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NEWS SECTION
There have always been elements of ambivalence in Peter Maxwell Davies’s music. It is possible to perceive a tension between freedom and order in works as early as Alma Redemptoris Mater of 1957, though there the ‘freedom’ was heavily circumscribed within the musical texture. In that work the melismas, deriving from medieval models, decorate the controlling cantus line. Indeed melismatic lines which appear in various works of this early period are strictly controlled by the pitch organization despite being temporally free. An extension of this organizational idea can even be seen in the early children’s works, where freedom versus order is key to the musical argument, allied to the concern not to compromise the compositional technique despite writing for less accomplished players.

It is the same tension between freedom and order that spawned those infamous foxtrots of the late-60s Music-Theatre works; and most interestingly in the orchestral St Thomas Wake, a Foxtrot for Orchestra of 1969, where the Foxtrots contest the musical space with the ‘serious’ material. A counterbalance to the more outrageous works are those highly controlled and succinctly argued compositions of the mid- to late-1960s, such as Second Fantasia on John Taverner’s In Nomine (1964) and, above all, Worldes Blis (1969).

For all their eclectic exuberance, none of the pre-1970 works seriously challenged Davies to reconsider his compositional technique. True, there is evidence that after coming back from Rome in the late 1950s the composer may have gone into one of those periods of self-doubt which have afflicted him approximately every ten years, but the post at Cirencester Grammar School sorted that problem out: firstly by channelling his creativity into work with, and for, children, and secondly by providing material which would act as a springboard for new work aimed at the concert hall – thus the arrangements of Monteverdi led to Sinfonia (1962), the String Quartet (1961) and so on.

Davies’s second compositional crisis, of the late 1960s, was probably brought on by a reaction to the intensity of the compositional processes, and the equally intense level of productivity in, and around, Worldes Blis in particular. His move to Orkney may not have been entirely a direct response to this crisis but undoubtedly the ‘sense of place’, as Arnold Whittall¹ has termed it, exercised a powerful influence in renewing and refreshing his creative output, starting with From Stone to Thorn (1971).

The compositional crisis of 1978–9 was of a rather different order. Davies had recently completed Ave Maris Stella (1975), still widely regarded as his ‘masterpiece’, and he had simultaneously tackled that supposedly arch-conservative form, the Symphony, for the first time,
to some critical acclaim. Symphony No.1 was completed in 1976. This
was followed by The Martyrdom of St Magnus (1976) and then by Salome
(1978) along with Black Pentecost (1979) and The Lighthouse (1979).
Salome had been commissioned by Flemming Flindt to launch his new
Flemming Flindt Circus Company on 10 November 1978 at
Copenhagen. It was probably quite attractive as a project at first – a
full-length ballet, Davies’s first – but as time pressed on and the dead-
line grew ever closer there was just so much to do. In the end the first
draft was completed only two months prior to the first performance;
but at what cost?

Within six months Davies was writing to John Amis:

For me a dreadful time, of crisis about composition. I have had to cancel a load
of engagements, to be able to come to terms with this, & to find any possibility
of going on as a composer. This all with terrible self-torturings & consciences,
but, although it is disastrous in the short term, I hope it is, in the long term, only
constructive.2

There had been other pressures on Davies at the time he was writing
Salome. He had, for some years, been convinced that Boosey &
Hawkes, who had been his sole publishers for well over a decade, were
just not doing enough promotion of his music. He believed that there
was in fact active opposition to the Fires of London, but he had
‘learned to live with that’. However events took a new turn with
Salome and he became convinced that the publishers were actually now
trying to ‘sabotage’ him. On the back of two folios of the sketch for
Salome is the draft of a long letter to Boosey and Hawkes in which he
lays out some serious criticisms including some relevant to Salome
itself:

Bergen 27th My [sic]’78

... But now with the ballet ‘Salome’ when you did NOT SEND THE
COMPLETED FIRST ACT to Flemming Flindt in Copenhagen for a month
after you had the score. Knowing the speed & strain of my writing it against
time & with the feeble feeble excuse you had not had an acknowledgement of
the first bit you sent – this is the end as far as I am concerned and I will simply
NOT be sabotaged in this way...

In addition to his frustration over Boosey & Hawkes’s apparent tardi-
ness with respect to Salome (and this in the context of what he
perceived as unforgivable delays in the publishing of his scores), he
was also angry at proposal to offer a ‘rehashed’ version of Salome to
the London Symphony Orchestra while giving the ‘real’ work to the
Philharmonia, seeing this as a slur on his ‘professional integrity’.3

Little wonder, then, that with so many negative drains on his confi-
dence that he should eventually succumb to a time of self-doubt.
Although the crisis hit around the time of the completion of Black
Pentecost in June 1979, all the evidence suggests that it was Salome
which created the problem for the composer. Aside from all the
external concerns, the time factor was playing havoc with his normal
working methodology. His desire to structure and control the musical

2 The British Library catalogue information is: Davies (Peter Maxwell), Sir, composer, Letters
3 Maxwell Davies Manuscripts ADD. MS 71274, verse of folios 87 and 88 (incidentally the date
on the draft letter helps in establishing a chronology for the composition). This letter gives a
new dimension to Davies’s relationship with the Philharmonia – showing there was rather
more underpinning it than is suggested by Nicholas Kenyon’s bald statement that ‘conflicts
over the casting of this [Black Pentecost] led to a cooling off between Rattle and the composer
and there have been few if any [sic] Maxwell Davies performances from Rattle since’.
flow was present as always in the work, but he simply did not have the time to engage his usual level of organization. We have some indication of this in the draft score. It is now well known that Davies had devised a personal script in his early teens but aside from very occasional extended comments it has normally been used in the draft scores only to label, to indicate set choice, and to specify instrumentation and such like. This makes much more significant several specific diary-like comments which appear in the script on the first draft of Salome, of which this is the most telling:

I must write the first thing that comes into my head. There’s no time for further reflection. Sometimes no bad thing to get rid of inhibition and find out what my musical imagination is really made of.4

Here then is the primary source of the problem: the lack of time brought Davies face to face with the dichotomy between the need for structure and control on the one hand, and freedom of expression on the other. The fact is that whereas a composer might deliberately choose to confront such warring opposites in the search for a refreshed means of expression, Davies had no choice but to ‘go with the flow’ and see what came out the other end.

Written material about Salome, in the form of programme notes and significant references, is rather scarce. One of the few important references occurs in an interview with Roderic Dunnett for The Independent online website following the composer’s appointment as Master of the Queen’s Music. Davies says: ‘above all I enjoy a fresh challenge – being made to attempt something I haven’t done before, just as I did with writing Salome’.5 One can take this at face value, but actually the composer’s comments on his works are rarely simple statements of fact. As Pascal said, ‘A cipher has a double meaning, one clear, and one in which it is said that the meaning is hidden’6: too many conspiracy theories later, it is tempting to speculate that there is rather more to Salome than first appears.

To understand the long-term significance of Salome it is essential to begin with some consideration of Davies’s starting point for the work. Here we encounter the first surprise. The pre-compositional sketch material for Salome is much less extensive than would be expected for such a large work, and certainly in comparison with Ave Maris Stella and the First Symphony. One has to be careful, however, in making absolute statements about the presence or absence of sketch material for Davies’s work. This is either because on some occasions Davies retains a portion of the sketches, often with the intention of using them in another work (although this really becomes much more common in the works of the 1980s), or sometimes the sketch material is incomplete because part, or all of it, has been gifted to an individual. This is the case for example with Ave Maris Stella; part of the sketches were gifted7 and the British Library sketches only make sense when put together with the gifted portion.

4 British Library catalogue numbers for Salome are: ADD MS 71274,71275 and 71276. The annotation is to be found in 71274, folio 39
6 Blaise Pascal, Penseés: http://www.classicallibrary.org/pascal/pensees/pensees10.htm (Section X, stanza 677) [accessed 10 Jan 2005].
7 The British Library catalogue numbers for Ave Maris Stella are ADD MS 713278 and 71395. The rest of the sketches are presently [January 2005] in the hands of Mrs Marie Curry of Letchworth. Probable links with the First Symphony sketch materials cannot presently be verified due to the lack of significant available sketch material for that work.
Notwithstanding the possibility then that some Salome material is missing, the sketches do appear to be rather restricted, and since it has a direct bearing on the compositional processes and procedures used in the work a brief summary of the rather limited source set working is necessary. The detail from the charts will be found in the Appendix, which I have numbered Ex.1 but which readers will find at the end of the article.

The source square (Ex. 1a in Appendix) – Original Transposition (OT) in Davies’s terminology – is not really a set square per se, it is simply a linear version of the Liber Usualis plainsong for the Festival of John the Baptist, ‘Puer qui natus est nobis’, 9 chromatically inflected, but not sieved, and laid out on seven discrete rows. As a result the length of the rows is not consistent and the duration set, such as it is, is simply derived from the number of the pitch in the sequence (so the first note G is inflected to G# and becomes ‘1’ in the duration sequence, and so on). Another effect of this is that rows 2, 4 and 6 have the same pitch content, with minor re-orderings. The second set form (Ex. 1b) – New Transposition (NT) in ‘Davies-speak’ – is simply the Original Set at a variety of transpositions, whereby the third and fifth rows now have identical pitches.

This is not the level of organization applied to previous works. What is more there are only three more pitch squares: the first, the 7×7 magic square of Venus (Ex. 1c), derived from the opening seven pitches of the Original Transposition, although the resulting magic square produced by the numerical manipulation is limited to symmetrical arch shapes of pitches for each row (effectively forward and retrograde) and labelled on the left ‘pallas’ and on the right ‘venus’ – two sides of the same goddess. The other two transpositions (Ex 1d/1e) need no further explanation as their derivation is obvious. This magic square is presumably deliberately symbolic and probably represents, on one level, Salome herself.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the set-derived material is a very long cantus violin melody made up from various linear readings of the revised New Transposition Set (Ex. 1e) and laid out line by line as an extended musical acrostic for Joan(n)es Baptista, each musical line assigned to successive letters of the name. Davies has added Ds and E♭s to make each row have seven pitches.10 Example 2 shows the first six lines:

Example 2: Joan(n)es B(aptista) cantus – source set and row direction indicated

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8 Liber Usualis p. 1505–6.
9 ‘Sieving’ was first used by David Roberts in his 1986 Birmingham University Ph.D. thesis Techniques of Composition in the Music of Peter Maxwell Davies to describe the composer’s method of abstracting pitches from the plainchant in order to construct a work’s source row.
10 At the Maxwell Davies conference at Canterbury Christchurch on 16 October 2004, it was suggested to me by Peter Owens that the use of pitches D and E♭ (in German D and S) could represent the first and last letters of the composer’s name: given the composer’s penchant for such detail, this suggestion has some merit.
The labelling of the letters for each thematic line is in Davies’s script and my translation of these is in brackets. It will be obvious, I hope, that the letter shapes are mapped onto the magic square to obtain the note sequence. This extended cantus is heard only twice in Part 2 but its sheer durational length ensures that both continuity and repetition underpin the whole of Scene 4 of Act II (Execution and Apotheosis of John the Baptist), as well as the cantus being the ‘personification’ of the Baptist himself.

Such a thematic procedure is not unexpected in Davies’s music, but it is what happens around this cantus which is both interesting and significant. The point is best illustrated by making a comparison between a passage from the First Symphony and a representative section from the Joan(n)es Baptista cantus exposition in Salome.11

Notwithstanding the lack of a detailed background analysis for the First Symphony, some quite significant differences in approach are evident. In the example from Salome the main chordal parts are simply doubled through the orchestra which, when stripped away, leaves essentially a 4-part homophonic texture. It seems unlikely that the chordal ‘infill’ to the actual cantus has been set-derived, since the pitches used tend to be only a semitone/tone and a perfect/diminished fifth distant from the main cantus line, as seen here. In other orchestral works up to this time the instrumental parts are normally set-derived and have associated variable durations connected to the magic square, as seen in the example from First Symphony. The

11 Using the First Symphony as a starting point for this comparison points up the absence of a critical analysis of this work, such as Peter Owens has provided for Worldes Blis and Stone Litany in particular. What is more, for a work of this complexity it would be good to be able examine all the pre-compositional material, since at the moment what the British Library holds is clearly far from complete.
rhythms (and metre) in Salome are generally much more regular than in other orchestral works of the time: one might argue this is inevitable for a ballet, although that did not inhibit Stravinsky! Overall the ballet score is much less complicated than the Symphony and this suggests that the musical detail in this work was more spontaneously composed than is the case in earlier orchestral compositions – or, for that matter, in Black Pentecost completed a few months later.

The nature of the textures created in Salome suggests that some consideration of orchestration is necessary. Referring to works up to at least the First Symphony, Davies famously remarked that ‘there is no “orchestration” as such’; while that may be true of the First Symphony, it seems to me that it is rather less convincing to apply the same statement to Salome. Since the musical material is less set-oriented, it follows that since the orchestration is not being used simply to carry the set lines, it therefore operates as an independent musical idea in its own right – in other words, ‘orchestration as such’. The results of this ‘new’ or perhaps ‘non-functional’ approach to orchestration per se can be found in effects such as the octave doubling of the cantus line (as in Ex. 3) or the percussion ensemble in Scene 5 of Salome.

The compositional contradictions inherent in Salome were played out in the works of the 1980s in a perhaps unexpected way. Following the Second Symphony (1980) there are effectively three distinct levels in Maxwell Davies’s compositional output, excluding the works specifically for children. At one end of the spectrum are chamber works such as Image Reflection Shadow (1982), a tightly structured and fully set-derived work with a plethora of magic square-based manipulations, very much the successor to Ave Maris Stella. The symphonies fall within this general area of working, as Nick Jones has shown for the Third Symphony (1984). The next level encompasses many of the concerto-type works of the 80s where the set material is extensively explored, but in these pieces there is clearly an element of freedom in the execution and working out of musical material. Then there are the lighter works which generally do not use set-based material at all but, significantly, begin to contribute extensively to the background materials for the more complex works, principally the symphonies.

How have these contradictory approaches been reconciled? Part of the answer, for the composer, was to know his thematic material very well: in pre-concert talks for large-scale works such as, for example, the Fourth Symphony of 1989, he speaks of taking the musical material for a walk (as in round the island). Knowing the source material as well as possible is the only insurance against simply just writing anything that comes into one’s head. It is interesting to note that for many of Davies’s later works there are a large number of script notations for set choice early on in the draft but less and less as the piece develops, which is consistent with the idea of increasing familiarity with the material and of allowing the musical ideas to develop more spontaneously.

12 Programme note for the First Symphony at www.maxopus.com/works/symph_1.htm [accessed 7 January 2005].
13 A comparison of the use of percussion in The Martyrdom of St Magnus and Salome will demonstrate some of the differences in Davies’s use of non-pitched percussion in these two quite dissimilar works, which are nonetheless tied together through their exploration of the nature and effect of martyrdom.
Example 4a: Scene 2 Salome 3 before Fig. 1
Example 4b: opening of the 3rd movement of Symphony no. 2
A further answer to the contradictions that lay at the heart of his compositional crisis is found in Davies’s approach to the structuring of works. While it is not unusual for him to speak of having to solve the problem of form and structure anew every time, there are constants in the way he approaches these elements. I have referred elsewhere to Davies’s use of terms like ‘statement’, ‘middle eight’, and ‘reprise’ to designate significant sectors – not exactly ternary shapes but with many of the characteristics; this can be traced back at least as far as the Second Tavener Fantasia, but is a structural constant very common in the works of the 1980s.\(^\text{16}\)

Similar structural referents are implied by Davies’s use, albeit in German, of words like ‘Durchführung’ (development), ‘Übergang’ (transition) and so on, which indicate a direct engagement with elements of traditional formal archetypes. In charting these structural constants, it is clear that particular generating plainsongs also keep reappearing: plainsongs such as Dum complerentur and Veni Creator Spiritus, that go right back to the earliest published works. These chants, which are found in Alma Redemptoris Mater (1957) and Five Motets (1959), have been used sporadically during the intervening half-century and are probably symbolic for the composer. Their most recent incarnation at the time of writing this article was in the Mass and Linguæ Ignis (both 2002), but it would be very surprising if they not used again in the series of string quartets now in progress.

Part of the legacy of Salome is the way in which it anticipates some of the compositional strategies of later works and certainly one of the most important of these is the development of ‘tonality’ as Davies conceives it. Whereas in Ave Maris Stella the work reaches catharsis in the flute’s statement of the generating plainsong (that is to say the uninflected plainsong statement is a goal, an end in itself), in Salome Scene 2, on the other hand, fragments of uninflected plainsong in the bass parts (Ex.4a/5a) give the music a diatonic underpinning which contributes strongly to the work’s ‘tonality’ both locally, and in terms of longer-term harmonic planning. It is therefore to Salome, and not to earlier tonal parodies (or even modal In Nomines) that we should look for the precedent when examining ‘tonal’ examples in later works, such as, for example, the opening of the third movement of the Second Symphony, which carries such a strong sense of tonal centring (Ex.4b/5b):
compositional technique of the later work – typifying that connectivity which interlinks various aspects of the composer’s music in the more diverse manifestations of the 1980s and beyond.

In addition, Davies’s use of focus pitches – the D starting note of the Joan(n)es Baptista individual cantus lines is one such example – is tied into his increasingly ‘vertical’ consciousness: the ‘harmonic’ grounding of his music which Nicholas Jones has explored.\(^\text{17}\) The greater emphasis placed on the ‘harmonic’ vertical in the works of the 1980s and later may not be entirely due to the ‘experience’ of Salome, but it seems clear that this work was a catalyst towards change and development of this facet of Davies’s style.

The view of Salome as a transitional work offered here can readily be challenged, not least by Davies himself, since it involves an interpretation of compositional processes only really known to the composer. However, the available evidence suggests that the ‘experience’ of Salome led to lasting and significant developments in Davies’s music, changes that were, to use his own words, ‘in the long term, only constructive’.

**APPENDIX — EXISTING SET CHARTS FOR ‘SALOME’**

![Example 1a](image1)

![Example 1b](image2)

Music examples from *Salome* © copyright 1978 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.
Example from Symphony No.1 © copyright 1978 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.
Examples from Symphony No.2 © copyright 1981 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.