

Boston Lyric Opera brings ‘The Lighthouse’ to JFK

By Harlow Robinson

| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Thomas Hase, lighting designer for “The Lighthouse,” at the JFK Library.

In New England we love our lighthouses. Beacons of safety in the stormy dark, they adorn the jagged coastline like timeless monuments to our maritime history. But lighthouses, especially in the pre-automation era, also gave rise to more unsettling feelings and questions. Who lives there, anyhow? What weird phenomena might lighthouse keepers witness, or imagine, during those long days and nights of lonely vigil, fog, and spray?

These questions also fascinated distinguished British composer Peter Maxwell Davies. For many years, Davies, 77, has lived on Sanday, one of the remote Orkney Islands north of Scotland, where lighthouses are crucial fixtures of the ruggedly romantic landscape. In 1979, Davies transformed his interest in local maritime lore into music when he completed “The Lighthouse,” a chamber opera in a prologue and one act. Since its 1980 premiere at the Edinburgh Festival, “The Lighthouse” has become one of the most popular of all 20th-century operas, having been performed by more than 100 different companies.

- This week, Boston Lyric Opera will present four performances in Smith Hall at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. British stage director Tim Albery will make his BLO debut, as will set and costume designer Camellia Koo. BLO's British-born music director David Angus will conduct.

"The Lighthouse" is the latest offering in BLO's Opera Annex program, created to stage productions in alternative, non-theatrical venues around the city. With a panoramic view of Boston Harbor, Smith Hall provides an evocative setting for an opera about the sea. "We are creating a world that will embrace the audience," said Albery in a recent phone interview.

Davies wrote the libretto based on a book by Craig Mair, "The Lighthouse Boy," which tells the true story of the disappearance of three keepers from a lighthouse on the desolate Flannan Isles. When the supply ship Hesperus arrived as scheduled on Boxing Day in 1900, no trace of the men was found. The crew entered the lighthouse to find the living quarters deserted, beds still unmade, as if the inhabitants had just stepped out.

Theories were advanced to explain the keepers' disappearance: that one keeper was an alcoholic who pushed the others over a cliff; that a love affair among the men went bad; even that they were abducted by extraterrestrials. More likely, per the conclusion of the official investigation: They were carried off from a landing site by a rogue wave.

In fashioning his libretto, Davies took liberties with the known facts. He changed the name of the lighthouse to Fladda, and combined scenes from the inquiry with imagined scenes of the three keepers before their disappearance: Sandy (tenor), Blazes (baritone) and Arthur (bass). The singers who portray the keepers also take on the roles of the three officers of the Hesperus questioned at the court of inquiry in the opera's prologue. The cast of the BLO production features tenor John Bellemer, baritone Christopher Burchett (in his BLO debut), and bass David Cushing.

The dense modernist musical language of "The Lighthouse" presents a challenge to both the three singers and the 12 members of the chamber orchestra. The instrumentation is highly untraditional, including a dozen different percussion instruments, a piano, a celesta, an out-of-tune upright piano, several flexatones, a referee's whistle, and a guitar. During the prologue, the solo horn part intones the questions being asked of the officers. Much of the vocal writing unfolds in jagged declamatory recitative.

Albery, the director, knows that "the music is fiendishly difficult. The three singers are onstage for the entire opera, and they have to gradually go insane. So while they must keep track of very intense and complex music with their rational brains, they must also express extreme emotion and irrationality."

The decision to produce the opera at the JFK Library was made before Albery was engaged to direct. Having worked at many of the world's leading opera houses, he is staging "The Lighthouse" for the first time, and he admits that Smith Hall "is not the easiest space to do a show in." There is no orchestra pit, no stage, and the acoustics were not designed for music. The distant lights of the city will be visible through the enormous windows. Developing the staging is "a matter of discovery," he said. "We're still trying things out."

Over the course of his career, Albery has staged numerous productions of the operas of Benjamin Britten, widely acknowledged as an important influence on Davies's music. The director sees a particularly strong connection between Britten's "Turn of the Screw" (produced by BLO Opera Annex two seasons ago at the Castle on Columbus Avenue) and "The Lighthouse."

Both combine elements of mystery and ghost stories, and unfold in a stream-of-consciousness style. "They have the same kind of sound world," Albery observed. "But the combination of legal and poetic language in 'The Lighthouse' is even more disarming and unique."