



©SIMON ANNAND

## The Child and the Magic Spells

What happens when you take the lush, melodic music of Maurice Ravel, and combine it with the whimsical words of Colette? **Tiffany Parks** reveals the answer.

**F**orget everything you think opera is supposed to be. Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, set to a libretto by Colette, invites audience members to enter the fantastical yet disturbing world of a child's imagination. When a temperamental little boy is reprimanded by his mother for not completing his homework, he flies into an infantile rage, shattering a tea set, ripping books apart, tearing up the wallpaper, and shaking the grandfather clock. As if under an ominous spell, the inanimate objects he has so thoughtlessly damaged come to life, each one interpreted by a different voice. The broken Wedgwood teapot and cup challenge the naughty boy to a boxing match; the grandfather clock with his deep baritone threatens to fall on him, clanging ominously; the shepherd and shepherdess on

the wallpaper chastise him; the princess steps out of the torn book of fairytales to say she will abandon him; and the flames of the fire, personified by a tinkling coloratura voice, warn, "I warm the good, but I burn the bad!" Even the math book comes to life, with each number portrayed by a member of the children's chorus, to torment the boy. In the second act, the scene becomes an enchanted garden, with the same singers taking on the roles of owl, bat, oak tree, frog, squirrel, dragonfly, and nightingale to enact their final punishment before making peace. Because of the complex staging and costumes, *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* is rarely performed, and usually only in concert version, so don't miss the chance to see this fully staged production at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, directed by Laurent Pelly and with Charles Dutoit at the podium (p54).

## The Spanish Hour

The one-act opera that shares the bill with *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* is a light-hearted musical comedy, also by Ravel. *L'Heure Espagnole* tells the story of a naïve Spanish clockmaker and his unfaithful wife, who hides her lovers inside her husband's grandfather clocks when he comes home early (p54).

