

Maxwell Davies

Naxos Quartets – No. 1; No. 2.

Maggini Quartet (Laurence Jackson, David Angel, violins; Martin Outram, viola, Michal Kaznowski, cello).

Naxos 8.557396 (super-budget price, 1 hour 13 minutes). Website www.naxos.com. Producer Andrew Walton. Engineer Eleanor Thomason. Dates September 30th–October 2nd, 2003.

This disc marks an auspicious moment in the chamber music of the new millennium. It is the inaugural recording of the first two of a set of ten string quartets currently being written by Peter Maxwell Davies in fulfilment of a historic commission from Naxos. The deal is that over five years Maxwell Davies delivers two quartets a year, the Maggini Quartet give each its first performance, and Naxos records and releases the series on disc. Right on schedule, the composer and the Maggini have reached the half-way mark: the Fifth Naxos Quartet was premiered in



Maggini Quartet with Sir Peter Maxwell Davies

John Barnam

October, exactly two years after the First. Davies will deliver the final quartet in 2007; but since the plan of making the works available on disc is only now being realized, this part of the project appears set to run until 2009.

In sum, and as the first disc makes plain, this is a contemporary chamber-music epic, serialized. The analogy is not far-fetched: Maxwell Davies himself once said his quartets were conceived as a whole and would unfold like the chapters of a novel. So here is the marvellous first instalment of the large-scale musical narrative. It initiates a new opus for a new century, but does so with the Classical architectonics of the composer's 'late' manner, familiar from the symphonies and concertos of the past two decades. Despite the Modernist complexity of the idiom, there are reworkings of *allegro* expositions, 'Teutonic' developments, recapitulations, variations, scherzos, tonal-key relationships, and so forth, as well as allusions to Haydn and Beethoven. And there are also some of the more idiosyncratic Maxwell Davies signatures: images of the Orkney environment, references to Orkney folk-fiddling, memories of Scottish dance rhythms.

Perhaps because it wants to lay a foundation for the entire cycle, the three-movement First Naxos Quartet strikes me as paradoxically less welcoming than the more settled Second. A cold wind sweeps through it. The opening is a movement of abstract shapes, bleached colours, fierce contrasts and swift changes of character and energy. In the slow movement, the antagonisms become vicious, and the

colours – premised on long, evocatively textured chords – turn spectral; yet a wide-arched melody slowly unfurls and aspires to float upwards, ever higher, until it disappears out of carshot. Looking to the *Presto* finale of Chopin's B flat minor Piano Sonata, the short final movement is a rapid, ghostly flicker which quickly thins out and expires.

The heart of the Second Naxos Quartet – the work was completed early in 2003 – is its long opening movement. After a beautiful, sustained introduction – all texture, colour and harmony – the *Allegro* offers a journey as bracing as it is cerebral. This is unpredictable music, full of surprise, brimming with vividly etched ideas; it's constantly pulled, torn even, by the contesting impulses of its bold and

animated argument. For all its Classical schemata, the music's way of proceeding from moment to moment is perhaps best thought of as 'empirical', and contingent: the experience of each moment, each event, elicits responses that are simultaneously new events. So the process continues – as an ongoing series of negotiations within a lively dialogue. Set in thick, in-pasto-like harmonies, the next movement is a thrilling, brilliantly imagined, dramatic recitative and *arioso*. A brief Scherzo separates it from what follows: the solemn, dark, serious finale. Some slow, sacred dance, perhaps, this wonderful movement is borne by sumptuous harmonies that lead to a stunning conclusion: the music tends towards white-out, slows to immobility, finally congeals in a single, piercing tone.

As so often before, the Maggini shine brightly. Virtuoso, intelligent, gorgeously toned, they are also excellently served by the warmth and transparency of the recording. The booklet notes are written by Maxwell Davies himself. Though certainly of interest as the composer's way of attempting to put his notes and sketches into words, they say too much and too little: many listeners are likely to find them heavy on technicality and light on other sorts of context and implication. But happily these pieces, these opening chapters, are powerful and abundant enough to allow listeners to discover their own meanings in them. Those who succeed are likely to find themselves keenly anticipating the next instalment.

Christopher Ballantine