



■ Belfast's 'Magic Flute', with (l. to r.) Aoife Miskelly (Pamina), John Graham-Hall (Monostatos) and Ben McAteer (Papageno)

pink stockings, suspenders and plunging cleavage to Papageno's streaky, bird-fouled boilersuit—was pure catharsis, the most simply joyful moment in the entire evening.

There was beauty too in the way that Mears finessed the reconciliation of Tamino and Pamina, the disarming tenderness of whose affection for each other was, for once, fully convincing on a human level. Again Mears benefited from the wonderfully natural performances of Anthony Gregory and Aoife Miskelly, who radiated happiness and well-being when Sarastro married them at the opera's conclusion. Miskelly delivered an artlessly forlorn, touching 'Ach, ich fühl's' ('Now I know that love can vanish', in Jeremy Sams's

translation), and Gregory's plangent lyricism was a constant throughout the evening.

There was strong support from a particularly feisty team of Three Ladies—Sinéad O'Kelly, Sarah Richmond and Laura Murphy. Stephen Richardson's Sarastro emerged with convincing thoughtfulness and dignity, Mears electing to debunk certain obsessive-compulsive aspects of the brotherhood's *modus operandi* gently, almost affectionately, not simply to lambast its control-freakery and misogyny. Mears turned Monostatos's problem from race into simple ugliness, his 'blackness' represented by the donning of a sinister gimp-mask as he prepared to molest Pamina. It didn't detract from John Graham-Hall's adept, panto-villain assumption.

Nicholas Chalmers conducted a lucidly-textured account of the music, whose often relaxed tempos allowed the singers to enunciate with involving clarity. And that was, in fact, the defining hallmark of this witty, unpretentious, heart-warming production: its unusual lucidity of purpose, a narrative fluidity belying the work's notorious plot difficulties. It made for a heartening and—yes—magical evening.

TERRY BLAIN

Lucia di Lammermoor

Winslow Hall Opera, September 11

No sooner had Cameron and Miliband made their frantic unionist visit to Scotland than the Borders came to Buckinghamshire with *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Technically, this was not quite country house opera, since Winslow Hall, a superb red-brick edifice designed by Christopher Wren, looms over the southern entrance to the small market town of Winslow; that being said, despite its proximity to both Aylesbury and Milton Keynes, it feels worlds away from the commuter belt. The house was bought in 2010 by

the restaurateur Christopher Gilmour, who in 2012 hosted Stowe Opera's *Figaro*, before mounting *Carmen* in 2013. The auditorium, backing directly onto the house, is a sturdy rectangular tent with steeply-banked seating for just under 300 people.

As yet at least, the company provides a less manicured—and more genial—experience than Glyndebourne or Garsington. The ticket desk suggests a village fete, you need to pop across to the pub for a cup of tea, and the garden, with its canvas gazebos (picnic hampers can be ordered), is more shabby chic than Sissinghurst. Early September brought a run of six performances, with tickets at £62 or £75, including a charity donation to Medical Detection Dogs.

A 90-minute dinner break came after the wedding scene, but this *Lucia*, directed by David Penn and conducted by Oliver Gilmour (brother of Christopher and formerly principal conductor of the Bulgarian State Opera), sustained powerful momentum—very much a tight tragedy rather than a highlights opera. In Deirdre Clancy and Sam Steer's decor it took place before folding screens that carried a monochrome photographic panorama of hills and reversed to plain cerise, while the costumes, with Enrico and the gentlemen of the chorus in kilts, were suggestive of the Edwardian era.

Simply clad in cream, Elena Xanthoudakis sympathetically conveyed Lucia's highly-strung naivety. At her wedding she managed to hold herself icily together until the contract was signed; the subsequent Mad Scene, at such close quarters, was genuinely

harrowing. Xanthoudakis's clear lyric sound has striking immediacy, and her fluent coloratura grew naturally out of its musical and emotional context, with even the cadential top notes transformed into (truncated) exclamations of shock. Her Edgardo, the Argentinian tenor Pablo Bensch, an alumnus of the Royal Opera's Jette Parker programme, sang with consistent style and beauty and unforced pathos—he will no doubt make a fine Werther in due course. His gentle, almost studious stage persona contrasted with the splendidly saturnine Enrico of Vasile Chisiu, powering through his lines with mellow, vibrant tone, but sidelined after the interval by the omission of the Wolf's Crag scene. Chris Foster's acute use of the text brought Raimondo alive, Laura Kelly made a suitably concerned Alisa, and both Gianluca Paganelli (Arturo) and Ed Bonner (Normanno) seized their moments to the full. Initially, there were a couple of rough edges in the orchestra, but the mainly youthful chorus made a strong and focused impact from its first notes.

YEHUDA SHAPIRO

■ Elena Xanthoudakis as Lucia at Winslow Hall Opera, with Chris Foster as Raimondo

