Peter MAXWELL DAVIES
Piano Concerto • Worlde Blis
Kathryn Stott, Piano
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra • Maxwell Davies
Peter Maxwell Davies (b. 1934)
Piano Concerto - Worldes Blis

Piano Concerto (1997)

Many composers working in the concerto genre have rushed to oblige the two most written-for instruments, violin and piano. Not so Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. His Violin Concerto – admittedly rising to meet a grand occasion and a great soloist, Isaac Stern – appeared only after 30 years of creative activity, in 1985. Between then and the Piano Concerto, the score of which bears the date 'September 24th 1997', his series of Strathclyde Concertos to enrich the solo repertoire of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra’s front-desk players – including the double bass – was immediately complemented by the unlikely concerto writing of all, for piccolo.

Stern has said of the Violin Concerto that it ‘challenges the total technique and sensibilities of both player and orchestra’, and the same is true of the Piano Concerto. The work is very much ‘for Kathy’, the soloist on this recording, whom the composer has heard in a wide repertoire; though the two works in which her interpretation has especially caught his imagination, John Ireland’s genial Piano Concerto and a Mozart concerto in which he has conducted her at the Orkney Festival, would seem to have had little bearing on the finished work. Initial talk of a Mozart model using Strathclyde chamber forces yielded to the concept of a virtuoso piece on the scale of the Feux trotting solo clarinet. The Adagio 2 proposes a cantabile melody and even a key. C sharp minor, and thickens towards an epic denouement. Then the hard-worked pianist takes up the finale without a break 3 launching into variations of the first movement’s dances, again with constantly changing time-signatures but this time with even fewer pauses for thought. Strings articulate another impassioned climax, leading to a substantial cadenza in which the pianist moves from delicate filigree to a dramatic fantasy. Then the final toccata-like runs in octaves bring us closer to Bartók and Prokofiev than anything else in the work – a well-deserved, good-humoured final homage.

David Nice

Worldes Blis (1966-69)

Although he only became latterly known as a symphonic composer, Maxwell Davies produced several pieces that might be reasonably described as 'symphonic' in the period from his Second Fantasia on John Taverner’s ‘In Nomine’ of 1964 to his First Symphony (Naxos 8.572348) completed 14 years later. The most expansive of these proto-symphonic pieces is Worldes Blis, composed during 1966-69 (which later year was to see a number of significant works such as the orchestral foxtrot St Thomas Wake [8.572349] and the theatrical piece Vesaliı icons [8.572712]) and which was rapidly to gain a measure of notoriety owing to its première, the composer conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts on 28 August 1969, when a sizable number of the audience left in its course. Subsequent revivals, however, have reaffirmed the uncompromising power of this ‘Motel for Orchestra’ in which the outwardly conflicting cross-currents of Medieval and Renaissance principals, an emotional impact redolent of European expressionism from the early twentieth century, and developmental procedures of the Classical symphonic era are brought into powerful accord.

The work’s title has been taken from a thirteenth-century plainchant whose actual text (translated here by Tony Healey) is itself apposite to the music which it inspired:

Worldes blis ne last no throve
Hit wit and wend away anon.

The lenger that hich hit i knowe,
The lasse hic finde pris ther on.

For all hit is imynd wyd kare,
Mid sorrewe ant wid uuel fare
Hit wit and wend away anon.

The lengur that hich it i knowe,
Hit let mon wen hit ginnet agon.

Worldy bliss lasts no time at all,
It departs and passes away in a moment.

The longer I have known it
The less value I place upon it,
For it is all mixed with care,
With sorrow and with ill-fortune,
And in the end leaves man poor and desolate
When it has passed away.

All the bliss that is here and there
Comprises in the end weeping and lamentation.

Richard Whitehouse

The plainchant is first sounded by unaccompanied harps 4 before being taken over by lower strings and winds at the extreme bottom of their compass, the music proceeding to rise through the instrumental registers at an unvaried slow tempo in a process which occupies virtually half of the work’s overall length. As this happens the sound-world gradually becomes more diverse and luminous, with frequent recourse to glissandi in the strings to heighten expression while horns and trombones can be heard intoning the plainchant as a cantus firmus (fixed melody) in the densely polyphonic texture. At length this process reaches its culmination, trumpets being heard above the strings and timpani as the music explodes into the febrile confrontation of strings and brass 5. A sequence of tensile and often complex developments now gets underway – initially at the same underlying tempo as brass and lower strings muse ominously on the plainchant in a condensed recital of what has already been heard, then with increasing energy & as percussion enters the fray with its overlapping estatios and violent assaults from cymbals then drums. This subsides to leave upper strings exposed over basses, then brass begin an upwards ascent 7 which gradually presages greater activity from the strings and harps as the music enters a further aggressive phase with percussion – not least the metallic instruments – once again to the fore. This erupts into the maelstrom of strings and brass 8 before an outburst from drums leads to the heightened return of the plainchant on trombones 9 and the curtailed yet also notably intensified reprise of the initial section. From here the texture gradually rises through the registers of strings and brass, but now without any parallel change in the level of dynamics, before it reaches a climactic point in which the so-called ‘death chord’ (as derived from the opera Taverner) emerges balefully right across the whole orchestra with ringing percussion in attendance. The music then disintegrates into a last percussive onslaught, one which leaves only the quietest of dissonances on the brass to resonate gently into silence.
Kathryn Stott

Kathryn Stott is recognised internationally as one of Britain’s most versatile and imaginative musicians and among today’s most engaging pianists. She is in demand for a wide variety of chamber music alliances, playing with some of the world’s leading instrumentalists, as well as appearing on major international concert platforms in recitals and concerto performances. She has also directed several distinctive concert series and festivals and has developed an extensive and exceptionally varied catalogue of recordings. Born in Lancashire, she studied at the Yehudi Menuhin School and the Royal College of Music and was a prize-winner at the Leeds International Piano Competition 1978. In addition to her busy career as a performer worldwide, she is a visiting professor at the Royal Academy of Music in London. She enjoys associations with many orchestras and is a favoured partner of many distinguished chamber musicians. She has been performing and recording with Yo-Yo Ma for nearly thirty years and has developed shared musical interests with an eclectic group of performers, bringing a close involvement with many leading string quartets. A particular interest in contemporary music has led to several world premieres.

Follow @kathystott on Twitter or visit her website: www.kathrynstott.com

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Patron: HRH The Duke of York, KG • Artistic Director and Principal Conductor: Charles Dutoit

Formed in 1946 by Sir Thomas Beecham, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) has enjoyed more than 65 years of success, giving first-class performances of a wide range of musical repertoire all over the world with artists of the highest calibre. Under the inspired leadership of Artistic Director and Principal Conductor Charles Dutoit, the Orchestra maintains and builds on a demanding schedule of performances, tours, community and education work, and recordings. Throughout its history, the Orchestra has been directed by distinguished conductors including Rudolf Kempe, Antal Doráti, André Previn, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Daniele Gatti. Today the Orchestra continues to enjoy the support of high-ranking conductors such as Pinchas Zukerman, Grzegorz Nowak and Daniele Gatti. Central to the RPO’s thriving concert schedule is its prestigious annual series at Southbank Centre’s Royal Festival Hall. At the Orchestra’s London home Cadogan Hall, the intimate and luxurious surroundings provide the perfect concert atmosphere in an idyllic location. Completing the Orchestra’s London programme of concerts, the iconic Royal Albert Hall provides the ideal setting for a varied series of monumental performances, ranging from large-scale choral and orchestral works to themed evenings of familiar repertoire. The Orchestra offers a comprehensive regional touring programme, with established residencies in Croydon, Northampton, Lowestoft, Reading, Crawley, Ipswich, High Wycombe, Aylesbury and Dartford. Internationally the Orchestra is in high demand, undertaking several major tours each season. Recent tours have included performances in the United States, Canada, China, Russia, Azerbaijan, Spain, Italy, Germany and Japan.

www.rpo.co.uk
Dedicated to Kathryn Stott, Peter Maxwell Davies’s Piano Concerto is “one of the most attractive and immediately likeable piano concertos to appear for some time. Miss Stott’s performance must be regarded as definitive in its comprehensive grasp of the work’s multi-facted appeal.” (The Sunday Telegraph) The symphonic “Motet for Orchestra” Worldes Blis unites medieval plainchant with the emotional impact of early 20th century expressionism, having “an organic concentration that is unsurpassed in his output” (Gramophone).

Sir Peter MAXWELL DAVIES
(b. 1934)

Piano Concerto (1997)* 36:02
1 I. Moderato – Più mosso – Andante – Più mosso – Andante – Più mosso – Andante 17:22
2 II. Adagio – 8:35
3 III. Allegro 10:04

Worldes Blis (1966-69) 42:23
4 Lento recitando – Lentissimo – 18:50
5 L’istesso tempo – 4:31
6 Allegro – 3:30
7 Poco più mosso – 6:19
8 Allegro – 1:46
9 Lento 7:27

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