

# South Shore Critic

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## BMOP's "Fantastic Mr. Fox": A Cautionary Tail



*The Cast of "Fantastic Mr. Fox"  
(photo: BMOP)*

*Tobias Picker: Fantastic Mr. Fox* is the official title of a new compact disc release of the opera by Picker, the current Artistic Director of Tulsa Opera, who pulls off the almost impossible feat of composing an opera that is aimed directly at families, not just children; that is, children of all ages. With his welcome use of melodic tonal lyricism, even though a modern piece, and the caustically witty Libretto by Donald Sturrock, this work is sure to charm listeners of any vintage. Performed by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) under the direction of Gil Rose, the recording features members of Odyssey Opera, the Boston Children's Chorus, and a host of well-known vocalists. Commissioned and premiered in 1998 by Los Angeles Opera, this recording was made during its performance period in Boston in 2014, and just released this month on CD.

Based on the revered children's novel by Roald Dahl, the fable centers on the efforts of the eponymous fox (baritone John Brancy), the antihero who's on a food-finding mission on behalf of his family, contemporaneously thwarting the aim of three mean farmers, Boggis (bass- baritone Andrew Craig Brown), Bunce (tenor Edwin Vega) and Bean (baritone Gabriel Preisser) to kill the varmint that's been eating their chickens and geese and drinking their cider. Mr. Fox enlists his forest friends, including Mr. Porcupine (tenor Theo Lebow), Miss Hedgehog (soprano Elizabeth Futral), Rita the Rat (mezzo-soprano Tynan Davis) and others. The remaining characters include Mrs. Fox (mezzo-soprano Krista River), Agnes the Digger (countertenor Andrey Nemzer), Mavis the Tractor (soprano Gail Novak Mosites), Badger the Miner (baritone John Dooley) and Burrowing Mole (tenor Jonathan Blalock).

There are also four fox cubs: Abigail Long, Abi Tenenbaum, Zoe Tekeian, and Madeleine Kline. The story is accessible as is the music (this despite the fact that Picker was trained by a trio of Modernist composers, Elliott Carter, Milton Babbitt, and Charles Wuorinen).

Picker has stated that there can be found in this work a “green message”, if one wishes to find one (with its portrayal of the barren land above ground and the warmer natural world below). There are instances of slapstick, European styles, and neoclassical Stravinsky-like sound. In several passages, including those utilizing the Children's Chorus, there is sublime music for adult and child listeners. In short, it's both relatively brief and compellingly approachable in its score with an ample supply of cleverness and wit in its libretto, with no evidence of being “dumbed down” for its target audience. What more could anyone want in an opera for the whole family?