

50
THE DORSET OPERA
FESTIVAL
FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY YEAR
1974–2024



We're there when it matters

Proud sponsors of the
Dorset Opera Festival

Complete network of industry leading
experts, delivering unparalleled expertise
and unbeatable client service.

- > Family Law & Divorce > Wills & LPAs > Conveyancing
- > Corporate & Commercial > Litigation





Golden Anniversary Commission

It's hard to believe that Dorset Opera is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2024. To mark this milestone, we have commissioned an opera from adored polymath and composer, Paul Carr, which will further link your favourite opera company to the history of Dorset itself.

Along with his librettist, Euan Tait, Paul has set Thomas Hardy's second novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* to a score that will delight and exhilarate audiences. Rarely - for Hardy and for opera - this work has a happy ending!

Audiences at both Poole's Lighthouse - where the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra has premièred several of Paul Carr's works - and Bryanston, where his directorial interpretations of some of the greatest operas in the repertoire have ensured that he remains a permanent fixture in our diary. Having begun his directing career with us, Paul is now in demand throughout Europe and across the operatic world.

Who can forget his *Suor Angelica*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Aïda*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Eugene Onegin*, *Don Giovanni*, *The Magic Flute*, *Le nozze di Figaro* and the British stage première of Lord Berners' *Le Carrosse du Saint-sacrement* - nine key productions over the past 11 years, that have helped put Dorset Opera firmly on the UK's operatic map.

As a feted composer, Paul is no stranger to the airwaves where his compositions are enjoyed almost daily by listeners to all classical music stations, but mainly Classic FM and BBC Radio3...

Under the Greenwood Tree will be conducted by our music director, Jeremy Carnall and, it will be workshopped as we get nearer the Festival. Paul Carr himself will present our June Bluffers' lunch, where he will give an extended introduction to his new opera.

Priority booking in 2024

Priority booking for the 2024 Festival begins in January. Each of Patrons' Circle will get the opportunity to book online from the following dates:

President's Circle	Tuesday 06 February
Chairman's Circle	Tuesday 13 February
Director's Circle	Tuesday 20 February
Conductor's Circle	Tuesday 27 February
Overture Circle	Tuesday 05 March
Friends of Dorset Opera	Tuesday 12 March
General Booking	Tuesday 26 March

The box office will be open at 10.00am for online booking; should you need to speak to a human, the telephone number is 07570 366186. Our booking brochures, along with the 2024 Events' Diary, will be winging their way to you for the opening of your booking period by which time, the performance dates will be fixed!

The performance week is 22-29 July, 2024.

AGM Date...

The Annual General Meetings of the charities - Dorset Opera and the Friends of Dorset Opera (FODO) - will take place on Monday, 29th January 2024 at 18.30 for 19.00. Once again, the venue will be Duke's in Copper Street, Dorchester DT1 1GA - by kind invitation of our chairman, Garry Batt, and his fellow directors. (Please note, only registered Members of the Company may vote, if called upon so to do.)

Do let us know if you intend to join us. If you would like an electronic copy of the annual report and accounts. Please send a request email to: info@dorsetopera.com



The Dorset Opera contingent: Mike Brook, Seymour Adams, the Groom and the Bride, Molly Adams, Caroline D'Cruz, Jane Brook.

At last, another Dorset Opera wedding...

They don't happen often, but when they do, they are always the most joyous of occasions! Our latest wedding involves a couple who met whilst they were in the chorus for *L'elisir d'amore* and *Un ballo in maschera* in 2015.

Ellen Adams is the daughter of Dorset Opera surtitled and music librarian, Seymour Adams, and Assistant Company Manager (and chorister) Molly Adams. Ellen's husband is Arthur Bruce - a baritone of distinction from north of the border who has been making a name for himself singing principal roles with Scottish Opera and is now working everywhere from the UK summer festivals to those including Chicago, Wyoming and Berlin.

Arthur's wife, meanwhile, will be sticking to her maiden name - Dr Ellen Adams! We wish them the most wonderful life together.



Mr and Mrs Arthur Bruce

50 | Join the Golden Anniversary Fund

Would you help us to meet the increased costs of mounting our Golden Anniversary festival this coming year?

Do consider joining our Golden Anniversary Fund, by making a donation of £1,000 or more, (over and above your regular giving). This Fund has been inaugurated with a generous donation from longstanding Patrons, John and Margrette Jones.

Other ways that you can help us fund our work:

- Support our Summer School - contribute towards bursaries (not covered by individual trusts).
- Support the orchestra in general or an individual instrumentalist
- Support the orchestra Academy Players' bursaries
- Support our continuing Wardrobe partnership with Arts University, Bournemouth - assist in the cost of accommodation for up to four individuals on campus at Bryanston
- Support individual, named soloists of your choice
- Become the sponsor of our Music Director and other conductors
- Become a sponsor of one of our Stage Directors
- Support our Chorus Director, Stephen Harris
- Support our Assistant Chorus Master, Ian Shaw
- Support our Set Designer, Rufus Martin
- Support our Costume Designer, Stewart Charlesworth
- Support our Lighting Designer, James Smith
- Support this year's Assistant Directors
- Support our Chorus Manager, Frannie Hewitt
- Support our Répétiteurs, Janet Haney and David Smith
- Or simply ask for your extra donation to go towards supporting the chorus or the orchestra in our Golden Anniversary year...

If you would like to discuss the possibilities available to you, please don't hesitate to contact DO HQ on 01258 840000 or email info@dorsetopera.com

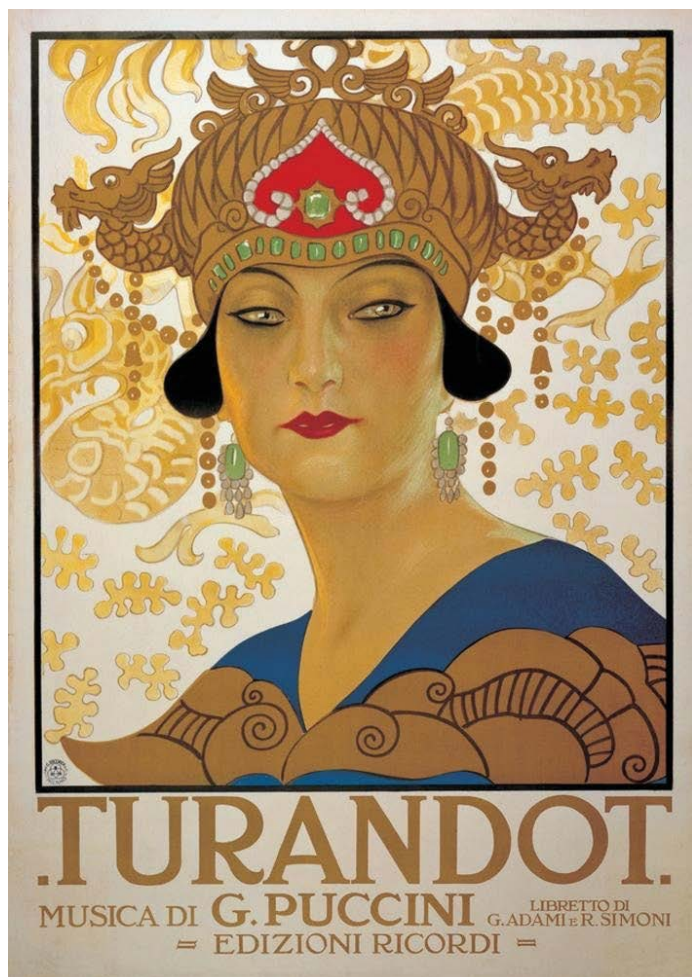
Important News for Friends of Dorset Opera



The Chairman of FODO, Rosamond Cassidy, has indicated that in order to keep pace with the RPI, the Trustees propose increasing the Friends' subscriptions for the 2024 year. They have remained at their present level since 2016!

The new subscriptions will increase to £60 for a single- and £80 for a double-membership. A letter (and new Standing Order form) will come to you by post.

Friends' priority booking remains in place...with booking opening on Tuesday 12th March, provided subscriptions are paid by the new collection date of 15th January; otherwise Friends who make late payments will be able to book only when others have done so.



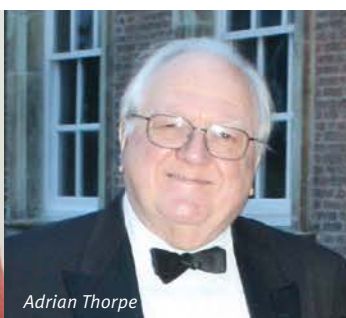
50 | Bluffers' lunches for January & February

The new Events' Diary is nearing completion. We just have one or two dates to add, then we can print it in time to be distributed with the booking information you will require, early in the New Year. You may well find Bluffers' lunches are already sold out. They are proving exceptionally popular these days.

Broadcaster Natalie Wheen is the guest speaker for our January Bluffers' on 18th January. Her subject is 'Talking dirty...!' We can't wait! Adrian Thorpe returns on 22 February to lecture on one of his favourite composers 'Puccini' - especially as 2024 is the 100th anniversary of his death. You will recall that he died before he could complete his final work, *Turandot*. It was later completed by one of his pupils, Franco Alfano, but the publisher, Ricordi and Puccini's family, goaded by musicologists, thought that whilst the ending was a rousing and triumphant repeat of the great tunes in the opera, it wasn't the way that the great maestro would have developed the finale. So, in 2001, the composer Luciano Berio - whose music is astonishingly contemporary, completed a new ending for *Turandot*. Famously, it fell to Dorset Opera to give the British stage première of *Turandot* with the Berio ending in 2007.



Natalie Wheen



Adrian Thorpe



THE DORSET OPERA FESTIVAL

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY YEAR
1974-2024

The home of Country House opera in South West England featuring renowned soloists, a full orchestra and a large chorus of emerging young artists

Marquee Bar | Picnics | Formal Dining

World Première
UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE
An opera in four seasons
Composer: Paul Carr
Librettist: Euan Tait (*After Thomas Hardy*)

Marking 100 years since the composer's death...
MADAMA BUTTERFLY
Giacomo Puccini

Joint production with Warsaw Chamber Opera
CASTOR ET POLLUX
Jean-Philippe Rameau

Coade Theatre, Bryanston, Blandford Forum
Box Office: dorsetopera.com
07570 366 186

*The social highlight
of Dorset's summer...*



The latest on the English National Opera debacle...

The party is over. It has just been announced that the English National Opera is to decant, lock, stock and barrel, to Greater Manchester.

It is not yet clear whether Manchester's huge new cultural complex - 'imaginatively' named Factory International or (The Factory) - although toiling under the overall banner of Aviva Studios, now a naming deal has been done with the well-known insurer, to the tune of £35 million, will become the base for ENO.

The complex, originally estimated to cost £111.6m when building started in 2017, has come in, six years later at more than twice that figure - £242m! That includes a grant of £106m through the Arts Treasury Lottery Fund. ACE will continue to fund the company £10m per annum into the future.

The ENO had a shortlist of five places it was considering setting up its new headquarters, with Manchester, the biggest city in Europe without a resident opera company, always the favourite. Other cities in the running were Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool and Nottingham.

The announcement of the move was made a year after Arts Council England (ACE) removed ENO from the national portfolio and said future funding would be dependent on moving outside London. ACE later agreed a partial funding reprieve and gave ENO until 2029 to relocate.

ENO said it had agreed a partnership with the Greater Manchester city-region. The company said it was excited by 'the potential opportunities to collaborate with the region's vibrant arts ecology, and the chance to inspire and create work with and for new audiences and communities within Greater Manchester'.

Andy Burnham, the mayor of Greater Manchester, said ENO was "one of the most exciting cultural institutions" in the UK and there was pride in being able to bring them to its new home.

"We've worked closely with them to set out a shared vision for a future in our city-region, where they can continue making groundbreaking opera, foster new collaborations with artists across the north and bring their award-winning learning and wellbeing programmes to communities here.

"Greater Manchester's world-renowned history of radical art,

activism, and affecting change, and the cultural renaissance taking place across our towns and cities, makes it the ideal home for the ENO. We can't wait to welcome them and see where this new partnership takes us."

Those sentiments were echoed by Bev Craig, the leader of Manchester city council, who said that the region was a "perfect fit" for ENO, and Paul Dennett, the city mayor of Salford.

"Manchester today is completely unrecognisable from what it was just a few decades ago," Craig said. "The city has transformed itself over the last 30 years into one of Europe's fastest growing cities with the largest creative economy in Europe after London.

"We're a city that puts culture and the arts centre-stage and the impact of this can be seen in the audience numbers, range of venues, skills pipeline and local talent that already exists here in abundance."

ENO said its new base would be fully established by March 2029 but it would stage work across Greater Manchester before then. It would also continue to have a "substantial" annual season, up to and beyond 2029, at the Coliseum in London, which it owns.

The move has been welcomed by arts leaders in Greater Manchester. Julia Fawcett, the chief executive of the Lowry arts centre in Salford, said her organisation was "absolutely thrilled", and John McGrath, the chief executive of Factory International, said he was delighted. "We look forward to developing a number of exciting new co-productions together, and to presenting these ambitious explorations of the future of opera across the coming years."

The news has also been welcomed by senior figures in the opera world. Alex Beard, the chief executive of the Royal Opera House, said: "The news that ENO's future is assured is an enormous relief to all of us who care for a thriving opera ecology for the country."

Laura Canning, Opera North's general director, said: "We will be working closely with ENO to ensure that together we can develop audiences for our thrilling art form and ensure that more people across the region can experience the power, resonance and vitality of opera and live performance."

Apart from the first 3 paragraphs, this article is taken from The Guardian. ©



Figaro picks up his award!

Ossian Huskinson - this summer's 'naughty' Figaro - has now collected his Critics' Circle 2022 Young Talent (Voice) award (which we reported in the Spring edition of DONews). We can now show Ossian receiving his award from legendary opera critic George Hall at a ceremony at the London Coliseum.

50 | Your name linked to The Greenwood Fund in perpetuity

You can imagine that producing a new opera is a costly exercise but what better way is there to celebrate our 50 years of Dorset Opera-making?

We would love it if you would kindly consider helping us to celebrate our birthday by becoming a Commission Sponsor of our new opera, Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

You will appreciate that an operatic work of this stature requires months of dedication and toil. Your donation (over and above your regular giving, please) would go towards supporting the extensive costs involved in composing the opera, creating the libretto, orchestrating the work and producing both the vocal- and the full orchestral scores and associated parts. Extra funds will go towards the cost of mounting the production - including the sets (designed once again by Rufus Martin) and costumes (Stewart Charlesworth) along with the orchestra and other vital outgoings.

By making an extra, substantial donation to the Greenwood Fund, you (or a nominated friend or relative) can have your/their name(s) listed on the frontispiece of the printed score, in perpetuity. Name(s) will also appear as crucial supporters in the 2024 souvenir programme.

It has been suggested that a minimum donation of £500 would be appropriate. If you are a taxpayer, Dorset Opera can also benefit by claiming the Gift Aid on your extra donation.

If you would like to discuss all the possibilities available to you, please don't hesitate to contact DO HQ on 01258 840000 or email ad@dorsetopera.com



The International Opera Awards, Finalist...

We were delighted to have been nominated, and shortlisted as a finalist in the 'Rediscovered Work' category for our production of *La Roi de Lahore* at this year's International Opera Awards which were held at the Teatr Wielki in Warsaw.

Artistic Director, Roderick Kennedy, was joined by Operations Director, Susannah Hubert, along with Mike and Jane Brook who are assistant managers in our company office when we are resident at Bryanston.

Whilst we weren't successful in our quest, we certainly made our presence felt and we did a tremendous amount of networking. The Sunday Times' former opera critic, Hugh Canning joined us for lunch: look out for him at a Bluffers' lunch or two in the 2024/25 season!

We also held a very productive meeting with the Warsaw Chamber Opera during the 24 hours we were in Poland (we are hoping to share their production of Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* but are yet to fix the dates).

We're looking forward to returning to the Opera Awards in 2025, when we hope to be nominated in the 'New Work' category.



**MOZART'S
DON GIOVANNI**

Fully staged production
with orchestra



Tuesday 9 April - 7pm

Regent Centre, Christchurch BH23 1AS

Tickets £32, £26 and £10 for

under-18s and in full-time education

www.regentcentre.co.uk, 01202 499199

Thursday 11 April - 7pm

Theatre Royal, Winchester SO23 8SB

Tickets £38, £28 and £18

www.theatreroyalwinchester.co.uk - 01962 840440

Saturday 13 April - 4pm

Coade Hall Theatre, Blandford Forum DT11 0PX

Tickets £38, £30 and £10 for

under-18s and in full-time education

www.ticketsource.co.uk/hurn-court-opera

www.hurncourtopera.org

Registered Charity: 1177609



Berliner Staatsoper in Unter den Linden

Our 2023 Trip to Berlin

In the long tradition of visiting foreign climes to experience the best of our industry in the great opera houses of the world, we took a party of Dorset Opera's most avid supporters to Berlin in April.

Like so many European capitals, the city of Berlin sports three opera houses: the great Staatsoper in Unter den Linden (which, before the Wall came down was in the East); the Deutsche Oper built in 1961 to give West Berlin the opera theatre it deserved in the divided city; and the Komische Oper - primarily an operetta and musical/variety venue which could also be used for other events and balls - again, left in the East after the construction of the Wall.

Some of our distinguished party chose to see a performance in each of the three theatres but most of us opted for a superb concert by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra at the Philharmonie conducted by the 'new Karajan', the brilliant Finn, Klaus Mäkelä - who clearly models himself on the late, controversial, maestro.

Our opera choices, therefore, were *La bohème* at the Deutsche Opera - a wonderful spectacle using everyone they could muster, with *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Staatsoper in an interesting production that worked beautifully. The only disappointment was that Freddie de Tommaso was billed to play the Italian Singer but, dear reader, it wasn't he that walked onto the stage at the apposite moment...

It was another great triumph for Hugh Watkins and (new tour operator, John Whibley - who graciously rescued *Travel for the Arts* during lockdown).



Freddie de Tommaso

**50 | Freddie de Tommaso
helps us celebrate...**

Keep your diaries free over May weekends as we hope to announce that superstar tenor Freddie de Tommaso will be joining us for an exclusive concert to celebrate our 50th Anniversary.



September 1974...

On Saturday 14 September 1974 the audience sat expectantly awaiting the familiar overture of Bedřich Smetana's opera *The Bartered Bride*. Strangely enough, 2024 marks the 200th anniversary of his birth. It's one of those works where the overture is infinitely more famous than the rest of the piece. The venue was the BSR (the Big School Room) at Sherborne School which has its own charm, but little else. The opera company presenting the work was, at that point, un-named. The event was advertised as a Sherborne School performance.

The company was a combination of school pupils, teachers and staff from the Sherborne Schools who had been tempted back to school before the end of the summer holidays to take part in a sort of residential summer school - but it wasn't called that. It was simply a group of like-minded folk who had been inspired by a much-admired young clarinet teacher by the name of Patrick Shelley (later to become Director of Music at Sherborne). Shelley persuaded the Director of Music at Sherborne Girls, one Augusta Miller, to become his chorus master and Robert Glen, who had worked at Glyndebourne as a répétiteur, became his producer - as Patrick liked to call the role which we now refer to as the director. Glen was a Classics master at the school.

The orchestra (consisting of mainly Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra members and led by the great Brendan O'Brien who sadly passed away only recently), took up half the available floorspace. They were already in their seats and the audience was getting restless. What was the hold up? Suddenly, the doors at the back of the hall opened and, in walked a small party of people who proceeded to occupy the only remaining empty chairs in the BSR. A buzz went round - people stood! A few started to applaud. One of the party was immediately recognisable. To everyone's utter astonishment, it was HRH The Prince of Wales - an acknowledged opera lover! And so it was that the future King Charles III - at that time, stationed at Yeovilton - gave the royal seal of approval to Patrick's little adventure...



Brendan O'Brien

It saddens us to report the death of former Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra leader, Brendan O'Brien, who led the orchestra from 1968-1997. At the same time, he led the Dorset Opera Orchestra each summer until 1996.

Brendan was appointed Leader of the BSO in 1968, aged 32, and first appeared in the role at Bournemouth's Winter Gardens on Sunday 9 June that year. The concert, given under the baton of guest conductor Louis Frémaux, featured: Berlioz's *Le Carnaval Romain* Overture; Saint-Saëns' *Le Rouet d'Omphale*; Mendelssohn's *Fourth Symphony* (Italian); and Franck's *Symphony in D minor*.

Born in Dublin, Brendan was a pupil of Michael Macnamara, who also taught Hugh Maguire (former leader of the London Symphony and BBC Symphony orchestras). He later studied with Jaroslav Vanecek, the Czech-born violin and viola pedagogue, before moving to London for further study. Brendan joined the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and also performed with the Royal Philharmonic and London Symphony orchestras, before becoming Leader of the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra for two years before his move to Bournemouth.

Brendan led the BSO for almost three decades, from 1968-1997; a pivotal chapter in the Orchestra's story. He was Leader under six principal conductors, including: Constantin Silvestri; Sir Charles Groves; Paavo Berglund; Uri Segal; Rudolf Barshai; Andrew Litton and Yakov Kreizberg. Artistic highlights of the period included numerous landmark recordings, the growth of regional touring in the South West, and several international tours.

Brendan gave his final performance as Leader in August 1997, at the Three Choirs Festival, under the baton of conductor Roy Massey in the Festival's opening performance. Beyond his retirement, Brendan continued to champion the Orchestra's work and was an active participant of care home performances and livestreamed concerts. We will miss him deeply.

© Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra

Dorset Opera is a Registered Charity No: 1105318
and a Company Limited by Guarantee No: 5170704

Dorset Opera Festival, Cheselbourne, Dorset DT2 7NP

For advertising opportunities in DO News
and in opera programmes contact +44 (0)1258 840000
or email info@dorsetopera.com | dorsetopera.com

Dress Rehearsal Photographs by Julian Guidera

Designed by Dorset Digital Print Ltd | 01202 620215

REVIEWS:

Dorset Opera Festival 2023

What the critics said about our production of: *Le Roi de Lahore*

The Guardian | ★★★★★☆

Andrew Clements

Rare staging of Massenet's sumptuous grand opera

The Dorset Opera Festival chorus and orchestra along with a fine cast do full justice to this spicy tale of a doomed love triangle - a forgotten gem that has not been staged in Britain since 1879.

Part residential summer school, part refreshingly unstuffy country-house opera, Dorset Opera Festival regularly includes a rarity among its annual offerings. This year that curio is *Le Roi de Lahore*, the third of Massenet's operas to be performed in Paris and the work that established his international reputation. It was widely performed across Europe within a few years of its première in 1877, before disappearing almost completely from the repertoire in the 20th century and the Dorset production, directed by Ella Marchment, was thought to be the first British staging since it was performed at Covent Garden in 1879.

Though the libretto is specific in setting the action in Lahore, as Marchment observes, the opera really inhabits a 'fictional fantasyland'. At its dramatic core is a love triangle spiced with incest; the king Alim is secretly in love with Sitâ, who has taken a vow of chastity, while she in turn is lusted after by her uncle, the king's minister Scindia, who also has designs on the crown. Alim is killed by Scindia, but allowed by the god Indra to return to life as a commoner, with the proviso that he will die again when Sitâ does. Forced to marry Scindia, Sitâ kills herself, whereupon Alim dies too.

Le Roi de Lahore is conceived very much in the mould of a French grand opera, complete with a large chorus and a ballet in the third act, set in 'Indra's paradise'. The Dorset production dispenses with the dancing, but within its more or less permanent set, designed by Rufus Martin with just enough touches of faux orientalism to conjure a sense of the exotic, it does a very fine job of suggesting an opera conceived on the most sumptuous scale.

Fantasy it may be, but the passions it deals in are real enough. Musically it's all very impressive too, with superb contributions from both the Dorset Opera Festival chorus and orchestra, conducted by Jeremy Carnall, in a score that sometimes harks back to Meyerbeer, but also includes the odd touch of Wagner. The central performances are taken by Amar Muchhala as Alim, Seljan Nasibli as Sitâ, and Michael Anthony McGee as Scindia. Muchhala and Nasibli make a very convincing couple, fearlessly coping with what is sometimes very high-lying vocal writing, while McGee does well to give what could easily be a cartoonish baritone baddy a little more depth and credibility. In every respect, it's a show that does full justice to a forgotten opera, which perhaps deserves a bit more attention than it currently receives.

The Mail on Sunday | ★★★★★☆

David Mellor

Dorset Opera is going from strength to strength, with a fine performance of Jules Massenet's first Paris hit, *Le Roi de Lahore*, lavishly presented at Paris Opera in 1877. *Le Roi* did well, and travelled Europe quickly, arriving in London in 1879. After which, nothing. This is the first professionally staged UK performance since then.

And it's a big success with some characterful singing from a good team of soloists, with the chorus, in which Dorset Opera rightly takes such pride, also on top form. Keen young singers who want a career in opera, or people who merely want to be part of it, join a course in parallel with the festival, where the art of chorus singing is imparted. On this evidence, to very good effect.

With vivid orchestral playing under the spirited baton of Jeremy Carnall, who really has the measure of this music, this was a performance full of good things. Especially true of the director, Ella Marchment, who rightly, with an unknown piece, presented it traditionally. An excellent team of designers ensured what emerged was most attractive to look at.

My sadness is that there are only three performances, and the Dorset Opera Festival is over almost as quickly as it began. How good if on the back of achievements like this, they can find some way of making it longer next year.

There are plenty of justly neglected operas, but *Le Roi de Lahore* isn't one of them. It has great melodic charm, and the orchestration is first class. It needs a cast who can cope with some demanding arias, and here it gets them; the pivotal role of Alim the murdered king who briefly returns to earth, is well taken by Amar Muchhala; his beloved, Sitâ, sung on the Decca recording by Joan Sutherland no less, is most effectively presented by Seljan Nasibli. Other support, like Julian Close's imposing Indra, and Tim Bagley's charismatic High Priest go down well. There is a curiosity here, an imported villain, from the United States, the baritone Michael Anthony McGee. His singing is pretty wayward, but his camp charm won me over before the end. And after all, he's the villain, not a heroic tenor.

There have been many delights during this year's summer operas. This is not the least of them. Local people should get in behind Dorset Opera. It's well worth their support, and a lot of achievements lie ahead, under the wise direction of artistic director Roderick Kennedy, himself a highly experienced professional singer.



2023 International
**OPERA
AWARDS**
FINALIST

Opera Scene | ★★★★★☆ Mike Smith

Theatrically voluptuous, picturesquely medieval Indian, director Ella Marchment's take on the neglected Massenet work plays well to the strengths of Dorset Opera; a knock-out, strong chorus, fine young players and singers, with expert guidance.

The opera's fantastical story is another tale of the merciful gods allowing a betrayed dead lover return to his beloved - this time think Vedic scripture rather than the usual Greek gods - with the context being a Hindu kingdom threatened by the onslaught of Islam, and a perfidious love-interest rival. So, while the rain belted down outside, the searing heat of the desert kingdom was conveyed with an ever-redder skyline from lighting designer James Smith.

The grand opera of Massenet's time demanded plenty of scene changes, so the production is necessarily very stop-start which jars for contemporary audiences more used to more through-performed works. The scene changes from designer Rufus Martin seem to involve largely moving around a few of the pavilion structures that form the set. We can be in a palace, a desert, outside the palace, in paradise, and the backdrop can be more or less fiery red, and the pavilions have shifted location a little. They are rather pretty though. As with the set, we have sumptuous variations on Punjabi costumes that revel rather than shy away from the orientalism of Massenet's work.

Dorset Opera has a fabulous chorus. With such a large chorus on the stage, I lost count at 45, there is not an awful lot you can do with them en masse apart from place them from one side of the stage to the other in a variety of choreographic moves. What they contribute is the gorgeous singing that lifts this into a very worthwhile operatic and theatrical event.

That is also, of course, thanks to the principals led by the strong and secure flowing tenor of Amar Muchhala as Alim, the King of Lahore, who is almost literally stabbed in the back by his own minister, Scindia, sung here a boo-hoo-hiss pantomime villain by baritone, Michael Anthony McGee. The long suffering priestess Sitâ, is sung with more poise than passion by the appealing soprano Seljan Nasibli, with a resonant Timothy Bagley a strong Timour. There was a particularly fine portrayal of the god Indra from bass Julian Close who dominates the entire opera by being a statue of the god on earth, then a living deity in paradise and then Commandatore-like coming to life back on earth to escort the lovers to their eternal bliss. The servant Kaled was beautifully sung by mezzo Kezia Bienek.

The Dorset Opera orchestra under conductor Jeremy Carnall was lively and spirited delving into the luxuriant beauty of Massenet's score, and worked in harmony with the principals and that impressive chorus.

It is another achievement by this company, founded in 1974, that has established itself as a Massenet revivalist trailblazer building on *Hérodiade* in 2006 and *Le Cid* in 2018. Bold repertoire, high calibre musicianship and commitment to the next generation of performers and artists - quite an ambition and quite an achievement.

The Stage | ★★★★★☆ George Hall

Wow-factor level of glamour

Dorset Opera Festival is on its mettle in this ambitious revival of Massenet's forgotten grand opéra. For much of the 19th-century, the Paris Opera was the world's leading lyric theatre. The genre for which it was most renowned was simply called 'grand opera' - works conceived on the most extravagant scale, usually five acts in length, with tons of spectacle and - another essential requirement - a substantial ballet.

Many of the behemoths produced at this period later disappeared from the world repertoire as too expensive to mount: so it was particularly ambitious of Dorset Opera Festival to revive on stage - apparently for the first time in the UK since 1879 - Massenet's third opera, and his first international success, premièred in Paris two years earlier. Dorset has previously won success with Massenet's other 'grand operas' - *Hérodiade* in 2006, *Le Cid* in 2018 - and this remarkable revival of a forgotten epic consolidates the company's reputation.

Fulfilling all of the criteria of 'grand opera', *Le Roi de Lahore* is certainly both long and lavish. In Dorset's staging, passionately conducted by Jeremy Carnall, most of the ballet disappears, though one or two skilfully danced sections remain.

To attain a wow-factor level of glamour on a budget minute by comparison with the Paris Opera in its heyday is an outstanding achievement: clever recycling of the basic set together with subtle lighting and director Ella Marchment's resourceful marshalling of her troops on stage - especially the company's confident chorus - all help to realise this success. Impressive, too, is the clarity of Marchment's storytelling, allowing her to make something involving out of the fantasy tale of Alim, an 11th century King of Lahore murdered by his jealous minister, Scindia, who desires Sitâ, the king's beloved.

A strand of mysticism is revealed in the third act when the murdered Alim, arrived in heaven, pleads to be allowed to return to earth to meet Sitâ once more. Much of this section is sublime - and thereafter Massenet's heady late-Romantic score just gets better and better! Together with imaginative design and production, committed orchestral playing and the strong principal performances form the other crucial elements.

Throughout a long and arduous evening Amar Muchhala holds faith with the role of Alim, his resilient tenor meeting every challenge, while the characteristically Gallic lyricism of Sitâ and Seljan Nasibli's soprano form a perfect match. At times vocally underpowered as the irredeemably wicked Scindia, Michael Anthony McGee nevertheless relishes the sheer swagger of his character's villainy.

Julian Close brings a superior bass to bear on Indra - also delivering perfect physical stillness when representing the god's statue. Tim Bagley gives a strikingly dramatic account of high priest Timour, while the sheer beauty of Kezia Bienek's mezzo is shown to advantage in her scene with Sitâ.



2023 International
**OPERA
AWARDS**
FINALIST

Roderick Kennedy and Dorset Opera's achievements on the back of an annual summer school are impressive, mixing familiar repertoire with many rarities and premières, among them three little-known Massenet operas (including the UK's first staging of the history epic *Le Cid* in 2018). *Le Roi de Lahore* has probably not been staged in the British Isles since 1879 at the Royal Opera House-not even Wexford has taken it on-although Chelsea Opera Group gave a concert performance in 2015.

It was Massenet's first grand opera blockbuster, a (vaguely) historical, exotic and religious show specifically made for Paris's mighty Palais Garnier, its première there making Massenet's name in 1877, about the time that the tide was beginning to turn on the seemingly insatiable French taste for Cecil B de Mille-style spectacles. The plot tells of Sitâ, a temple virgin, caught between her love for Alim, the king of Lahore, and the lustful intentions of Scindia, her uncle and the king's minister. The latter brings about the king's murder, but once he's in Paradise the god Indra allows him to return to life and love with Sitâ (shades of *Carousel*) with the proviso that when she dies so does he (again). She prefers death to dishonour at the hands of her uncle, and there is a redemptive double apotheosis (shades of *Der fliegende Holländer*) while Scindia lives to regret the error of his ways.

Bryanston's Coade Theatre obviously does not have anything like the Garnier's scope, but Ella Marchment's staging had bags of attitude, with blissfully over-the-top costumes (Stewart J. Charlesworth) and a fixed-but-flexible set of a fantastical desert palace (designed by Rufus Martin), all of it evoking a mysterious, savage orientalism that stayed, just, this side of parody. The overture's blood and thunder set the tone of the performance, and while it was a pity not to have Act 3's ballet in Paradise, Massenet's music certainly rises to a variety of dramatic occasions.

There's a hint of the sort of thematic germ that was to animate *Werther* so effectively 15 years later, but here characterization is more on the generic side.

The cast went for it with a will, with the Azerbaijani soprano Seljan Nasibli a fearless focus as Sitâ, coping marvellously with the high drama and even higher vocal line - Massenet liberally seeds the role with Richter-scale top-note challenges, which would have been wearing had they been effortful. Her voice also has a pliant lyricism and sense of style that gave the music's gender moments an alluring sensuality. The Mumbai-born tenor, Amar Muchhala, responded in kind as King Alim, with sweet intensity and an impressively soft and controlled high register that served his love duet well, emerging heroically bloodied but unbowed by all the disasters the opera throws at him.

With a killer gaze and extravagant Babylonian beard, the American bass-baritone Michael Anthony McGee was not remotely fazed by Scindia's melodramatic potential, keeping the role's haughty disdain and cruelty on a rolling boil, singing with style and sumptuous tone. He was warmly boo-hissed at his curtain-call. The bass Tim Bagley's Timour, the high priest at the temple of Indra, confidently led the first act, during which Julian Close remained totally motionless as a statue of Indra, breaking into resonant voice to take charge in Paradise. In the mezzo trouser role of the king's servant Kaled, Kezia Bienek was light and elegant in her one aria. All the cast sang the accompanied recitative as if French was their first language, and the 60-strong chorus was a force to be reckoned with and emoted like mad. The conductor Jeremy Carnall and his orchestra had idiom, pace and ensemble at their command, opening the door onto Paris' waning fixation on the operatic hyperbole of 150 years ago.

Performance...

...through understanding, skill and experience

INVESTMENT | PENSIONS | INHERITANCE PLANNING | TRUSTS | EQUITY RELEASE

Expert Financial Management:

Bottriell Adams

Chartered Financial Planners

01202 848080

mail@bottrielladams.co.uk

www.bottrielladams.co.uk

Gary Bottriell

Bottriell Adams LLP, Gaunts Business Centre, Gaunts, Wimborne BH21 4JT

Regulated and Authorised by the Financial Conduct Authority



≡ 2023 International ≡
**OPERA
AWARDS**
— FINALIST —

Opera Today | ★★★★★ Robert Hugill

Massenet's *Le roi de Lahore* at Dorset Opera

Despite the revival of interest in Massenet's operas, *Le roi de Lahore* does not seem to have been staged in the UK since 1879. It is that still relatively unfashionable thing, a French grand opera, in five acts with a colourful historical setting, doomed lovers and a ballet. It requires substantial forces to bring off. But, having successfully staged Massenet's *Hérodiade* in 2006 and *Le Cid* in 2018, Dorset Opera has risen to the challenge magnificently. I caught Dorset Opera's production of *Le roi de Lahore* on Thursday 27 July 2023 in the Coade Hall of Bryanston School. Directed by Ella Marchment and conducted by Jeremy Carnall, with Amar Muchhala as Alim, Kezia Bienek as Kaled, Michael Anthony McGee as Scindia, Seljan Nasibli as Sitâ, Tim Bagley as Timour and Julian Close as Indra. Set designs were by Rufus Martin with costumes by Stewart J Charlesworth and lighting by James Smith.

The story concerns a love triangle between Alim (Amar Muchhala), King of Lahore, Scindia (Michael Anthony McGee), the King's minister, and Sitâ (Seljan Nasibli), who has taken vows of chastity in the temple of Indra. An interesting wrinkle in the plot is that Alim dies at the end of Act Two, but in Paradise, he successfully pleads with Indra (Julian Close) to be allowed to return. Things do not end well, and the two lovers are united in Paradise.

On one level, the plot is pure hokum, set in a fantasy India that says more about French Orientalisme than reality. But on another level, it is about the idea of how far you would go for a beloved. The great virtue of Ella Marchment's production was that she took the story entirely seriously, not attempts at irony or sending it up, allowing the music space to tell the emotional story.

The setting was moved from its problematic Indian setting to a fantasy world, still vaguely Eastern but more storybook with highly eclectic designs. This was helped enormously by Rufus Martin's lovely sets, a group of reusable units that looked good, were shining in James Smith's lighting and provided functionality and flexibility. These were complemented by Stewart J Charlesworth's amazing costumes, the principals seem to have got lost in the dressing-up box, with make-up to match, whilst the chorus costumes had a number of Eastern and Middle-Eastern themes going on. The result created a sort of visual elan that this style of opera really needs and made up for any lack of stage room.

Of course, all this would be as nought without a good performance, and Ella Marchment drew strong involved performances from her principals and marshalled the chorus brilliantly. It should perhaps be explained that the chorus members come together for a residential course before rehearsals begin and mix those with experience with those with none. There were also about 60 of them, all fully engaged and imaginatively used.

Some of the opera's best-known music is in the ballet, including a famous saxophone solo. This ballet was cut, but four of the chorus, Charlotte Davies, Xiaotong Duan, Nikki Wilson and Daisy Lapworth, provided dance in two of the chorus numbers.

Massenet's musical style makes a real nod to the French grand opera tradition, though by 1877 the style was in the past and things were changing; by the end of the century Meyerbeer's grand operas would be replaced by Wagner in popularity stakes, the Paris Opera would be performing Verdi's *Otello* in the original language, and Massenet would be writing smaller scale lyric

works. In *Le roi de Lahore* there are stand-alone numbers, but Massenet weaves them into a constant lyric flow that hints at the style of his later works.

As Sitâ, Seljan Nasibli combined feistiness with great charm and fine Gallic vocal style. Whilst the opera was recorded by Joan Sutherland, Nasibli's Sitâ was closer to French stylists such as Mady Mesplé and Nasibli gave us much to enjoy throughout the evening. That we had so much lovely lyric and dramatic music attached to a heroine who was anything but passive was a breath of fresh air.

As a hero, Alim was a bit of a failure, his city is being attacked, he is defeated in battle and dies. But he plods on, true to his love for Sitâ and wins in the end. Amar Muchhala brought a robust heroism to the role, imbuing the music with character and strength. His death scene in Act Two was a lovely, extended love duet with Nasibli's Sitâ, whilst in Act Four when resurrected, he finally found the gumption to stand up to McGee's Scindia in a thrilling scene. Whilst the ending saw the two lovers evaporate in romantic bliss.

Scindia is something of a pantomime villain and Michael Anthony McGee simply went for it. Wonderfully slimy with plenty of rolling of eyes in Act One as he tried to persuade Sitâ (his niece) to marry him. He recurred throughout as the villain, yet in Act Four he had a lovely solo about his love for Sitâ, a moment that allowed McGee to add some depth to the character.

Kezia Bienek was Kaled, the King's servant. A small role, Kaled disappears after Act Two, but Bienek and Nasibli had a lovely duet in Act Two with the two voices undulating together delectably, then Bienek had a solo that was stylishly engagingly sung and made you regret the role was not larger.

The high priest, Timour, was sung with admirable strength and style by Tim Bagley, but the character was somewhat conflicted, seeming to support both Scindia and Alim and felt under-written. But Bagley sang with such confidence that this ceased to matter.

In a remarkable coup de theatre, Julian Close remained immobile for the whole of Act One, as a statue of Indra, thus eliciting a gasp from the audience when the statue came alive in Act Three. Close brought dignity and a finely dark bass voice to the role. In the small role of a village elder, chorus member Jay Broadhurst (a student at the Royal Northern College of Music) impressed enormously.

The orchestra of the Paris Opera was huge, resources lavish and rehearsal time considerable. At Dorset, conductor Jeremy Carnall had some four dozen players, and from the first dramatic notes of the overture, you knew you were in good hands. This was a strong, rich sound with not inconsiderable style, and whilst Carnall was alive to the score's beauties, he kept the dramatic flow up admirably.

Massenet's *Le roi de Lahore* is not a masterpiece of the first water, but this performance showed that if performed with style, imagination and commitment it more than holds its own. And what Ella Marchment, designers Rufus Martin and Stewart J Charlesworth, and the whole team added to this was a little bit of theatrical magic that really did transport us.



2023 International
**OPERA
AWARDS**
FINALIST

REVIEWS:

Dorset Opera Festival 2023

What the critics said about our production of:

Le Nozze di Figaro

The Stage | ★★★★★☆
George Hall

Paul Carr's production of Mozart's 1786 opera is set in the late 1950s in Count Almaviva's villa on the southern coast of Spain; a more hidebound period than ours, one might think. But given the suggestive shenanigans during the overture - when umpteen people creep out from underneath the constantly moving duvet on top of the bed that the Count has helpfully provided for Figaro and Susanna to sleep in - polyamorous activity is well underway even before the Count and Countess arrive for their summer break.

In fact, one character, at least, has transferred sexual allegiance. Since the opera's première, the page Cherubino has invariably been played by a female mezzo (or maybe a soprano), but has always been presented as a teenage boy experiencing his first sexual feelings for the opposite sex. In lightweight mezzo Amber Reeves' impersonation, Cherubino (the surtitles call her Cherubine) is clearly a young woman. What doesn't transfer to the new identity is the burgeoning maleness of a character who is perhaps destined to become as much of a womaniser as the Count: in the play Beaumarchais wrote as a sequel to *The Marriage of Figaro*, *The Guilty Mother*, the Countess even has Cherubino's child.

Leaving that misstep aside, Carr and his well-selected cast enter fully into the complex erotic dance that goes on within the opera, one that sees people at different levels (in the original 18th-century version) in a rigid class structure, and at various stages in their lives, make fools of themselves prompted by their sexual desires and jealousies.

Much of the narrative is skilfully charted and Carr's production, designed by Rufus Martin, Binny Mathews and Stewart J Charlesworth, is handsome to look at. It sounds good, too, with some top-quality vocal casting. Jamie Groote's Countess provides warmth and poise, equalled in fellow-soprano Ellie Laugharne's empathetic realisation of her servant and friend Susanna. Baritone Thomas Humphreys' dynamic Count, constantly shifting between barely controlled lust and self-righteous anger, meets his vocal match in bass-baritone Ossian Huskinson's likable Figaro. Indeed, all four of these artists makes a marked success of their assignments.

More experienced performers also score highly: Eddie Wade's distinctly fallible Dr Bartolo (a shame that his 'vengeance' aria is cut), Naomi Harvey's all-too-human Marcellina (a pity that the antagonistic duet with Susanna also goes), as well as Aled Hall's bang-on-the-button double act as Don Basilio and Don Curzio. Timothy Bagley makes a surprising amount out of Antonio, with Caroline Kennedy registering positively as a Barbarina worldly-wise beyond her years.

Opera Magazine
Peter Reed

Le nozze di Figaro was another first for Dorset Opera, here directed by Paul Carr and set in the Almaviva ummer villa by the sea in 1950's Spain. The women wore their Dior well (costumes again by Charlesworth), and Martin's set of a room with lovely views (painted by Binny Mathews) breathed casual indolence, privilege and glamour-casual everything really if the hyperactive bed-hopping during the overture was anything to go by. And if Carr was making a point with a gender-fluid Cherubino (here called Cherubine) and a brief bit of bashful LGBT connection between Antonio and Bartolo in the closing ensemble, it barely registered.

The 1950s saw social certainties beginning to unravel but Carr didn't make much of Figaro's resentment of the Count, set against Susanna's enjoyable and pragmatic grasp of the pecking order. Other directorial tweaks included Antonio popping up in unlikely places and Bartolo as a Kenneth Williams tribute act. Among the cuts were Figaro and Susanna's 'Din, din, don, don' duet, Bartolo's Vendetta Aria, and the lethal Susanna-Marcellina duettino, while Marcellina's hands-on appraisal of Figaro as her husband-to-be during the overture would probably land her in court today. The surtitles referred to the Signor and Signorina (Count and Countess) throughout, there was at least one mention of the Generalissimo (Franco, presumably), and there were odd anachronisms such as 'I'm toast' and gobsmacked'.

All of which Mozart and Beaumarchais took in their stride, as did the strong, characterful cast. Ossian Huskinson's attractive agile bass and affable presence were a pleasure as Figaro. Thomas Humphreys' finely-sung alpha-male Count mixed Marlon Brando-like virility with baffled authority. He secretly witnessed the Countess's '*Porgi, amor*', beautifully sung by Jamie Groote a wife both puzzled and bereft. Groote's voice has an appealing softness that can quickly harden, and her exchanges with Cherubino (Amber Reeves, on great form in the role's showstoppers) had quite an erotic charge. Ellie Laugharne was a delight as Susanna, nonchalantly fielding all the plot intricacies and singing with mischievous elegance. Naomi Harvey kept her boozy Marcellina just about upright, an irresistible caricature. Eddie Wade's Don Bartolo became more and more outrageous, in good company with Tim Bagley's seamy Antonio. Caroline Kennedy singing Barbarina's Pin Aria was worth the wait, and there were telling cameos from Aled Hall as Dons Basilio and Curzio. The conductor José Miguel Esandi kept the orchestra and cast on a short leash for the ensembles, the overture was brisk and very brilliant, and the great sightlines between pit and stage were much to the singers' advantage. I wonder what Dorset Opera has up its sleeve for its 50th birthday next year.



Duke's
200
1823-2023

Anniversary

AUCTIONS | VALUATIONS | COLLECTION ADVICE



01305 265080
www.dukes-auctions.com
enquiries@dukes-auctions.com

[VIEW](#) | [BID](#) | [BUY ONLINE](#)

Duke's
Brewery Square
Dorchester, DT1 1GA