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Alea III masters Maxwell Davies opera

REVIEW | MUSIC

ALEA III - Theodore Antoniou, music director, in a performance of contemporary chamber operas, at Boston University Concert Hall, Thursday evening.

By Richard Dyer
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Alea III's first venture into opera was a double bill of Peter Maxwell Davies' "8 Songs for a Mad King" and the Brecht/Weill "Kleine Mahagonny."

"8 Songs" dates from 1969 and at that time there wasn't anything like it in the world: this amazing, hilarious and tragic set of raving monologues is still probably Maxwell Davies' most famous work. The protagonist is England's George III, or perhaps somebody who *thinks* he is. The texts, assembled by Maxwell Davies and Randolph Stow, come from actual lines spoken by that unhappy monarch. The instrumental music is full of mystery, specificity (no music has ever sounded more like birds - or like madness), purposeful stylistic clash, and diverse allusion; the funniest moment comes when the piano does a nightclub version of the opening recitative of Handel's "Messiah." The vocal "line," with its animal groans, screeching into falsetto, straight singing, and heaven-knows-what-else, is probably the most demanding ever composed, so much so that anyone in 1969 would have thought that "8 Songs" would remain the exclusive property of the actor for whom it was conceived.

In fact "8 Songs" has become one of Maxwell Davies' most-frequently performed works; the Greek baritone Spyros Sakkas is the fourth person to tackle the piece in Boston. Vocally Sakkas was astonishing and wonderful; he has the technique to do everything

Maxwell Davies asks for with complete security - he never sounded as if he was ripping his throat apart, and some of his part even sounded *beautiful*, which brought a new dimension to the music. (Sometimes in listening to "8 Songs" I wish the King would just shut up so that I could hear the *music*.) But Sakkas had trouble projecting more than about 30% of the words, and he isn't really the virtuoso actor the part requires - he plunged only from music stand to music stand.

On the other hand, Theodore Antoniou secured an instrumental performance that was in every respect outstanding. The players were Iva Milch (flute), Gary Wright (clarinet), James Cooke (whose violin wasn't smashed, as the score directs), Joan Esch (cello, superb in "To Be Sung on the Water"), Janice Weber (piano and harpsichord), and Nancy Zeltsman (percussion). It was Zeltsman who at the powerful end drummed Sakkas offstage, howling.

The "Kleine Mahagonny" suffered because Antoniou has only been back from Germany (where he had gone for the world premiere of his opera) for 10 days. The instrumental performance was again characteristically outstanding. But while Lynn Torgove and especially Rosemarie Grout sang well, the men, all of whom have good voices, made a sour-sounding ensemble that consistently lagged behind the beat and rounded off the sharp edges of the music.

Director Craig A. Wich had done his homework: The production followed the descriptions of the original 1927 Baden-Baden premiere, and the action took place in a boxing ring in front of projections of German Expressionist paintings and drawings. The staging had its moments (a terrifyingly casual game of Russian roulette), but too much of it was cluttered and unfo-

cussed and in complete conflict with music and words that are angry and direct. Both Brecht and Weill were adamantly opposed to a production that would provide a specifically American locale and time period for the action; it seems likely that they would also have opposed a production limiting the action to a certain period of German history, particularly when the projections were showing us the real thing, and the direction was borrowing from the fifth-hand "Cabaret" (even to the point of adding an androgynous Joel Grey character), and the singers could only give us a very American college try at decadence.