

# BLO illuminates Peter Maxwell Davies's The Lighthouse

## Beams of light and fright

By LLOYD SCHWARTZ | February 10, 2012



Venue isn't everything. But when it's an inspired one, it certainly helps. I was very excited to hear that Boston Lyric Opera's next Opera Annex production — *The Lighthouse*, Peter Maxwell Davies's scary {1979 chamber opera, in only its second Boston production in nearly three decades — was going to be staged at the JFK Library. What better place for an opera set mostly at a lighthouse than in a room with a vast curved window looking out onto Boston Harbor?

My main worry was over the acoustics. Maxwell Davies's own libretto is full of odd Hebrides locutions and twisted syntax, just as the vocal lines themselves are often gnarled to the point where getting the words across is a real challenge. In 1983, at its American premiere — even as staged by Peter Sellars, with such expert singers as the celebrated baritone Sanford Sylvan, a splendid 12-piece onstage ensemble conducted by David Hoose, and the small auditorium of the now-defunct Boston Shakespeare Company — I found the text difficult to decipher.

But Londoner Tim Albery's ingenious surround-sound playing area, Canadian designer and installation artist Camellia Koo's evocatively constructed erector-set set (the center-stage lighthouse, three buoys at the sides and behind the audience, the aisles covered with tarps that looked splattered with bird guano), **Thomas Hase's spectacular lighting effects (including a beam of ominously circulating light coming from outside the window)**, and David Angus's sympathetic and pointed conducting, somehow all helped us focus on the singing, and although the singers' volume changed depending on where they were placed, they were always able to project a major percentage of the words.

Here's the story: the opera opens at a court of inquiry at which three officers are testifying about their discovery that three lighthouse keepers on an island in the Orkneys had mysteriously disappeared. Albery's staging had the three officers not just remembering but reliving before our eyes what they found, including a repellent infestation of rats. The details of their stories don't always coincide. Was a chair in the lighthouse knocked on its side or on its back? Was a smashed teacup on the table or on the floor? Are they disagreeing or being deliberately evasive?

Then as the Prologue becomes the main body of the opera, titled "The Cry of the Beast," the three officers morph into the three lighthouse keepers themselves. What an odd bunch they are. And how convincingly the three singers embodied them. Baritone Christopher Burchett is Blazes, a handsome devil of a tough who seems to have murdered an old lady for her money (shades of Dostoevsky) and let his father hang for the crime; firm tenor John Bellemer is the sentimental Sandy, blighted in love; and bass-baritone David Cushing, whose voice seems to grow and grow more resonant each time I hear him, is the religious fanatic who's probably most responsible for bringing them all to their tragic end. As they become more and more desperate, their voices screech into hair-raising falsetto. Horn player John Boden, at a music stand in the rear, "plays" the wordless voice of the interrogating judge.

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