

Classical **MUSIC**

WOMEN ON TOP

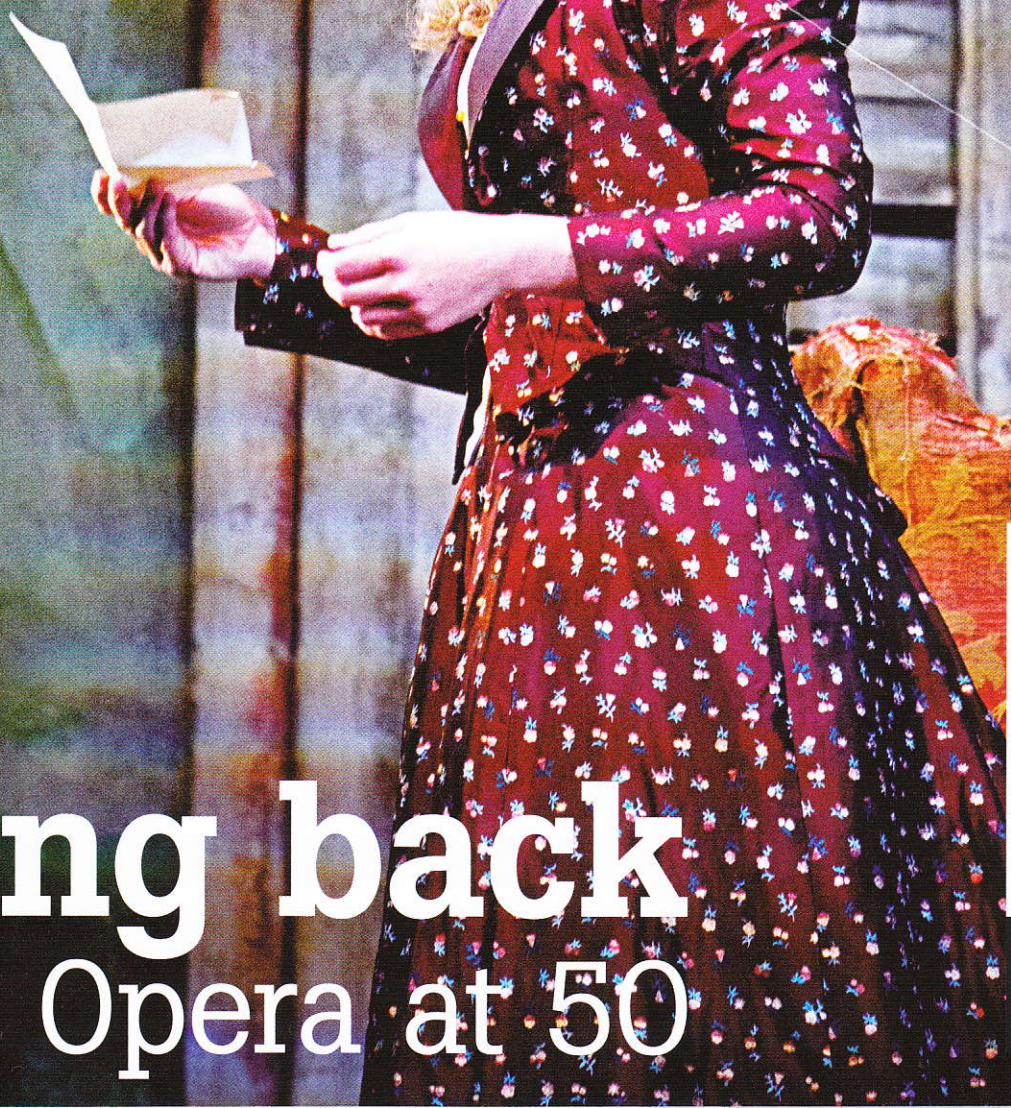
South Bank music chiefs

ANVIL CHORUS

Celebrations in Basingstoke

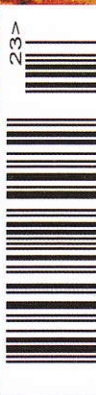
TRUMPET VOLUNTARY

Best of amateur music-making



Coming back

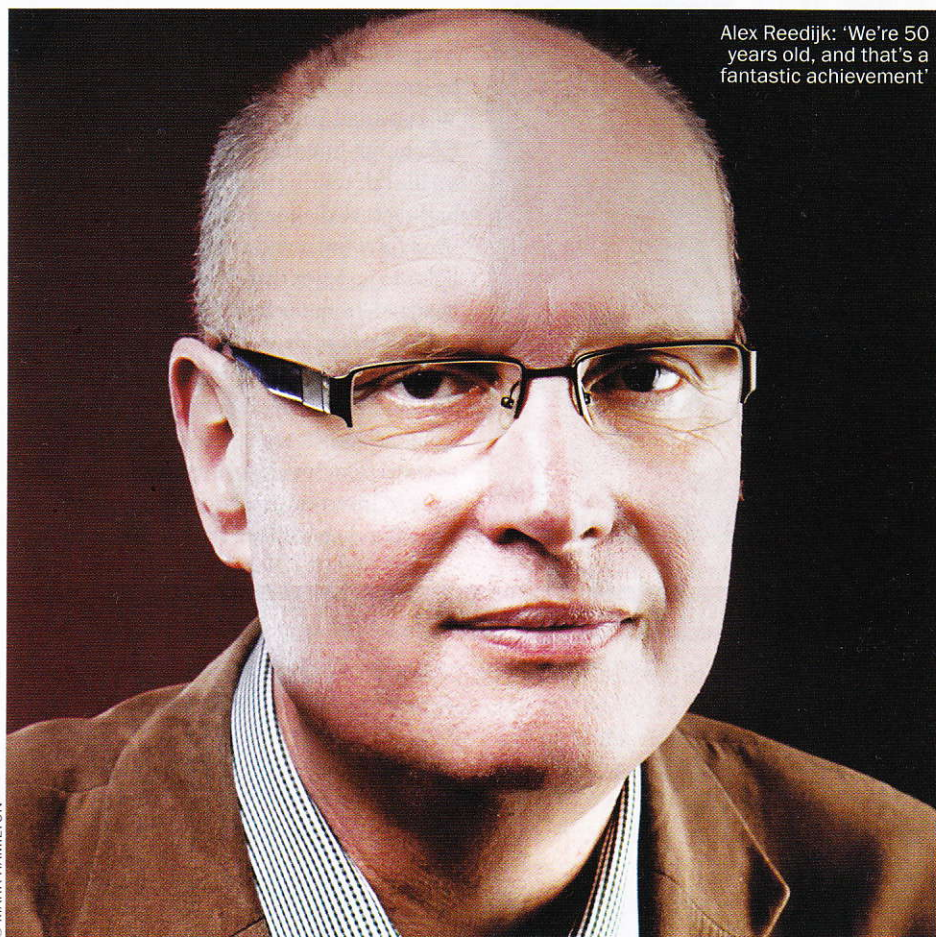
Scottish Opera at 50



R

The road ahead

In recent times the Scottish Opera story has been one of financial crisis, job cuts and controversial decisions, but as the company celebrates its 50th anniversary, general director **Alex Reedijk** tells David Kettle of his plans for more positive headlines



Alex Reedijk: 'We're 50 years old, and that's a fantastic achievement'

© MARK HAMILTON

'Prudent stewardship.' It's a description of his role that Scottish Opera general director Alex Reedijk slips in right at the end of our interview.

Yet those two words encapsulate the twin concepts at the heart of his approach as head of the company: tough, realistic, sometimes stern financial management, coupled with a nurturing development of its potential. And with Scottish Opera about to kick off its 50th anniversary celebrations, those ideas seem to define its current position quite neatly.

'When I first started here in 2006,' explains Reedijk, 'I said I was going to try and hold true to the things that Alexander Gibson did and believed in when he started the company. OK,

we had a bit of fine-tuning to be absolutely ready for the 21st century, but basically we're 50 years old, and that's a fantastic achievement.'

Reedijk had inherited some serious financial problems when he moved from New Zealand Opera to Glasgow in February 2006. The 2005/6 main-stage season had been suspended and 88 jobs lost following a financially draining (but critically acclaimed) *Ring* cycle, and his later decisions to employ the chorus on a freelance basis and put the company's orchestral players on part-time contracts were controversial to say the least.

'You've got to trim down your costs as much as you can in order to put as much value on stage for the Scottish taxpayers,' he says. 'And

it's incumbent on us to turn as much fixed cost into variable cost. There are huge seasonal fluctuations in our staffing levels, and yes, that's included reimagining our relationships with our chorus and orchestra. It's also permeated backstage and into administration, where we use more fixed-term contracts.'

But understandably, in a year of celebration for the company, Reedijk is reluctant to dwell on the past. 'As a company we're financially in order, and we're out of the news for all the dumb stuff. And there aren't many performing arts organisations that get to be 50 years old.'

Indeed. And Reedijk's ambitious plans for the year ahead make clear his careful appraisal of the company's values and strengths. 'Our DNA is quite unique, I think,' he says. 'We do main-stage operas as the composers intended them, and we tour them, but parallel to that is our smaller-scale touring. The third strand is our long-standing education work, and fourth are our new commissions. Lots of other companies do some of these things, but there aren't many that do them all.'

Ironically, it's Scottish Opera's extensive education and outreach work rather than its large-scale productions that are now many people's main contact with the company, through short-form storytelling opera, primary-school projects and evening and weekend groups for young singers. 'In many ways we're at the heart of the organisation,' says director of outreach and education Jane Davidson. 'It's an exciting year for us – we're bursting at the seams.'

Her flagship anniversary project is *The Elephant Angel*, a new community opera created by the company's recently appointed composer-in-residence Gareth Williams and Northern Irish novelist

"We're out of the news for all the dumb stuff"



Kate Valentine as
Countess Almaviva in
The Marriage of Figaro

so that there's lots of counting and patterns, and they all respond really well to that.'

Yet Reedijk is clear about the financial benefits that a healthy outreach programme brings. 'What's amazing is that the better-quality ideas you have, the more they attract money. People always think that raising money is hard, but it's not hard if you've been lucky enough to have good ideas, and people to deliver them.'

The DNA strand covering new commissions is represented in a quartet of chamber operas by James MacMillan, Craig Armstrong, Huw Watkins and Stuart MacRae at this year's Edinburgh International Festival. And for its small-scale touring programme, to mark its half-century the company is taking a chamber-sized *La traviata* and a concert of opera highlights to no fewer than 50 venues throughout Scotland, from the Borders to Orkney.

For Reedijk, it's part of the company's responsibility to its audience. 'In a country like Scotland, people live hundreds of miles away from each other, and it isn't practical to ask you to travel from somewhere remote on the west coast to Inverness or Glasgow to see a performance. But there's still every chance that you're a

MARK HAMILTON

Bernard MacLaverly that will tour Scotland and draw on local primary school children's street games. 'I thought, kids and elephants – you can't do better than that!' says Davidson. 'It uses two professional performers, four or five young singers from our Connect youth programme, and a chorus of about 30 primary-school children. And there's another class of primary children who are going to take care of press, marketing, poster design, front of house, stage management and so on – to show all the different elements that go into making an opera.'

The company is also targeting ever younger audiences. Alongside the highly successful opera for newborns *BabyO*, which is set to tour to New Zealand, Abu Dhabi and Hong Kong ('It just blew us away – we couldn't predict its success,' says Davidson) the company has recently unveiled its successor, *SensoryO*, a piece for toddlers that combines music with movement, images, touch, smells and interactivity. 'We actually created *SensoryO* with two strands,' explains Davidson. 'We're doing performances in theatres for toddlers and their parents, but we're also visiting 17 different special educational needs schools and working with children up to the age of eight. We've designed the show

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF SCOTTISH OPERA

- 1962** Scottish Opera founded by Alexander Gibson
- 1970** *The Turn of the Screw* performed in Reykjavik, Iceland – the company's northernmost performances
- 1974** The company purchases the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, home to its Glasgow productions ever since
- 1979** Scottish comedian Billy Connolly takes a role in *Die Fledermaus*
- 1980** Orchestra of Scottish Opera formed
- 1985** Richard Mantle becomes managing director
- 1986** John Mauceri appointed music director
- 1991** Richard Jarman made managing director
- 1992** Richard Armstrong appointed music director
- 1996** World premiere of James MacMillan's *Inés de Castro* at the Edinburgh International Festival
- 1997** Ruth Mackenzie made general director
- 2000** Chris Barron appointed chief executive
- 2003** Complete performances of Wagner's *Ring* cycle in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Salford. Wins South Bank Show Award
- 2005** Main-stage season suspended following serious financial problems
- 2006** Alex Reedijk appointed general director
- 2007** Francesco Corti appointed music director
- 2007** Thomas Allen makes his Scottish Opera directorial debut with *The Barber of Seville*
- 2008** Five:15 series of short contemporary operas launched
- 2010** Premiere of *BabyO*, opera written specially for six- to 18-month-olds
- 2011** Company makes its debut at rock festival T in the Park
- 2012** Scottish Opera celebrates its 50th anniversary

passionate opera consumer, or customer, so it's our job to make sure that you get something from us.'

The anniversary main-stage season includes a new *Magic Flute* that continues Thomas Allen's directorial relationship with Scottish Opera. 'He and Scottish audiences have a really wonderful relationship. This is the third of four pieces that I hope he'll do with us all together,' explains Reedijk. There's also a return for Wagner, in the form of *The Flying Dutchman*, but Reedijk is more than aware of the potential risks: 'We haven't done any Wagner since 2004, and the *Dutchman* is still fantastically ambitious for us, but it's the right scale of Wagnerian ambition.'

Alongside *Werther*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the company's yearly collaboration with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and a concert performance of *Cav* and *Pag* to kick off the anniversary season on the 5 June birthday itself, the season concludes with, of all things, *The Pirates of Penzance*. 'We're doing *Pirates* because – well, why not?' laughs Reedijk. 'It's in partnership with D'Oyly Carte Opera, who are returning to life after a dormant period. We'll make it in Scotland, then we're endeavouring to send it off on a tour round the UK.'

Looking beyond the anniversary year, outreach director Jane Davidson is exporting the company's educational expertise to China (see box) and also working towards 2014: 'We're kicking off a huge project for the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, which involves going to Botswana, India and Canada to work with performers there.'

OUTREACH DIRECTOR JANE DAVIDSON EXPLAINS SCOTTISH OPERA'S PLANS TO EXPORT ITS EDUCATION WORK TO SCHOOLS IN CHINA

How did the Chinese connection first arise?

Last year the first minister Alex Salmond went to China to sign a cultural memorandum of understanding, and he took over a whole range of things representing cultural excellence from Scotland. We have done quite a lot of international work at Scottish Opera, and the government asked us if we would come as part of the programme.

What was the first project?

We have a piece called *Tale o'Tam*, based on Robert Burns's *Tam o'Shanter*, and the Confucius Institute at Edinburgh University teamed us up with the Beijing No 4 High School to work on it together. The kids there learnt it in advance, and we went and spent a week with them and developed the piece as a performance. They loved Burns already – he's quite well known in China.

What is it that makes the Chinese teachers so interested?

What we're teaching is personal creativity and development, and teaching teachers how to use those things in terms of integrated learning. The Chinese are tremendous when it comes to academic achievement, but the idea of using the arts to further young people's understanding of science or maths or languages, which is the way we're moving here, is quite a new phenomenon for them, and they're really interested in it.

What's the next stage?

In September we're going to the Experimental High School in Tianjin, to work on similar projects with students, student teachers and the university.

What's in it for Scottish Opera?

Everyone's saying that China is a land of opportunity, but we do have things other than technology to export. We have best practice, and we've worked really hard to develop a programme that has attracted a lot of interest internationally. We have something that we can sell, or share, and if it could bring benefits to what we're doing here, and that's certainly something we're interested in pursuing.



This year's new production of *The Rake's Progress*

MARK HAMILTON

Reedijk is clear about the main challenge that lies ahead, though: 'The big thing we must always keep an eye on is our journey through our funding mix.' There's no doubt that he's brought a new commercial awareness to the organisation that can trace its roots back to Alexander Gibson's entrepreneurial spirit back in 1962. And if that means referring to audiences as customers and stressing the organisation's brand values ('I think our brand is in our storytelling – there's a narrative truth to what we do,' Reedijk says), then so be it.

'One of the big changes over the last six years has been building an internal receptivity to ideas, so that we think we can do things, rather than thinking things aren't possible,' he explains. 'We've got to absolutely shamelessly exploit every opportunity in order to benefit our art form and our audiences.'

CM