

Anthropocene

David Kettle

'People can expect still to feel tense even after the opera finishes.' Composer Stuart MacRae is unapologetic about the compelling narrative that he and librettist Louise Welsh have devised for their new work, *Anthropocene*. Indeed, there are undeniable thriller aspects to this tale of an unsettling discovery in the high Arctic – not to mention moments where the story could spin off in any number of alarming directions.

But alongside its unashamedly suspenseful storyline, *Anthropocene* is unafraid to engage with weightier issues – questions of climate change, sacrifice, even exploration and our ceaseless quest for knowledge.

MacRae and Welsh are both established creators in their own rights – MacRae as a widely commissioned composer, with BBC Proms and other festival premieres to his name; Welsh as an award-winning novelist and playwright, and also Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. *Anthropocene* is their fourth – and most ambitious – collaboration for Scottish Opera, following the short *Remembrance Day* for the Company's *Five:15* season in 2009, then 2012 chamber opera *Ghost Patrol* (which won them a South Bank Sky Arts Award), and the Robert Louis Stevenson-inspired *The Devil Inside* in 2016.

Origins and inspirations

It was during the run of *The Devil Inside* that MacRae and Welsh first began discussing a new, larger opera. 'The narrative element came first,' explains MacRae. 'We didn't know where it would take place, but we knew our characters would somehow be confined together, and their relationships would start to break down. We talked about it being in a building, or a cruise ship. Then Louise brought in the idea of an outsider, a figure that would come into the group and be the catalyst for disruption.'

They point to specific works that were in their minds at the time, works whose influences can still be discerned bubbling under *Anthropocene*'s own distinctive identity. 'I was interested in sci-fi films where the characters are confined in a spacecraft,' remembers MacRae, 'for example *Alien* or Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* – the idea of isolating people where arguably there should be no people.'

Welsh points to two older texts as points of inspiration. 'I thought a lot about *Frankenstein*,' she explains, 'particularly the ending where the Creature is left alone in the land of ice. We also thought about

Opposite:
Sarah Champion as Daisy
in *Anthropocene*. Scottish
Opera, 2019.



Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, especially the idea of an island, and of strangers being introduced onto it.'

A film that exerted a particular influence, however, was the remarkable 2013 Danish documentary *Expedition to the End of the World*. 'A group of people – scientists, an artist, a philosopher, a historian, an anthropologist – voyaged on a sailing boat to explore fjords in Greenland that had been locked in ice for millennia, but were now navigable because of climate change,' explains MacRae. 'That idea of a cast of characters with different reasons for being there, and who each look at their situation differently, fed into the narrative of *Anthropocene*.'

Why did they finally settle on an icy environment as their setting? 'It's just such an interesting landscape,' says Welsh, 'and one that's made very dangerous by its extremes of weather. It's a landscape that invites myths.'

'Why does it invite myths?' MacRae enquires.

Welsh offers a straightforward response: 'Perhaps just because you can't see properly! Lots of people have hallucinations on the ice – they see things that aren't there.' That's an idea that has clearly informed *Anthropocene's* unfolding narrative. 'And of course we know of people who ended up in very extreme situations there, such as Ernest Shackleton.' The Irish-born explorer's 1914 expedition to cross the Antarctic led to the loss of his ship, *Endurance*, and three lives, before his party's eventual rescue.

A balanced cast

With their setting decided, MacRae and Welsh's next step, they explain, was to generate their characters. And here, there were practical as well as narrative concerns. 'When you think about who would be on a research vessel in the Arctic,' explains Welsh, 'obviously there's going to be a captain and crew – although our crew is much reduced – and the scientists involved. We thought it would be interesting to bring in the backer of the operation, too.'

It's also the largest opera cast that MacRae and Welsh have created – eight singers, in a work that thrives on ensemble interactions rather than imposing a hierarchy of lead and subsidiary roles. And within the opera's cast, there was an underlying intention behind MacRae and Welsh's creation of characters: to provide strong, independent roles for women. 'We thought: let's level the playing field,' explains MacRae. 'The idea of a main female character in opera being a victim has been done so much. We wanted to look at the work as existing in the modern world, where we're not just focusing on the adventures of men, with women as side characters. It was a conscious decision, but not a self-conscious one.'

Considering an outsider coming into this isolated group led MacRae and Welsh to contemplate unusual origins. 'When we knew we were going to set the opera in the north of Greenland, and we talked about the idea of an outsider coming in, there had to be a supernatural element,' remembers MacRae. 'Otherwise who else could it be? There's nobody else up there.'

'There's a mystery there,' confirms Welsh. 'Why is there a stranger there in the first place?'

Contemporary concerns

Despite its traces of magic and mystery, however, *Anthropocene* is very much an opera of our own times, and a work that refuses to ignore an issue that's profoundly affecting the Poles: climate change. Welsh, however, is clear about the opera's relationship with arguably the most pressing problem of our times: 'This isn't a "climate change opera". But of course we're aware that the human race is having an effect on the planet. We don't have an answer, and the opera isn't a finger-pointing exercise.'

'Humankind's relationship with nature and climate change are part of the context or the setting for the story,' continues MacRae. 'Because it's set in the Arctic, which we know is at the forefront of the impact of climate change, it's impossible to ignore that. Our characters acknowledge the issue, but they're not presenting a vision – or our vision – of what needs to be done about it. We'd rather provoke people to ask themselves questions about climate change than try to provide answers.'

The opera's title makes the work's context explicit. Anthropocene is an alternative term that's been suggested for our current geological epoch (otherwise called the Holocene), in an unequivocal signalling that the most profound impact on the planet is coming from humankind itself. The term was first popularised in the early 2000s – many cite the work of Nobel prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul J Crutzen, though the word existed for decades beforehand. It's still an unofficial term, though scientists are increasingly confident about using it as an accurate, legitimate description of where we are.

In MacRae and Welsh's opera, however, Anthropocene has another specific meaning. Entrepreneur Harry King, funder of the expedition, has co-opted the term as the name for his state-of-the-art research vessel. It's perhaps a brash reappropriation of the word to indicate humankind's dominion over the natural world, though the irony won't be lost that King's supposedly indestructible ship itself falls prey to unpredictable changes in the weather.



Opposite top: Sarah Champion, Stephen Gadd, Jeni Bern and Mark Le Brocq in *Anthropocene*. Scottish Opera, 2019.

Opposite bottom: Jennifer France as Ice in *Anthropocene*. Scottish Opera, 2019.

But the context of climate change aside, one of the opera's underlying themes is sacrifice, an idea that plays out on different levels across the work, most clearly as an offering made to unseen forces to bring good fortune, but also in the subtler sense of willingly giving something up for the greater good. 'We looked at myths and legends about sacrifice,' explains Welsh, 'and at Frazer's *The Golden Bough* – we thought about early ideas that feed through into the Christian story.'

Welsh and MacRae also point to exploration – and ethical questions behind it – as an idea that informed the opera. Humankind might have the compulsion to voyage, explore and make discoveries, and indeed the technology to achieve it. 'If we had enough money, we ourselves could go on one of these Arctic exploration trips,' Welsh points out. But whether we should undertake these journeys, and disturb what we find there, is another question entirely. 'The opera happens at the very top of the world,' explains MacRae, 'where arguably there should be no people. People have never lived there, and perhaps we should leave it alone.'

All the tension of a thriller

Anthropocene hovers somewhere between a realistic, true-to-life story and something more akin to a fable or allegory – though MacRae and Welsh are keen for audiences to interpret its narrative for themselves. The opera's thriller aspects, however, are undeniable – something that both creators acknowledge. 'Louise and I don't really need to try to make a thriller,' MacRae laughs. 'It's what we end up doing. What excites both of us, I think, is the sense of being able to build up tension, and to decide when to release it and how.' Hence MacRae's comment that audiences might leave the opera still feeling tense, and thinking about what they've just seen. 'Louise's novels are page-turners – I think it's an instinct for both of us. I like music that's tense as well – I know if I'm not feeling a bit wound up by a piece of music, then I tend to lose interest...'

Behind their intention to challenge and provoke, though, is MacRae and Welsh's trust of their audience – to deal with sometimes challenging subject matter, and to engage with complexities in plot and music alike. 'Stuart has a sophisticated musical language,' says Welsh. 'And the things we're thinking about – the themes, the setting, the characterisation – are all quite challenging too. We have the respect for the audience that they can cope with that.' She acknowledges, too, the expectations and prior knowledge that audience members themselves will bring. 'That's one of the joys of working with this kind of archetypal set-up. The audience will have seen films and read stories with a similar set-up, and they know it can go in any direction. So we're working with the audience's own expectations and imagination too.'

What's equally important for *Anthropocene*'s two creators, however, is audience members' experience in the theatre. 'I remember a couple of

people saying to me after *The Devil Inside*, that they weren't sure if they liked it until the following day,' explains MacRae. 'I thought that was a great reaction, a real compliment, because it showed they'd been thinking about it.'

'I love it when you go to the opera, or the theatre or cinema,' says Welsh, 'and you come out as though you've been on a rollercoaster ride, slightly dishevelled, with your hair all over the place. We want people to feel entertained and transported, and we want to make something that lives beyond the opera house, that steps out into people's lives.'

WHAT TO LISTEN OUT FOR

Character through vocal writing

MacRae provides distinctive vocal lines for the opera's eight individual characters, using musical elements that reflect their contrasting characters. Captain Ross, for example, tends to sing in short, abrupt phrases that revolve around a limited number of notes, reflecting his solidity and perhaps a certain stubbornness. Harry King, by contrast, has expansive, confident vocal lines, while the mysterious Ice sings in high, unpredictable, sometimes decorated lines that convey her strange, volatile nature.

Musical set pieces

'How could you create an opera set in the Arctic and not use the northern lights?' asks Welsh. And the shifting, kaleidoscopic hues of MacRae's delicate setting in Act I form just one of the opera's musical set pieces, alongside a raging storm that threatens the ship in Act III. 'The storm is not all bangs and crashes,' MacRae explains. 'It's more of a swell of sound. Sometimes composers focus on one sound world for a whole opera, but I tend to make a sound world or colour for each scene, often suggested by an image from the scene.' Listen out also for the ship's engines growling in the orchestra as they struggle ever more insistently against the ice near the start of the opera.

Tonality and non-tonality

MacRae integrates passages of consonant tonality into an otherwise more dissonant, non-tonal musical language. Tonal triads underpin several key scenes, and one particular passage in Act I is written in a modal minor key, standing out as strikingly different from the rest of the opera – intentionally so. 'There is a section where for several minutes we're in a tonal or modal world,' MacRae explains, 'and that's a moment of self-realisation for one or two of the characters. It happens gradually, and it's a very subtle transition into and out of tonality that contextualises this awakening.'



Above: Mark Le Brocq as Harry King and Sarah Champion as Daisy in *Anthropocene*. Scottish Opera, 2019.

Photography by James Glossop.

Flowing, cinematic structure

Within its three Acts, *Anthropocene* is divided into clearly defined scenes, but its structure might be experienced as more free-flowing, even cinematic. Music from one scene might stray into the beginning of the next, and MacRae and Welsh sometimes jump cut between contrasting conversations within a single scene.

Instrumental colour and quartertones

Quartertones – musical pitches that fall in the cracks between notes on a piano keyboard – provide a rich, unusually ear-tweaking sound world for certain scenes in the opera. Up high on violins or piccolo, they add a strange sparkle to the opera's sound, and the incessantly shifting microtonal harmonies make a striking effect at *Anthropocene*'s conclusion. MacRae further adds to the opera's arresting sonic universe with some very unusual percussion instruments, used sparingly but to great effect.

David Kettle is Scottish Opera's Programme Editor. He is also a music critic for *The Scotsman* and *The Daily Telegraph*, and has written about music for a broad range of publications including *Classical Music*, *The Strad*, *The List*, *The Times* and *BBC Music Magazine*.