

Accessible opera

Opera fans in Devon should expect the unexpected in a new production of a much-loved classic, says SU CARROLL

Devon Opera has a hard-earned reputation for staging accessible versions of opera favourites while encouraging new and young talent, primarily from the region. This autumn their choice is Verdi's popular *La traviata*, a timeless tale of love and tragedy set in 19th century Paris and the story of doomed courtesan, Violetta, and her young lover, Alfredo.

The company are performing in the original Italian, with surtitles, and the artists will be accompanied by piano. Playing the title role is soprano Natasha Day with tenor Alberto Sousa as Alfredo and baritone Phillip Smith as Germont, under the musical direction of Jonathan Pease.

Stepping into the director's role is a newcomer to Devon Opera – Rachael Hewer who arrives in Devon from Glyndebourne and admits she is very excited about this opportunity.

"It's the first time somebody else has asked me to direct a full production, although I run a theatre company and have done a lot of theatre," she says. "*La traviata* is the perfect choice for me as I've only seen it a couple of times and I've never worked on it before so there's not a whole room of somebody else's



ABOVE: Devon Opera's 2015 production *The Passion of Puccini* was of Acts 2 and 3 of *La bohème*.

BELOW: Devon Opera has chosen Rachael Hewer to direct *La traviata*.



RAISING FUNDS

Rachael Hewer and her partner, the composer Mark Turnage, will be staging a fundraising event on 14 October at the Aeolian Court in Chudleigh with the Friends of Devon Opera.

Rachael will talk about the production and how they've made some of the artistic and creative choices and offer a glimpse behind the scenes of the world of opera. Mark, who wrote an opera about Anna Nicole Smith which premiered at the Royal Opera House, will share an insight into the composition of *La traviata* and will be able to answer questions on how Verdi created this masterpiece. *Tickets are £20 each. Call Devon Opera on 01626 853502.*

versions and ideas. It's so iconic and audiences love it, it's very accessible musically. There's not a long cast and it's not too overwhelming."

Devon Opera is small but ambitious with a desire to produce more full-length operas after a success performing selections of operatic favourites. It had a particularly successful 2017 with a concert *Conquests of Love* performed at Budleigh Music Festival, a production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and the appointment of a new Artistic Director, soprano Natasha Day. They also have a new patron in the Dowager Countess of Devon.

The future looks exciting but there is still a need for Friends to add their support and for new sponsors to help. It's in this frame of mind that Devon Opera has appointed Rachael to direct *La traviata*. She admits she is not your typical opera director.

"I grew up in Grimsby from a very working class background. I haven't got any music qualifications and I don't have languages or a family name. I'm not an orchestra player or a singer who has decided to change director," she says.

What she does have is a passion for theatre, opera and hard work –

training at Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and grafting in stage management for over ten years until someone recommended her to Glyndebourne. It was Natasha Day – who she knew as a student – who suggested her to Devon Opera.

"My job is to provide this company with what they want," she says. "At this stage in their existence they need to engage with the audience and give people what they want to see, but not what people have seen before.

"That's the reason why Devon Opera have engaged a new person with different ideas. It's a massive step for a small company to engage someone they don't know who has the power to make all the decisions. I'm saying: I'm the director and this is my show. Trust me and support my decisions.

"At Glyndebourne, they engage a director, a designer and the team and that's where their involvement ends. The creation is in the hands of the director. There's an incredible trust and support for the creative team and that equals remarkable work. They do take risks and they are pioneers with what they put on stage. "Devon Opera's *La traviata* will be traditional, but it won't be anything people have seen before. Everything chosen to highlight the theme comes from the score and the words. We're here because we're making art and bringing people new things and new ideas and showing them something new. And to do that with pieces that are 200 years old is wonderful. People will come and hear every single note, experience something new and leave enriched." ♦

La traviata will be performed by Devon opera at Exeter's Barnfield Theatre on 22 November and at the Great Hall, Dartington, on 24 November. Visit devonopera.co.uk for details.