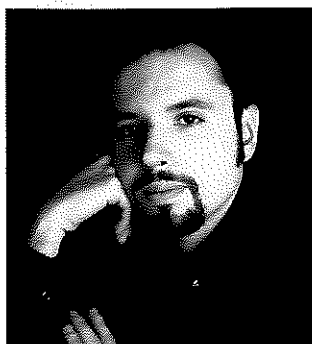


sorely needed. He's certainly one of Europe's top young star conductors and, like Luisotti and Carydis, demonstrates what a help all those opera companies in Europe offer in giving young talents the solid experience they need.

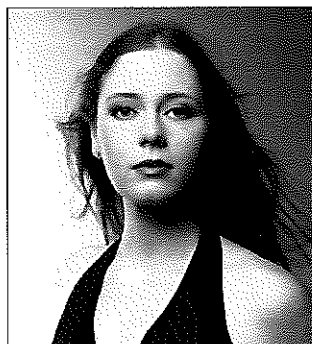
**CARLO VITALI**

After storming the houses of her native Tuscany, the barely 20-year-old soprano **Alessandra Marianelli** is increasingly being heard both in Italy and abroad. To such exquisite lightweight roles as Britten's Titania and Puccini's Lauretta, she contributes faultless technique, sterling voice colour and straightforward sensuality without coarseness. Her Zerlina, as heard this season in Reggio Emilia and Verona, was simply perfect. The Barcelona-born mezzo **Anna Tobella**, taking her first steps away from her home the-



**Constantinos Carydis**

atre, charmed the audience at Florence's La Pergola in the world modern premiere of Vivaldi's *Ate-naide*. Her resolute delivery and polished middle register added considerable dramatic impact to the trousers-role of Varane, a roguish Persian prince. **Angelo Forte**, a former choirboy in the Pope's Cappella Giulia, has now grown into a versatile tenor, whose debut in a cameo



**Alessandra Marianelli**

role at San Severo's Teatro Verdi (in *Trovatore*) was followed by a string of acclaimed recitals in the same area. Talent scouts from the USA are reportedly after him.

**HEIDI WALESON**

Bass **Eric Owens** has had plenty of work since he won the ARIA award in 1999, but he attracted major attention this year in the title role of



**Anna Tobella**

Eliot Goldenthal's *Grendel*. As the tormented monster, onstage for most of the opera, Owens displayed not only a formidable voice but also a compelling stage presence. Owens was also a standout as General Leslie Groves in John Adams's *Doctor Atomic* last year. **Jennifer Holloway**, a young mezzo-soprano, and a Santa Fe Opera apprentice, was charming and fresh-voiced as

**National Opera Studio Showcase**

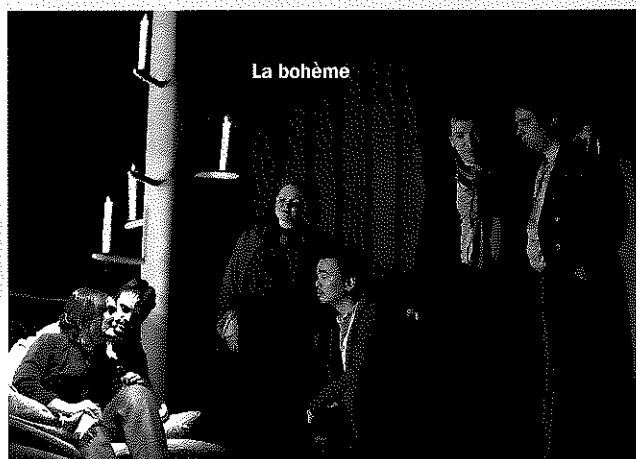
**Hackney Empire LONDON**

The most striking aspect of the National Opera Studio's annual showcase evening was its transfer from the concert hall environment of the Queen Elizabeth Hall on South Bank to the altogether more appropriate surroundings of the Hackney Empire. (Although this did lead to the somewhat bizarre sight of Nicholas Payne, director of Opera Europa, and a clutch of critics, mustering after the performance at one of the grottiest bus stops in London to catch the Number 38 back to the city centre.) The showcase benefitted hugely from the technical capabilities of the proscenium arch stage and the atmosphere of the recently-restored auditorium – the theatre, like English National Opera's Coliseum, was designed in lavish High Edwardian style by Frank Matcham. Yet the theatre's intimate scale allowed close contact between the conductor, NOS's head of music Roy Laughlin, and the singers.

Director Stephen Medcalf, designer Stephen Watson and lighting designer Simon Corder made the most of the opportunity, with a simple set that consisted of little more than simple green-painted slats, a garden chair, a bench and a tree-like wooden pole but could be transformed extremely effectively from garden, to graveyard, to drawing-room. The Royal Ballet Sinfonia proved adept at coping with the frequent changes of style required by the programme's varied repertoire of scenes from Handel (*Xerxes*), Verdi (*La Traviata*), Stravinsky (*The Rake's Progress*), Rossini (*La Cenerentola*), Bizet (*Djamileh*), Mozart (*Così fan tutte*), Donizetti (*L'elisir d'amore*) and Puccini (*La bohème*).

I had expected great things from **Anna Stéphany**, having been very impressed by her in the past, but she had a shaky start as Xerxes, with some uncharacteristic lapses of intonation. This was a shame as Stéphany has a Sarah Connolly-like quality both vocally and physically that should have made the casting ideal. However she warmed up well, her coloratura growing in confidence, and in a later scene she was astonishingly good as Cenerentola.

As Violetta, **Mairéad Buicke** also warmed up well after a rather harsh-voiced start; she would clearly have no difficulty in filling a much



larger house. It is difficult for a voice that has the power for Verdi's dramatic scenes also to have the control required for the tender moments, but Buicke came pretty close.

The distinctive, characterful voices and commanding stage presences of **Benjamin Segal** as Tom Rakewell and **David Soar** as Nick Shadow complemented one another well in the Stravinsky, and **Eamonn Mulhall** was impressive as Don Ramiro in the Rossini and Ferrando in *Così*, displaying a delightfully old-fashioned Irish-Italian tenor sound in the John McCormack mould. A very different mood was established very quickly for the Bizet, although the NOS's French language coaching could do with being stepped up a little.

A fine quartet in *Così* (**Kate Valentine**, **Eamonn Mulhall**, **Madeline Shaw** and **Krzysztof Szumanski**) set a relaxed, sexy mood for the second half of the concert. **Joanne Boag** as Adina in *L'elisir* drew the attention, with a well-controlled coloratura. But the climax of the evening, the final act of *Bohème*, proved to be a metaphorical as well as a literal show-stopper, with the ensemble switching skilfully from slapstick to the paths of Mimì's deathbed in performances that were completely satisfying both vocally and dramatically.

**CLARE STEVENS**