



COMPOSER'S NOTE

by Peter Maxwell Davies

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 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, but the men had disappeared into thin air.

There have been many speculations as to how and why the three keepers disappeared. This 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.

The work consists of a prologue and one act. The Prologue presents the Court of Inquiry in Edinburgh into the disappearance of the 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, and the inquiry is conducted by the horn of the orchestra, to whose wordless questions the protagonists answer, making the questions retrospectively clear. The Court reaches an open verdict. At the end of the Prologue the three officers together tell us that the lighthouse is now automatic and the building is abandoned and sealed up, while the lighthouse itself flashes its automatic signal to a rhythm which is reflected in the orchestra.

The main act bears the subtitle *The Cry of the Beast*. The scene is set inside the lighthouse with the three keepers at 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-making 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. This Blazes does, 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 jolly song about an adolescent's career of crime in city slums leading to murder and the death of his parents. Sandy sings a love song, which when taken up and accompanied by the other two keepers, takes on a new meaning suggesting that his love-life might not have been as innocent as would at first appear. Arthur sings a holy-roller rabble-

rousing ditty about God's revenge on the Children of Israel for worshipping the Golden Calf - a projection into God's will and bible history of his own boundless and unexpressed aggression.

Subsequently the atmosphere turns chill - 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 - they might be directly from the songs each keeper sang if these are taken as personal revelations. These ghosts, which we do not see but which the keepers persuade each other are visible, drive them 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 comes down 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, as is, indeed, whether the officers themselves are trying to persuade themselves that some truth they fear is not so, or perhaps that they are trying to cover something up.

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

The structure is based on the Tower of the 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, which on this level transforms the game of crib into a play of fate with Tarot cards, summoning up all the power of their baleful influence.