The twelfth SOUND FESTIVAL opened on Thursday with a fearless plunge straight in at the deep end. It offered an exploration of the piano music of Peter Maxwell Davies including at least two of the most fascinating and challenging piano works of the twentieth century. However, since the Festival’s raison d’être is to support and celebrate the very newest in music, Thursday’s opening programme also included four new works co-commissioned by SOUND and the University of Aberdeen. Three of the composers of these works, every one of them dedicated to the memory of Maxwell Davies, were present in the Elphinstone Hall to introduce their pieces. For most of them “Max” was a well-loved friend as well as an admired composer. Sally Beamish was unable to be present on Thursday but she sent a short introduction to her piece entitled Mavis. It was read out before his performance of her piece by our star pianist Rolf Hind. Hind was last in the Elphinstone Hall in November of 2012 for a hugely successful SOUND concert celebrating the music of contemporary English composers in orbit round a central core of music by John Cage.

I will begin by discussing the four wonderfully colourful pieces dedicated to the memory of Maxwell Davies. The first of these by Gemma McGregor, entitled Always by the Shore, was commissioned with the support of soundbytes investors Margaret Carlaw and Derek Ogston. Gemma told us that her piece was inspired by fond memories of her attendance at the funeral of Maxwell Davies. “Max” did not want the traditional observances of a religious funeral. Instead the journey to his burial became a happy celebration of his life and of the Orcadian surroundings which he loved. In some ways a sad occasion is remembered fondly by Gemma and her music reflected just that. Many of Gemma’s compositions have ideas of place at their heart and Always by the Shore was no exception. There were ripples, wisps of melody and above all the special sensation of Orcadian light in her piece delivered on the upper register of the piano by Rolf Hind.

Rolf’s own composition, The Dark Hug of Time was based on a simplified version of the “magic squares” that Maxwell Davies occasionally used in composition. It was a work, like many of those produced by Maxwell Davies that contained a huge wealth of thematic ideas, changing backgrounds and piano colours – a fitting tribute to the great composer.

Alasdair Nicolson based his composition Magnus IV – Orpheus in his cottage, on the bell sounds of St Magnus Cathedral. The bell sounds resonated rather magnificently on the piano in this performance suggesting the broad open expanses of the Orcadian landscape – a beautifully atmospheric and colourful piece. In his introductory words, Nicolson painted for us a picture of Maxwell Davies’s cottage on a hillside, “far from the madding crowd” where hospitality was always warmly offered.

The Mavis in the title of the piece by Sally Beamish refers to the Scots word for a song thrush. Her piece was a simple chorale with the song of the thrush disporting itself above. It gave us another glimpse of the Orcadian landscape at its most alluring, presumably in summer.
Maxwell Davies’s own piano works cover a vast range of styles and difficulties, from the simplicity of his most popular work, Farewell to Stromness and Yesnaby Ground. In my past incarnation as a music seller I have sold hundreds of copies of these twin pieces and even I have had a go at playing them. At the opposite end of the range of difficulty, his 5 Piano Pieces Op. 2 and the Sonata which concluded the performance could only have been played by a true virtuoso such as Rolf Hind.

The Five Piano Pieces Op. 2: Andante, Allegro, Andante, Adagio – non troppo and Allegretto are composed according to a 12 note scheme. Rolf Hind mentioned Schoenberg and Boulez as sources of inspiration but I sensed the spirit of Messiaen in there as well. Variety was certainly the spice in these pieces. There was icy brittle playing but moments of softness too. Rolf Hind brought out contrasts in dynamics, phrasing, piano touch and very importantly the use of pedal too. The result was a truly riveting performance full of colourful detail.

Three Sanday Places, Knowes O’ Yarrow, Waters of Woo and Kettletoft Pier demonstrated a quite different side of Maxwell Davies. These were pictorial pieces, quite simple and tuneful. I was reminded of the music of Eric Satie – not that these pieces sounded anything like Satie’s music but like Satie, in these pieces Maxwell Davies was able to draw so much atmosphere and feeling from quite simple music. Six little pieces (actually five) were short and to the point. Rolf Hind suggested the music of Webern as a model. They were, he suggested, tight, intense and jewel-like – a good description of these pieces and of the music of Webern. These pieces came across as polished and well worked out with never a note going to waste. What was special in this performance was that each of the pieces radiated its own special character.

Sub tuam Protectionem represented Maxwell Davies’s interest in ancient plainchant melodies played firmly in the left hand while the right hand tried to disrupt them with angular modernity. From where I was sitting I could see the score of the twin piece Ut Re Mi. It was fascinating to see the way in which the music was reduced to shorter and shorter sections, oh and here I must congratulate the excellent page turner.

The final piece in the concert was the most highly developed and richly constructed. The Piano Sonata had seven contrasting movements. It has been praised for its seriousness, detail of thought, shaping and tightness of structure. Rolf Hind’s performance was remarkably clear and explicit. The listener had to concentrate hard to follow where the music was going but that brought its rewards. It was apparently inspired by Beethoven’s Sonata in A flat major Op. 110. Perhaps so, but at a first listening, that hardly came across. It would require intensive study to get hold of such an idea – the sort of thing that Rolf Hind had literally at his fingertips. It was, at first hearing an astonishing assault of sound – a work of amazing complexity. What helped me to grasp the piece more clearly was when I spoke to Ralph Hind at the end of the concert and he showed me the dedication at the head of the work to Charles Senior, poet, runic scholar and keeper of the bookshop in Stromness. The quotation on the title page from a poem by Senior read thus:

“The cries of gulls
curling in shoalward whirlwinds
around the surging firth,
are muted by croak of raven
and bleat of lamb
from silence to silence!

Yes, that was it. That was the Orkney in which Maxwell Davies was in love and it explained much of the music in his amazing Sonata.