

## BachTrack

# Opera North's *Giulio Cesare* is a sparkling success

Saturday  
14-Jan-12 19:00

[Map](#) Leeds Grand Theatre  
Giulio Cesare

**Giulio Cesare in Egitto, HWV 17 (Handel)** [Buy CD](#)

### Opera North

**Robert Howarth**, Conductor

**Tim Albery**, Director

**Pamela Helen Stephen**, Mezzo-soprano: Giulio Cesare

**Sarah Tynan**, Soprano: Cleopatra

**Ann Taylor**, Mezzo-soprano: Cornelia

**James Laing**, Countertenor: Tolomeo

**Kathryn Rudge**, Mezzo-soprano: Sesto

The Roman emperor Julius Caesar's entanglement with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra is one of the best-known love stories of all time, and the operatic re-telling by George Frideric Handel, with its incredible music and universal themes of war, passion and politics, is experiencing a resurgence. In 2005, Glyndebourne mounted an award-winning production of the opera which they revived to great acclaim just four years later, and now Opera North have created an exciting new *Giulio Cesare*: their first staging of a Handel opera in more than ten years.

Telling the story of Cesare's attempts to defeat the Egyptian ruler Tolomeo (Cleopatra's brother and husband) after the Egyptian assassination of Cesare's great rival Pompeo, the opera veers between moments of heady romance and extreme violence as Cesare and Cleopatra's affair intensifies and the Roman characters seek vengeance against Tolomeo for his murderous acts. Described by director Tim Albery as a mixture of the "ravishing" and the "brutal", Opera North have created stunning visuals which successfully communicate his vision of a "utilitarian, militaristic world of Rome" to encase the "golden, slightly decayed jewel box that is the ancient kingdom of Egypt". Designer Leslie Travers' multifaceted set transforms effortlessly from the perfect backdrop for love to the perfect backdrop for war, **with candle-like lighting effects picking up on shimmering gold leaf to create a sparkling atmosphere for the opera's more sensuous moments. Later, an orange glow descends to transform the once-glittering box into a fiery chamber of crumbling mortar that sets the scene for the opera's battles.**

Opera North have assembled an accomplished cast of singers who not only sound wonderful, but inject power, humanity and sexuality into these ancient characters. As Cesare, mezzo-soprano Pamela Helen Stephen captured a masculinity which made her role just that bit more believable. As the villainous Tolomeo, countertenor James Laing projected a strange air with layers of psychological depth when combined with the character's acts of brutal murder and attempted rape.

The standout performances of the night, however, were given by Kathryn Rudge as the murdered Pompeo's grieving son Sesto and Sarah Tynan as Cleopatra. Rudge sang her arias and duets with great technical skill and passion. She has a rich, creamy mezzo voice perfectly suited to the trouser roles she has received acclaim for (she made her professional debut as



Cherubino for ENO) and from the very beginning of the performance she was an audience favourite, receiving warm applause at the end of everything she sang.

In creating her Cleopatra, Sarah Tynan has strayed as far from the obvious as possible: there are no nods to Liz Taylor's iconic portrayal here. Instead of the archetypal Egyptian seductress, we are presented with a willowy, blonde, vulnerable queen who, although determined to succeed in a man's world, does not take on male characteristics to do so. This extremely feminine characterisation brings us closer to Cleopatra than we might expect, and is entirely suited to Tynan's pretty, delicate soprano which sparkled through the more upbeat moments of the opera and created a great depth of emotion during her arias of love and longing. Her 'V'adoro, pupille' ('I adore you, eyes') was a glorious, atmospheric highlight of the evening, with Cleopatra dipping her toes into the pool of water in the centre of the set as she sang the beautiful decorative repeats. Surrounded by soft candlelight, Tynan's lovely tone filled the theatre with a beautiful, intense warmth that was utterly seductive. Equally moving was her 'Piangerò la sorte mia' ('I shall lament my fate'), in which she moved seamlessly between sad reflection and spirited anger.

The score in its entirety is sublime, and under the baton of Robert Howarth, the Orchestra of Opera North brought the joyful, fast-paced baroque sequences to life, but also melted into beautiful, languid arias which will have the power to seduce even those most resistant to Handel's charms. This is a wonderful opera with themes that continue to resonate, and Opera North's production sounds and looks absolutely stunning. Let's hope they don't wait another ten years before tackling Handel again.

*Submitted by **Laura Kate Wilson** on 16th January 2012*