

New kid on the block

Gareth Williams' foray into opera has been no ordinary one. He brings a fresh set of ideas, many of which he hopes to bring into fruition as Scottish Opera's first ever composer-in-residence. **David Kettle** meets him

I kind of fell into opera by accident, really. The first one I wrote started off as something more like music theatre and turned into an opera by chance. I'm not sure how that happened, really. Hardly the kind of driven, ambitious talk you might expect to hear from Scottish Opera's newly-appointed composer-in-residence. But the thoughtful, genial, Armagh-born Gareth Williams has had no ordinary route into opera.

Even his initial experience of the genre was not the revelation that others profess: 'The very first opera I saw was *Don Giovanni* when I was 17 – I think a music teacher took us to see it in Belfast. I remember liking it, but also struggling with the language and the singing, and

I'm not sure how much I really got from it.'

Williams' early musical experiences were far from the opera house, playing and singing in bands and working as a bar pianist (which he still does when he has the time). He is also an accomplished singer-songwriter. But it was when he went to study music at Queen's University, Belfast, that he started to explore the classical repertoire in earnest.

'When I was studying,' he explains, 'I kept composition very serious, and songwriting as very fun and light. I always felt the need to keep the two things very separate in my head. But I think those lines are now more blurred.'

Williams went on to take a PhD in composition at the Royal Scottish Academy in Glas-

gow, where he now teaches. Scottish Opera general director Alex Reedijk saw a student-led work of his. 'For *Love in the Blue Corner*, his opera about boxing, he'd written the music and the libretto, and he'd almost staged it himself too,' says Reedijk. 'I thought, jeez, here's a guy with a real burning desire to have his work heard. But it's not about him promoting himself – it's his desire to tell stories.'

It seems that Williams' unusual route into opera had also given him an unusually engaging approach to the art form: 'I suppose opera is the ultimate form of song, really,' Williams says.

What was it about Williams' music that interested Reedijk? 'I think he's got a particular ability to connect with an audience,' he says. 'There's a Puccini thing going on inside him – a directness and an emotional connection. We've seen that in the pieces he's written for us – the audience feels something from what he's writing.'

These pieces for Scottish Opera included two commissions for the company's *Five:15* project that paired composers and authors to create 15-minute chamber operas. 'In 2008, Bernard McLaverty and I wrote *The King's Conjecture*,' says Williams. 'It was based on a story we heard about King James IV and a baby boy he put on an island with a wet nurse who was deaf and dumb. They went to visit the island after ten years to see if the child could speak, thus proving that language was a gift from God.'

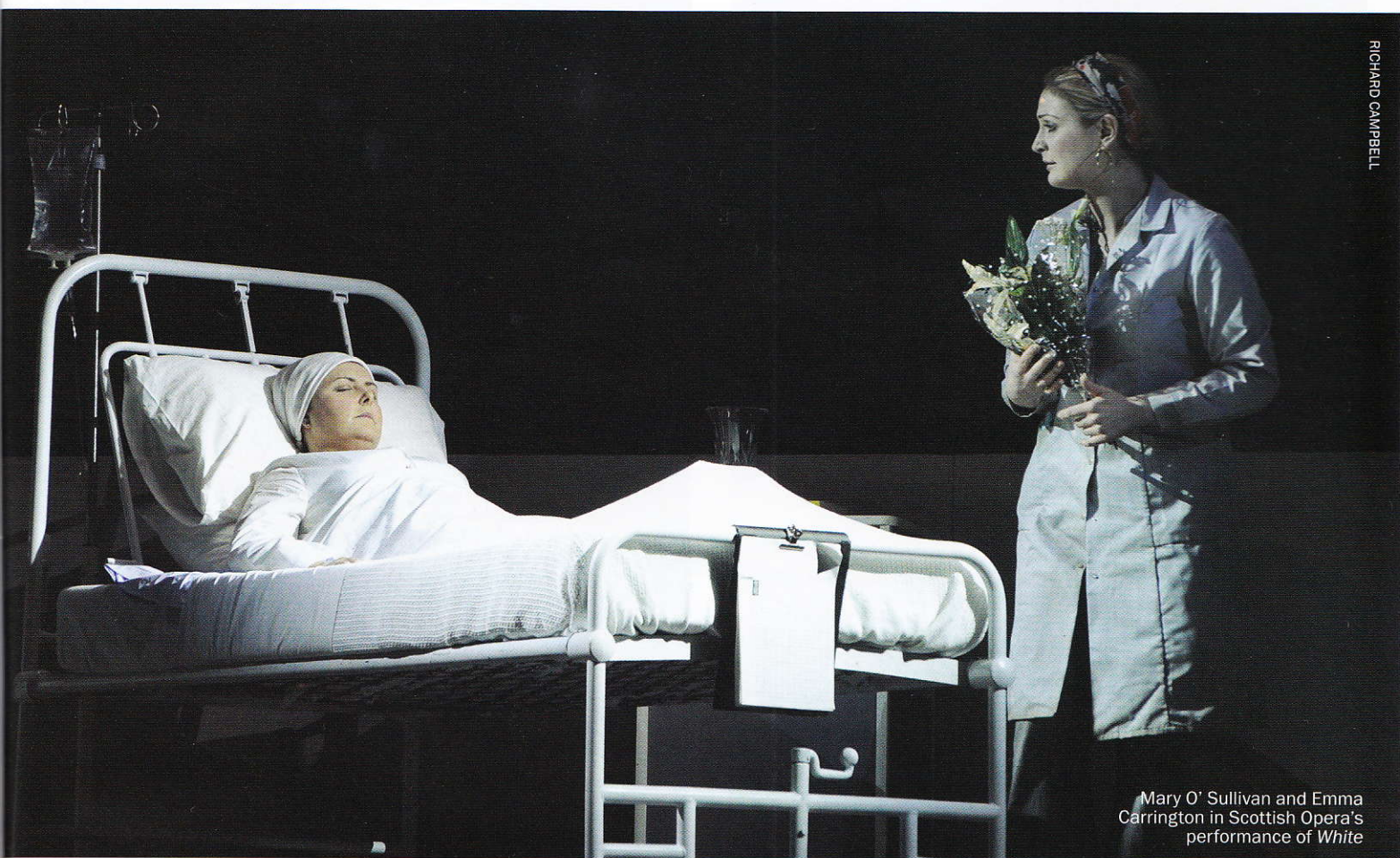
The second commission was to a libretto by Glasgow-based writer Margaret McCartney, who had been in the audience for *The King's Conjecture* and felt inspired to work with Williams. 'That was a piece called *White*, set in a hospice,' says Williams. 'It's about a cleaner who doesn't speak any English befriending a patient, and developing her language that way.'

Following these two successes with Scottish Opera, it was a logical next step to formalise a relationship. Reedijk had always wanted a composer-in-residence with the company, and



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Mary O'Sullivan and Emma Carrington in Scottish Opera's performance of *White*

felt that both sides would benefit: 'As a company that's had a lot of that stuff stripped away, it's important to build back into the company some bits that are at the coalface of what you do for a living.'

As for what's in it for Williams, he seems genuinely humble about his ambitions. 'I do want to get better at writing opera. There's maybe an idea that in a role like this, you're in training for a very long piece on the main stage. But I don't see it like that at all – I'm very interested in chamber opera, and in opera outside the theatre space.'

And these are concerns reflected in the three projects that Williams already has underway. 'The first one is a community opera,' he says. 'It's about a zoo keeper at Belfast Zoo during world war two who decided she would bring the elephant home every night during the blitz to keep it safe. I'm going to go out to schools in the spring to work with the kids to develop their own sections, so I hope it will be quite a different piece in each place we perform it.'

Williams' other two projects are at earlier stages, so he's more hesitant to divulge much about them. 'One is a site-specific chamber opera that's going to go round specific locations in Scotland – a piece that fits in with a particular kind of landmark.' The other is less performance-based, but has profounder ambitions. 'We're creating a relationship with a hospital,

where I go in with an opera singer and a voice trainer and work on one of the respiratory wards. We're trying to create songs for people who have breathing difficulties and respiratory problems, so hopefully just by singing these songs their quality of life can improve.'

Ambitious aims, certainly. And they're all ideas that came from Williams himself. 'It's absolutely up to him what he does,' says Reedijk. 'I want him to be able to use the resources of the company. I want him to be able to just sit

down and write music, to feel safe enough to write so that he's not always fretting about his rent or bills.'

But with such diverse activities, where does Williams think the role will take him in two years' time? 'I've no idea!' he disarmingly admits. 'But what's really sad is that I can already feel that sense of dread that I'll have at the end of the period, because the time is going to slide by very quickly. Writing opera is a very slow process.'

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GARETH WILLIAMS: TIMELINE

- 1977:** Born in County Armagh, Northern Ireland
- 1996-99:** Studies music at Queen's University, Belfast, including composition with Piers Hellawell
- 2000:** Wins Great British Conservatoire Composers Forum prize for his piece *Search Engines*
- 2000:** Moves to Glasgow to study at the then Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama
- 2006:** First opera, *Love in the Blue Corner*, premieres at the Plug Festival in Glasgow
- 2007:** Begins teaching at the then Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama
- 2008:** Awarded PhD in composition from St Andrews University
- 2008:** *The King's Conjecture* commissioned and performed by Scottish Opera
- 2009:** Composer-in-residence at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris, where he writes two large-scale music theatre pieces
- 2009:** *White* commissioned and performed by Scottish Opera
- 2009:** Residency at Tapestry Opera's LIBLAB in Toronto produces three short operas
- 2010:** Second residency at Tapestry Opera's LIBLAB in Toronto produces four short operas
- 2011:** Writes collection of site-specific operas for Sloans, Glasgow's oldest bar
- 2011:** Appointed Scottish Opera's first composer-in-residence