

# An accordion tribute

Jonathan Dove tells **Michael Pearce** about his new concerto, *Northern Lights*

When accordionist Owen Murray asked to join the music class at Edinburgh College of Commerce (now Napier University) in 1973, he was accepted – but told never to bring ‘it’ with him. Undeterred, the Scot studied for six years at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and established the classical accordion department at the Royal Academy of Music in 1986 – since nurturing an award-winning generation of accordionists.

More than four decades since his first ‘rejection’, Murray and the Scottish

Chamber Orchestra commissioned an accordion concerto from Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, who said: ‘Owen’s life’s work has been to establish an identity for the classical accordion. To be able to collaborate with a musician of his distinction is an unmissable opportunity to create a landmark in the history of this instrument.’ Sadly, Davies died just before starting the concerto, but Jonathan Dove accepted the invitation to bring it to fruition.

## What was your relationship with the accordion before this commission?

I was introduced to the accordion by Jeremy Sams – the British theatre director, writer, translator and composer.

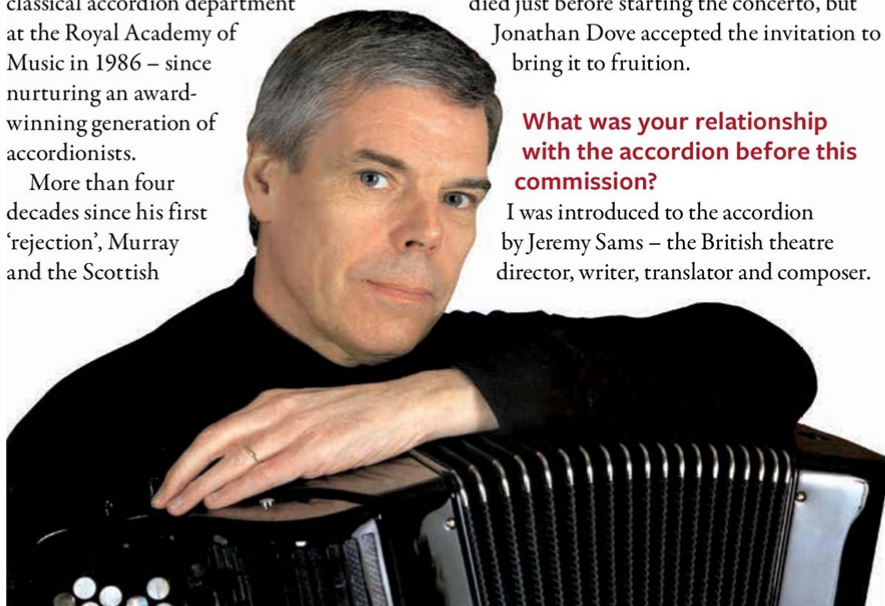
He had written the music for a production of *Ring Round the Moon* by Christopher Fry at the Royal Exchange and was leading the band from the accordion. When he wanted to leave the show, I had to learn the accordion overnight and memorise the score – but that was a piano accordion with a standard bass [left-hand buttons play chords] not free bass played by classical accordionists [left hand plays chords or single notes].

I first used the accordion in arrangements. I arranged *The Magic Flute* for the City of Birmingham Touring Opera and remember a review said, ‘Why, oh why, did Jonathan Dove insist on playing the accordion?’ Since then, I’ve written accordion parts in a number of my own operas, including *The Enchanted Pig*, *Tobias and the Angel*, and *Swanhunter*, and in the *Adventures of Pinocchio*, I even used two accordions!

## What qualities do you like about the instrument?

It’s certainly different from other keyboard instruments because it breathes – and

*‘[Establishing] an identity for the classical accordion’: Owen Murray*



## MAY 2019: PREMIERES IN THE UK & IRELAND

(World premieres unless otherwise stated. Full listings at [classicalmusicmagazine.org](http://classicalmusicmagazine.org))

### 1 May

**Sir Harrison Birtwistle** New work (London Symphony Orchestra, Sir Simon Rattle, conductor, Barbican, 7.30pm)

**Jonathan Leshnoff** Suite for Cello, Strings and Timpani (Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, BSO Young Conductor in Association, Johannes Moser, cello, Lighthouse, Poole, 7.30pm)

### 2 May

**Béla Bartók** Piano Quartet in C minor Op 20 UK prem (Notos Quartet, Wigmore Hall, London, 7.30pm)

**Jonathan Dove** Accordion concerto (Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Clemens Schuldt, conductor, Murray Owen, accordion, Benjamin Marquise Gilmore, violin, Queen’s Hall, Edinburgh, 7.30pm)

**Paul Zaba** *Sidechains* (Solem String Quartet, CLF Art Café, Bussey Building, London, 8pm)

### 3 May

**Samantha Fernando** New work (Philharmonia Orchestra, Martyn Brabbins, conductor, Sheku Kanneh-Mason, cello, The Anvil, Basingstoke, 7.45pm)

### 7 May

**Cecilia McDowall** *Da Vinci Requiem* (Philharmonia Orchestra, Wimbledon Choral Society, Neil Ferris, conductor, Royal Festival Hall, 7.30pm)

### 9 May

**Philip Glass** Symphony No 12 (*Lodger*) European prem (London Contemporary Orchestra, Royal Festival Hall, 7.30pm)

### 11 May

**Golijov** *Oceana* UK prem (BBC Symphony Orchestra, Joana Carneiro, conductor, Barbican, 7.30pm)

**Eric Thiman** *The Lord is my Shepherd* (Harriet Astbury, soprano, Caroline

Clemmow, piano, Bingham and District Choral Society, St Mary’s Church, Radcliffe-on-Trent, 7.30pm)

**Ian Stephens** Clarinet concerto (Kensington Chamber Orchestra, Tom Seligman, conductor, Mandy Burvill, clarinet, St Peter’s Notting Hill, London, 7.30pm)

### 18 May

**Mark Bowden** *Descent*; **Ben Wallace** *5 Gifts for an Old Friend* (BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Tamsin Waley-Cohen, violin, Elizabeth Donovan, soprano, Ryan Bancroft, conductor, BBC Hoddinott Hall, Cardiff, 7.30pm)

**Fung Lam** *Endless Forms* Scottish prem (Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Elim Chan, conductor, Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow, 7.30pm)

### 19 May

**Graham Waterhouse** *Emerald Spring* UK prem (Andrew Fisher, violin, Yukiko

Osedo, piano, Alison Smart, soprano, Katy Taylor, flute, St Mary-at-Finchley Parish Church, Finchley, London, 6pm)

### 24 May

**Thomas Larcher** *Chiasma* UK prem (BBC Symphony Orchestra, Sakari Oramo, conductor, Barbican, 7.30pm)

**Lord Gerald Hugh Tyrwhitt-Wilson** *Portsmouth Point, Overture*; **Charles Villiers Stanford** Violin Concerto in D; **Ralph Vaughan Williams** *The Blue Bird*; **Robin Milford** Symphony (BBC Concert Orchestra, Martin Yates, conductor, Sergey Levetin, violin, Dorchester Abbey, 7.30pm)

### 25 May

**Mark-Anthony Turnage** Quartet No 4 *Winter’s Edge* UK prem (Piatti String Quartet, Wigmore Hall, London, 1pm)

### 27 May

**Enno Poppe** *Freizeit* UK prem (Kuss Quartet, Wigmore Hall, London, 1pm)

breathes in a human way. You can crescendo and diminuendo within notes, so there's an intimacy of phrasing which is fascinating. It also has an incredible range, which means it can have a conversation with many instruments. On button accordions [rather than piano keyboard on right side] you can easily span an octave and a fifth, so you can play chords with one hand which you can't on other instruments and rapidly move between notes far apart. The 'bellow shake' technique is also such a unique texture; there's nothing quite like it.

#### What are the main challenges of writing for accordion?

Up close, it feels like a loud instrument, but in a concert context it can be easily covered – so balance is a big consideration. If possible, Owen and I both wanted the piece to work without amplification and that's what I've written for.

Another challenge is there's a strap over the left hand and it operates the bellow, which means it's much less agile than the right. You can't move as far or fast,

so certain left-hand figurations you might imagine at the piano aren't possible on accordion.

I own a standard bass accordion and so Owen lent me a free bass instrument while I was writing. Of course, the challenge there is I didn't want the piece to be limited

dedicated the concerto to his memory and quoted his famous *Farewell to Stromness* in the last movement.

Max lived in Orkney most of his life and so the northern lights came to mind. I've never been to Orkney, but I've seen the aurora borealis off Greenland – it's

“There is the strong feeling of a night sky and of nature doing its own thing”

by my own technical ability, but I could certainly find out if a chord was achievable. I'd encourage anyone writing for accordion to spend as much time with a player as possible.

#### What is behind the title *Northern Lights*?

The story about how Peter Maxwell Davies nearly wrote the concerto is very touching. He had this long association with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and was such a force for the creation of new music. I've

an amazing phenomenon. In the second movement, there is the strong feeling of a night sky and of nature doing its own thing, with one solitary human wondering what's happening and asking questions he may not be getting answers to: that's when the magical Northern Lights appear.

*2 May: Jonathan Dove accordion concerto, Northern Lights (Owen Murray, accordion; Clemens Schuldt, conductor; Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Queen's Hall, Edinburgh)*

29 May - 8 June

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