

## Original Features

### *W11 Opera at Riverside Studios, December 4*

W11 Opera celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2011, and celebrations are most definitely in order. Since its foundation, the company has commissioned 33 operas to be performed by young people from schools and youth groups in every area covered by the West London postcode. And they have been operas—not musicals—with ambitious, demanding music and challenging themes, which have prompted committed and accomplished performances by children ranging in age from eight to 18.

With *Original Features*, the composer Julian Grant and librettist Christina Jones have constructed an intriguingly multi-layered drama around a beautiful but derelict house. It is inhabited by the ghosts of servants past, who step out of an 18th-century painting, and is brought back to life by the artist William Carrington and his wife Georgie. They are deemed worthy of living in the house by its eccentric owner and go on to fill it with wildly colourful paintings and equally colourful children, suitably named Crimson, Emerald, Indigo, Amber, Sky, Violet and Ruby.

It is the 1920s and Grant allows himself plenty of delectable musical allusions to that era, notably in a riotous silent-movie cop-chase sequence and a Gershwin-ed up number for the American art collector Pamela Golden, sung with great panache by Annabel Omole. One of the greatest achievements of the piece is to provide so many different and individually rewarding roles, from Mr Pidgeon (Lucy Bradley) the bank manager with his troupe of head-bobbing, wing-shrugging junior Pidgeons, to Charlie and Walter (Olivia Hugh-Jones and Meg Griffiths), the shrewdly observant window-cleaners. There was also a rather fine turn from Izzy Cullinan as a machinating wicked cousin.

Everything was kept moving along at a brisk and lively pace by both the music director Philip Sunderland and the stage director William Relton; and there were cleverly evocative designs by Neil Irish with an overflowing fancy-dress box of costumes by Caroline Bronwen Hughes. Economic downturns are endured and triumphed over, a scarf turns out to be endowed with magical properties, children are abandoned and maltreated, and the house is saved from demolition at the 11th hour. Depicting a time of enormous change and upheaval, the opera reflects those themes and is unafraid to confront their darker aspects. When the children's parents return to rescue them in the nick of time, there is no glibly happy ending. Only the youngest children can forget their earlier neglect and welcome them home with unequivocal delight. For the older ones, memories and misery endured are not so easily dismissed.

HENRIETTA BREDIN

■ *Luke Deacon (William Carrington) and Miranda Ostler (Georgie Carrington) in the W11 Opera premiere of Julian Grant's 'Original Features'*

