

# Elegant, wistful Puccini, rousing, passionate Verdi

Opera North stages a charming *Rondine*, Chelsea Opera Group goes to a Masked Ball

[Extract]



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On October 22, Chelsea Opera Group's autumn offering was a concert performance of *Un ballo in maschera* (A Masked Ball) - standard rep, although it's nearly a decade since the Royal Opera presented the opera and more than two since English National Opera last did. Opera Holland Park showed in 2019 that one of Verdi's most theatrically flamboyant works can be done with more modest means. Only one OHP singer, the delightful Alison Langer as Gustav III's cheeky page Oscar, repeated her role in Chelsea Opera Group's performance, and she was in effervescent form, her peachy lyric soprano throwing off the spritely coloratura with effortless ease.

But all the Chelsea ladies dominated this performance, none more so than Nadine Benjamin as the conflicted Amelia, torn between her love for her husband and the declarations of the Swedish King. Benjamin's soprano is not huge, but it is superbly focussed and she is fearless in the exposed notes above the stave. She has learned to shape an eloquent Verdian phrase, much to the benefit of her two solos and the ecstatic Act 3 love duet. Without sets and costumes, she caught precisely the theatrical dilemma of her character, heart-rending when pleading with her husband to let her see her young son. Benjamin is already a Verdi soprano to reckon with: I look forward with impatience to her Elvira in *Ernani* - a more florid role than Amelia - at next summer's Buxton Festival.

Maria Schellenberg revealed a plush mezzo in the contralto role of the gypsy soothsayer Ulrica Arvidson, while Philip Rhodes certainly has the dark looks for the principal assassin, Anckarstroem, and sang strongly. Charne Rochford stepped in as Gustavo at short notice, and if his timbre is not the Verdi tenor of one's dreams - his current work is mainly focussed on Wagner's Siegfried - he nevertheless projected the rhythmic vitality of his music with enthusiasm and élan. Among the smaller parts, Arthur Bruce's ear-pricking Cristiano made a notable contribution, as did Thomas D Hopkinson and Jack Holten as the conspiratorial basses.

Thanks to Anthony Negus's conducting of the amateur chorus and orchestra, the performance had genuine dramatic impetus. Negus is renowned as a Wagnerian, but in his previous existence as a

member of Welsh National Opera's music staff, he must have conducted more than the occasional Verdi performance. His deft handling of Gustavo and Oscar's light-hearted music, his grand shaping of the central love duet, and his dark conception of the scenes with Ulrica and the plotters, suggested he should do more.

Correction: I am grateful to eagle-eyed operamane, Ruth Elleson, for pointing out Nadine Benjamin sang Amelia in later performances of *Un ballo in maschera* at Opera Holland Park.