

**Marina Bartoli**

a richly Slavic voice, will have an equally successful career.

**ROBERT THICKNESSE**

Let's start with a director for a change. **Stephen Barlow** restaged Jonathan Kent's frightfully dull Covent Garden *Tosca* before producing his own effort for Holland Park, and it was one of the highlights of the year: not just the very successful updating – to a dusty 'Roman' (more like Sicilian) town square in 1968, with Scarpia as a Mafioso politician – but the sober and totally convincing direction of a great cast too. As usual it was RCM singers who impressed me most: **Ruby Hughes**, a poised singer with a lovely soulful tone and great legato who I've seen in a couple of Handels and a Purcell, and **Madeleine Pierard**, formerly a mezzo and now a soprano who has a great future (among others) in castrato roles: she's certainly

**Claudio Sgura**

a more convincing man than most countertenors. Coloratura is her thing, and she has a way with da capos that certainly sounds like spontaneous musicianship. Both have great stage presence too.

**CARLO VITALI**

At Vicenza's Olimpico, for Vivaldi's *Ottone in villa*, **Florin Cezar Ouatu** from Romania warbled Cecilia Bartoli's signature aria 'Gelosia, tu già rendi' with his mellow, yet powerful, soprano, without any squeaking or forced overtones. Disregarding his macho looks and bristly black beard, one could imagine a genuine castrato in action. A further surprise was green-eyed **Marina Bartoli** (no relation) in the trousers role of Ostilio. With her sterling colour expanding effortlessly in clarion high tones, perfect pitch, energetic coloratura, straightforward acting, this 'lesser' Bartoli may worry *La Cecilia*

**Kassandra Dimopoulou**

some time soon. **Claudio Sgura** as Scarpia at Macerata's Sferisterio: still in his early thirties, the Apulia-born baritone couples firm tone, crisp utterance and dark villainous elegance. Is he the next Raimondi?

**Kassandra Dimopoulou** (Cleopatra) and Georgia-born **Ketevan Kemoklidze** (Giulio Cesare): two fiendish show-girls for an unabridged, yet very entertaining role debut in Handel's *Oriental extravaganza* at Thessaloniki's Megaro Mousikis.

**HEIDI WALESON**

I keep running across soprano **Heidi Stober** as a jewel shining from the mud. This season, she was a bright-voiced Carolina in a tedious *Matrimonio segreto* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and a passionate Tigrane, effortlessly triumphing over a horrible costume, in *Radamisto* at the Santa Fe Opera. The limpid, focused quality of her soprano is

**Ketevan Kemoklidze****Heidi Stober**

immediately arresting; so is her beauty. A Wisconsin native, Stober got lots of performing experience with the Houston Grand Opera Studio, and this season will be heard at the Deutsche Oper Berlin as Pamina, the Shepherd in *Tannhäuser* and Oscar in *Ballo*. **Ellie Dehn** made her Metropolitan Opera mainstage debut in the challenging, stratospheric role

**Heritage Opera**

Over the past two years, Heritage Opera has staged nine operas in castles and stately homes across the north of England to sell-out audiences and critical acclaim, as well as several gala concerts and an educational workshop.

Heritage Opera was founded by the freelance conductor **Chris Gill** in 2006, when the company performed *Così fan tutte* and *Onegin*, both in new English translations by Gill himself. Heritage Opera's following two productions were sung in Italian with English surtitles: a *Bohème* led by 'versatile conducting which nursed out beautifully graded, subtle detail' and a *Figaro* 'riddled with musical finesse and fine comic sense' (both these, and subsequent quotes are taken from *Opera Now* reviews). The company has also produced *The Turn of the Screw*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Die Zauberflöte* and a *Dido and Aeneas/Beggar's Opera* double bill, which featured **John Rawnsley** as Mr Peachum.

Heritage Opera also fosters some outstanding young artists. One of its 'most talented regulars' is the Polish-English soprano **Serenna Wagner** (pictured), who trained at the RNCM and ENO Opera Works. A singer 'possessed of vocal power and pathos', her roles for Heritage Opera have included Fiordiligi, Tatyana and an 'utterly enchanting' Mimì. For Heritage Opera's 2009 season, Serenna Wagner will appear as the title roles in *Tosca* and the UK première of Poland's national opera, Moniuszko's *Halka*.

2011 sees the specially commissioned world première of **Jonathan Dove's Mansfield Park**, which plays to Heritage Opera's strengths: fully-staged opera at close quarters inside beautiful historic venues, performed by outstanding singers in period costume. For more information visit [www.heritageopera.co.uk](http://www.heritageopera.co.uk)

**W11 Opera**

Last winter, *Opera Now's* reviewer admitted to being 'moved to real tears' by a heart-string-pulling moment in Julian Grant's and Christina Jones' *Shadowtracks* – an hour-long music theatre piece commissioned by W11 Opera. For nearly 40 years this unique company has been commissioning works for young people and staging them with a large cast of local schoolchildren every December.

For its 2008 season, composer **Mark Bowden** and librettist **Helen Cooper** have written *The Song of Rhiannon*, adapted from the Welsh legend cycle, *The Mabinogion*.

Set among the mist-swathed mountains of Wales, the powerful epic of Rhiannon, horse-riding goddess of eternal youth, will be W11 Opera's 29th commissioned work when it opens at the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith.

The company is built around teamwork between parent volunteers and an all-professional music and production team headed by music director Philip Colman. The composer's brief is simple: tailor the work to the strengths of young voices, especially ensembles. Therefore, *The Song of Rhiannon* includes such intriguing characters as gargoyles, Classical Statues and a small field of wheat.

A W11 Opera production makes a perfect introduction to music for the children in your life. However, if you too are easily moved to tears by the sight of dozens of enthusiastic, superbly rehearsed youngsters singing and acting their socks off, especially around Christmas, then don't forget your hankie. For more information or to book tickets, visit [www.riversidestudios.co.uk](http://www.riversidestudios.co.uk) or contact the box office on 020 8237 1111.

