherwise has the character of a conventional survey, are heartening attempts to talk about the music in a way that begins to approach the kind of detail needed if anything substantive is to be said about it. If in the rest of my review, which is mostly concerned with this section of the book, I seem to take Griffiths to task over a number of issues, it should not be imagined that my criticisms spring from any disapproval of his venturing to commit analysis — far from it.

Of the three Interludes, the one that I found most revealing was that on the String Quartet. In particular, Griffiths's identification of the basis of its durational organisation, though not without its own difficulties, solved a problem that had long puzzled me. His account is nevertheless incomplete. For example, he makes no reference to the scheme of systematic transposition and change-ringing permutation by which the initial idea generates the principal line of the first section and which explains much that happens later.

The analysis of *Antechrist* is by and large accurate: the basis of the transformation process that provides most of its material is correctly set out, though the manner of its derivation from the borrowed source material of the work, the 13th-century motet *Deo confitemini—Domino*, is muddled. There are, however, two mistakes Griffiths makes that I think are important enough to set right. The first of these appears in the following passage:

The agent of this transformation of principle into antiprinciple is implicitly the bass clarinet melody which lies beneath in long notes, and which turns out to be a précis of the *Gloria Tibi Trinitas* plainsong, D—F—D—C—D—F—G—D—E—C—D. This would have a place in the work by virtue of the D-centred mode it shares with the *Deo Confitemini* and also of its prominence in Davies's musical mind at this time, but there is a deeper reason for it to be drawn into play here. The text of the *Deo Confitemini* is concerned with the incarnation of Christ, which The Trinitarian antiphon

would seem to deny, and indeed the music of the motet might appear already to be questioning its verbal message, with its three parts and its bottom voice littered with what can be conceived as references to the *Gloria Tibi Trinitas* chant. On this level, therefore, *Antechrist* is a meditation on the mystery of the Trinity begun by the thirteenth-century composer. (p.60)

Griffiths is absolutely mistaken in identifying the bass clarinet melody as the Sarum antiphon *Gloria tibi Trinitas*, which occurs frequently in Davies's *Taverner* works of the 1960s, and which (omitting immediate repetitions of notes) begins D-F-D-C-F-G-F-G-A. His deductions concerning the text are therefore invalid. The melody is in fact a quotation from a chant of the Roman liturgy, the salutation *Benedicamus Domino*, and comprises the first eleven notes of a melisma on the word 'Domino'. The reason why the quotation is appropriate involves an intricate network of music-historical references and an elaborate kind of punning. I think this is sufficiently interesting to go into the matter in some detail here.

This portion of the chant *Benedicamus Domino* was frequently used in the Middle Ages as a clausula tenor, a clausula being a polyphonic setting of a melisma of a responsorial chant. Its context would have been something like this: the first word of the chant, 'Benedicamus', would be sung unadorned by a chorus; then the long and expressive melisma on the word 'Domino' would be elaborated as a clausula sung by soloists; finally the chorus would complete the monophonic chant to the words 'Deo gratias'. The clausula was the precursor of the motet, the earliest motets being nothing more than clausulae removed from their appropriate context as an elaboration within a chant and provided with new texts in the upper parts. As the melisma 'Domino' had been so popular for elaboration as the tenor of clausulae, it became similarly popular as a motet tenor.

The reason why 'Domino' of *Benedicamus Domino* goes with the main quotation of *Antechrist*, *Deo confitemini—Domino* should be becoming clear. For that motet too is based on a 'Domino' melisma, though not this time from *Benedicamus Domino* but from the verse of the Easter gradual *Haec dies*. The verse begins with the words 'Confitemini Domino'. Here we see that the kind of inter-reference or punning employed by Davies is of a type not dissimilar to that the medieval mind revelled in, for the unsung word 'Confitemini' chimes with the text 'Deo confitemini' of the upper voices.

A further circumstance that unites the chant *Benedicamus Domino*, several clausulae and motets upon 'Domino', the chant *Haec dies*, and *Deo confitemini—Domino* is that they all appear as examples in volume 1 of the *Apel—Davison Historical Anthology of Music*.¹

Griffiths's confusion of *Benedicamus Domino* for *Gloria tibi Trinitas* is of course a hint that the similarities between the two chants might have been a further consideration in Davies's mind, just as it might also have been a consideration that embedded in the opening of the tenor of *Deo confitemini—Domino* is the retrograde of another figure, D-F-E-D-C, that appears regularly in Davies's *Taverner* compositions. But here we begin to get into the kind of deep water where Davies's work so often lures us, for such chains of association, connotation, and resemblance, once begun, have no logical conclusion, and the point at which we cross the boundary from what is directly signified by a work to what is nothing more than free association quite independent of it is difficult to judge.

The second important error concerning *Antechrist* appears directly after the passage last quoted.

The two basic materials, motet and plainsong antiphon, begin to interfere with each other more directly later in the piece. For example, in Section 7 the piccolo has a cantus in long values, A-E-F-E flat-C sharp-D-A, which is obtained by subtracting the intervals of the *Gloria Tibi Trinitas* from those of the piccolo's first *Deo Confitemini* derivative, that of [Example 1]:

This is purest moonshine. No elaborate contour transformations are needed here. (In any case this is not a device of a kind I have ever detected Davies using). The notes in question stem from what Griffiths calls the piccolo's first *Deo confitemini* derivative (bars 43-6)—call this A(0). What Griffiths has failed to notice is that the piccolo, far from playing a cantus firmus, is here participating as an equal partner in a duet with the violin. Together the two instruments play a succession of vertical dyads, each of which is made up

Example 1

A 10 G 10 F 10 Eb 10 Db 3 Fb 10 D 10 C
 D 3 F 9 D 0 D 0 D 10 (C) 2 D 3 F
 A 7 E 1 F 10 Eb 10 C# 1 D 7 A

of one note from A(0) and one from its retrograde inversion, AI(0)R. Example 2 gives the appropriate analysis of the pitch-class structure of the passage. This is a technique that is very typical of Davies's writing; I have elsewhere given such devices the inelegant but functionally descriptive name of 'common-order-number dyads'.

These are errors of identification and interpretation, and I could point to a number of others of the latter type. Errors of simple fact are much rarer but they do occur. For example, Griffiths writes of the *St Michael Sonata* (1957):

At first Davies assembled these movements under the straight-forward title 'Sonata': only after the first performance was the work renamed in honour of the saint on one of whose feast days its composition was begun. (pp.28-9)

This is a very curious assertion. I have in front of me the programme for the first performance of the work at the 1959 Cheltenham Festival in which the piece is quite unambiguously titled 'St Michael—Sonata for 17 Wind Instruments'. This kind of thing would be comparatively harmless if only anyone ever took any notice of corrections, but once the seeds of error are planted they are pretty certain of yielding a fine harvest in due course: I expect to find this 'fact' repeated in print into the indefinite future. I note for instance that though Griffiths is kind enough to make reference to a review of mine in *Contact*,² he has ignored the correction I made there to the information appearing in the published score of *Stedman Doubles* as to its place of first performance. Does it matter much? Perhaps not in the universal scale of things, but if it's worth putting in the book it's surely worth getting right.

I was frequently worried by the kind of terminology that Griffiths uses. I appreciate at least a part of the problem that faced him: in setting out to write a book whose audience is meant to include the non-specialist he must inevitably have been wary of introducing too many unfamiliar terms, and the idea of employing relatively familiar ones, with their meanings extended, must have seemed very tempting. But this has frequently led to the weakening of terms to a point where sometimes they have little more than poetic or associative effect. Take 'cantus firmus'. As it has always been understood it has meant something like: 'A melody, which may be invented by the composer but usually is not, used as the basis of a polyphonic composition through the addition of contrapuntal lines.' There are many instances in Davies's work where the term may be used in this sense, given a certain leeway over notions of what is or is not 'counterpoint' in post-tonal music. But in several places Griffiths stretches 'cantus firmus' to cover an event that is neither a melody nor, under any reasonable interpretation, the basis of its contextual polyphony. Similarly there are things he calls 'canons' that can be admitted as such only if the term is extended grotesquely beyond its customary limits. And when he writes of the *Five Piano Pieces* (1955-6): 'The exercises in strict counterpoint that had been carried out in the *Trumpet Sonata* have borne fruit . . .' (p.26), it is a fine-sounding phrase, but it implies

Example 2

