





ROBERT WORKMAN

▲ Terrifying: Mark Stone as Rigoletto at Nevill Holt

◀ So terrifying was Stone's searing central performance you would have thought he was a crazed murderer himself. Obsessive, staring-eyed, unnerving and virtually foaming in his fatal desire for revenge, Stone painted a picture ('He is crime and I am punishment') of almost psychopathic proportions: That he is gulled into engineering his own (and Gilda's) undoing is a deadly paradox.

If Stone dominated every time he appeared, hunched and seething, Susana Gaspar enjoyed her own success as Gilda. She ably expressed the vulnerability of an innocent teenager, both initially, where she appears in her upstairs bedroom (set designs by Simon Lima Holdworth) and throughout her starry-eyed, doomed dealings with the appalling, randy Duke.

Chalmers produced a wealth of expressive detail from the score: subtle rubatos and magical fade-outs; expressive, finessed violins and an aching intensity underlying Rigoletto's lament; finely etched flutes and piccolo in 'La donna e mobile', and for Gilda's final scene. In fact, two items at the start set the tone: the Duke's brief, sensual duet with a strutting young tenor courtier; and the split-second handling of the overture. The vocal ensembles were uniformly top-notch.

★★★★★

Roderic Dunnett

High on the list of hard things to achieve in opera are the sexual energy required of onstage orgies (all that awkwardly expressed libido) and the social energy required of party scenes (the phoney smiles and awkward back-slaps). It's especially a problem in *La traviata* with its two big parties that dissolve and reassemble. But they proved a key strength of the *Traviata* staged at **West Green House** by William Relton, marking his first season at the artistic helm there.

Set amid the stunning gardens, lakes and fountains of a perfect Queen Anne house

in Hampshire, West Green ranks among the smaller of the serious UK country-opera venues, but it's probably the most enchanting and it punches well above its weight in terms of style. This *Traviata* summed things up: small-scale but chic, with elegant designs by Colin Falconer that conjured out of very little a convincing sense of 1920s Paris. And the party scenes worked beautifully, as intimate soirées in a swish apartment.

They felt natural, spontaneous, with choreography that barely registered as such (the best kind in these circumstances). Especially effective was the way that Relton gave some context to set-piece ensemble numbers like the *Brindisi*, which played out as a game, its cod philosophies prompted by table-cracker mottos.

All this made for an engaging company show – which is as well because the Violetta, Jessica Rose Cambio, didn't shine: in voice and personality she pushed too hard, too much the local diva, not enough the vulnerable, self-sacrificing flower of conscience.

On the other hand, Korean tenor Jung Soo Yun's Alfredo was more nuanced, done with taste and elegance. Meanwhile, in the pit, Oliver Gooch conducted with a brisk efficiency that extracted a mostly good sound from a modest orchestra, despite the thinness of its strings. More players, with more tone, would be a fine idea in future. **BN**

★★★★★

Michael White

▼ Small-scale but chic: *La Traviata* at West Green House



MATTHEW WILLIAMS-ELLIS