



THE REHEARSAL

The Chelsea Opera Group holds a unique place in the history of British opera. We go behind the scenes at the final rehearsal before its acclaimed performance of Euryanthe at Cadogan Hall

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For most people, Friday night is the time to switch off, kick back and relax. Not so for conductor Cameron Burns and the 112 members of the Chelsea Opera Group. It is the evening before they perform Carl Maria von Weber's *Euryanthe* at Cadogan Hall, and the orchestra and chorus are assembled in Henry Wood Hall for their final *tutti* rehearsal.

The German grand-heroic Romantic opera in three acts is a tough choice for Cameron's debut with the group – technically challenging for the musicians and extremely demanding on the soloists. He, however, has absolute faith in the talented company of amateurs and professionals before him, and urges them on.

'It is an extremely difficult opera, so we still need to iron out a few things,' he confirms. He tackles the tricky sections with gusto, calling for replays and firmly but fairly taking the chorus to task when necessary. 'It is my responsibility to bring out the best in people,'

he says. 'Conducting calls for great tact and sensitivity. You need to be clear and direct but at the same time encouraging and inspiring. Your mood on the podium dictates the mood of the room, so it is extremely important to be calm and relaxed, especially when dealing with a challenging work such as *Euryanthe*.'

This unusual choice for the performance at Cadogan Hall – one of three a year – is typical of the Chelsea Opera Group. It was founded in 1950 by music critic David Cairns and the late Stephen Gray, General Manager of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. At the time, both were unknown young musical enthusiasts with a passion for opera, and their first performance, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, was conducted by a young Colin Davis, who went on to become one of Britain's greatest conductors.

The group's mission – to bring opera to a wider public and give young instrumentalists and singers the chance to perform leading >

Left: conductor Cameron Burns with the Chelsea Opera Group. Above, from left to right: mezzo-soprano Camilla Roberts; violas Stefan Laros and Ellie Merton; double bass Jacob Head



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Cameron Burns, conductor
Chelsea Opera Group

may be established abroad but are unknown to British audiences. Celebrated alumni of the Chelsea Opera Group include conductors Sir Simon Rattle, Sir Mark Elder and Sir Roger Norrington and opera legends Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Sir Willard White and Jill Gomez.

The combination of amateur and professional talent gives the group its unique energy – a quality that appeals hugely to conductors such as Cameron. Having largely worked abroad, he seized the opportunity to take to the podium here in London. ‘In the UK, we produce some of the best opera in the world,’ he says. ‘We are blessed with some of the finest conservatoires with exceptional standards of teaching and coaching. We take opera seriously; as a largely subsidised art, it comes with a great sense of responsibility to our sponsors to live up to expectation and merit their support.’

operatic works before the public – is alive and well today.

The group is a magnet for talented amateurs, young professionals and chorus singers, while opera aficionados relish the opportunity to enjoy less well-known operas and see performers who

At 31, Cameron is one of the group’s youngest conductors. He hopes to offer a fresh perspective, marrying his voice and opera-coaching expertise to his conducting skills, described as ‘urbane, unhistrionic and impeccable’ by *The Times*. ‘Conducting opera singers and conducting an orchestra require very different disciplines,’ he says. ‘It is hard work to bring both areas together. Performances are extremely demanding, mentally and physically.’ If further proof were needed, he mops a dripping brow and restores order to a ruffled, damp shirt.

In the highly competitive world of conducting, Cameron is in a privileged position. ‘I’ve always been a fan of Sir Colin Davis, so to work with the group with which he started his career is a great honour. I feel proud to be part of our grand operatic heritage and to work with such talented musicians and singers.’

Inspired by a team that includes celebrated violinist Diana Cummings as leader of the orchestra, and internationally renowned mezzo-soprano Deborah Miles-Johnson as chorus master, the group performs with passion and brio. Little wonder critic Richard Nicholson regards their performances as ‘among London’s most joyful operatic events’.

As for *Euryanthe* on the night at Cadogan Hall? ‘It was a triumph,’ reports Cameron the following Monday. ‘An absolute triumph.’



TALENT SPOTTING

Kirstin Sharpin (soprano, above) A graduate of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and the Cardiff International Academy of Voice, Kirstin has performed numerous critically acclaimed roles, notably The High Priestess in *Aida* with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall.

Diana Cummings (first violin and leader of the orchestra, below centre) One of the country's most distinguished violinists, Diana boasts a glittering international career as a soloist and an orchestra leader. She is currently a Fellow and professor at the Royal Academy of Music.

Jonathan Stoughton (tenor, below right) Having trained at the Royal College of Music's Benjamin Britten International Opera School and the National Opera Studio, Jonathan made his debut as Radames in *Aida* at the Royal Albert Hall, and has embraced various roles as an oratorio and concert soloist.



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