

# TEMPO

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## CHORAL MUSIC TODAY

This issue, devoted mainly to Peter Maxwell Davies, is timed to coincide with the first performance of his *Five Motets* (in the opening concert of the 11th St. Pancras Festival at Friends House on March 1st). One of the reasons for the six-year gap between composition and performance of this work, as Anthony Payne points out in his article on p.7, has been the difficulty that it presents to the singers. The composer originally conceived it for a cappella forces, but as it became clear that a satisfactory performance was hardly attainable in any normally possible amount of rehearsal time, he compromised, like Schoenberg in *De Profundis*, by abandoning the a cappella conception. Unlike Schoenberg however, instead of simply permitting the doubling of the vocal parts by wind instruments, he composed an instrumental accompaniment which, while fulfilling this function, is more than a mere doubling, and adds a new compositional dimension to the work.

Probably in time some ambitious and enterprising choirmaster will root out the unaccompanied version and find it perfectly performable, but at present it does seem to need not only instrumental support but also professional singers. It shares this second requirement with much choral music being written today, and this is reflected in the increasing number of professional choirs—though there are other reasons for this too, among them the steady decline in amateur choral singing. More professionalism in this field is in many respects a welcome development, and the only disadvantage is that it has to be paid for, and that adequate rehearsal for difficult modern works, the very ones that most need professionals, becomes very expensive. This may mean that composers will now have to choose between choir and orchestra, instead of having both as they used to. And since singers are still not so expensive as players this may accentuate the general trend of the last fifty years away from the orchestra.

There are indeed, in spite of the decline of the amateur choir, already signs of a return to choral music at the expense of the orchestra. As compositional technique becomes more abstruse, composers seem increasingly to want to assert the humanity of their work, and to make explicit its expressive intention, by clinging to the most elemental musical medium, the human voice. Perhaps, paradoxically, this may even lead to a revival of the amateur choir. The Princeton High School Choir showed at Cheltenham last year that Maxwell Davies's music (*Veni Sancte Spiritus*) is perfectly accessible to amateurs. What they can do other young people can do too, and since the aesthetic appeal of such so-called 'avant-garde' music will always be primarily to the younger generation, it could provide just the incentive that has so long been lacking to get them back into choirs.