

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (b. 1934)
The Lighthouse (1979)

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

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
Sir Peter Maxwell Davies

PART I

[1] PROLOGUE - THE COURT OF ENQUIRY

The Scene is set in the courtroom, Edinburgh, moving back to on board the Lighthouse Commissioner's ship, and to the steps leading to the lighthouse door.

THE THREE PROTAGONISTS

(come to the front of the acting area, and directly address the audience, together)

From the records of a Court of Enquiry into the unnatural disappearance of three lighthouse-keepers from the Fladda Isle Lighthouse, by the Lighthouse Board, Edinburgh, with evidence from officers of the Lighthouse ship, who went to Fladda on their normal round of lighthouse duties, with provisions, and the relief.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 1

No sir, our passage was difficult. Visibility was reduced as we approached the Sound, down to less than a cable.

It all started when we met a sudden eddy, and the vessel took a violent sheer. Then we entered a race, where none had ever been, with the tidal stream against the gale and the swell. In the violence and confusion, we could not take soundings for the sharp uneven rocks below. But we knew we had to make across the stream, but we had not the power to fight it. Sometimes we thought we heard the foghorn but it seemed to come from all over the place, and confused us worse.

OFFICER 2 (from high)

Get up into the wind.
Make to port.

OFFICER 3 (from high)

We must flood the after hold.
Stand by to lower the longboat.

(sudden calm)

OFFICER 3

We have cleared Hell Point.
Suddenly slack water, so flat, black.
Uncanny, you can hear the creak of the blackbacks' wings; they loom, big as ravens, through the mist.
The surprise storm - the stream running where none ever did - a curse is on our journey.
This calm is more nerve-racking than the storm.

OFFICER 1
Look out astern.'

A light!
A triangle of lights!
Three lights, white Three more lights, red, flashing, white, then red.
They've gone, lost in the mist.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 2

No sir, I did not see the lights. Only he saw them.
He said it was the Angel of Death. it sounds like it was a storm signal, but I don't know where from.
There's no lighthouse near Hell Point.
But I heard the foghorn.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 3

No sir, there is no foghorn there. But we all heard it it, though from different places. No, I cannot explain.

OFFICER 1

The dawn blackness was a bilge-grey smudge in the blackness. At last the mists parted and we saw the lighthouse, a black finger on the horizon, with no light flashing and the sea a dead expanse of lead.

In silence the ship peeled a steely furrow from the shale-grey flatness, opening and closing an oily slit. The dawn a corpse-grey scowl.

OFFICER 2

No-one spoke as we came alongside the lighthouse jetty.

OFFICER 3 (on high)

Slow ahead! Hard-a-port!

OFFICER 1

Not a sound, not even the mew of a gull, or the faint splash of surf.

OFFICER 3 (on high)

Midships! Half astern!

OFFICER 2

The hush of our breath and the boom in our veins
Too loud a sound in that place.

OFFICER 1

Below the jetty, as we went ashore, three black selkies calmly watched us, a long, soft stare of silent witness, cold as the sea, remote.

OFFICER 2

I saw no selkies, but lined on the trail, three great scarfs, black as a hole, observing us coldly, without any fear, their clawed wings spread wide, heavily carved on the silver-grey air, heraldic, looming.

OFFICER 3

I saw no scarfs, but across our path came three black gibbies, tails erect, proud and sleek as panthers, not the lighthouse tabbies we had seen before, but wilder, sinewy beasts.

OFFICER 1

No lighthouse keepers came down to meet us, eager for letters and news. Slowly we climbed the steps to the lighthouse door. The silence pressed in our cars. High up above, we saw the door yawning mutely open. Our footsteps thudded muffled, dead; no friendly faces appeared in welcome, no outstretched hands, but fingers of mist, clammy, unnatural, reached down from the tower towards us, pressing in on us with fear and foreboding.

(The three officers are in front of the lighthouse door)

OFFICER 2

Go slowly, softly now.
There's an eerie chill in the air.
Why are the keepers so quiet?
They must be all ill.

OFFICER 2

Something is moving inside.
Take care! Easy now! Look! Rats!
Black rats! Curse them!
A plague of rats over the doorsill.
Over our feet!

OFFICER 1

The rats have gone.
Let's look inside, but be careful.
This feels uncanny.
The air is too close.

(They go inside)

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 1

Yes, sir; it smelt bad in there. Rotten, evil.
The table was set, for three. The oatcakes were mouldy; the rats had been at them. There was nobody.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 2

Yes, sir; the table was set.
A chair was overturned.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 3

No sir; the table was set, all tidy.
The meal had, not been cleared.
Nothing was amiss, except that
a chair was lying on its back.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 3

I did not examine it, sir, but I think it was damaged.
And a cup had been broken.

ALL THREE OFFICERS *(together)*

The bunks were made, and tidy.
All was in shipshape order, clean and neat.

The lantern was trim and polished, the oil-reservoir full.

But though we looked everywhere, of the three lighthouse- keepers there was no trace.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 1

The chair was on its back, sir.
Yes, a back leg was broken.
It could have been pushed over, in haste.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 2

On its side, sir.
No sir, not broken,
but the chair had been shoved in haste, I'd say.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 2

Yes sir, a cup had been broken.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 2

It was on the floor.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 3

Yes sir, the chair had been knocked backwards and overturned.
A front leg was broken.

HORN SOLO

OFFICER 3

Yes, sir, a cup had been smashed;
it was on the table.

ALL THREE OFFICERS *(together)*

It looks as if one keeper stood up from the table, suddenly and pushed over a chair and broke his cup. We suggest he could have been called out urgently, by another keeper to the aid of the third, in difficulties down at the jetty, and then they were all three swept away. A bar was bent down there, most likely by an uncommon powerful wave. It must have been a few days before, by the state of the oatcakes on the table. But everything was well kept, and cared for. We could find nothing wrong, except as we say.

(They come forward, as at the opening)

The court of enquiry judged the disappearance of the three lighthouse- keepers due to death by misadventure, recording an open verdict.

It was hard to find men to replace the three dead. The place now had a bad name; no one wanted to live there, for weeks and months on end, imprisoned with memories, ghosts, echoes.

ALL THREE OFFICERS *(together)*

The lantern went automatic, the quarters were abandoned, sealed up, blind. The lighthouse is now automatic, empty. The lighthouse is now automatic. The lighthouse is now abandoned, its ghosts are shut in, sealed in, tight.

The lighthouse is now dead, except for its robot lantern.

(The lantern of the lighthouse flashes its "automatic" signal, at first very faintly, but slowly increasing in brightness to full strength, during the final music)

END OF PROLOGUE

PART II

[2] THE CRY OF THE BEAST

*The scene is set inside the lighthouse.
The three lighthouse keepers are at table.*

ARTHUR

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.
Oh God, beam forth that light and truth which brought us into
Your tabernacle and sanctuary.
Bless the fruit of the vine and the bread we break as a sign of the fulfilment
of Your kingdom.
And protect us against the hand of any that betray the Son of Man, at this
table. Amen.

BLAZES

You know, Arthur, there isn't any fruit of the vine, it's tea.
And no bread: it's oatcakes, already stale and hard.
We've been here for months, and even your fine graces can't bless a meal
when it's the same old nosh, night after night.

SANDY

And be thankful for that. God just go on keeping the Beast from the door.
We've been stormbound for weeks now beyond our term, but at least we
can still eat.

ARTHUR

If you have faith, and doubt not, whatsoever you ask in prayer, believing,
you shall receive,
Let us pray for deliverance.

BLAZES

Arthur, you're a sinner same as Sandy and me, who uses the Book to
justify the Beast in him, and put us in our place.
So enough of this holy talk it cuts no ice, we know you too well.

SANDY

Give over, you two.
Let a man eat his pilchards in peace.
Blazes, let's have a game of crib.
I know it's too sinful for Arthur, but he can say a prayer for us.

ARTHUR

Many are my adversaries, yet have I not swerved from
Thy testimonies. It is time to light the lantern, beaming forth as a light from
God across the dark seas of sinfulness, to guide even the most depraved
Beast towards holy salvation.

*(He climbs aloft and lights the lantern-it has a different signal from the
"automatic" one at the end of the Prologue. He whistles the tune of "Eternal
Father, Strong to Save")*

(Sandy and Blazes start their game)

SANDY

Your deal.

BLAZES

Three for last.

THE VOICE OF THE CARDS

(taken by Arthur aloft, unseen)

The wheel of fortune churns
From the mad seas of chaos
Coronation, degradation.

SANDY

Two for his heels

BLAZES

Arthur, you're a sinner same as Sandy and me,
who uses the Book to justify the Beast in him, and put us in our place.
So enough of this holy talk it cuts no ice, we know you too well.

SANDY

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The wheel of fortune churns
From the mad seas of chaos
Coronation, degradation.

SANDY

Two for his heels

THE VOICE OF THE CARDS

Triangle of effulgent light,
Raining meteors, red and white,
Whose solar iridescence
Fails to penetrate the night
Of a castaway loose on the deep.

BLAZES

Ten pips

BLAZES

Fifteen, two

THE VOICE OF THE CARDS

In the uncertain light of a pallid moon
The eye shapes empty chimera

SANDY

Fifteen, four

BLAZES

One for his nob

http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=8.660354

THE VOICES OF THE CARDS

As lightning strikes the sea-girt tower
The lamp's snuffed out
In a widdershin rout

SANDY

Four fifteens, eight, two pairs, four, three sequences of three, nine, total, twenty-one

THE VOICE OF THE CARDS

Three times seven in a madcap dance
The world blazes destruction

BLAZES

Two fifteens, four; a pair, two; two sequences of three, six; and a flush, three; total, fifteen.

THE VOICE OF THE CARDS

Black legs rooted deep in earth
His fish-scales skim the water.
The devil's bat-wings beat the air,
His face flames crooked laughter.

SANDY

Last card, thirty-one.

THE VOICE OF THE CARDS

The fool in triumph bestrides the world,
All forms and ranks inverted,
While bedlam triumphs and mooncalves bay,
At God himself corrupted.

SANDY

You fiddled it.
I saw that slip,

BLAZES

That's a lie, you with your eyes all over my cards.

ARTHUR (*returning from lighting the lantern*)

For Christ's sake, Blazes, both of you, watch it.
You're far down the gadarene slope to depravity and wanton godlessness.

BLAZES

Listen to him, all puffed up with his windbag self-righteousness.
But I could tell you a few things about him...

SANDY

Blazes, that's enough.
We're all too close in this prison to keep any secrets,
but you can at least be reasonable and keep up appearances,
or we'll finish up raging beasts in a cage, eating each other.

Come on, Firebrand,
we need a change of tack.
How about singing us a song, to cheer us up.

BLAZES

I'll sing you a song, by God.
But you must both then sing, after-wards,
in your turn-and then we shall see who is King,
who the Devil, and who the Fool amongst us.

(*As they move to a new acting area, the light-house lantern fades, and the new area is slowly lit up*)

[3] BLAZES' SONG

(*accompanied by fiddle, banjo banjo and bones*)

1) When I was a kid our street had a gang

That was the toughest in all the land.
We ruled with fist and razor and chain,
Till all the city trembled at the mention of our name.

2) But our parents were much better than us,
For when they had a fight they really got bust,
With police and truncheons and hospital cases,
And beautiful patterns all over their faces.

3) They had something we could only crave,
Which gave them strength and made them brave:
From a little brown bottle they poured liquid fire,
Which boosted them up with revolutionary ire.

4) When they got drunk you had better look out,
As for nothing they'd get ratty and land you a clout; clout;
often they'd get merry and you could stay up all night
Taking care to hide when they started to fight.

My father spent most of his time inside
And in this fact I took considerable pride.
But when he came home, he drove us up the wall,
For, inspired by the bottle, he found fault in us all.

Then he used to tie me to the chair,
And bum me with ciggies on my bum bare,
And when my ma screamed at him to stop,
He clobbered her about the head until he made her drop.

Now when I reached the age of eleven,
Having no cash was not my idea of heaven,
For basic needs you could lift what you liked,
But you needed cash to look specially bright.

I'd heard the old woman, who lived up the stairs
Unloading on my mither all her woes and cares.
One day i overheard her, when she said
That she kept a bag of money hidden under her bed.

So late one night, when they were oot on the toon
I crept up the stairs and into her room.
But when she appeared at the bedroom door,
I knocked her over, on to the floor.

Then she let out a banshee shout,
So I hit her on the head, until I'd knocked her out.
But she puked up blood with a gurgle and plop,
So I stamped upon her face until I'd made her stop.

I took the bag of money down to our flat,
And then the police came in, and found it under the mat.
They grabbed hold of my dad, and cracked him on the lug,
And carted him away, and stuck him in the jug.

12) Three months later he was hung by the neck,
And my mither lost her reason, and became a total wreck.
And I wept sore when they were shoved underground,
Thanking Christ who had kept me safe and sound.

13) All through my life I took care to ignore
The expression of that old woman slowly smothered in her gore.
And the moral of my tale cannot fail to tease If you're both clever,
and lucky, you can do just what you please.

SANDY

Bravo, Blazes-
you fair bring the old woman to life.

ARTHUR

After a song like that,

a bit of exorcism might be in order.

[4] SANDY'S SONG

(accompanied by cello and out-of-tune upright piano)

Oh, my love, I dream of you,
Your hair of gold, your eyes so blue.
Oh that you held me in your arms!
arms! am transported by your charms.

In a meadow sweet, in a secret valley,
Resting on my staff, I muse and tarry.
Fast i come to where my love doth lie,
And all my senses sense defy.

From my sleep, so deep, so long,
By the cock, crowing loud, I am aroused
My dream is flown.

SANDY
Oh! my love I yearn for you.

ARTHUR
In a meadow sweet,

BLAZES
From my sleep, from my sleep

SANDY
Your hair of gold,

ARTHUR
In a secret valley,

BLAZES
So deep, so deep,

SANDY
Your eyes so blue,

ARTHUR
Resting on my staff,

BLAZES
so long

ARTHUR
I muse and tarry

SANDY
Oh! that you held me

ARTHUR
fast

BLAZES
by the cock

SANDY
Oh! my love I yearn for you.

ARTHUR
In a meadow sweet,

BLAZES
From my sleep, from my sleep

SANDY
Your hair of gold,

ARTHUR
In a secret valley,

BLAZES
So deep, so deep,

SANDY
Your eyes so blue,

ARTHUR
Resting on my staff,

BLAZES
so long

ARTHUR
I muse and tarry

SANDY
Oh! that you held me

ARTHUR
fast

BLAZES
by the cock

SANDY
in your arms!

ARTHUR
I come

BLAZES
crowing loud, crowing loud,

SANDY
I am transported

ARTHUR
to where my love doth lie.

BLAZES
I am aroused

SANDY
by your charms, by your charms.

ARTHUR
and all my senses sense defy

BLAZES
dream is flown,

BLAZES
You're a dark horse, Sandy.
God knows what you've been up to.
May your dreams come true.

ARTHUR
I don't know what your song means, but I disapprove.
Anyway, here's something with uplift, for a change.

[5] ARTHUR'S SONG
(accompanied by clarinet, horn, trumpet, trombone and tambourine)

This be thy God, oh Israel,
Made with a graving tool.
Set high upon an altar,
Proclaiming His new rule.

Bring to the new God worship,
With sacrifice thereunto,
Dancing and votive offerings,
The richest you can show.

The Golden Calf will save you
From all adversity,
But wreath His neck with garlands,
And praise His name away.

ANDY and BLAZES
Praise, praise the Lord.

The Lord of Hosts, right jealous,
Sent Moses, full of trust,
To smite the Calf asunder
And grind the gold to dust.

The mighty Lord, in wrath,
Waxed hot against his people,
And thought those wholly to consume,
Whose ways were set in evil.

5) He took the sons of Levi,
And ordered them to slay
Every man his brother
And his neighbour straight away.

SANDY and BLAZES
Praise, praise the Lord.

7) There died about three thousand,
Smitten by the sword,
Ere Moses deemed this was enough
Atonement to the Lord.

8) But though the Calf was ground to dust,
And God piled high the slain,
The matter is not ended
The Calf will rise again.

9) The golden image sleeps awhile,
Craving incarnation, And will return, a raging bull,
Wreaking blind destruction.

SANDY and BLAZES
Praise, praise the Lord.

10) But God set each against his son,
And each against his brother,
To guard against the sinful day
The Calf should break asunder.

11) So praise the Lord in all His works,
Who purges from His herd
All who sin against Him,
In thought, or deed, or word.

BLAZES
Well done, Arthur;
nothing like a bit of old blood and thunder.

SANDY (to himself)
If Blazes is King, then I am the Fool,
but Arthur is both Fool and Devil,
or perhaps all three, by turn.
Preserve us from both the Golden Calf of his imagination and his jealous
God

(to the others)

While we've been singing our songs,
the mists have come down.
They are twisting thick around the rock.
It is time to start the foghorn.

ARTHUR
Thank God the walls of the tower are thick,
and preserve us from the brunt of that sound.

(He climbs to the lightroom and starts the foghorn)

HORNSOLO

ARTHUR (to himself)

The cry of the beast across the sleeping world.
One night, that cry will be answered, from the deep.

SANDY
The sea is much wilder tonight.
The mists are creeping into the tower;
it smells of cold sea-graves in here, of sea-wrecks, of sea-death.

BLAZES
The shadows are jumping, long and jagged.
What is that - by the door? Christ!
It must be the fog and the storm!
We've been here too long.
You start imagining things.

SANDY
Relief will be here, any day now.
It must be.
It's been longer than ever before.

BLAZES
The sea is getting worse.
Listen to that.
There it is again- by the door.
It's only a heap of oilskins.
No!-it's getting up-rising from the floor.
It's coming here- it's moving in, close.

(he tries to take his eyes away)

No, I won't look. I can't look. It's her.
The old woman with that streaming face.
She's staring at me.
She wants her damned purse back.
Don't touch! Her hands on my face!
Her blood running into my eyes!

Get off, you hag. I haven't got it.
It's gone. You're dead, buried.

(he looks toward the door)

No, you two.
You can't come in, not in here! Our mother, worm-chewed.
Father, your throat. Get back, into that frozen graveyard.
They have touched me, laid their hands on me, cursed me.
Gangrene freezing all my veins.
They are calling me, through the storm, down to the jetty.
They have a boat.

SANDY
They are coming in at the door.
I don't know who they are, but they want me,
want me to go with them, to sail away, into the night.

Faces. Faces I know, from deep in the past.

There is my sister, sitting at the table.
She is a girl again.
My dream-was it her?
I had forgotten.
No, it is not her, not any more.
Thank God, it has turned away.

No, this can't be true.
I will not look. it's him, that boy:
the boy at the manse, dead and forgotten
these twenty-odd years.

(very scared)

No. I didn't, we didn't.
That preaching minister.

(panicked)

and that damned prying schoolteacher.
I must go with him, the boy, away, into the night.
I told. He will forgive, if I go with him, now,
out into the night.

BLAZES
(quietly)

The room is full of ghosts,
called out by the foghorn,
from the depths, the depths of the sea.

SANDY
(horried)

We thought they were safely drowned.
They want us; they need us.
They have to take us back,
away with them, into the blackness

ARTHUR *(returning from the lightroom, singing a crazed "Hymn")*

The Beast is called out from his grave
Deep below the tide,
And he shall claim those with his sign,
That mark we cannot hide.
(recitativo drammatico)

I see him moving across the waters,
a Golden Calf full of eyes,
to claim his servants, who have not the seal of righteousness
upon their foreheads.

We shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God,
who have made an image to the Beast,
and worshipped it.

We are snared in a trap between the claim of the Beast
and the wrath of the avenging God.
But in our distress we distinguished not the Beast from God.

Call on all your ghosts, an army of ghosts,
to defend us from the might of the Beast.

(he gradually assumes himself characteristics of the Beast)

(from afar, the three eyes of the Beast approach, ever brighter white and red lights, flashing, becoming eventually an all-blinding dazzle)

(Blazes and Sandy fall in behind Arthur, as he moves slowly towards the door)

ARTHUR

The only cure is to kill the Beast in the name of God,
to strike him before he claims us for his own, then the wrath of the Lord
shall not wax hot against us.
(all three join in a "hymn" before the intolerable dazzle of the approaching light)

ARTHUR

From lowest depths of woeful need,

BLAZES

To God we send our plea,

SANDY

To turn His wrath against the Fiend,
In confidence that we

Our vacillating spirit bared In combat, face to face
With Antichrist, will now be spared,
To wash in divine grace.

(With the light dazzling the audience, the three lighthouse-keepers in the doorway become, in a trice, the three officers from the Lighthouse Commission boat. The eyes of the Beast are seen to have been the lights of the ship. All is suddenly calm, the light normal. The officers have the discarded clothes of the keepers over their arms.)

OFFICER 1

We had to defend ourselves,
God help us.

OFFICER 2

God what a mess! What shall we do?
They were crazed, run amok.
Unnatural, demonic beasts!

OFFICER 3

Explanations will be difficult.
It will look bad.
But who knows what happened?
The men have disappeared-perhaps lost to sea, swept away.

OFFICER 2

All three keepers?
Who will believe that?

OFFICER 3

Why not? What else can have happened?
That rush of black rats from the door must have confused us.
Bestial things, rats.

OFFICER 1

Leave everything in the lighthouse in shipshape order.
The keepers have gone, disappeared, that's all we know.
God rest their souls.

ALL THREE OFFICERS

And amen to that. *(They tidy up quickly)*

OFFICER 1

Is all in order, and ready?
- Then have the relief keepers disembark.

(They leave. The light becomes dim. They re-enter as the three relief lighthouse-keepers. They are obscure and phantasmal, very suggestive at once of ghosts and automatons. They take up positions at the table, as at the opening of the scene, which starts to play again.)

ARTHUR

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost...

BLAZES

There isn't any fruit of the vine: it's tea. And no bread...

SANDY

just go on keeping the Beast from the door...

(The band has the repeated rhythm of the words, "The Lighthouse is now automatic" from the end of the Prologue. The lantern starts to flash, very faintly at first, but then increasing in intensity, its "automatic" signal. When it is at its brightest, the music and the light cut, together.)

THE END

The Lighthouse

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