



**Rhian Morgan talks to the London-based youth opera organisation about their back catalogue of commissions and discusses how you can put on these and other contemporary operas in your school**

With an impressive 29 specially commissioned operas under its belt, W11 Opera plays a leading role in bringing new music to young people. As an independent opera company producing operas performed by students aged between nine and 18, it takes its name from the Notting Hill and Holland Park areas of west London, where there is a ready made cast of enthusiastic children just waiting to take to the stage. And its back catalogue is available for any school or youth music group to take up themselves.

Since its debut performance of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* in 1971, the company has produced a string of well-received productions, almost all of which are new works created by internationally recognised composers, George Fenton and Richard Harvey among them. Sarah Johnson, one of the trustees of this unique, privately funded music company, recalls how 'local music-loving parents clubbed together in 1971 to stage a scratch production of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* in a local church. At the end, the producer found her sleeve tugged by a tiny child with the burning question, "What are we doing next year?" And so an extraordinary story began.'

#### CONTEMPORARY REPERTOIRE

Now, with rehearsals for *The Whale Savers* (by the composer Martin Ward and librettist Phil

**Rhian Morgan** worked as a TV and radio journalist and now specialises in writing about music education. She also works as a media policy adviser to the education and heritage sectors.

Porter) scheduled for the autumn, Johnson believes the company's 30th commission 'seems like a perfect example of how to solve all the problems of writing for young singers'. And engaging young singers, dancers and actors can be a skilled balancing act, as any school music department which has mounted productions will tell you.

The instinct can be to go for the familiar options and wheel out the old favourites – well-known songs that are easy to imitate, recognisable characters that cause squabbles amongst competitive teenagers – but W11 Opera's extensive back catalogue does now offer a more challenging and potentially more satisfying alternative.

Phil Porter believes their contemporary content – this year's opera concerns a group of bored teenagers who save the day by taking on the establishment – helps present a coherent musical and intellectual experience, adding that: 'We have written *The Whale Savers* not only to stretch the most able performers but also to ensure an enjoyable performance for the youngest, new performers.'

With an impressive list of patrons, including Lady Valerie Solti, Nicholas Kraemer and Sebastian Faulks, one imagines the company can call on a high-class bank of volunteers, but W11 is keen to stress that the operas are performable without immense resources.

Some of the works go on to be revived by schools and other opera companies.

Composer Bernard Hughes' commission *Chincha-Chancha Cooroo* was first performed in 2006, was produced for a second time earlier this year, by North Cambridge Family Opera in Massachusetts, and there are plans for a further revival in Calcutta in 2010 and at St Paul's Girls' School at Christmas 2010. 'I really think teachers should be looking at some of the works available from W11 when they are deciding on a school production,' he says. 'It's very easy to go down the familiar musical road but there's actually a lot more satisfaction, more of a reward in this sort of work, where the children are saying "we'll never manage it" and then they do. These operas were all commissioned and written for children, so there's none of the problem of casting children in adult roles. And although it is demanding having the cast sing throughout, which is one of the aims of W11, in other ways they are actually easier to take on.'

Hughes' work is based on an Indian story, and while containing enough drama and comedy to satisfy the younger end of the cast, there are also, according to Hughes himself, 'nuances of morality and universally recognisable characters' to appeal to and challenge all ages. Costumes were a much praised highlight of this production, as was the weaving of Indian rhythms and instruments into the score. In an attempt to make the work more accessible to schools, Hughes has made two medleys of songs from the show, which can be performed as choir items, or with some kind of semi-staging. 'A full-blown production of *Chincha-Chancha Cooroo* is a big undertaking – but learning the songs alone is easily more achievable,' he believes.

*ANTiphony*, which was commissioned by W11 Opera in 1994 and revived in 2005, is another opera that has also been performed elsewhere. Composer Graham Preskett and librettist John Kane worked with the unlikely material of two rival ant colonies, one peaceful but dull, the other military but cowardly. Can a pair of musical grasshoppers change their lives? Is the Fly on the Wall a double agent? And just how obnoxious can the Warrior Ant Queen get? 'Delightfully tuneful and bouncy score, brilliant production values and some very pretty, well-tuned singing by a team of infectiously enthusiastic performers,' said the *Telegraph's* opera critic, while some of the children involved – and they are

**OTHER HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE:**

- *The Girl And The Unicorn* (1978) by Stephen Oliver – colourful scoring, including parts for recorders
- *Double Trouble* (1990) by Louise Lasdun – a contemporary interpretation of the Chinese folk tale of the pot that makes a copy of everything put inside it
- *All In The Mind* (2004) is Edward Lambert's sci-fi production, with a compact orchestra of just clarinet, piano, two keyboards and percussion
- *The Song of Rhiannon* (2008), composed by Mark Bowden, from the medieval Welsh *Mabinogion*.

really the people one should listen to here – deemed it 'absolutely super ... because basically it's an essential part of life that at one time or another you just have to have fun!'

The conductor Nicholas Kraemer remembers conducting the 1985 commission, *Bel And The Dragon*, the apocryphal story of Daniel, composed by John Gardner. 'I remember a journey to London Zoo at 7am to record 90 seconds of lion-roar. When it came to that moment in the opera, our lions sounded far more terrifying than they looked. By this time we had far more children in the group than we could properly cope with – but as always a solution was found. Our dragon had approximately 40 tiny pattering feet.'

And this spirit of coping with whatever comes along continues; this year's score is long complete but composer Martin Ward is more than happy to make changes to accommodate whatever forces the auditions bring along. 'I've started with around eight instruments, 80 children, who will fit into groups, and 28



W11 2008: *The Song of Rhiannon*

solo parts, which range from a few words to the full thing. But the aim is to fit in as many mini-solos as the cast will support to give everyone a chance.'

Like any composer, Ward is keen for his piece to have legs. He believes both the music, designed to be sung by children, and the subject, the environment and the media, have huge appeal to pupils and could 'easily be adapted for half the current forces' for a smaller school production. 'There's really something very special about performing a new work,' he says. 'It's not just handing out the CD and singing along as it can be with musicals, but the opportunity to do something no-one else has done.'

**HOW YOU CAN BENEFIT**

W11's website – [www.w11opera.org](http://www.w11opera.org) – provides invaluable tools for schools or groups who are thinking of performing one of the works from its back catalogue. There are comprehensive synopses, pictures, press and cast comments and, in some cases, excerpts and contacts and links to the composers' own websites.

Sarah Johnson, a parent as well as a trustee, feels strongly that schools should consider restaging one of the W11 commissions rather than 'yet another performance of *Grease*'. 'These works were, after all, written with the skills and demands of children in mind. Children generally don't have big voices so our composers and librettists move the action on by writing for them in groups, for example.' So much more satisfactory for everyone than casting around for a teenager who can portray a grandfather, she believes.

The content is also important. 'Nine-year-olds generally don't want to sing avant-garde music,' says Johnson, 'and our least appropriate submission was an operatic *Nutcracker*, featuring an under-age pregnant girl,' she says. 'Our commissioning group – all some-time parents with children involved – are very aware of what interests children and what doesn't, and the back catalogue reflects the care which has been taken in commissioning.'

Reviving a production is not difficult, Johnson believes, but she admits that the

commissioning process is daunting, especially for new groups. W11 has an enviable wealth of expertise at its disposal, as well as a strong reputation that encourages both well-known and up-and-coming composers and librettists to approach W11 and take on commissions. The composer and librettist currently receive a £7,000 package to divide between them. Some artists believe they cannot work for this amount, but such is the reputation of W11 that others – Karl Jenkins and George Fenton among them – are happy to see their work performed so professionally and in a setting that encourages children to become involved in the arts.

'If you do want to commission yourself,' Johnson advises, 'I'd suggest approaching the music colleges and conservatoires in your area and letting people know that you're there and what you're looking for. Composers need to know what you want, so invite them to your performances so they can get a feel for what is going on.'

W11 has been around for almost four decades now, its performances so inspiring and full of enthusiasm, its rich past inspiring its future, that its success can make the process seem straightforward. But as Johnson admits, there is a huge amount of hard graft by a huge number of people. The beauty of the project is that other organisations – those who are brave enough to step beyond the 'let's make a musical' route – can benefit from their commissions, and composers will often help with making arrangements for whatever forces and scoring are to hand.

This year's composer, Martin Ward, points out that 'the W11 back catalogue is an absolutely fantastic resource because if you want opera, rather than a musical, there simply aren't that many options for this age range.'

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

- *The Whale Savers* by Martin Ward and Phil Porter will be performed at the Riverside Studios, London, on Saturday 5/Sunday 6 December, with performances at 3.30pm and 7.00pm. Tickets: 020 8237 1000.
- Details of the company, and all productions, can be found at [www.w11opera.org](http://www.w11opera.org).
- The full list of productions, together with synopses, reviews and pictures, is available at [www.w11opera.org/past\\_years/pastyears.html](http://www.w11opera.org/past_years/pastyears.html).