



Peter
MAXWELL DAVIES

The Lighthouse

Neil Mackie, Tenor

Christopher Keyte, Baritone

Ian Comboy, Bass

Members of the BBC Philharmonic

Maxwell Davies



Peter Maxwell Davies (b. 1934): The Lighthouse

A chamber opera in a prologue and one act. Music and Libretto by the composer

The Background

The original inspiration for this work came from reading Craig Mair's book on the Stevenson family of Edinburgh. This family, apart from producing the famous author Robert Louis, produced several generations of lighthouse and harbour engineers. In December 1900, the lighthouse supply ship *Hesperus*, based in Stromness, Orkney, went on its routine tour of duty to the Flannan Isles lighthouse in the Outer Hebrides. The lighthouse was empty. All three beds and the table looked as if they had been left in a hurry and the lamp, though out, was in perfect working order. The men had disappeared into thin air.

There have been many speculations as to how and why the three keepers disappeared. My opera does not offer a solution to the mystery but indicates what might be possible under the tense circumstances of three men being marooned in a storm-bound lighthouse long after the time they expected to be relieved.

Prologue – Court of Enquiry

The Lighthouse consists of a prologue and one act. The *Prologue* presents the Court of Enquiry in Edinburgh investigating the disappearance of the three keepers. The three protagonists play the parts of the three officers of the lighthouse ship, the action moving between the courtroom, the ship, and the lighthouse itself. The enquiry is conducted by the horn of the orchestra (which, in some productions, sounds from among the audience), whose wordless questions the protagonists answer – making the questions clear in retrospect. Gradually they move from straight testimony into fantastical imaginings of evil during a 'flashback' to the lighthouse, but then we snap back to the courtroom. The Court reaches an open verdict. At the end of the *Prologue* the three officers tell us that the lighthouse is now automatic and the building abandoned and sealed up, while the lighthouse itself flashes its automatic signal to a rhythm which is reflected in the orchestra.

Act – The Cry of the Beast

The single act bears the subtitle *The Cry of the Beast*. The three singers from the *Prologue* become the vanished keepers. The scene is set inside the lighthouse with the three keepers at the table in a state of edginess with each other. Arthur is a bible-thumping religious zealot, constantly at loggerheads with Blazes who has no truck with his hypocrisy; the third keeper, Sandy, tries peace-keeping moves to keep them apart. When Arthur leaves the table and goes aloft to light the lantern, Sandy and Blazes have a game of crib. They quarrel over this, and when Arthur returns, the atmosphere becomes extremely tense. Sandy suggests that Blazes should sing a cheerful song to help break this tension. Blazes obliges, followed by Sandy and Arthur.

Each song, though light and superficial on the surface, might be taken as an indication of the inner character and history of the singers. Blazes sings a rough ballad, accompanied by violin and banjo, about an adolescent's career of crime in city slums leading to murder and the death of his parents. Sandy sings a love song, with cello and out-of-tune piano, which when taken up and accompanied by the other two keepers, takes on a new meaning – suggesting that his love-life was not as innocent as it might have appeared. Arthur sings a holy-roller, rabble-rousing ditty, with brass and clarinet, about God's revenge on the Children of Israel for worshipping the Golden Calf – projecting his own suppressed aggression into God's will and biblical history.

The atmosphere turns chilly – fog swirls about the lighthouse and Arthur starts the foghorn with the words "the cry of the Beast across the sleeping world – one night that cry will be answered from the deep."

From the mists, ghosts from the past of the three keepers emerge to take their revenge – ghosts that might be directly out of the songs each keeper sang if these were indeed personal revelations. These ghosts cannot be seen but Sandy and Blazes convince themselves that they

are visible, driving themselves into a state of such guilty desperation that they become crazed. The ghosts call upon Blazes and Sandy to go out with them into the night.

When Arthur returns from the lightroom, he is convinced that the Beast has called across the sea – the Golden Calf has come to claim his servants. The eyes of the Beast are seen to approach, eventually becoming an all-blinding dazzle. Calling upon God's help, bellowing a hymn, the three keepers move out to defend themselves against this spirit, which they now see as the Antichrist.

At the climax of the storm and the brightest point of the light from the eyes of the Beast, the keepers are replaced by the three officers from the lighthouse ship (played by the same three singers), and the light of the approaching Beast is seen to perhaps have been the light of the lighthouse ship.

From the remarks of the ship's officers, the exact nature of the lighthouse keepers' disappearance is open to interpretation. Indeed, are the officers themselves trying to deny some truth that they fear? Or are they trying to cover something up perhaps?

When the relief keepers enter the lighthouse, although they cannot be seen very clearly, it is more than possible that they are the same three we saw earlier in the act. As the lighthouse is seen to flash its 'automatic' signal, there is the further possibility that we have been watching a play of ghosts in a lighthouse abandoned and boarded up for eighty years.

Musical Structure – The Tower of Tarot

The structure is based on the Tower of Tarot, whose number symbolism is present in the structure of all the music, and which erupts into the surface of the opera in the form of the words sung by Arthur during the card game, representing the Voice of the Cards. On this level the game of crib is transformed into a play of fate with Tarot cards, summoning up all the power of their baleful influence.

Peter Maxwell Davies

Neil Mackie



Photo: Chris Christodoulou

The tenor Neil Mackie enjoyed an international career spanning over 45 years. Born in Aberdeen, Scotland, he won a Foundation Scholarship for postgraduate studies in London. A substantial Gulbenkian Fellowship enabled him to study in Munich with the Swiss tenor, Ernst Häfliger, but the greatest influence on his career was undoubtedly the legendary English tenor, Sir Peter Pears. Neil Mackie has sung at most of the major venues throughout the world with many of today's foremost conductors and orchestras in a wide-ranging repertory. In 1977 he appeared in the title rôle in the première of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies' *The Martyrdom of St Magnus*, which led to a fruitful collaboration with the composer over a twenty-year period. Neil Mackie has also appeared in the premières of countless works by Scottish composers as well as many notable first performances of Benjamin Britten, Kenneth Leighton and Hans Werner Henze. In 1995 Neil Mackie was appointed Head of Vocal Studies at the Benjamin Britten International Opera School in London. He resigned from this rôle in 2006 and the same year retired from the concert platform. He was immediately appointed to the professorial staff at the Royal Academy of Music in London and currently holds a Professorship at the University of Agder in Southern Norway.

Christopher Keyte



Photo: June Keyte

Christopher Keyte was a Choral Scholar at King's College, Cambridge, and has made over fifty solo recordings. With the Fires of London he has taken leading rôles in operas by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, *The Martyrdom of St Magnus*, *The No. 11 Bus*, *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame* and *The Lighthouse*. He was a founder member of the Purcell Consort of Voices, with whom he made many recordings which are now classics in their own field. He has sung in Australia, New Zealand, Israel, Iceland, Oman, Finland, the United States and Europe and every Cathedral in the British Isles. Christopher Keyte was awarded an Hon. RAM from the Royal Academy of Music in 1984 and received an Honorary Doctorate from Anglia Ruskin University. In 1989 he was appointed to the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where he has sung solo rôles in *Death in Venice*, *Fidelio*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Fedora*, *Mathis der Maler*, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paul Bunyan* and *Billy Budd*.

Ian Comboy



After singing the *Messiah* solos at 17, Ian Comboy studied at The Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester and The Vienna Academy. He made his début in *The Magic Flute* at Glyndebourne, and after one performance was offered a contract with English National Opera, where he sang Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, Wagner's *Mastersingers* conducted by Reginald Goodall, *The Force of Destiny*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *The Mikado* and Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*. Ian Comboy had a long association with Scottish Opera (*Don Giovanni*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Mastersingers* and *Mary Queen of Scots*) and Welsh National Opera (*Wozzeck*, *Ariadne*, *House of the Dead*, *Der Freischutz*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, and John Metcalf's *Tornrak*). He made his début at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in Peter Maxwell Davies' *Taverner*, where he also sang in *Don Carlos* in the much acclaimed Zeffirelli/Visconti production under Haitink, and Kurt Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins*. Ian

Comboy has sung in most major European cities, as well as in Israel and South Africa, and he created the the bass rôles in Peter Maxwell Davies' *The Martyrdom of St Magnus*.

BBC Philharmonic



Photo: Sussie Ahlberg

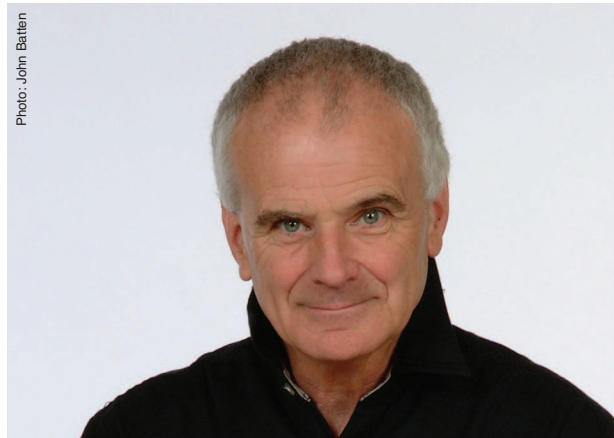
The BBC Philharmonic is based at MediaCityUK in Salford and performs an annual season of concerts at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall, as well as regular concerts in other venues across the north of England. As one of the BBC's six performing groups the majority of the orchestra's concerts are broadcast on BBC Radio 3. The BBC Philharmonic is supported by Salford City Council, enabling the orchestra to build active links in the local area through a busy learning and community programme. Juanjo Mena, from the Basque region of Spain, has been Chief Conductor since 2011, with John Storgårds as Principal Guest Conductor. The distinguished Austrian composer HK 'Nali' Gruber is Composer/Conductor and former Chief Conductor Gianandrea Noseda is now Conductor Laureate. The BBC Philharmonic has had its roots in the city of Manchester, since its foundation in 1934 as the BBC Northern Orchestra. In 1982, soon after moving

to the BBC's new building on Oxford Road in Manchester, it changed its name to the BBC Philharmonic. As an internationally-renowned orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic regularly tours in Europe and Asia.

Joanna Boddington, *Flute/Piccolo/Alto flute* • **Simon Butterworth**, *Clarinet/Bass clarinet*
Neil Grundy, *Horn* • **Martin Winter**, *Trumpet* • **Paul Reynolds**, *Trombone*
Geraint Daniel, *Timpani/Percussion* • **Paul Patrick**, *Percussion* • **Rob Lea**, *Percussion/Bones*
Beverley Davidson, *Violin/Tam tam* • **Janet Fisher**, *Viola/Flexitone* • **Peter Dixon**, *Cello*
Jeffrey Box, *Double bass* • **Timothy Walker**, *Guitar/Banjo* • **Stephen Pruslin**, *Piano/Celeste/Honky tonk*

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies

Photo: John Batten



Universally acknowledged as one of the foremost composers of our time, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies has made a significant contribution to musical history through his wide-ranging and prolific output. He lives in the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland, where he writes most of his music. In a work list spanning more than five decades, he has written across a broad range of styles, yet his music always communicates directly and powerfully, whether in his profoundly argued symphonic works, his music-theatre works or witty light orchestral works. Maxwell Davies' major dramatic works include two full-length ballets, music-

theatre works *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot*, and operas including *Resurrection*, *The Lighthouse*, *The Doctor of Myddfai*, *Taverner* and *Kommiltonen!* (Young Blood!). His huge output of orchestral work comprises numerous symphonies and concerti, and light orchestral works such as *An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise* and *Mavis in Las Vegas* (8.572348). His substantial chamber and instrumental catalogue includes the landmark cycle of ten string quartets, the *Naxos Quartets* (8.505225), described in the *Financial Times* as "one of the most impressive musical statements of our time". Maxwell Davies has held the position of Composer/Conductor with both the Royal Philharmonic and BBC Philharmonic Orchestras. He has guest-conducted orchestras including the Cleveland Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Russian National Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic and Philharmonia Orchestra. He retains close links with the St Magnus Festival, Orkney's annual arts festival which he founded in 1977, is Composer Laureate of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and is Visiting Professor at London's Royal Academy of Music and Christchurch University Canterbury. Maxwell Davies was knighted in 1987 and appointed Master of the Queen's Music in 2004, in which rôle he seeks to raise the profile of music in Great Britain, as well as writing many works for Her Majesty the Queen and for royal occasions.

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On a routine tour of duty in December 1900 the supply ship *Hesperus* discovered the Flannan Isles lighthouse in the Outer Hebrides to be empty, the three keepers apparently having disappeared into thin air. Peter Maxwell Davies' haunting and thrilling chamber opera *The Lighthouse* is heard here in its classic première recording. It shows what might have become of the three men, marooned in their storm-bound tower and overwhelmed by ghostly visions and crazed desperation, creating a dramatic imagining of a story which remains a mystery to this day.

Sir Peter
MAXWELL DAVIES
(b. 1934)

The Lighthouse (1979)

A chamber opera in a prologue and one act

Music and Libretto by the composer

Part 1: Prologue

1 The Court of Enquiry 27:27

Part 2: Act

2 The Cry of the Beast 11:22

3 Blazes' Song 3:34

4 Sandy's Song 4:24

5 Arthur's Song 25:42

WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDING

Sandy, Officer I Neil Mackie, Tenor

Blazes, Officer II Christopher Keyte, Baritone

Arthur, Officer III, Voice of the Cards Ian Comboy, Bass

Members of the BBC Philharmonic • Maxwell Davies

Previously released on Collins Classics

The libretto can be accessed at www.naxos.com/libretti/660354.htm

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