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THE DORSET OPERA
FESTIVAL
MMXVIII

Simply Our Most Successful Festival Ever...

Every Christmas newsletter seems to carry reports of greater successes and record breaking figures, but this year was truly amazing! Records were broken in all areas thanks to you, our loyal supporters and not an insignificant number of opera aficionados who were determined to attend *Le Cid*.

- We took more money at the box office and sold more tickets than ever before
- Five of our six performances were totally sold out
- Our seventh British première (Massenet's *Le Cid*) gained 4 star reviews across the board
- Our Outreach programme reached new heights

...and so to 2019. What's in store for next July?

Dorset Opera News | Christmas 2018 | Issue 27



La bohème | Soloists & Children's Chorus

Outreach and Children's Chorus...

Following the success of our 2017 project at Queen Elizabeth's School in Wimborne, a donation was kindly made by one of our Patrons to enable us to continue our education work in 2018.

Board member Lynsey Docherty planned and implemented two projects for us in 2018. The first was to recruit, through open audition, a children's chorus made up of local young singers for the Festival's main stage production of *La bohème*. The audition call was widely shared on social media, promoting young singers' opportunities within Dorset Opera to the wider public. The selected youngsters were given the opportunity to train weekly for 5 weeks, to work with a world class cast and production team, as well as providing the opportunity for their parents and families to see the production. *La bohème* conductor, Peter Robinson, remarked that this was the best children's chorus he'd ever worked with. 80% of the children's chorus then took up the opportunity to sing in another opera production four weeks later as part of the Salisbury International Arts Festival launch weekend. Dorset Opera is delighted to have been able to ignite a love for opera through an experience these children would never have had otherwise.

The second part of the education project was a week-long residency at St. Edward's School, Poole, made possible by the generosity of Patron, Kathryn Ballisat. Forty-six young people aged 11-17 worked with the Dorset Opera education team to create a re-imagined version of *La bohème*, performed to a packed school hall of students, teachers and parents, and later attending the dress rehearsal of the Dorset Opera Festival production itself.

The young people devised lyrics and music with composer Richard Barnard, learnt original music and worked on their singing and performance skills with Lynsey Docherty, and were directed in the production by Anna Lawrence. The resulting work was true to the themes of Puccini's opera, with the children's own slant on the overall message, using their original words and compositions, complete with an 8-piece band and costumes, ending with a fully

staged performance lasting 25 minutes. The show also featured Pauls Putnins, (a cast member from Dorset Opera's production); Lynsey herself and with much excitement, the children's music teacher, Camilla Foster-Mitchell (a Dorset Opera alumna in superb voice), giving the students the chance to work alongside professional singers. The concluding speech from the headmaster was both emotional and uplifting, and perhaps best summarises the impact of the project on the school:

'We have seen something quite remarkable here. I am genuinely humbled and amazed by the growth, change and development in only 5 days of the students working with the professionals. How could they have done that without the help of Dorset Opera? I am so grateful to them.'

If you would care to fund or contribute to the cost of our schools Outreach programme in 2020, please get in touch via: info@dorsetopera.com



Opera Outreach at St Edward's School, Poole



More for you in 2019...

Unbelievably, 2019 celebrates our 15th year at Bryanston! Surely it can't be that long? So, in an expansion to the Festival we are presenting a seventh performance.

To mark the occasion, we are re-visiting the opera that opened the Bryanston era back in 2005 - Verdi's immortal *Nabucco*. This will be our third production, the first having been in 1983. Despite being an 'early' Verdi, *Nabucco* is stuffed with remarkable music that you cannot fail to adore. The most famous piece is what has become known as *The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves*... otherwise, *Va pensiero!*

We can promise you a wondrous cast - conducted by Dorset Opera Festival music director, Jeremy Carnall - and you can rely on the fact that our dynamic young chorus will give their all to make the performances unforgettable.

After the great success of *Le Comte Ory* in 2017, we present what is probably Donizetti's most famous opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor*. We last performed this over a quarter of a century ago, back in 1993. Again, we will feature a stellar cast of bel canto singers which includes three tenors. Standby for fireworks!

Another matinée...

Each July, the matinée performance is always sold out, so we decided to offer our audiences the opportunity to see both operas in matinée form. Therefore, from 2019 onwards, there will be another matinée on the Thursday afternoon.



Nabucco 2005

...and a gala opera concert!

The evening of Friday 26 July will see our first opera concert featuring all the forces of the Dorset Opera Festival. This will be a very special black tie event.

Ticket pricing for 2019

There will be a recategorisation of some seats and a slight increase in ticket prices. Full details including the Opera Gala concert, will be set out in your priority booking packs and online.

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DOF artists triumph at Garsington & Wexford...

Dorset Opera emerging artists Verity Wingate (soprano) and Robert Forrest (tenor) have won top awards at Garsington Opera this year. Verity, from Salisbury, who appeared in our 2013 season, surprised us all with the quality and maturity of her voice at the age of 16. Garsington clearly recognised her talent and awarded her the Leonard Ingrams award - their top prize.

Robert Forrest has been a DOF regular for several years and has sung roles in *Eugene Onegin*, *Macbeth* and *Le Comte Ory*. Blessed with a glorious tenor voice, Patrons will recall that Robert entertained them at our Christmas gathering two years ago.

Meanwhile in Wexford, the Gerard Arnhold Award was presented to the Polish baritone, Simon Mechlinski, who made his Dorset Opera Festival debut in *Le Comte Ory*. He made his Wexford debut this year singing the role of Luigi in *Il bravo* by Mercadante and as Dr Malatesta in *Don Pasquale* by Donizetti, but also found the time to perform in a lunchtime recital. Of his lunchtime recital, Operawire said:

“...Simon Mechlinski wowed the audience! At only 23, Mechlinski showed ability well beyond his years, and looks set for a hugely successful career.”



Wonderful Wexford!

Towards the end of October, some thirty-two Dorset Opera supporters found themselves on the Emerald Isle for what is recognised internationally as the last of the year's great opera festivals.

The Wexford Festival is in its 67th year and is renowned for presenting or reintroducing new and neglected works - and that was certainly the case with all this year's productions. On our arrival evening, we gathered for dinner and were welcomed to the Festival by the Artistic Director, conductor David Agler. Another guest was one Harriet Kennedy who was stage manager in charge of props on the busiest show - Mercadante's *Il bravo*.

Four operas were on the main Festival menu, and most of our party elected to see them all. Our first visit to Wexford's 10 year-old National Opera House was to witness the European première of American composer William Bolcom's *Dinner at Eight*. With spectacular 3D scenery, the opera is set at the time of the Wall Street crash and follows the travails of the invitees to the eponymous dinner party. The funniest moment is the heroine's coloratura aria extolling the delights of 'lobster in aspic'! Bolcom's music was descriptive if not memorable in a cinematic idiom (perhaps reflecting the fact that there was a 1933 film of the same name starring Jean Harlow) but it didn't quite live up to the sumptuous production, which featured Dorset Opera emerging artist, Ranald McCusker, as Eddie the bell hop!

Saverio Mercadante was a composer with a prolific operatic output who, in his time, rivalled Rossini and Donizetti and whose musical style clearly influenced Verdi. His *Il bravo* is a tremendous work which richly deserved an outing - but the story is virtually incomprehensible! Again, a stunning set with a huge chorus and cast - of which we must mention Simon Mechlinski (Raimbaud in our *Comte Ory*) and Mr McCusker yet again.

The third show was a double bill consisting of Franco Leoni's *L'oracolo* (set in the 1940s around the opium dens of San Francisco) and *Mala vita* by Umberto Giordano (composer of *Andrea Chénier*). Both operas featured some superb singing from three excellent Korean baritones and tenor Sergio Escobar. The Dorset Opera connection with this double bill was scenic designer Cordelia Chisholm whose set was simply magnificent. When fresh out of college, Cordelia designed the sets and costumes for our first four Bryanston productions. She is now a regular at major opera houses.

Lunchtime recitals and a short works programme of reduced operas in the afternoons plus trips and walks organised by our tour organiser, completed the brilliant package. Nearly everyone on the trip reckoned it was a triumph - the best so far!

With Wexford's budget standing at €3.9m it does rather make what we do in Dorset - for an eighth of that amount - a bit of a minor miracle.





Three generations of Dorset Opera...

The latest addition to the Kennedy clan, Georgina - was born to Alex Kennedy and his partner Kathryn - was keen to take to the stage when she visited Bryanston this summer. Alex, who can be found assisting patrons on both sides of the bar in the marquee, has appeared on stage in earlier productions (*L'elisir d'amore* in Sherborne in 1997) and elsewhere, at the age of four, he played 'Sorrow' to the Cio Cio San of Rosalind Plowright in *Madama Butterfly*.

Events Diary 2019...

The 2019 Events' Diary is packed with even more dates than ever. It will be landing on doormats with your priority booking information early in the new year. But let us tempt you with a just a few of the regular events as well as new highlights.

- There will be a further eight Bluffers' lunches - featuring such speakers as Caroline D'Cruz, Nigel Beale, Alan Frost, Simon Rees, Adrian Thorpe and Hugh Watkins.
- Another unmissable Celebrity Lunch with one of The Metropolitan Opera's top brass.
- '*Covent Garden Comes Back to Dorset*' - the Royal Opera's Jette Parker alumni join us for a very special concert, this time at Wimborne Minster featuring the next generation of opera stars from the Royal Opera House's Jette Parker Young Artists' programme.
- Another glorious Ritzy Tea Party at the home of former Lord Lieutenant of Dorset, Mr & Mrs Michael Fulford-Dobson in Cerne Abbas.
- Our annual Summer Firework Fiesta on the waves of Poole Harbour (with fish & chips).
- For our Patrons only, a very special dinner - with entertainment - at the kind invitation of Lord & Lady Phillimore.

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REVIEWS:

Dorset Opera Festival 2018

What the critics said about our production of: **Le Cid**

The Telegraph | ★★★★★☆

Rupert Christiansen

With the world première of Donizetti's *L'Ange de Nisida* at Covent Garden, Mascagni's rarity *Isabeau* at Holland Park and Verdi's neglected *Alzira* redeemed by the Buxton Festival, this has proved a jamboree month for trainspotting opera buffs.

Fans of the French romantic repertory can now thrill to the novelty of the first ever British staging of Massenet's *Le Cid* - presented by the wonderful Dorset Opera, a summer camp accommodated in the idyllic grounds of Bryanston School, with a reputation for distinguished work created by students collaborating (albeit in limited rehearsal time) with first-rate professional soloists.

Massenet's nickname in his lifetime was 'Mam'zelle Wagner', but in this case, such a monicker gives a misleading impression.

Le Cid is big and ambitious, but neither delicately feminine nor spiritually vaporous - it's a late example of the tradition of Grand Opera, full of procession and acclamation, with choruses and extended ensembles that may hit some sort of record for overall decibel level. Jeremy Carnall conducts it with fierce, uninhibited energy, and the orchestra attacks it with relish.

Some might find it relentless and enervating; I love its robust muscular intensity and thrill to the aching, palpitating melodies through which the central characters grandstand their emotions.

Loosely based on the high and mighty classical drama by Corneille, it tells the story of the medieval Spanish warrior who kills the father of his beloved Chimène in a duel of honour, but wins back her heart through his noble self-sacrifice and deeds of derring-do against the Moorish invader.

Christopher Cowell's staging, nicely designed by Steve Howell, doesn't fuss it up. Sensibly transplanting the action to the 19th-century, it will win no prizes for subtlety and features some perfectly ludicrous swordplay, but its total lack of pretension is rather refreshing.

What makes the evening worthwhile, however, is the terrific bravado of the young American tenor Leonardo Capalbo in the title-role.

Slight of build and inexplicably costumed as a hotel bell-boy, he nevertheless sings with unstinting heroic grandeur and does full justice to the lovely aria '*O souverain, O juge*': his clean, bright, firm timbre is very well suited to this school of music, and he should sing more of it.

Lee Bisset is Chimène: she flings herself into the girl's passions with abandon, but more control and restraint might have steadied her wayward intonation.

Paul Gay and Philip Rhodes do sterling work as baritonal dignitaries, and the youthful chorus trained by Benjamin Goodson sing with roof-raising fervour. A hugely enjoyable occasion.

The Stage | ★★★★★☆

George Hall

Given Jules Massenet's unassailable position in the pantheon of 19th-century French opera composers, it seems inexplicable that such a major work as his four-act grand opera *Le Cid* (1885) should never have made it across the Channel until this production by the Dorset Opera Festival - a company with a solid track record in staging rarities.

That said, this handsomely designed and...traditionally staged production shows the company achieving something that many bigger and far better resourced enterprises would quail at: a lavish presentation of a piece from the heyday of the Paris Opera, when it was the world's most opulent theatre.

The company can rely on a committed, 70-strong chorus, unafraid of any challenge, and an orchestral complement of 50 that works perfectly in this venue. Conductor Jeremy Carnall demonstrates an ideal sense of balance and maintains momentum in a piece that could all too easily fall flat.

Pride of place amongst a doughty cast must go to Italian-American tenor Leonardo Capalbo, who not only keeps going throughout the arduous title role of Rodrigue (alias *Le Cid*), but does so with the kind of ringing tone and old-fashioned heroic stance this piece of dramatic hokum needs to succeed. Soprano Lee Bisset responds with a Chimène of passion and authority.

Paul Gay's dignity as Don Diègue is equalled by that of Charles Johnston as the Count of Gormas, their ridiculous row setting the entire plot in motion. Phillip Rhodes is the stern King of Spain and Ross Ramgobin makes two striking interventions as a Muslim emissary and (in the form of a singing silhouette) St James.

The Observer | ★★★★★☆

Fiona Maddocks

...Dorset Opera has established a reputation for staging rarities. This year, in rep with *La bohème*, the company gave the UK première of Massenet's *Le Cid* (1885), about the medieval Castilian warrior hero.

Frequently performed after its Paris premiere, the opera was shunted aside for no obvious reason after the first world war... Massenet's score, which has a couple of familiar standalone arias and many grand choruses and ensembles, is a gorgeously vivid affair, saturated with emotion and without a speck of subtlety.

...It's certainly worth doing, with challenging roles for Rodrigue (*Le Cid*) and his lover, Chimène, taken with punch and intensity by Leonardo Capalbo and Lee Bisset. Paul Gay's Don Diègue stood out among the well-taken supporting roles. The company's music director, Jeremy Carnall, steered the performance with engaging gusto. Christopher Cowell's production, designed by Steve Howell

and updated to around the 1890s, caught the spirit of French operatic grandeur without fuss.

...Performances take place at the school's well-appointed Coade theatre, which has what you might call a generous acoustic. Under the persuasive artistic directorship of the international bass Roderick Kennedy, Dorset Opera's standards, and its reach, are ever rising. *Le Cid* was a triumph, luckily, since luring a Massenet agnostic to a far-off region on a train-strike weekend could have ended badly. Instead, I'm a convert, or on the way.

Opera Magazine | George Hall

Massenet's four-act grand opera had a slap-up première at the Paris Opera in 1885: it continued in the repertoire until 1919, notching up more than 150 performances. Given its appearances in many other major theatres around this time, it's surprising that it didn't find a place on the UK stage until this characteristically ambitious production at the Dorset Opera Festival; but then there has been renewed interest in *Le Cid* of late, with a 2011 revival at the Opera de Marseille transferring to the Paris Opera in 2015, on both occasions with Roberto Alagna taking on the arduous title role.

...it is an opera with highlights in the form of Chimène's luscious lament '*Pleurez mes yeux!*', Don Rodrigue's '*O souverain, O juge, O père!*' ...Massenet otherwise seems to be relying on his superb technical skills more than on inspiration, though there's no denying the sheer effectiveness of whatever he does, and in whatever dramatic context. I'd personally place it below works on a similar scale such as *Hérodiade* (a success for Dorset back in 2006) or *Le Roi de Lahore*.

...what Dorset managed to provide in terms of quality as well as quantity was on an altogether remarkable level. Without a Parisian budget to draw on, the designers Steve Howell (sets) and Rebecca Hopkins (costumes) came up with a handsome sequence of visuals that enabled the director Christopher Cowell to do the piece proud while moving the plot ...to the time of the opera's original production. With substantial forces to keep in play on a limited stage space, Cowell did a fine job of clarifying the action.

Leonardo Capalbo shone in the title role, maintaining heroic tone and man-of-action stance and holding absolutely firm throughout his enormous contribution to the third act. Lee Bisset's accomplished account of Chimène brought her equivalent success. Phillip Rhodes exuded authority as the King, with Simone Riksman a suitable rival to Bisset for Rodrigue's romantic interest. The plot is launched by a disastrous stand-off induced by notions of Spanish honour: here Paul Gay (Don Diègue) and Charles Johnston (the Count of Gormas) were in furious contention. The rising British baritone Ross Ramgobin excelled in two appearances...Dorset's chorus sounded thrilling, the singers dramatically both willing and able. The orchestra was on top form and the conductor Jeremy Carnall conveyed the work's qualities with enthusiastic skill.



Leonardo Capalbo | *Le Cid*

David de Mattos



David de Mattos, who died peacefully on 6 November 2018, three weeks before his 95th birthday, was a long-standing passionate supporter of Dorset Opera and a participant in many early productions.

David was the fourth of five children whose father died when David was three. The family was left poor but in a very loving environment though another tragedy befell the family when David's older brother died age 16.

David was schooled at Christ's Hospital then qualified as a Chartered Engineer and Fellow of the Institution of Electrical Engineers. He served in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve during World War II. In 1945 he was on a landing craft preparing an assault on Malaysia responsible for sonar, gaining him the nickname 'Ping'. He was in the Bay of Bengal when the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were dropped.

His engineering life included time with AEI and RHP living in Bristol, where he married Rhian in 1957 and where their son Christopher was born; Cardiff, where daughter Helen was born; Derbyshire and Warwickshire. He followed up business interests at the Administrative Staff College in Henley where he took a sabbatical as a lecturer before moving to Dorset in 1970 on becoming a director of Westland Helicopters.

Son Christopher started at Sherborne School in 1972 and, with the encouragement of DO founder, Patrick Shelley, became involved in the 1976 production of *Carmen*. This led to his parents striking up a friendship with Patrick and to David singing in the chorus for many years. His last performance was in *Salvator Rosa* in 2000 when he decided that the production was so special that a professional recording of the opera should be made. David successfully raised funds and the resultant recording was a world première - and is still available online.

David and Rhian undertook a 10-month world tour in 1990, taking only what they could carry in backpacks. They were stuck in Oman during the first Gulf War, were feted as royalty in Jordan (Rhian's brother had been at Sandhurst with King Hussein) and were on-the-ground observers of a coup in Thailand.

During DO's *Ruslan and Ludmilla* in 1996, David discovered that the bass, Roderick Kennedy, was looking for a new home and suggested a property in his village. Kennedy subsequently bought it. Having suddenly lost Patrick Shelley in 2003, when Dorset Opera was mounting Erkel's *Hunyadi László*, David persuaded Kennedy to help him run the office. Soon after, DO Chairman, Tim Lee, invited Kennedy to take over as Chairman. Kennedy suggested he might, instead, take on the task of artistic director.

David de Mattos was also responsible for introducing the late William Gronow Davis to Dorset Opera, a hugely successful match that led to William's eventual appointment as President.

Daughter Helen supported David at home in Abbey Cottage but he came to need round-the-clock care early in 2018 and he was moved into a care home. His funeral took place on 23 November, followed by a memorial service in Witchampton village church. The family have kindly requested that donations in his memory should go to Dorset Opera.



Le Cid | Soloists & Chorus

Where next for Patrons? Our greatest success story...

Did you know that we now have over 90 Patrons (that's actually 157 individuals because most of them are couples). In 2009 we had around 24 meaning that we have had a 275% increase over the last 10 years. However, the entry level Patrons donation has remained the same for the last 15 years at £250 (single or couple) which, in today's money is around £362.

We have been looking at the benefits we offer our Patrons and what is the best way to recognise the magnificent contribution they make to the Dorset Opera Festival, not only from a financial aspect but by bringing friends and colleagues to performances, supporting our Outreach programme, making their homes available for functions and making Dorset Opera a welcoming organisation of which people want to be a part.

We have examined what other companies offer their Patrons and supporters and, not surprisingly, there are a large range of 'benefits', levels of Patronage and approach.

It is felt that after nearly 15 years, we need to bring our model up to date but we are also aware that it's imperative to have your views on the best way to move forward. Do you think that the amount you currently contribute is about right? Should there be a different rate for single and joint membership, as the Friends of Dorset Opera?

Should access to Patrons' events be commensurate with their level of giving? Should we encourage a monthly payment scheme by Direct Debit - with the donation amount being divisible by twelve? Should we do as many of our country-house opera rivals and have an expiry date so that if you haven't made a contribution within a twelve-month period, your benefits cease? Should it be easier to set up/change levels of Patronage through the website?

If you have thoughts, ideas or comments, or would care to increase your contribution, we'd love to hear from you... ad@dorsetopera.com

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AGM, Annual Report and Accounts...

The joint AGMs of Dorset Opera and the Friends of Dorset Opera will be held on Monday 28 January 2019 at 18:30 for 19:00 at Duke's, Copper Street, Brewery Square, Dorchester DT1 1GA - with grateful thanks to our Deputy Chairman, Garry Batt, and his fellow directors. There should be plenty of parking on site and refreshments and canapés will be available before the meetings as usual.

For Members, Patrons and Friends of Dorset Opera, an AGM Calling Notice is enclosed with this newsletter. Should you require electronic copies of the full Report and Accounts prior to the meeting, please send a detailed request email to info@dorsetopera.com

Encouraging music making



How wonderful to find our orchestral academy students getting together in their own time to make music. In this image, oboist Christopher Bouwman, is mentoring three of his younger colleagues.

Priority booking in 2019

Priority booking for the 2019 Festival begins in January. Each of our Patrons' Circles will get their opportunity to book in plenty of time.

President's Circle
Chairman's Circle
Director's Circle
Conductor's Circle
Friends of Dorset Opera
General Booking

Tuesday 22 January
Tuesday 29 January
Tuesday 5 February
Tuesday 12 February
Tuesday 19 February
Tuesday 5 March

Once again, we will be using the Regent Centre in Christchurch as our box office. Their website has been improved and not only will you be able to print your tickets but in 2019, we hope you will be able to reserve marquee tables and chairs online.

When booking you will also be able to add dining and food options after completing your ticket purchase. If you prefer to think about your picnic and dinner options nearer Festival-time, simply order them by going to the food ordering page on the Dorset Opera Festival website or re-visit the Regent Centre booking pages. Unless you have elected to have booking material sent to you electronically, you will automatically receive booking forms in good time to make a postal application. When printing your tickets, please download the information sheet which will answer any FAQs you might have about your visit to Bryanston.

Almost uniquely in this country, the Regent Centre does not charge a booking or administration fee. Please be aware that if you request tickets to be sent to you by post, you will incur a small charge of just £1 for postage.

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REVIEWS:

Dorset Opera Festival 2018

What the critics said about our production of: *La bohème*

Bachtrack | ★★★★★☆

Dominic Lowe

In London and the South East the population is on the verge of collapse as the heat relentlessly rises into the mid-30s. At Bryanstons School in the South West, however, conditions are slightly more bearable and indeed have offered some balmy evenings as Dorset Opera Festival's 2018 season gets under way. Under its charismatic Artistic Director Roderick Kennedy, its logistic achievements remain outstanding; nothing less than the staging and preparation of two operas in just a couple of weeks with a full scale educational commitment to a well-sized chorus of young singers who benefit from an intensive training schedule and regular access to the experienced soloists.

DO's commitment to pedagogy for the chorus is a major factor in repertory choice, and in programming *La bohème* there's an opportunity to explore just how tightly Puccini in theatrical terms constructs his operas. Peter Relton's production is reassuringly conservative; an open stage with walls plastered with fragments of poetry and artistic sketches; bare floors and under-furnished with just one bed (one ponders on sleeping arrangements in a garret that serves four), a table and a couple of chairs, a small stove in the corner; a painted backdrop of Paris, the Eiffel Tower in the distance. The second and third acts transform easily into the Latin Quarter and the toll gate, and a large circular window on the left allows for a little subtlety - in the second, diners on the top floor of Cafe Momus, in the third a view into the garret showing exasperated silhouettes of Rodolfo and Marcello.

It's restrained and sensible, but where Relton's talent really shows is in the *Personenregie*; his focus on character interaction makes for scenes of powerful atmosphere. The camaraderie of Act 1 with the jovial camaraderie of the four struggling artists is credible, and more to the point, enticing. The relationships between them are well-sketched, the choreography of the Benoît scene well-timed. Likewise, the atmosphere of the Latin Quarter is joyously evoked, and the scene with Musetta's aria '*Quando me'n vo'*' is laid out well, the gloominess of Alcindoro and Marcello, present and past lovers sitting at the same table bemoaning her behaviour a nice touch. The last scene is moving in just the right way, the warmth and energy of earlier acts fading into bleak lethargy.

It seems only fair to comment first on the quality of the chorus, including some very young singers indeed, who gave a boisterous and flavoursome performance, singing in unison and with a focus not just on how, but what they were singing. Shelley Jackson was a captivating Mimì, a delicate and charming presence which became deeply moving in the third act. Vocally, she showed well-integrated registers with a beguilingly full lower voice and secure top notes. It's a nicely sized voice, but there's a flair for nimble pianissimo which was sensibly deployed. Adam Smith had a vivid stage presence as Rodolfo, but seemed underpowered and frequently struggled to sing over the orchestra. Baritone Nicholas Lester has sung and impressed at Dorset Opera before; here as Marcello, he

was most impressive, the voice rich and well projected with clear diction and plenty of colour. He conveyed chemistry with his Musetta sung by Lauren Michelle, who brought a lovely diva-quality to her performance. Sumptuously sung, generous on the highs, Michelle very much dominated Act II.

In the secondary roles, Pauls Putnins and Ross Ramgobin were strongly cast as Colline and Schaunard, the former displaying a bold, forceful bass-baritone, the later elegantly sung under an unseasonably thick coat. Charles Johnston's Alcindoro was a crusty old stick, appropriately outraged and downtrodden, and Johnston doubled as the equally unfortunate Benoît, giving a comic turn as the lusty old landlord in need of female companionship.

The Dorset Opera Orchestra under Peter Robinson gave one of the strongest performances I have heard from them; quality of playing was generally high and the noticeable absence of significant flaws in the brass was to be commended. Robinson's reading was lush and dynamic; a highly enjoyable *Bohème* indeed.

The Stage | ★★★★★☆

George Hall

For its second summer offering Dorset Opera returns to the tried and tested with Puccini's classic - a work that never palls no matter how many times one experiences it.

Peter Relton's capable production pushes the period forwards from around 1830 by about a century, but the piece's values remain genuinely timeless.

Designers Steve Howell and Rebecca Hopkins come up with a snazzy set and costumes to match; the stage is unusually crowded for the Cafe Momus scene, to accommodate the company's vast and indefatigable chorus plus a small army of talented kids (Oliver Gill's demanding child is particularly good). Relton arguably goes too far in turning Musetta's admittedly show-off, showpiece Waltz Song into a full-scale production number that is practically a meta-theatrical intrusion; but it's forgivable.

Leading the cast is Shelley Jackson, whose refulgent soprano imprints Mimì on the audience's collective memory. Adam Smith's Rodolfo has the odd moment of vocal insecurity but generally gives a perceptive and worthy account of an exposed and emotionally complex role.

Lauren Michelle's Musetta registers as more applied from without than felt from within, but she certainly seizes her opportunities. Pauls Putnins' superb Colline climaxes in an unusually moving account of the Coat Song.

His resilient baritone another major asset, Ross Ramgobin's Schaunard enlivens every scene in which he takes part, while it says much for the varied artistry of Charles Johnston that before checking my programme I had assumed his expertly crafted comic turns as Benoît and Alcindoro to be delivered by different singers.

Peter Robinson conducts a performance observant of the kind of small but significant details in Puccini's score most interpreters sail through without noticing, and equally possessing a keen sense of structure and tempo. Under his baton the orchestra and indeed the entire company are on terrific form.

Opera Now | George Hall

...at Bryanston, Dorset Festival Opera's first UK staging of another major but largely forgotten 19th-century work: Massenet's *Le Cid*. Premiered at the Paris Opera in 1885, this four-act epic comes from the composer's prime, and it was good to encounter it - though as a whole it's scarcely on the level of his best work, despite some genuine highlights.

...In other respects Christopher Cowell's production delivered the visual goods in a remarkable manner, partly courtesy of strikingly clever designs by Steve Howell (sets) and Rebecca Hopkins (costumes).

The festival's largely trainee chorus was a major asset here and in the event's second offering, Peter Relton's skilful *La bohème*, played in Paris roughly a century later than Puccini's librettists asked for but otherwise a confidently traditional reading of the piece.

Both works were excellently played under the respective batons of Jeremy Carnall and Peter Robinson. Casts focused on young performers with rising reputations. Leonardo Capalbo sustained the daunting title-role of the Massenet with alacrity, well partnered by Lee Bisset's impassioned Chimène. In the Puccini, Shelley Jackson's Mimi, Pauls Putnins' Colline and Ross Ramgobin's Schaunard were especially notable.

Performing in a well-equipped theatre in the grounds of a public school empty over the summer, Dorset Opera is a relaxed affair (dress casual, as in Buxton) that provides an event of major artistic quality in a part of the country where there's not much opera to be seen and at a time of year when almost all the other festivals have ended their seasons. It is clearly thriving under the leadership of Roderick Kennedy, who runs it with a light but expert hand.



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