



McGegan's Brahms – January 17, 2015

An Orkney Wedding with Sunrise

Peter Maxwell Davies
b.1934

Composer and conductor Peter Maxwell Davies often bases his works on preexisting music, either English medieval and Renaissance themes or folk melodies. Since 1970, Davies has resided on Hoy Island in the Orkneys, off the northern coast of Scotland, gleaning much of his musical material from the islands' indigenous music.

Davies composed *An Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* in 1984 for the Boston Pops Orchestra as a commission for its centenary. According to the composer, it is a musical postcard record of an actual wedding he attended on Hoy.

The piece is unashamed program music, portraying the boozy wedding scene and making it clear that Hoy's inhabitants know how to "make merrie." Davies describes the work: "At the outset, we hear the guests arriving, out of extremely bad weather, at the hall. This is followed by the processional, where the guests are solemnly received by the bride and bridegroom, and presented with their first glass of whisky. The band tunes up, and we get on with the dancing proper. This becomes ever wilder, as all concerned feel the results of the whisky, until the lead fiddle can hardly hold the band together any more. We leave the hall into the cold night, with echoes of the processional music in our ears, and as we walk home across the island, the sun rises, over Caithness, to a glorious dawn. The sun is represented by the highland bagpipes, in full traditional splendour."

The piper is required to play the pipes in the key of A, the common key of earlier folk pipes, instead of the B-flat of most modern pipes, which were changed to fit in with the B-flat clarinets in marching bands.

Maxwell Davies served for ten years as Conductor/Composer of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London and is the Composer Laureate of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. He guest-conducts orchestras both in Europe and in the United States. He was knighted in 1987.

Concerto in D minor for Two Pianos & Orchestra

Francis Poulenc
1899-1963

Francis Poulenc was one of the youngest members of the six young French rebel composers of the 1920s, disciples of the iconoclastic Erik Satie, known as *Le groupe des six*. Their only uniting credo was the right to express themselves in their own personal way. They resisted what they considered the "phony sublimity" of the Romantic style, especially the legacy of Wagner, which Satie called "sauerkraut music." Their goal was, as Poulenc wrote, to create music that was "clear, healthy and robust – music as overtly French in spirit as Stravinsky's *Petrushka* is Russian."

Poulenc came from an affluent family of pharmaceuticals manufacturers (the forerunners of France's giant chemical conglomerate Rhône-Poulenc SA) and was considered the black sheep of the family. Urbane, sophisticated, witty and easy-going, the model of the Paris *boulevardier* whose idea of a day in the country was a stroll down the *Champs Élysées*, his public persona was reflected in his music. But in his late thirties his music became more serious as he turned increasingly to religious subjects. His style owed much to Ravel's impressionism and to neoclassicism, always with a clear sense of melody. He never participated in atonal or serial music so popular among his colleagues in Paris between the wars and after.

The Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra reflects Poulenc's lighter side, something of a romp through music history – classical and popular. It was composed in 1932 on a commission from Princess Edmond de Polignac (née Singer, as in sewing machines) and premiered in Venice the same year. It opens with two clashing chords, followed by a sparkling entry of a four-note motive by the first piano. The second piano enters with different ideas, reflecting Poulenc's fondness for the music hall, at times sounding like background music for a silent film, at others like French folksong. A mysterious duet of the two pianos that ends the movement supposedly reflects the sound of the Indonesian gamelan orchestra that Poulenc had heard at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931.

The slow second movement opens with a charming theme that Poulenc admitted was patterned after Mozart (most likely the second movement of the Piano Concerto No. 26 in D, K 537). But the second phrase of the theme quickly moves through the centuries, from the romantics, to the mild dissonance of the twentieth to end on a refrain right out of a film score, and on to a hint of "Elvira Madigan" (Mozart, Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major K. 467).

The Finale is an exuberant piece with hints of jazz. Poulenc indulges in his love for sweeping melodies hinting at the street music of the times.

All in all, with its sudden mood shifts and its dialogue between the playful and the serious, the Concerto for Two Pianos sounds like a score for a silent film. It was probably composed, and should be listened to, with tongue firmly placed in cheek. As an added diversion, try to count the many musical quotes and parodies from classical models.

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73

Johannes Brahms
1833-1897

Unsure of his ability to compose symphonies, Brahms took 14 years to finish his first in 1876. Its critical and popular success, while far from overwhelming, gave him the confidence to try his hand at a symphony again, and this time with much greater assurance; thus it took him just a few months in the summer and fall of 1877 to compose his Second Symphony. The contrast between the two is analogous to that between Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, and the parallel can be extended to the environment surrounding their creation. Brahms spent the summer of 1877 in Pörschach, an out-of-the-way village in the Austrian countryside, from where he wrote to Vienna's chief music critic, Eduard Hanslick: "So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to step on them." The symphony's sunny spirit – especially the last two movements – and relatively transparent orchestration harks back to the young Brahms of the two orchestral Serenades (1856-60) and has less of the dense

orchestration that permeates much of Brahms's symphonic writing. But true to Brahms's nature, the Symphony has its darker moments, the composer replied that it reflects his habitual melancholy.

Brahms kept all but his closest friends in the dark about the character of the new work, hinting that it was tragic, somber, dirge-like, and – adding facetiously – would require the orchestra members to wear black crêpe armbands. The premiere in Vienna on Dec. 30, 1877, under the baton of Hans Richter, was an unqualified success, and the ebullient third movement had to be repeated at the insistence of the enthusiastic audience.

The first movement begins gently, only gradually building in dramatic intensity. The opening three notes in the cellos and basses represent a three-note motivic element (motto) that pervades the first movement sometimes in the melody, at others as an accompanying figure. Yet, offsetting this persistent kernel is a considerable array of themes, some of which find the little motive embedded within them. Various discussions of this movement refer to it as “sunny,” but it is more like a sun that frequently hides behind clouds. The second theme in the distant key of f-sharp minor is one of the darker moments and becomes the heart of the development section. Nevertheless, good weather prevails by the end with a gentle coda recalling the motto and ending with a restatement of the first theme.

Like the preceding movement, the *Adagio non troppo* is packed with melodies, but this time the sunshine pretty much stays behind the clouds from the start. Here Brahms breaks down his longer themes into fragments, using the three-note motto from the first movement as well.

The Scherzo opens with a beautiful *allegretto grazioso* solo for the reed woodwinds, accompanied by pizzicato cellos. In an unusual move, Brahms uses the Scherzo theme again in the Trio – only speeded up to Presto and in 2/4 time instead of 3/4. The repeat of the Scherzo is a free variation with only brief reprises of the original woodwind melody.

The Finale, the most festive movement Brahms ever wrote, begins with a gray *sotto voce* (subdued) rhythmic variation of the three-note motto from the opening movement, once again in the cellos and basses. Here Brahms incorporates it into the beginning of the principal theme. The mood becomes gradually more excited, and the Symphony concludes in blazing optimism with a trumpet fanfare.

Program notes by:

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