

[Fiona Maddocks](#), [The Observer](#), Sunday 22 January 2012

## Giulio Cesare – review



Hot pants on the Nile: James Laing, left, and Sarah Tynan in Opera North's new Giulio Cesare. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Short, squat, silly, a bad actress, with a doughy, cross face and a "figure not advantageous for the stage": this was Horace Walpole's yobbish description of the star soprano who created the role of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt in Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (1724). Matters have improved, not just in the etiquette of criticism. [Sarah Tynan](#), making her Opera North debut in [Tim Albery's attractive new staging](#), is slim, pretty, good at acting and able to grace a pair of royal blue hot pants so brief as to scare most rivals for the role away from the production.

**Giulio Cesare** remains a Handel favourite, offering a familiar scenario in the central characters with the benefit of a politically explosive love match. Action takes place in Egypt following the murder of Pompeo. Death, grief, vengeance and sex provide Handel with the helter skelter of emotions out of which he created one of his most glittering works. The sequence of fabulous arias is shared between characters. The complete four-hour score is usually trimmed, as here. Committed Handelians aside, few will wince at the omissions. Modern-day consumption of opera – honouring the performers with silent attention instead of socialising during the slow bits as in the 18th century – presents a challenge to Handel audiences as well as directors, however much you admire the extraordinary musical achievements.

Albery avoids the common tendency of combating longueurs with frenzied action. Successful and ingenious though it was, Glyndebourne's recent production which turned [Danielle de Niese as the coquettish, dancing-babe Egyptian Queen](#) into a star, erred in that direction. Opera North's *Cesare* is far less playful, and more sober. With stylish ancient-modern sets and costumes designed by Lesley

Travers, the plot is easy to follow, the updated elements – chiefly the clothes – faithful to a clear guiding aesthetic even if anachronistic in historical terms.

Cleopatra and her effeminate, identically dressed brother Tolomeo (James Laing), both clean, sleek and blond, adorned with gold-plated Edward Scissorhands fingers to signify power, could double as the Volsung twins in *Die Walküre*, in looks if not voice – definitely not since Wagner, though happy to embrace incest, stopped short at writing for countertenor. The way the blank, tomb-pyramid of the opening revolves to become a gold-encrusted dugout, **twinklingly and imaginatively lit by Thomas C Hase, ensured we had something good to look at as the music processed from mood to mood.**

The anguished scenes involving Pompeo's widow Cornelia (Ann Taylor) and her vengeful son Sesto (Kathryn Rudge) came across powerfully. In a strong cast, Pamela Helen Stephen convinced as a rough, tough Caesar, her debut in this elusive role. Handel showed less interest in his hero than in the psychologically fascinating Cleopatra. Tynan, lithe rather than opulently erotic, cast her in a fresh light. If I have reservations, it's that the dramatic action, despite vivid moments such as the crisscrossing of spears and swords mid-fight, or the powdery shower of ashes trickling from the top of the pyramid, passed almost in parallel to the music, as if a separate entity. But that is the nature of baroque opera.

Robert Howarth, directing from the harpsichord and supported with expert continuo playing by Sally Pendlebury (cello) and Andrew Maginley (theorbo), instilled the Opera North orchestra with period instrument sensibility, though the sound, produced by modern instruments, remained robust, the speeds steady – an acceptable compromise for an opera house tackling its first Handel for more than 10 years. In a rigorously varied season, [Norma opens next week](#) in Christopher Alden's new production, followed in May by [Carousel](#). And reliable rumour has it that the company's Janáček series will be completed with a new *Makropulos Case* at the Edinburgh festival in August. Expect an announcement soon. Boldness, not caution, may be the best weapon against paltry budgets in 2012.