



## [Cendrillon](#) at RNCM

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) December 2017

French composer, Jules Massenet was a prolific opera composer, and so as part of the Royal Northern College of Music's ***French Connections Festival***, what better way to celebrate the festive time than with his take on the seasonal classic, Cinderella (Cendrillon in French).

I have to admit to loving Massenet's music, although I did not know the majority of this afternoon's score, and so it was just delightful listening to some new-to-me Massenet and wallowing in it! Of course, the RNCM Opera Orchestra under the baton of **Martin Andre** were superb and flawless. I enjoyed listening to the cleverness and ingenuity of the music, even down to trying to replicate sounds not normally associated with orchestras such as Breton Pipes, church bells and Shepherd's pipes, all in the score if you listen for them, and so cleverly and beautifully crafted as part of the whole stunningly emotive score.

Massenet's story follows our own pantomime version quite closely. We see a widower with his daughter impoverished and living in the countryside, and so he marries a wealthy society widow, in Paris one presumes, and she has two larger than life daughters, quite ungainly in both looks and manners. By law he has to support them, and so his own daughter is reduced to working in the household as a maid. I think what surprised me the most about this, is that because it was opera I was expecting at least one death and a tragic ending. It looked very much as if it were going that way when Cinderella takes poison and the Prince is dying of a broken heart, but no, the Fairy Godmother enters once again and makes sure that at least this opera has the wonderful happy ending that we all know and love.

As is what has become common practice for RNCM operas, in order to allow more students the opportunity of performing leads, there are two sets of principal casts, and so I can only speak about the cast which I saw perform. If the cast I didn't see were only half as good, then they would have been superb. Today's cast were faultless, and spellbinding. Their perfect voices - some of the most mellow coloratura I think I have ever heard - and their acting skills combine to bring this opera to stunning life.

Lycette (aka Cendrillon) was played today with earnestness and passion by **Fiona Finsbury**, whilst the dulcet tones of

**Kamil Bien**

's Prince Charming serenaded us. Pandolfe, Lycette's father and second husband to the domineering and over-bearing Madame De La Haltiere and her two daughters, was played with resigned dignity giving a truly empathetic performance by

**John Iwan Jones**

. Madame de la Haltiere herself was played with pantomimic gusto by

**Rebecca Barry**

, and the two

*ugly sisters*

Noemie (

**Eliza Boom**

) and Dorothee (

**Lucy Vallis**

) were just perfectly cast, playing their roles with both feet firmly on the ground and yet were highly comedic too. We could poke fun at them, but they were not cardboard cut-outs. It was

**Daniella Sicari**

's Fairy Godmother who impressed me the most vocally. For those of you who know me then you will know that I am not particularly fond of the soprano voice and would much prefer to listen to a male voice choir any day; I find them tinny and screeching when they reach for the higher notes and even some of the greatest and most lauded opera stars of yesteryear make me reach to cover my ears with my hands. Not Sicari. Her vocal dexterity in fact seemed to know no bounds and her high notes were pitched with simple clarity. Wonderful.

**Olivia Fuchs** directed this opera with great skill. She managed to bring out the characters of the principals and make them believable as well as taking into consideration the vocal demands opera makes on the performer. There were moments of sheer genius, as the audience are taken as whole on an emotional journey.

There was however, one very odd choice which jarred with me completely. With stunning costumes and an amazing set designed by **Yannis Thavoris**, we really were catapulted into the time and place of this opera. I absolutely loved the three 'mirrors' of the dogs mirroring the wife and two daughters. A great visual joke which worked wonderfully. I appreciated the skulls on the fleur-de-lys wall, indicating that all was not well with the Prince. A subtle symbolism. The first entrance of La Fee and her entourage was delightful and surprising. And the use of a mirrored wall not only inspiring and superb but also a lighting designer's nightmare. In other words, everything was perfect and wonderful - or at least it was until the third act and we are introduced to extremely modern intravenous drips, strip lighting and a modern hospital ward. This just screamed at me as being oh so wrong and out of kilter with the rest of the set and direction. Indeed it got a most uncalled for snigger from someone sat behind me. Such a shame.

That did not diminish the quality of the singing though, and with a wonderfully sounding chorus,

and talented principals, this was a truly uplifting and magical experience.