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Robert Maxwell:

A Life in Music

by Phillip D. Atteberry

Robert Maxwell interests me for two reasons. First, he has made important contributions to American popular music; second, he has always chosen innovative and unusual career paths. I was pleased when Mr. Maxwell consented to a series of interviews, the first of which was scheduled for 11:00 a.m., September 11, 2001. Obviously, that one didn't occur because at 9:06, the first of two jet liners crashed into the World Trade Center, changing the world forever. Maxwell, who lives with his wife some forty-six blocks from Ground Zero, was never in danger. But like all of us, he was deeply affected. He is reflective by nature, and this event heightened that impulse. He proved both willing and anxious to go through his career with me and assess it in some detail.

I knew something of Robert Maxwell's professional career, but I knew nothing of his early life or musical education, so I began by asking what led him to music and—more specifically—the harp. "I began playing the harp at age seven," began Maxwell, "in 1928."

The circumstances for this early beginning, however, resulted from philanthropic enterprises that Maxwell did not understand until years later.

"For the first quarter of the twentieth century," Maxwell explained, "most classical musicians in America were foreign born. They were European immigrants who had come to America in search of a better life and more musical opportunities. In 1928, ninety percent of the musicians in the New York Philharmonic had been born in Europe.

"Fortunately, a group of wealthy, music-minded philanthropists in New York City became concerned that the United States was not producing and developing future generations of musicians. So they formed the Philharmonic Scholarship Committee to do something about it.

"They engaged top professional musicians to go into the New York public school system and conduct musical aptitude tests on children who wanted to learn an instrument. If the child demonstrated aptitude, the Committee provided ten trial lessons with a first-rate teacher. At the end of that time, upon the teacher's recommendation, a scholarship was offered. And this committee was marvelously far-sighted. The scholarships not only provided lessons on the instrument, but also study in solfeggio, harmony and theory.

"All of this affected me because my two older brothers, Myor and Abe Rosen, who were ten and eleven,



Seven and a half year old Robert begins harp lessons with Mrs. Ormandy (Steffie Goldner), 1929

received scholarships, and thus a harp was delivered to our home.”

In discussing this philanthropic venture, I asked Maxwell why his brothers chose to play the harp.

“They had no choice,” he explained. “Various schools were assigned instruments. One school might be assigned woodwinds, another trumpet and trombone, another percussion, and their school was assigned the harp. The opportunity was so great that they never thought to question the choice of instrument.”

The scholarships Maxwell describes turned out to be one of the most successful philanthropic endeavors ever undertaken. Between 1928 and 1938, approximately 700 scholarships were granted. A majority of the recipients went on to become members of major orchestras throughout the country. Maxwell’s brother, Myor, for example, was harpist with the New York Philharmonic for over twenty-five years and his brother, Abe, was a long-time harpist with the Minneapolis Symphony. Maxwell’s scholarship came about accidentally.

“I was not considered for a scholarship because I was too young,” he continued. “But when the harp was delivered to our home and my brothers began practicing, I watched them closely and—when the harp was unoccupied—imitated what they did.

“Some months later, the circus came to town, and

my brothers’ harp teacher, Steffy Ormandy [*wife of Eugene Ormandy-ed.*], offered to take them after their harp lesson. Being a kind person, she offered to take me also. That’s how I ended up at her house during a lesson. When my brothers finished, I piped up and said, ‘I can play it, too.’ Mrs. Ormandy humored me and said, ‘Well, sit up here and let’s hear you.’ And sure enough, I could play that week’s lesson. She heard enough to recommend that I also receive a scholarship and start lessons.”

In discussing this period of his life, I asked Maxwell what his parents thought of having three boys in the house playing the harp. The question evoked painful memories.

“Sadly,” he explained, “my parents were not compatible, and my father left when I was young. My mother raised us and had a tough job of it. She had no skills that would provide her with a well-paying job, so she did odd jobs where she could find them. When the Depression hit in 1929, things got terrible, not only for us, but for everyone we knew. All of us chipped in to try to earn enough to live on. We delivered groceries, hauled junk, sold trinkets and neckties, anything to bring in a few dollars.

“But through it all,” he continued, “my mother loved music. It was a great passion for her. She particularly loved Caruso and symphonic music. We had a wind-up victrola at home and some big, heavy records. She played them a lot. She also took us to concerts when she could. During those years, there were Saturday night concerts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in January and February. They were free, and we attended religiously. In July and August, the New York Philharmonic played a series of modestly priced concerts at Lewisohn Stadium, which was uptown in the northern part of Manhattan. The Philharmonic season had long since concluded, of course, but the musicians—in order to supplement their incomes—performed additional programs. They played light classical pieces like the *Scheherazade* and ballet music, which I enjoyed thoroughly.”

By the time he reached high school, Maxwell began showing some musical independence. He made friends with Chubby Jackson, who later became a celebrated jazz bassist with Woody Herman, and together they wandered New York listening to the big bands.

“The big band craze hit in the middle thirties,” Maxwell remembers, “just about the time I was fifteen and met Chubby. We listened to all the bands, but I was most taken with Jimmie Lunceford and Count Basie—and Duke Ellington above all. Chubby and I went lots of nights to the Savoy Ballroom to hear Ellington.

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Jimmy Blanton was Duke's bassist at the time, and Chubby loved him. I was smitten by the soloists—Ben Webster, Johnny Hodges and Cootie Williams. The whole idea of improvising captivated me."

These musical tendencies, however, did not sit well with Maxwell's mother, who felt that popular music was inferior to classical. "I must say," recalled Maxwell, "that I even had to be careful about what I listened to on the radio while my mother was around. She did not appreciate what she felt to be the 'blaring' nature of popular music. Her musical sensibilities, which were highly developed, had formed in a different era from mine, so it is understandable that our interests and perceptions developed differently."

Upon graduating from high school, Maxwell took a job with the staff orchestra at radio station WTIC in Hartford, Connecticut. It seemed an odd career move for a person of his background and ability, so I asked what his motives were.

"It was a good education," he explained. "I was interested in popular music and saw this as a way to learn more about it. I expanded my knowledge of the popular repertoire enormously because we played everything—all the hits of the day and tunes that had already become standards.

"Also," he continued, "I learned about improvising. The studio orchestra, of course, couldn't afford

arrangers, so we worked from stock charts provided by the publishers. These were printed on a double staff, with the melody on top and the harmony beneath. We called the lower notes 'footballs' because they were mainly whole notes.

"At any rate, the director decided who played what. He might instruct the first violins to take the melody for sixteen bars then jump to the lower staff. He might start the cellos on the lower staff and at the bridge move them to the melody. All I had to work with were guitar parts, which, of course, consist of chord symbols rather than notes.

"I had studied harmony, so I knew what notes were in a G7 chord. But playing chords on the harp and improvising fillers in the open spaces was new to me. I learned a lot of what pianists call keyboard harmony. Before going to WTIC, I knew such things cerebrally, but after working there several months, the knowledge became instinctive. But I still had one major problem to solve.

"Since my earliest student days, I had become increasingly aware of a serious shortcoming in the structure of the harp. I found it impossible to play cleanly because of all the clashing tonalities from vibrating strings, particularly in the lower register. At times, I felt like I was playing in an echo chamber. Finally I realized that if I wanted to stay with the harp,



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Serge Koussevitzky (front row, 9th from L) and his “children that famous first year of Tanglewood, 1940. Some of the “children” included: Front row: Robert Maxwell (7th from L), Bernard Zighéra (5th from L) and Luca Foss (11th from R). Seated in the second row: Aaron Copland (5th from L). Standing in the back row: Leonard Bernstein (7th from R)

I had to find some solution. Gradually I began to develop a unique muffling system.

“I should provide a little context,” he began. “First, the ingredients of good music, whether classical, jazz or pop, are the same: melody, harmony, inner voicings and rhythm. But there is one other important element that can be taken for granted by every instrumentalist except for the poor harpist: cleanliness. Cleanliness allows the listener to hear inner voices, harmony and the full impact of a melodic line.

“On virtually all instruments, cleanliness is built into the instrument. This is not true of the harp. The only way to establish total cleanliness on the harp is to muffle each string as you play the next one.

“The ability to play cleanly was important when I was playing in dance and swing orchestras” continued Maxwell, “but it was absolutely essential when I started playing clubs. Because I was a solo act, I needed to complement the melodies and improvise with some combination of rhythm and moving bass lines, both of which require a cleanness that is not natural to the harp.”

Maxwell acknowledges that this style took years to master and often affected his writing and arranging. “If I wrote something that was virtually impossible to play cleanly on the harp,” he explained, “I would change the configuration of notes so that I could get my fingers in position to avoid unwanted, lingering vibrations.”

While working at WTIC, Maxwell became both a student and teacher at the local Julius Hartt School of Music, taking a course in counterpoint and teaching

theory to younger students. In the early spring of 1940, he was visited by Arthur Fiedler and invited to audition for a summer of musical instruction at Tanglewood.

“The first year of the Tanglewood scholarships was 1940,” explained Maxwell. “Students lucky enough to be invited received instruction from the first chair performers of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Fortunately, I was accepted and spent an exciting and challenging summer working with Bernard Zighéra, harpist with the BSO, and playing in a student orchestra conducted by Serge Koussevitzky. I also made many friends and acquaintances who later became important in the musical world. Aaron Copland was there, for example, and Leonard Bernstein was a conducting student.”

Maxwell went back to WTIC in the fall of 1940 and worked until the first of the year, but he realized that greater opportunities existed in New York, so he returned in the early spring of 1941, and ran headlong into a major opportunity.

“Shortly after I got back in town,” explained Maxwell, “I heard that the bandleader at the Rainbow Room, Matty Malneck, was looking for a harpist. He went to the Lyon & Healy harp salon, which was then on 57th Street in the Steinway Building, and inquired about local harpists who might be qualified. Mr. Hunt, the salon’s white-haired manager, had known me for a long time and knew of my improvising ability and interests in popular music, so he recommended me.

“Matty asked me to audition, so I used his band’s rhythm section to play a medley of Jerome Kern songs

that I had arranged for the harp. Happily, I got the job. And incidentally, a few weeks later, I decided I would like to have a recording of the Jerome Kern audition piece as a memento, so I went back to the studio with the rhythm section and recorded it, and that was my first professional recording.”

Landing a job in the Matty Malneck orchestra was a career breakthrough for Maxwell. Malneck, a violinist who rose to prominence with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in the 1920s, had an impressive musical resume. In addition to being a first-rate bandleader and violinist, he was a well-known popular composer, having penned, among other standards, *Stairway to the Stars*, *Goody-Goody*, and *I'll Never Be the Same*. He was also an important orchestrator, having arranged not only for Paul Whiteman, but later for Bing Crosby, Johnny Mercer and others. By 1941, Malneck fronted a top-drawer orchestra which traveled extensively but used the Rainbow Room as its home base. Unlike the hard-swinging bands of Benny Goodman or Count Basie, Malneck's orchestra followed the Whiteman tradition of playing sophisticated dance arrangements with a sprinkling of adventurous improvising.

“Matty was a very cordial man,” remembers Maxwell, “and he was very generous with me. He encouraged me to write harp arrangements, and he featured me a lot. Because of that, I pursued writing and arranging more than I otherwise would have. In fact, Matty and I collaborated on a piece called *Fantasy for Harp*, which was by far the most popular thing I performed during those years.”

The story of *Fantasy for Harp* is fascinating, for it not only landed Maxwell his second major job, with Rudy Vallee, but several years later the main theme of *Fantasy* emerged as a monumental pop hit, *Shangri-La*. But that takes us ahead of our story.

Maxwell's tenure with Malneck's orchestra was disrupted by the bombing of Pearl Harbor, an event that derailed many careers in many professions. “It's amazing the little things that you remember,” chuckled Maxwell. “We were playing the Rainbow Room when Pearl Harbor was attacked. There was considerable anxiety at the time. No one was quite sure that the Japanese—or the Germans for that matter—wouldn't attempt a raid on a coastal city. So a sign went up in the Rainbow Room (which of course is on the 65th floor) reading: ‘In case of air raid, go to the 64th floor.’ That drew a big, but nervous, laugh from the guys in the band.”

Early in 1942, the Malneck orchestra played at a private party on the palatial estate of song publisher Irving Mills. It was there that Maxwell met Rudy Vallee, who had enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard as Bandmaster of the 11th Naval District Coast Guard Band.

“We performed *Fantasy for Harp*,” remembers Maxwell, “and Rudy came up to me afterwards and asked what my military status was. When I said ‘I-A,’ he encouraged me, in his colorful manner of speaking, to haul my carcass down to the Coast Guard and enlist. He promised that, if I did, he would get me transferred to his band immediately, and he did.”

“I liked Rudy,” Maxwell said. “He was always good to me. He featured me a lot, even let me play solo sets. Because of him, I was able to expand my popular repertoire on the harp and try out the things I was working on.”

In 1944, while the band was playing one of its many engagements at the Hollywood Canteen, Arthur Marx (known to the world as Harpo) introduced himself to Maxwell and complimented him on his playing. “He told me he especially loved the way I played Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody* and asked me to teach it to him.”

“I was both stunned and flattered,” continued Maxwell, “though I had no idea what I was getting into. When I arrived at Harpo's home in Beverly Hills, two harps had been set up. Harpo explained that since his ability to read music was limited, he preferred to have me play the piece one phrase at a time and he would learn it that way.”

“Almost from the start,” Maxwell continued, “it was clear to me that Harpo would never be able to master the piece, though we persevered for four weeks. Mercifully, he ultimately came to the same conclusion.”



PHOTO BY U.S. COAST GUARD

Musician 1st Class Robert Maxwell performing with the U.S. Coast Guard Band of the 11th Naval District under the baton of Band Master Lt. Rudy Vallee, 1943



PHOTO BY BRUNO

“Bobby” Maxwell performing his solo act at elegant supper clubs in the States and abroad during the glamorous days of the 40s and 50s

So he said to me, ‘Look, I’m making a movie, and I need the Liszt *Rhapsody* for the soundtrack. Would you record it?’ Of course I was delighted.

“When I got to the MGM soundstage, everything was set up. Harpo, Werner Janssen, the film’s musical director, and a couple of audio engineers were waiting for me. After playing a few bars to check the volume and balance, Werner asked me to play the piece twice, which I did. Upon concluding,” laughed Maxwell, “Werner got up, grasped Harpo’s hand, shook it vigorously and said ‘Congratulations.’ Nobody said a word to me, nor was I invited to a screening of *A Night in Casablanca*, which includes my performance of the *Rhapsody*.”

When Maxwell was discharged from the service in September of 1945, he was approached by an MCA agent who was anxious to book him into some supper clubs.

“I was pleased by the opportunity,” he explained. “The outcome of the war had been clear for some time, and all of us had been considering what we might do after we were discharged. I had considered touring and club work, even though such a career direction was unusual for a harpist. But during the war I had vastly increased my repertoire of material appropriate for such venues. I had arranged lots of popular standards by Gershwin, Porter, Kern, Berlin and others. Also, I had composed several original pieces and learned quite a

number of light classics. Because I had been working on my technique of doing bass lines and rhythm underneath melodies and improvisations, I felt my talents were more suitable to a supper club environment than a symphony orchestra.”

Shortly after beginning his supper club career, Maxwell developed a unique platform for the harp which enhanced his performance. “The stage was a platform on legs,” he explained, “and it was rolled out onto the club floor with the harp on it. Mounted inside the platform were tiny spotlights. The platform itself had strategically placed cut-outs which directed the light beams to the ceiling. I controlled the lights with the heels of my shoes by pressing down on buttons installed in the platform. I could change from yellow to red to blue depending upon the mood of the music. Those lights made huge shadows on the ceiling and were quite dramatic. When I performed, I also insisted that the room be dark and that service be stopped. That made a welcome environment in which to perform, not unlike a concert hall.”

From 1945 to 1965, Maxwell and his wife spent forty-five to fifty weeks a year on the road, starring in such rooms as the Blue Angel and the Empire Room at the Waldorf Astoria in New York, the Palmer House in Chicago and the Coconut Grove in Hollywood. In 1946, he began to work regularly for the Hilton-Statler chain, performing thirty to thirty-five weeks a year in Hilton hotels across the country. Of course other bookings came Maxwell’s way during those years, including his second foray into the world of movie-making.

“In 1950, Fox Studios engaged me to do the soundtrack for a Clifton Webb film called *For Heaven’s Sake*. Clifton played the part of a very hip angel who liked to play jazz on his harp. I performed *St. Louis Blues* for the soundtrack of this film.

“Clifton and I worked exactly as Harpo and I had tried to do—Clifton at one harp and me at the other. Of course Clifton was not a musician, so I loosened the strings on his harp so that he wouldn’t hurt his fingers as he imitated my fingering.

“Clifton was the most meticulous performer I have ever known,” continued Maxwell. “When I looked at the rushes of his harp playing, I was amazed that this non-harpist actor was more precise in imitating my finger movements than Harpo had been.”

Maxwell regards his compositions as being a more enduring musical legacy than his performances in clubs. Even though he did most of his composing after assuming his post with NBC in 1964, his first composition, a bluesy jazz piece called *Harping on a Harp*, was composed in 1940 while he was still at WTIC in

Hartford. He composed his most famous composition, *Ebb Tide*, in January 1953 in preparation for a concert tour overseas.

"I was scheduled to fly to England the next week," he explained, "for an engagement with Gracie Fields at the London Palladium followed by a series of theatrical engagements across Great Britain. I performed *Ebb Tide* for the very first time that January at the London Palladium.

"After that performance, a young man whom I did not know, visited my dressing rooms. He was Frank Chacksfield, a young orchestra leader in London. He had a recording session scheduled for the coming week and was looking for new material. He liked *Ebb Tide* and wondered whether I could get him a lead sheet immediately. I took him one the next day."

Ebb Tide reached number one on the Billboard charts the summer of 1953. Sensing a financial bonanza, Robbins Music contacted the well-known lyricist Carl Sigman to write a lyric. He wrote an exceptional one and the tune has been recorded by a wide array of artists from Frank Sinatra to the Boston Pops.

Publishers are always looking to ride a hot streak, and after *Ebb Tide* became a monster hit, the executives at Robbins re-examined the Maxwell canon for other material that might prove profitable. Interestingly, they

uncovered a theme that Maxwell had written in 1941, shortly after joining Matty Malneck's orchestra. It turned out to be another mega hit—*Shangri-La*.

"In 1941, I wrote the music to what is now *Shangri-La*," explains Maxwell, "and took it to Matty for his opinion. He was most complimentary. He suggested that we take the theme I had written, combine it with some other material and produce a larger work. He wrote an opening which we called a verse. I wrote a jazz strain and a cadenza for harp and tom-toms, and all the while we were inserting touches of my Shangri-La theme. At the end, that theme is reprised in its complete form. We called the piece *Fantasy for Harp*, and we used it as a feature number. After I joined Rudy Vallee's Coast Guard Band, Rudy also used *Fantasy* as a feature. In fact, we recorded it in Hollywood in 1942, although it was not commercially released.

"Since Carl Sigman had written such a successful lyric to *Ebb Tide*, the publisher asked him to try his luck with my theme from *Fantasy for Harp*. He wrote a sublime lyric for it in 1954, and the song *Shangri-La* was born—or re-born—however you want to look at it."

Maxwell explains that the idea for *Shangri-La* began with something he had written in his 1940 arrangement of Jerome Kern's *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*.

"If you listen to my arrangement of that song,"

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Composer Maxwell consults with Ed Begley, star of the NBC TV special, *Kristie*, and NBC writer-director June Reig during a taping session at NBC Studios, 1964

notes Maxwell, “in the seventh and eighth bars there’s a little two-bar phrase of mine which fits right underneath the holding of the seventh and eighth bar whole notes. My two-bar little phrase intrigued me, and the next year I went on to build the theme of *Shangri-La* from it.”

Shangri-La continued to be popular for several years, with numerous artists reaching the Billboard charts with it. In fact, Maxwell himself had an unlikely hit with the tune in 1964. “My friend, David Rose, had a big hit with his tune, *The Stripper*,” recalled Maxwell. “And somehow I got the idea of doing *Shangri-La* with a similar kind of background. I was under contract to Decca at the time and recorded it for them. This was about the time the Beatles were taking over the charts and popular music was headed in a direction that had little to do with me. So I was astonished that my recording reached number 15 on the Billboard charts. Decca, as was common at the time, hastily had me record some more tunes and released them as a 12” album entitled *Shangri-La*, and the album peaked at number 17.”

In 1953, his tune, *Solfeggio*, achieved popularity of a different sort. The piece was written originally for Ernie Kovacs to use on his ABC comedy show’s famous—or infamous—“Nairobi Trio” routine. In this act, three men in monkey suits played respectively piano, drums and vibes, but the clowns inside were Ernie Kovacs, Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis. Maxwell’s recording of the tune on the MGM label reached the second tier of the Billboard charts late in 1953.

In 1965, Maxwell gave up supper clubs and settled in New York. “By 1965,” he explained, “I had been on the supper club circuit for twenty years. I was forty-four years old, and I was burnt out with it. Also, the heyday of such bookings was passing. There were still

rooms to play in Vegas, Atlantic City and New York, but in many cities across the country, such venues were passing away. So I gave it up and took up golf instead. But my musical instincts led me to practice my swing with a metronome.”

Maxwell’s semi-retirement, however, did not last long. About this time, Newton Minnow became chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, and in an often quoted speech referred to television as “a vast wasteland.” He particularly lamented the dearth of quality children’s programming. Maxwell explains: “In response to this criticism, the manager of NBC’s Public Affairs Department, a division responsible for producing news documentaries and religious and cultural programs, created the NBC Children’s Theatre with the assignment to produce a series of hour-long prime time specials for all family viewing. At this time, I was approached by NBC to write a score for one of these specials. I did, and my work impressed the producer-writer-director, June Reig. She hired me to work on a variety of projects, from children’s programs to documentaries and adult drama.”

Though Maxwell is reluctant to discuss his personal life, he told me that he married June Reig in 1969. His first wife, to whom he had been married twenty-four years had died earlier. Clara Maxwell, a child of that first marriage, is a ballet dancer and has for some years been artistic director of the José Limon Dance Company.

Maxwell’s work with NBC between 1965 and 1976 was varied. His most notable work for children’s television was scoring *Watch Your Child: The Me Too Show*.

“These were half hour shows, five a week,” explains Maxwell, “and they were designed for pre-school aged children and the adult who watched with them. Since they introduced young children to art, music, move-



Rehearsing Britten’s *A Ceremony of Carols* with conductor Robert Shaw for the NBC- TV special *The Heart of Christmas*, 1965



Composer Robert Maxwell and writer-director June Reig celebrate at the Emmys. Their NBC-TV film *Stuart Little* with Johnny Carson was one of the nominees, 1966

ment, literature and the world around them, including weather, music played a very significant role in each program whether it was as the theme or featured song, or as the musical introduction to each segment, or as background music for quiet projects. In addition to my harp, I had a small group consisting of recorder, violin, celeste and percussion. For background music I scored arrangements of classical music such as Bach or Mozart. I must have written three hundred or so children's songs for that program. It aired for two years, until 1973, and altogether I believe there were one hundred fifty episodes."

At the other end of the spectrum, Maxwell wrote background music to a series of hour-long, prime time specials that starred, among others, Bill Cosby, Sid Caesar, Johnny Carson and Orson Welles. During the bicentennial year of 1976, NBC produced a series of twenty-six dramas about various moments in American history from the Revolution to the present, and Maxwell scored them all.

When I asked Maxwell about his most challenging assignments at NBC, he mentioned two: his ballet score to *Little Women* and his Peabody Award, Emmy-nominated score to the documentary, *Tut: The Boy King*.

"*Little Women*," he said, "was done with the New York City Ballet and starred Edward Villella, with Joanne Woodward as the narrator. I wrote, scored and conducted the music, which was performed with an orchestra of about sixty-five pieces. It was the first such score I had done, and it took me about three months to complete. It was a most satisfying project.

"*Tut: The Boy King*," he continued, "was a totally different kind of project. It was a documentary filmed while the Tut exhibit was on display at the National

Gallery in Washington, D.C. Our crew went to the museum after hours and photographed each item in the exhibit. Orson Welles, who was guest host, narrated the script. The show was directed by June, and I wrote background music for each sequence behind Welles' narration. It was a challenge because I couldn't start composing the music until all the filming was done and I could see the finished product. I had to know in what sequence the items were shown, what specific comments were made about them, and most importantly, precisely how many seconds were in each sequence, for the timing of the music had to be exact."

During his tenure at NBC, Maxwell was asked occasionally to perform as a solo harpist. For example, when Robert Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, NBC, like the other two major networks, broadcast classical music for an uninterrupted twenty-four hour period. "I was asked to participate," Maxwell explained, "and I performed my transcription of the Bach *Chaconne* on that sad day. NBC won a Peabody Award for that program."

Maxwell was also soloist on the NBC *Christmas Show* in 1965 and performed the Handel Concerto with the NBC Symphony. Maxwell went on to tell me about the NBC Christmas special the following year: "It was called *The Heart of Christmas* and I performed Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* with the Robert Shaw Chorale.

As he moved into his 60's, Maxwell became semi-retired, working occasional studio jobs but not maintaining the hectic pace that had characterized most of his career. Now, at age eighty, he performs less frequently, though he continues to be an acute observer of popular music, and much of what he observes disappoints him.



Maxwell rehearsing his transcription of Bach's *Chaconne* for the Peabody Award winning *Robert Kennedy Tribute* on NBC-TV



Composer Robert Maxwell conducting his original score for the Bill Cosby NBC-TV special, *As I See It*, 1969

“The older one gets,” he explained, “the harder it is to be objective. I developed my musical values and frame of reference in the 30’s and 40’s. I pursued a career based on those values through the 50’s and early 60’s, and I was successful. But there has been a sea change in popular music during the second half of this century, and the change has not been good. I understand that generational conflicts will always exist and that those conflicts—in the largest sense—are good. They generate freshness of vision and openness of thought. But even so—in my view, American popular music has deteriorated because it has lost its appreciation for melody. And when melody deteriorates, so does harmony. When melody and harmony deteriorate, tone colors become less subtle. Those are the primary elements of good music and have always been. American popular music since the 60’s has emphasized rhythm, and that’s fine; rhythm is an important musical ingredient, but by itself, it’s not enough.

“I don’t listen much to contemporary American popular music,” continued Maxwell, “so I am going out on a limb by commenting on it. But I sense that one change from the 30’s and 40’s is that popular music today often expresses the frustrations, yearnings, visions or fantasies of a particular individual, however tortured and idiosyncratic that person might be. The great songs of the 30’s and 40’s captured emotions and situations that were more universal. Part of that universality was

conveyed in a melody that became a shared experience.

“These are very difficult matters to talk about,” Maxwell confessed, “but perhaps I can illustrate with a recent event. Two days after the horrible terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Congress met on the steps of the Capitol and spontaneously broke into a song. What did they sing? *God Bless America*. Who wrote it? Irving Berlin, one of the great melodists of all time. Of course the lyrics are wonderful; in Berlin’s simple, but metaphorically graceful way, the words exude a sincerity that is genuinely artistic. But the melody is also beautiful. It’s well structured; the phrases move gracefully and logically from one to another, and the beauty of the song emerges no matter who sings it. In recent months, I’ve heard it sung by opera singers, Irish tenors, rhythm and blues artists and country singers. The greatness of that melody shines through. That song was published in 1939, but over sixty years later, when faced with a national crisis, we instinctively turn to it because great art—in this case great music—brings out what’s best in us: our sensitivities to our fellow man, our appreciation of what it means to be human, our commitment to preserving and protecting one another. That’s why I suspect that our salvation ultimately lies in the humanities rather than in science or politics or the military. It’s the humanities—art and music and literature—that make us better people.”



Robert Maxwell performs a Fiftieth Anniversary Harp Concert at Carnegie Hall, April 5, 1991

In 1996, Maxwell embarked upon a mission to record his entire library of original songs and arrangements for the harp. To date, he has completed eight hours of music and there is more to come. Sadly, finding an interested record company is not easy. One record producer told him recently, "If you brought *Ebb Tide* to me today, I wouldn't even look at it because I'd have no idea what to do with it." And yet Maxwell grinds on, with a strong belief in what he has accomplished and a commitment to the musical values he has lived by.


"I am grateful to be able to get up every morning, look in the mirror, and see a healthy, active eighty-year-old man. Many people never experience such an opportunity, and I am trying to make the most of mine."

About the Author

Phillip Atteberry teaches English and jazz history at the University of Pittsburgh at Titusville. In addition, he frequently teaches summer seminars on jazz artists at the Chautauqua Institute in New York State.

He received his Ph.D. in English from Washington University in St. Louis. His articles have been featured in The Mississippi Rag, CODA Magazine and Cadence.

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