

Collaboration and innovation mark Scottish Opera's new season



David Kettle

Well, we bought a very large dartboard." Scottish Opera general director Alex Reedijk is being slightly facetious about how he and music director Stuart Stratford went about planning their 2018-19 season, just announced. But with so many seemingly conflicting demands to balance – main stage spectaculars versus smaller offerings; tried and tested versus brand new and edgy; Central Belt versus further flung; traditional opera house versus unconventional venues – the results are anything but random.

"I've described it as old and new, rare and classic," explains Stratford. "That may sound a bit glib, but actually it does sum up in many ways what we do. So we do have older productions – Thomas Allen's production of *The Magic Flute*, which is a classic; and Matthew Richardson's older staging of *Rigoletto*."

Joining those two revivals on the main stage, however, the centrepiece of the 2018-19 season is a brand new opera: *Anthropocene*, by composer Stuart MacRae and writer Louise Welsh.

That's a bold choice, but the company clearly has utter confidence in MacRae and Welsh's creative partnership following the enormous success of their gleefully macabre morality tale *The Devil Inside* in 2016. "That was a stonking success," confirms Reedijk. "I couldn't believe how much ownership there was of a Scottish creative team telling a story made in Scotland."

Anthropocene is the fourth work that MacRae and Welsh have created with Scottish Opera, although the company is remaining tight-lipped about the details of its story, save to say it's about a mysterious encounter by scientists trapped in the frozen Arctic. Its title comes from the name now being commonly given to our current geological epoch, in which mankind is the crucial impacting factor on the planet and its ecosystems. "But this isn't an eco-



Scottish Opera directors Alex Reedijk and Stuart Stratford

opera, not in any sense of the word," Reedijk is keen to stress.

Also new will be Janáček's passionate tale of forbidden desire, betrayal and guilt *Káťa Kabanová*, following the company's admired *Jenůfa* in 2015. "We both absolutely think Janáček is one of the masters of dramatic writing," explains Stratford. And the season's final big staging is a show already announced – a huge, ambitious, promenade *Pagliacci*, which brings together the Paisley community in July. "We have a community chorus that's inching

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towards 100," explains Reedijk. "We're going to be inside a tented structure, but it isn't a circus tent. It's going to look like a spaceship opera house that's landed. It's a way of coming out of the opera house and inviting people to engage with the art form."

Stratford picks up the theme: "For an opera that's all about questioning what is reality, what better way to stage it than with a mixture of professionals and non-professionals, mixing audience and performers together?"

Indeed, striking a balance between traditional main-stage shows and alternative ways of presenting

opera is at the heart of Reedijk and Stratford's thinking. "Of course we're committed to large-scale work in the big theatres," says Reedijk, "but a lot of people don't live in proximity to those theatres, so we're keen to explore alternatives, in a way that might intrigue audiences."

To that end, the annual Opera Highlights tour drops into smaller venues right across Scotland – including a full-scale tour of the Western Isles – with composer in residence Samuel Boldoni writing linking music to bring together works by Verdi, Mozart and Donizetti.

There are also some intriguing new partnerships: a "loose collaboration" (in Reedijk's words) with the Royal Opera House takes MacRae and Welsh's *Anthropocene* to London's Hackney Empire, and the company collaborates for the first time with East Lothian's Lammermuir Festival in Britten's ritualistic church parable *The Burning Fiery Furnace*. "It's a toe in the water," says Reedijk carefully, "a chance to get to know each other, and if it works, we can look at bigger projects together."

It's an adventurous, unconventional, thoroughly intriguing main-stage season. But there's no doubting Reedijk and Stratford's determination to get opera out there into Scotland, to extend their company's reach, and to engage with as many opera-goers – both old and new – as they can. ■

For more on Scottish Opera's new programme, see scottishopera.org.uk