

## *A Mirror of Whitening Light* by Peter Maxwell Davies, 1977

### Short Note by Paul Griffiths:

The 'mirror' is the great expanse of the Pentland Firth, as seen from Davies's croft: much of the music evokes the sea, with its flickering colours and splashy resonances. But the title alludes also to processes of alchemical transformation, and the music takes up this suggestion too in its sustained developmental energy, pressing through sections of diverse texture, speed and weight. It is cast in a single movement, in a characteristic modal version of C, and is effectively a condensed chamber symphony. It is also one of Davies's most gripping and beautiful achievements.

### Composer's Note: ( from an introductory talk for the first broadcast performance)

The title *A Mirror of Whitening Light* - originally I used the Latin, Speculum Luminis de Albensis - is alchemical, and I remember finding it in a book on alchemy by Jung, and I immediately transferred the idea (of the 'Mirror of Whitening Light' [to] the mirror of whitening light outside my own window above my work desk in Orkney). There, the bay is in fact like a crucible of ever-changing miraculous light. And the quality of this light is quite extraordinary; and to my ear, if you will forgive the transference from one medium to the other, when I hear *A Mirror of Whitening Light* now it reminds me of that very special quality of light which is due, I think, to the fact that the sun strikes not only from above, but is reflected into that window from the crucible, from the bay, from below - so that one has a two-fold light, which puts an extraordinary shimmering edge (sometimes quite literally a rainbow edge) on everything that you see.

Similarly, even in the world of sound, there is this extraordinary sound - a kind of wash, of sometimes very interestingly differentiated white sound which comes across the bay. By white sound I mean sound that contains all possible frequencies, but which divides itself out into extraordinarily interesting bands of frequency, depending upon the wind. And this has a kind of ever-changing chromatic colour which corresponds to the changing colour on what one sees and affects one's ear. And this, this visual and this aural experience is, I can say after the event, at the root of the inspiration of *A Mirror of Whitening Light*.

The work was written over quite a long period of time but it was written in spasmodic bursts over that time. I took as a starting-point the plainsong *Veni Sancte Spiritus* which, if one knows it, one can hear quite plainly recurring throughout the work. I also took as a principle of design the magic square of the sun, which I used as a kind of rhythmic and tonal grid-plan throughout the work. Perhaps I should explain that the magic square is an arrangement of numbers into a particular pattern. For instance, here, the numbers 1 through 64 are arranged, on a square, so that one has the numbers 1 through 64, not going in order, from 1 to 64, but in a pattern whereby if you go along the sides of the square, the numbers add up in that particular way (they always add up to the same thing). And if you go across that square of the numbers arranged in a particular way, they make very interesting patterns. And I see these patterns, in the first place, possibly as dance patterns; and one gets to know them by heart. One doesn't in fact deal with numbers at all. One deals rather as somebody who is dealing with *bell-changes*, with actual patterns with changes (emphasis added). So that the fact that these are numbers is of no consequence whatever. One is dealing in fact with rhythmic lengths and with pitches.

For the listener, this is not of prime importance but I must mention it in passing to reassure the listener that the structure, underneath even the wildest passages, is very rigidly controlled. (I firmly believe that the more one controls the flow of one's wildest inspiration, the wilder it sounds. And so when I really wanted to be wild towards the climax of this work, I imposed very rigid rhythmic

and tonal controls derived from the plainsong, and from that magic square; and the result is really quite extraordinary I find, even now.)

The form of the work is, I think, simple, even on first hearing. There is an introduction, where I quite literally slam at you a sequence of, it would appear, unrelated ideas which the rest of the work starts slowly to pin together, and to make sense of, and to connect. I think it only fair to say that that introduction was written after the rest of the work was finished. I felt I didn't want to start with the long bassoon tune - you'll hear a bassoon play a very high C, where the actual main section starts, after this introduction and the tempo becomes very slow. ... I didn't want to start with that. It reminded me too much of another piece of mine - Ave Maris Stella - and I didn't want to repeat it that kind of way.

The central section, after the slow section which starts with the bassoon solo, is an extraordinary development, which quickens, slowly quickens the pace of events. The isorhythmic sections become shorter, the rhythms become more disjointed and, if I can use the term 'hocketing', i.e. splitting up of material, melodic material between instruments, it becomes all frenetic. This central section leads to a climactic end of that development transformation section where one can, I think, without much effort of imagination hear dance rhythms which relate directly to the experience of going to dances in the north of Scotland, where the whole band flings at you (sometimes in very high, rather agonizing registers I find in rehearsal, particularly) - it flings at you these very straightforward 12/16, 9/16 rhythms, which have got quite a decided Scottish snap about them. This is if the rather calm, celestial opening of the main movement has gradually been transformed into a Bacchanalian riot. And the bassoon returns after that, with a restatement of the opening, which might, at first hearing, appear to be a recapitulation, but this is illusion because it is in fact only a bridge to the kernel of the whole work which crystallizes out of the tonal and, well, all the harmonic implications: and the orchestration of the work becomes quite limpid and very transparent; the final slow section, to my mind at least, resolves the questions that the structure so far has proposed. And the work closes, not quite with this slow section - although originally I had intended that this should be the end, I felt very strongly that the last word hadn't been said. Just as after I had written the last word I felt very strongly that the first word hadn't been said and I had to tag on an introduction at the beginning. And this final section, this coda (if you like to use the old-fashioned term) has the horn playing out the plainsong notes which have become gradually more and more oriented towards the rhythmic units of the magic square. These are the last, played out, very, very plainly and the other instruments gradually take up these pitches and build up a big harmony out of them - just a solid block-chord which I have made shimmer and it dissolves in a cascade of bell-sound on the crotales, and the effect at the end is (and I hope you don't think I'm being too fanciful) like a great wave which builds up and then crashes over and splinters into fragments of shimmering light.

Source: Composer's website MaxOpus (<http://www.maxopus.com/works/mirror.htm>)