

La traviata

West Green House Opera

23<sup>rd</sup> July

For his debut as artistic director of West Green House Opera, in its seventeenth season this summer, William Relton programmed eight days of events built around three operas with casts featuring a strong contingent of young British-trained singers: *La traviata*, *Così fan tutte* and Gounod's *La Colombe*. Relton himself staged the Verdi, turning the intimate scale of the show to maximum advantage with tight, purposeful deployment of forces and close attention to narrative logic and characterisation – each member of the eight-strong chorus was a partying hedonist rather than a generic operatic carouser. The setting was the Roaring Twenties, and bobs, beading and gold Mary Janes were set off against the Matisse-blue panelling of Colin Falconer's set. Some trenchant observations were made: during the Act 1 prelude, Violetta was stalked by predatory males; when flagging after the first verse of 'Sempre libera' she perked herself up with a line of coke and, as Act 2 segued into Act 3 on the open stage, Flora made sure to collect the scattered banknotes that Alfredo had thrown in his fit of rage.

The heroine, quite legitimately, was no shrinking camellia. Jessica Rose Cambio (an American pupil of Diana Soviero who has studied with Scotto and Freni) gave us a young woman who, before being driven to submission, seemed well able to look after herself: she certainly launched a decisive shot across Germont *père's* bows with 'Donna son io, signore, ed in mia casa'. In Act 3, her transformation into a terminal patient was achieved without histrionics, but with moving stillness and restraint (and make-up that simply drained her face of colour rather than transforming her into a zombie). Though her top notes tended to glare, Cambio possesses a rounded, flowing middle register – so important in Verdi – and a sure sense of style. Her Alfredo, Jung Soo Yun, initially somewhat stiff on stage, provided a beautifully caressed *mezza voce* and pulled off a ringing top C at the end of his cabaletta. To these ears, something in his timbre suggests he could excel in German repertoire. There was a wealth of nuance in Eddie Wade's interpretation of his father; with his pithy baritone, distinguished presence and alert acting he captured Germont's ambivalence with skill and subtlety.

Each of the supporting roles was a vivid cameo: there was the irascible Annina of Louise Innes, the glamorous, but hard-boiled Flora of Sophie Goldrick, Paul Curievici and Henry Neill gadding about cockily as Gastone and d'Obigny, Matthew Hargreaves as a pompous Duphol and Graeme Broadbent as a Dr Grenvil *de luxe* (also co-opted into the party scenes, where the bass's comic talents came into play). The conductor was Oliver Gooch, an alumnus of the Jette Parker programme at the Royal Opera House, where he has no doubt witnessed a *Traviata* or thirteen in recent years. He set the seal on the performance with an essential vigour and honesty, never slipping into wither-wringing, and the 30-person orchestra played with definition and refinement. There will be more Verdi at West Green House Opera in 2017 – *Un ballo in maschera* (director Richard Studer; conductor Jonathan Lyness), again complemented by Mozart: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, directed by Ashley Dean and conducted by Oliver Zeffmann.

Yehuda Shapiro