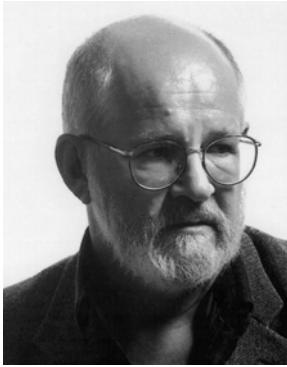


Nicholas Maw (photo: Maurice Foxall)



NICHOLAS MAW AND THE MUSIC OF MEMORY

Arnold Whittall

Back in the early 1960s, followers of new music in Britain soon became aware that the future would not be entirely dictated by the innovative radicalism of Princeton or Darmstadt – or even by such iconoclastic Brits as Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle. And anyone inclined to dismiss Nicholas Maw's *Scenes and Arias*, on its first version's Proms première in August 1962, as a nostalgic pseudo-Delian wallow, was put right by Anthony Payne's enthusiastic contextualization of Maw in this journal a couple of years later. In Payne's analysis, *Scenes and Arias* triumphantly avoided rambling romanticism, demonstrating a 'post-expressionist language' at 'a new pitch of intensity', as well as 'the composer's exceptional feeling for the movement inherent in atonal harmony'.¹

It might seem a long way from the technical roots of such an assessment to the kind of thinking which emerged 30 years later at the end of Roger Scruton's encyclopedic study *The Aesthetics of Music*. Scruton declared that 'the great task which lies before the art of sound' is that 'of recovering tonality, as the imagined space of music, and of restoring the spiritual community with which that space was filled'. Scruton then revealed his doubts that 'this act of restoration can be accomplished in Tavener's or Górecki's way: a musical equivalent of *Four Quartets* is needed – a rediscovery of the tonal language, which will also redeem the time. Many of our contemporaries have aimed at this – Nicholas Maw, John Adams, Robin Holloway, and Alfred Schnittke. But none, I think, has yet succeeded'.²

Maw's presence at the head of that un-alphabetical quartet is striking, and it might well be that Scruton had in mind the 'recovered tonality' that leads the mighty *Odyssey* to its E flat major ending – an ending, as Maw would not hesitate to point out, written several years before the work's large-scale central episodes. If *Odyssey* were indeed in Scruton's mind, he must have concluded that it did not succeed in fully recreating a viable tonal structure, still less in restoring any kind of 'spiritual community'. Nevertheless, it surely absorbs, refines and elaborates the post-tonal (rather than atonal) richness of *Scenes and Arias*, as well as transforming that work's fervent eroticism into one of the most powerfully heroic quest-narratives of post-1950s music: the associations between that ending and those of Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* and Elgar's Second Symphony, whether intentional or not, are difficult to ignore.

Odyssey was less an attempt to restore tonality with all its traditional, work-spanning hierarchical ramifications, more a prescient and brilliantly imaginative engagement with that contrast between suspended tonality (in Schoenberg's sense) and allusions to tonality which lies

¹ Anthony Payne, 'The Music of Nicholas Maw', *Tempo* 68 (1964), pp. 2–13.

² Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 508.

behind so much later 20th-century music, and which makes old-style distinctions between 'tonal' and 'atonal' seem crude in the extreme.³ There was nevertheless a huge sacrifice involved in the *Odyssey* enterprise, which occupied Maw, on and off, from 1972 to 1987. Before that, the apparently logical progression from *Nocturne* and *Scenes and Arias* to opera (*One Man Show*, *The Rising of the Moon*) had had less-than-happy results: the verbal and visual imperatives of staged comedy allowed Maw's special lyrical gifts too little room for manoeuvre. But some memorable instrumental compositions, like the superbly-crafted instrumental canvases of *Life Studies* (completed just as what became *Odyssey* was being begun) as well as the relatively short cycle *La vita nuova* (1979), setting Italian Renaissance verse for soprano and chamber ensemble, showed how subtly and eloquently the personal creative impulses so potently deployed in *Scenes and Arias* could evolve into new regions, both formally and stylistically. By the time the LSO commissioned the orchestral work that would become *Odyssey* Maw had achieved an uneasy but manageable *modus vivendi* in England. By the time *Odyssey* was finished, he had moved to America, and while this certainly brought new kinds of personal contentment, its effect on his music was rather more questionable.

Maw's one *magnum opus* after *Odyssey* is the opera *Sophie's Choice*, which occupied him for the best part of 11 years, from 1991 (when he first saw the film and read William Styron's novel), to 2002 (the Covent Garden première). There were several substantial instrumental works during these years – including the Piano Trio (1990–1), the Violin Concerto (1993), and the String Quartet No. 3 (1994–5) – as well as, with *Shanama* for chamber orchestra (1992), a marvellously spontaneous and evocative collection of separate pieces that builds on the achievements of *Life Studies*. But – perhaps in a bid to improve on Tippett's rather cartoonish representation of life and exile in a New York-like city in *The Ice Break* (1977) – Maw decided that his grandest opera would shun the mythic dimensions exploited so successfully by Birtwistle in *The Mask of Orpheus* (first performed 1986). It would instead edge closer to the 'recent-history-as-parable-of-human-fallibility' model essayed in John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991).

Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (written 1973–78, published 1979), from which Maw himself devised a libretto, is obviously and emblematically American in its setting and spirit, and has a strong autobiographical element. Styron's research took in a great deal of post-Holocaust cultural history, but his immediate source was *Five Chimneys* by Olga Lengyel, 'an eerily unemotional narrative written by a Hungarian woman who ... unwittingly sent both of her children to the gas chambers'.⁴ The sheer horror of Lengyel's experience might suggest that only the most factual and narrowed-down kind of narrative could do literary justice to it. But Styron chose a very different approach, with a tale in which the psycho-social consequences of the Holocaust are seen at work in Brooklyn a few years later. The Lengyel-figure, Sophie, is trying to build a new life, and new relationships, while living with the loss of both her children – one to the gas chambers, the other to illness. Styron had decided to give the archetypal dramatic topic of human choice a searingly naturalistic work-out – one that left him vulnerable to accusations of exploitativeness as well as of banality.

³ For related discussion, see Arnold Whittall, 'Music 1909: the birth of high modernism', *The Musical Times*, Spring 2009, pp. 5–18.

⁴ James L.W. West III, 'Styron's Sophie', Royal Opera Covent Garden, Programme Book for *Sophie's Choice* (2002), pp. 26–30.

Writing of Tippett's *King Priam*, Ian Kemp noted that 'by their nature and circumstances the characters are forced to make impossible decisions and live with the inevitably disastrous consequences':⁵ and when Tippett himself commented that Paris's 'problem of choice issues musically ... in a monologue of self-questioning, a questioning of fate, and life's meaning'⁶ he was highlighting the opportunity such a topic gives the composer to represent not just the anguish of the character experiencing agonizing dilemmas but the vulnerability, the fragility that arises when it is impossible to make a decision that is 'right' in all possible respects. In the end, the 'correct' decision for Styron's Sophie is to right the earlier wrong by choosing her own death, something the tortured relationship with Nathan helps to make possible. And here we can begin to imagine some of the reasons why Maw was so attracted to the story. It was the opposite of *Odyssey*: a study, packed with sordid details, of human inadequacy and failure. Instead of an idealized, wordless quest for human fulfilment and resolution there is an inevitable and inescapable collapse of self-belief, and of the will to live. The analogies with *Wozzeck* and *Peter Grimes* are clear, and the first at least would have mattered to Maw, who greatly admired Berg's opera. But Styron's veristic fable depends crucially on a level of manic eroticism whose musical equivalent would have been a kind of full-blooded expressionism – Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten* comes to mind – for which Maw had little taste. The novel's polarities – 'a daring mixture of low comedy and high tragedy' – are extreme, and the problems with the opera perhaps have even more to do with the difficulties of staging those extremes convincingly than with setting them to music. The film had it easier.

That 21st-century operas about the most fraught aspects of the Second World War – anti-semitism, nuclear fission – are difficult to bring off is confirmed by two other examples, each radically different from *Sophie's Choice*. In *Shadowtime* (2004) Bryan Ferneyhough offers a surreal fantasia around the life, thought and times of the Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, who committed suicide when trying to escape from Europe in 1940. Ferneyhough is less concerned with Sophie-like personal tragedy, more with the almost unearthly richness of Benjamin's writings, whose resonances have immense relevance for the kind of music that invites performers and listeners alike to question their motives as well as their capabilities. No less than *Sophie's Choice*, *Shadowtime* needs the space and setting of the theatre, while seeming to question their value. Less obviously challenging to performers and listeners than *Shadowtime*, the John Adams/Peter Sellars *Doctor Atomic* (2005) runs risks similar to Maw's opera in showing a special individual who is not just heroically, archetypically 'in extremis', but embroiled in a complex near-contemporary dilemma, a victim of history and its implacable power structures. The operatic Oppenheimer, like the operatic Sophie, acquires some of the attributes of the tragic Romantic hero: and yet it is difficult to place them alongside the great protagonists of 19th- and early 20th-century opera when their situations are so concretely determined by the facts of the Second World War. A filmed docudrama with incidental music can work well, but as a genre quite distinct from operatic tragedy. In these terms, therefore, it is *Shadowtime*, the least 'veristic' of the three compositions under consideration here, that works best as opera.

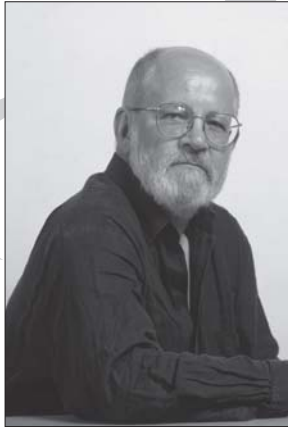
⁵ Ian Kemp, *Tippett: the Composer and his Music* (Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 355.

⁶ Michael Tippett, *Tippett on Music*, ed. Meirion Bowen (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 211.

⁷ James L.W. West, op. cit., 28 [see note 4].

Nicholas Maw

(1935–2009)



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Scenes and Arias (1962, rev. 1966)

"One of the most sensuous British works of the post-war years" *The Guardian*
Vocal score available on sale

La Vita Nuova (1979)

"Of all Maw's works for voice, these settings of Italian renaissance poets encapsulate perfectly his lyrical gifts and fondness for rich, Straussian harmonies"
Financial Times
Full score available on sale

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In Maw's case, the supposition that he wanted above all to provide an operatic complement to his earlier comedies as well as to the 'abstract' *magnum opus* that is *Odyssey* explains why it was impossible for him to consider a more optimistic, more mythically timeless subject. We have therefore been deprived of the kind of serenely beautiful post-Straussian operatic ending (echoing *Odyssey's* E flat major) that is, understandably, rare in contemporary music theatre: perhaps only Hans Werner Henze in his beautifully sustained and poised Salzburg commission, *L'Upupa und der Triumph der Sohnesliebe* (2003), has managed something which works in those terms. Henze's ending avoids pure consonance, but the orchestral postlude, depicting 'die blaue Stunde' – the twilight hour – is magically serene: understated, yet with an element of regretfulness that fits the opera's final, composite image of hope and uncertainty.⁸

For Maw it might be imagined that the concluding musical image of *Sophie's Choice* – a high E major triad in three solo violins sustained as the F natural which ends the limpid melodic line in a fourth solo violin dies away – is more appropriate to the contemporary world of social, religious tension and individual trauma than the utopian stability which emerges from *Odyssey*, and which can only be felt as fitting within the frame of that composition's philosophy of transcendence. Maw clearly believed that art could provide human experience with such visions of perfection. Yet those visions must always be complemented by more mundane, and less idealistic perceptions. One excellent early example can be found in the first of Maw's *Six Interiors* (the 1966 Hardy settings

⁸ See Arnold Whittall, 'Henze's haunted sensibility', *The Musical Times* (Summer 2006), p. 14.

for voice and guitar). In 'To Life' the poet rails at life's 'too forced pleasantries', and asks why, for once, might not life 'array/Thyself in rare disguise/ And feign like truth for one mad day/That earth is Paradise?' Creative artists have the ability to 'feign like truth', even when the reality from within which they do so is that of the Holocaust or Hiroshima. Perhaps it was some such perception that led Maw to continue to compose *Sophie's Choice* after the opera itself was finished, and in his very last work, the String Sextet subtitled 'Melodies from the Drama' (2007), to memorialize his own most ambitious recent work in such a poignantly allusive way.

Given his preferred musical idiom, it is understandable that memory, and memorializing, should play a vital part in Maw's creativity. He explained the importance of melody to him by declaring that, more than any other aspect of music, 'it has the power of entering the listener's inner life, and being imprinted on his memory'. This, combined with a desire 'to get the narrative drive back into music', and 'to throw a bridge back to tradition, while taking account of everything that has happened since Schoenberg'⁹ indicates a formidably ambitious agenda. But anyone believing that the most important, most fundamentally Schoenbergian thing that has happened in and since Schoenberg himself is the post-tonal transformation of tonality rather than its 'atonal' elimination might be willing to accept that Maw was as good as his word.

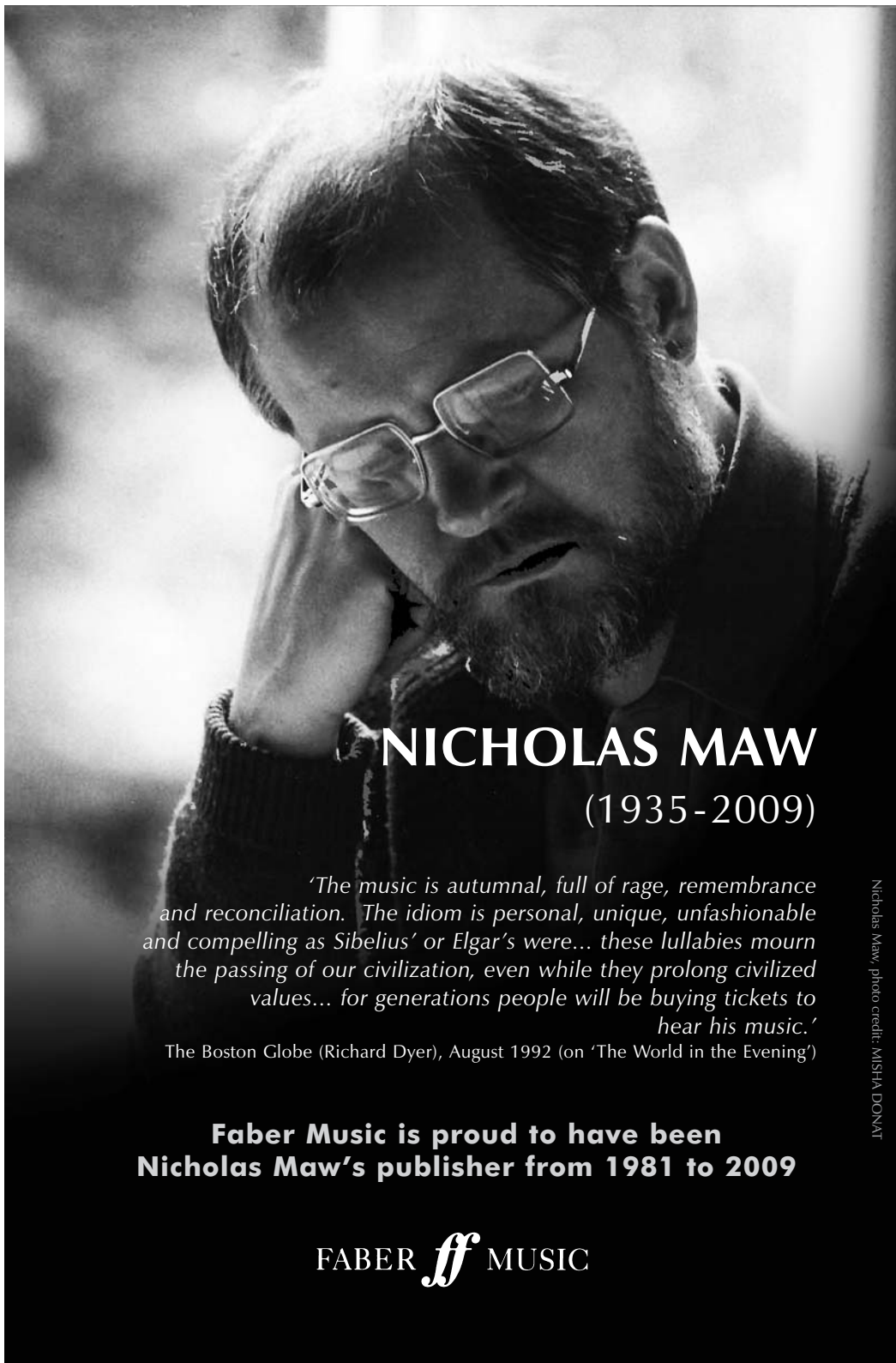
Occasionally, as in his *Music of Memory* for guitar (1989), which offers a set of 'meditations' on the Intermezzo from Mendelssohn's op. 13 string quartet, he was able to dramatize the distance between past and presence as a continuum rather than a disjunction, and without the kind of epic melancholia and fracturing of formal continuity which disturbed him greatly at an early performance of Birtwistle's *Earth Dances*. But while *Scenes and Arias*, *Life Studies*, *La vita nuova* and *Odyssey* not only kept melancholia at bay but positively transcended it, *Sophie's Choice* could only counter it by the kind of musical indirection that focuses on the human ability to learn from manifestations of vulnerability and failure. The narrator in the opera's Epilogue claims that he is able to mourn, but not to understand 'Auschwitz through Sophie and all her contradictions'. Maw's music conveys the mourning, the sorrowful memory, even if the seismic specifics of its source in history and real life cannot be drawn into the aesthetic experience: his understanding of the limited constructive role that contradiction could play in music precluded anything more disruptive or more downbeat. Maw's music enters the listener's inner life, even so, and his celebration of the power of remembrance and regret will survive in the memories of those who continue to value the special qualities of his achievements.



Nicholas Maw

5 November 1935 – 19 May 2009

⁹ As quoted by Thomas Sutcliffe, *The Guardian*, 10 August 1987. Cited in Kenneth Gloag, *Nicholas Maw: Odyssey* (Aldershot, 2008), p. 60.



NICHOLAS MAW

(1935-2009)

'The music is autumnal, full of rage, remembrance and reconciliation. The idiom is personal, unique, unfashionable and compelling as Sibelius' or Elgar's were... these lullabies mourn the passing of our civilization, even while they prolong civilized values... for generations people will be buying tickets to hear his music.'

The Boston Globe (Richard Dyer), August 1992 (on 'The World in the Evening')

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