

# musicOMH

## Giulio Cesare @ Opera North, Grand Theatre, Leeds

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★★★★

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(Photo: Alastair Muir)

‘S. P. Q. R.’ proclaims the inscription on the brutal concrete which surrounds Caesar as he announces his conquest – *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, the

Senate and the People of Rome – the phrase reminds us that this opera is above all a political one, and its grandiose assertion emphasizes not only the power of the Emperor but contrasts with his vulnerability in terms of how quickly he becomes obsessed with Cleopatra. The opposing worlds of Rome and Egypt are finely drawn in this Tim Albery production, and they are filled with three-dimensional characters whose desire either for noble heroism or brutal domination is brought out in a series of Handel's greatest arias. It's all about the singing of course, and for this revival of the 2012 production the cast is composed of a mixture of the experienced and the emerging, often with very fine results. The two protagonists belong in the latter group, at least as far as the UK is concerned, and although both have fairly small, light voices, these were impressive company debuts. Maria Sanner has the looks and bearing for Cesare, and she is especially strong when it comes to suggesting his more tender and thoughtful side; the reflection on man's fragility as he mourns the death of Pompeo was genuinely touching.

Ms Sanner also has the measure of Cesare's cunning and heroism, the former strongly shown in 'Va tacito e nascosta' with its glorious horn obbligato. The staging of this famous aria was remarkable for its musicality and dramatic logic; the audience was shown Cesare's awareness of the threat posed by Tolomeo via the character's voice and gestures, without extraneous business. No need for the singer to wield a hunting rifle – the hunt is in the music, and certainly no need to impose a dance routine, complete with distracting foot stamping; Handel's theme was manifest in the singing and the instrumentation.

Lucie Chartin's blingy little minx of a Cleopatra was another logical and credible characterization; every generation has its own notion of what Cleopatra was like, and the suggestion that she's a bit ditzy as well as seductive makes perfect sense. Vocally Ms Chartin is a firecracker, confident in her coloratura and touching enough in 'V'adoro, pupille' to demonstrate how easily Cesare fell for her.

The principals are supported by some outstanding Handelians, with James Laing's Tolomeo and Darren Jeffery's Achilla familiar to audiences; both sang with commitment and power, with Laing bringing out Tolomeo's brutality and

Jeffery presenting an unusually sympathetic Achilla. If there's some sort of award for going through painful stage business, the countertenor should certainly be a winner for that scene with the rope.

Catherine Hopper and Heather Lowe may be less familiar names, but we are sure to hear more from them. Ms Hopper's graceful singing as Cornelia and her fervent acting were marred only by the horrible suit she had to wear, fit only for 1998's Prison Officer Fashions. Ms Lowe was a lanky, boyish Sesto whose determination and vulnerability were finely expressed in her singing. Both roles are 'gifts' to singers of course, and here we were allowed to experience their grief and triumph without irrelevant stage distractions.

Paul-Antoine Bénos-Djian is another name with which we are sure to become familiar; he made much of the small role of Nireno, with captivating tone and secure stage presence. Dean Robinson's Curio was a stalwart presence.

The Orchestra of Opera North responded with gusto to Christian Curnyn's fast-paced yet elegantly phrased direction, and there was some superb playing from the horns, harp and theorbo. **Thomas C. Hase's lighting finely pointed up the differences between the glitz of Egypt and the formality of Rome**, and Leslie Travers' set designs powerfully evoked the tawdriness of one and the grandeur of the other. Albery's production is austere yet rich in association, singer-focused and a true company endeavour.