

Simon Keenlyside: The sound and the fury

Some singers might be daunted by the part of Prospero in Thomas Adès' challenging 'The Tempest', but not baritone Simon Keenlyside. Jessica Duchen meets the king of barnstorming performances

Published: 12 March 2007

The general image of opera singers is that they're a bit over the top - big personalities, big egos and all the rest of it. But nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to the British baritone Simon Keenlyside. At 47, he's in his prime, taking the lead at the world's finest opera houses, but he's soft-spoken, with a questioning mind and a touching, almost startling humility about his own art. It's the scale of his gifts as singer and actor that make him extraordinary - and ideal for a role based on one of Shakespeare's most iconic characters, Prospero in *The Tempest*, which requires a special balance of brain and brawn.

Thomas Adès's opera *The Tempest* premiered at Covent Garden in 2004, playing to packed houses and huge acclaim. Contemporary opera smash hits are as rare as hen's teeth, and the production's revival, opening on 12 March, has been eagerly awaited. Keenlyside created the role of Prospero, and won the Laurence Olivier award for outstanding achievement in opera for it.

Not that it was easy. "It was extremely difficult for all of us, and as a generalisation it was extremely high," he recounts, fresh from rehearsal at the Royal Opera House. "For Cyndia Sieden [the soprano], singing Ariel, representing something so high and bright - she said she just laughed when she first saw her part. Anyone in the audience who hasn't heard the piece before will also laugh, because there's nothing like it in the entire vocal repertoire. It's an astonishing thing to do at the beginning of the 21st century, to have a new colour for the whole evening. I don't know how Cyndia does it without counselling and physiotherapy after every performance."

The chief challenge is the emotional and musical progression that shapes the opera, especially Prospero's role. "For the first third, Adès's music is spiky, urgent, convoluted, and not a little atonal," Keenlyside explains. "But it becomes more lyrical as it goes along - so there's the question of how to do that and, more to the point, why to do that." This is typical Keenlyside: questioning, probing, speaking in a kind of stream of consciousness, with the mental cogs whirring almost audibly.

Keenlyside, whose parents were both professional violinists, started his singing life as a Cambridge chorister. But later, working extensively in central Europe, he built up a profile far removed from the exquisite, yet rather impersonal, British choral tradition. He had his first "big break", he explains, thanks to Bryn Terfel: "He turned up to hear me sing *L'elisir d'amore* in Scotland [where Keenlyside was singing for Scottish Opera] and I wondered what he was doing there. It turned out that he was vetting me for a *Don Giovanni* recording with Claudio Abbado - he'd recorded it when he was very young and couldn't do it again within a certain number of years." Next thing Keenlyside knew, he was off to Berlin and Abbado was telling him: "You've got the job, your friend Bryn put you forward for it." "That was nice," reflects Keenlyside. "Breaks come in funny ways."

Today Keenlyside's repertoire is enormous, ranging from Bach through to the present and involving as much lieder singing as possible. But he's quick to self-depreciation and likes to lance any burgeoning myths. "I think the most avant-garde thing you can say, as a so-called artist, is to tell the truth. The trouble is, when you do tell the truth, people don't believe you. 'Why is his repertoire so big?' they ask. The answer is, because I wasn't good enough when I was young to do the roles I wanted to do and carry them around; I had to take what work came along. Then people say: 'Don't be modest'. But it's the truth.

"I've been on a long fuse so far, I'm grateful for that and I've really enjoyed it. And it brings some surprises: like this, *The Tempest*." Here he finds another misapprehension to shatter: "Because I've done this, and [Lorin] Maazel's 1984, both at Covent Garden, people started to think I'm a specialist in contemporary opera. I'm not, and that isn't why I did the roles. I did them because I want to be at home."

Keenlyside's roles include some of the greatest acting challenges for baritones - Verdi's Rigoletto and Macbeth, and Berg's Wozzeck - and his ability to convey character through body and voice alike makes him a natural choice to be Prospero. Even so, he thought carefully before taking the part. "When we first did *The Tempest*, it was just half a year after I'd seen Derek Jacobi doing the real thing at the Old Vic. And I thought: people are going to come to this, and even leaving me out of the equation, they're going to have seen that..."

"Fortunately I'm helped by the wonderful writing. Ariel's role is so extraordinary that I'm not alone. And Caliban is a fascinating depiction. I always thought of Caliban in the play as a rough, scratchy, earthy, angry, dark force; but it's not written like that in this opera. There's a lot of angularity, but also a great deal of sentiment, nostalgia and pain at the loss of the island that has basically been stolen from him. The smaller roles, too, like Trinculo and Sebastian, are Shakespearean in weight. Adès' dramatic writing is breathtaking."

And then Keenlyside homes in on the heart of how to build and shape a role. Acting, he insists, shouldn't be done by "semaphoring" on stage, but by using the colouristic capabilities of the voice. One technique is "to send out quite a lot of sound in terms of pure decibels, but to make it sound soft and gentle if that's what's required. The best actors will do that. Take Jacobi: in the theatre he will build a role vocally and in decibels. In Prospero's big monologue, he built this fabulous pyramid to a great pitch, then brought it down an inverted triangle to nothing again. What does that mean? Colour. It means colour. And colour is everything.

"Great actors like Jacobi, Mark Rylance or Simon Russell Beale build characters not just on text, but with pauses, silences and sound. Once they've established the sound, they pull you in. Rylance pulls it out of nothing - he mumbles and stutters on purpose and drags you into the stage, pulls you in, then gives you something you're not expecting. Great singers do that, too. Any artist would be interested in colour. If art in general is a mirror of some facet of human existence, then you couldn't have enough colours."

And with the kaleidoscopic and sometimes revolutionary colours demanded by Adès's rich score, his words promise a great deal.

'The Tempest', Royal Opera House, London WC1 - www.royalopera.org;
(020-7304 4000) 12-26 March