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## The Lighthouse, Royal Opera, Linbury Studios, review: 'thrilling and chilling'



Samuel Sakker, David Shipley and Yuriy Yurchuk in 'The Lighthouse' at the Linbury Studio CREDIT: ALASTAIR MUIR

By **Rupert Christiansen**

23 OCTOBER 2015 • 4:39PM

There may be scarcely a handful of contemporary operas with any claim to classic status, but the Royal Opera's superb new staging – part of the Jette Parker Young Artists programme – confirms that Peter Maxwell Davies's *The Lighthouse* will end up as one of them.

Composed in 1979, at the peak of his creativity, it's a chamber piece for three male singers and a dozen players, only 80 minutes long and clearly inspired by Britten's knack of extracting maximal ends from minimal means.

Maxwell Davies' earlier theatrical ventures are marked by a frenzied Grand Guignol that verges on the self-indulgently gruesome and excessive. Here, however, not a note or an emotion is superfluous, as the drama (based on an actual case, dating from 1900) moves inexorably to its enthralling climax.

Like Britten's *Peter Grimes*, it focuses on the enigma of the sea, opening with an inquest which records an unsatisfactory verdict on a marine mystery. But whereas Britten looked outward, contextualising individual tragedy in communal humanity, Maxwell Davies looks clausturally and Expressionistically inwards – the devil is at work here.

Three officers report on the disappearance of three keepers from an isolated Hebridean lighthouse, a solo horn representing the Coroner's questions. Their accounts of what they found don't tally, and flashbacks suggest that something is being covered up.



Royal Opera's superb new staging of 'The Lighthouse' CREDIT: ALASTAIR MUIR

In a second section, the singers change identities to become the keepers: three men, trapped with each other for months on end, turning murderously dangerous and deluded.

To keep the peace, they each sing a song illustrative of their personalities – an opportunity for Maxwell Davies to provide brilliant pastiches of a tub-thumping revivalist hymn, a dirty street ballad and a genteel parlour love ditty. From the piccolo that depicts the squawking gulls outside to the banal banjo that mechanically accompanies the ballad, the orchestra seems to be playing on its nerve-ends, complementing the acute sensitivity of the vocal writing.

As thick fog descends, some demonically terrible force is unleashed: what precisely happens when the investigating officers appear is left vague. Yet the score leaves one in no doubt that terrible things have occurred and unquiet ghosts have taken possession.

Greg Eldridge's pitch-perfect staging is brilliantly designed and lit, and the three young Jette Parker singers – Samuel Sakker, Yuriy Yurchuk and David Shipley – give performances of scalding intensity; the Southbank Sinfonia under Jonathan Santagada plays with virtuosic clarity.

Together they take us into the Heart of Darkness – a journey that is thrilling, chilling and hauntingly unsettling.

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