staged it in three separate locations in Derry, now it comes to Belfast in Cameron Menzies's plush but pointed production.

Era-splicing, topically accented and cinematically slick, the staging boasted the largest forces yet employed by the company, including a 53-strong chorus drawn from the long-established Belfast Philharmonic Choir and drawing on NI Opera's own chorus development programme, still in its infancy. This proved its worth in the sumptuously realized 'Te Deum'.

Svetlana Kasyan as Tosca in Cameron Menzies's new production for Northern Ireland Opera

It also saw the Irish debut of the Russian star-in-the-making Svetlana Kasyan as Tosca. Although possessed of a rich, ripe occasionally wayward soprano that lent due fervour to 'Vissi d'arte', she never fully convinced as Puccini's most tortured heroine, despite her undeniably vivid stage presence, enhanced by Gillian Lennox's luxurious costumes. The late substitution of Peter Auty as Cavaradossi may well explain the initial lack of combustible chemistry between the two, although his 'E lucevan le stelle' eloquently demonstrated Puccinian credentials. Likewise Brendan Collins, making a visceral and vehement impression in his role debut as Scarpia, if not yet a wholly dangerous one.

Strong support came from Niall Anderson, making much of the Sacristan, from Aaron O'Hare and Connor Campbell as Spoletta and Sciarrone, and from Matthew Durkan as Angelotti. The Ulster Orchestra responded to Eduardo Strausser's ardent if intermittently uncertain baton with aplomb.

Atmospherically lit by Ciarán Bagnall, Niall McKeever's imposing set accommodated intimacy and grandeur, the cusp of a church cupola, on the interior of which Cavaradossi is painting a portrait of Jesus, transforming to a cloud-shrouded vortex into which Tosca hurls herself from a receding scaffolded bridge.

First-night cavils aside, *Tosca* sees Menzies upping the ante for a company reaching towards its maturity despite the endemically parlous state of public funding for the arts in the region. This production has the potential to grow into something altogether memorable.

MICHAEL QUINN

The Yellow Wallpaper

The Opera Story at the Lilian Baylis Studio, London, September 14

Since 2017 The Opera Story has been run by its co-founders, Hamish Mackay and Manuel Fajardo, with a blend of flair and imagination. This small company stages a newly commissioned opera each year, and the strike rate has been unusually high.

The latest work and its staging (in the very useful venue of the studio theatre at Sadler's Wells) were both exemplary. London performances were given twice nightly, following a

successful Copenhagen premiere in August (itself an indicator of the company's development). Composed by Dani Howard, it demonstrates an advance over her earlier live piece for the company, *Robin Hood* (2019), which felt somewhat diffuse.

Running to some 50 minutes, *The Yellow Wallpaper* takes a classic American short story and, with a well-crafted libretto by Joseph Spence and a taut production by Amy Lane, makes a concentrated and fascinating drama out of it. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote her story in 1892. It concerns a married woman who has recently given birth and is suffering from a severe instance of post-natal depression. Her husband (a doctor) moves the family to an isolated old house where pretty well all activity is forbidden her as hindering a cure based on the notion of absolute rest. (She ignores the prohibition on writing.)

While stuck in the marital bedroom—almost as a prisoner—she develops a fascination with the lurid wallpaper, discerning in its patterns the figure of a woman whom she regards as imprisoned therein (not unlike herself). Eventually the woman in the yellow wallpaper frees herself; in Lane's production, the central character and the mysterious woman almost seem to have swapped places.

It is a haunting and powerful tale that has been variously interpreted: some developing form of mental illness is frequently cited. There have been quite a few adaptations as plays, radio dramas and films, but this seems to be the first opera on the subject. The story seems a natural for the genre, and both librettist and composer have handled it with skill. While Spence's text may not tell us quite enough about the character and her situation, its brevity is otherwise a virtue.

Howard's score is written for a mezzo-soprano in the central role—here the powerfully expressive Clare Presland, who drew the audience right into the complex heart of the character—plus two excellent instrumentalists: the pianist Berrak Dyer and cellist Midori Jaeger. The cello writing is more expressive, perhaps, than the largely accompanimental piano part, which relies on post-minimalist figurations and is arguably a bit too dense; but in general terms the score maintains interest as it colours in the drama.

Clare Presland and Valerie Ebuwa in The Opera Story's production of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'

There's a fourth participant—the dancer Valerie Ebuwa, who provided her own mesmerizing choreography as the woman in the wallpaper. Emma Ryott's set was utterly simple—essentially a chair—while Charlie Morgan Jones's lighting summoned all the necessary atmosphere, especially in its use of mist to suggest the sinister, all-pervading wallpaper.

This further success for the company also speaks of the entrepreneurial and creative talents of those running it—exactly what's needed in the business at higher levels, too.

GEORGE HALL