

**MAXWELL DAVIES "Naxos" Quartets: No. 1; No. 2 • Maggini Qrt • NAXOS 8.557396 (72:39)**

The Maggini play Maxwell Davies with the same kind of last-day-on-earth commitment and intensity that the Composers Quartet gave to the Carter First and Second. They are also given the best quartet sound I've heard from Naxos in these two opening shots of a salvo of 10 commissioned by the label from the Master of the Queen's Music. The recorded range is huge but credible, and this helps concentration: Eleanor Thomason's engineering work is a fine example of technology serving the specific needs of both music, and listener. The temptation must have been to go just too dry and close in the sound.

Maxwell Davies writes this kind of thing for people who are prepared to go the extra mile through the bracken, listen a few times, and stick with it. The Naxos price-point is important, therefore. As a kid, I had to tape Maxwell Davies with a mike, live off the radio, as the LPs all cost too much. When I *did* save up and get one (the *Second Fantasia*) it turned out hardly anyone else in the world bought it. It could be lonely as Hoy out there, as a Max admirer.

We're on Hoy again here, *och aye*, as the composer paces out yet another windblown musical labyrinth, but we're also in New Vienna. Most other quartet masters you could mention flash by, in fact, with Classical and Romantic models transformed, grammatically, into deep structure. But this is the familiar Maxwell Davies environment, and fundamentally expressionist. He talks of lighter relief in the short movements, but there is none to be had. He's jousting with Beethoven with a fair degree of grim determination, in the teeth of a gale, throwing pebbles in the ever-watchful face of death. I hope, as he plans these 10 as one meta-quartet, that he doesn't get bogged-down in the structure, on Hoy. There does have to be more to admire in music than arcane formal ingenuity. Already, these works move the heart, on close inspection.

His seascapes are all Max, and not Bax. The opening movement of the First is a big, dynamic, and emotional achievement by any historical standards, while the succeeding Largo may just be his best long-stretch of anguished, shattered music. He then closes out with a throwaway, two-minute finale, to keep us guessing: a whole, rich life condensed into a chilling, throwaway line. As usual with Maxwell Davies, the ample analytic accompanying notes (from the composer this time) bear little or no relation to the effect the music makes on the listener (especially with regard to tonality), and the words are best ignored until the music has sunk in to the emotional core.

This CD is a nostalgic journey into complex modernist authenticity, and the authentic complexity of life and art. I thought Max would relax after this, but next, in 2003, he engaged in his work with the war in Iraq. Watch this space.

Something to really get your teeth into, then, with some musical meat as well as structural skin and bone. A brave move and a premium product from Naxos, warmly recommended. **Paul Ingram**