

A New Orfeo at Portland's 'Other' Opera Company

By James Bash, *Musical America*

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PORTLAND, OR--Portland's newest opera company, OrpheusPDX, began its inaugural season on August 4 with Monteverde's *L'Orfeo*, a new production by Chas Rader-Shieber deftly tempered with a bit of humor, adding a refreshing breeze to the storyline.

The company, brainchild of Christopher Mattaliano, who helmed the Portland Opera from 2003 to 2019, offers summertime opera so as not to conflict with Portland Opera's season. Staff works remotely and performances, on the Portland State University campus, take place in Lincoln Performance Hall, known for its excellent acoustics and small size (475 seats)--ideal for early opera and small scale contemporary works.

Opening with an al fresco wedding banquet, this retelling of the Greek legend offered an outstanding cast, led by baritone Conor McDonald. Holly Flack delivered the brief prologue as La Musica and then settled in as an effervescent Euridice, her soprano sparkling.

Hannah Penn's Messaggiera plumbed the depths of sorrow when she related Euridice's demise to Orfeo, who brought everything to a standstill with his soul-searching lament in "Tu se' morta." Deac Guidi created a rough and obstinate Caronte. Abigail Renee Krawson's Proserpina maintained a regal countenance while pleading successfully with Plutone (Zachary Lenox) to give Orfeo a chance to lead his wife out of hell. Steven Brennfleck conveyed a consoling but not sentimental Apollo, who offered Orfeo a place in the heavens from which he could admire Euridice forever.

Megan Wilkerson's inventive and colorful stage design flashed the words "Till Death Do Us Part" on the back wall throughout. Occasionally, some words or letters were omitted; for example, "De Part" highlighted the scene in which Orfeo tried to lead Euridice out of the Underworld.

Alison Heryer's costume designs were upscale contemporary. The most whimsical were the infernal spirits', who were dressed in gauze-like white outfits that matched the wedding dress of Euridice. Connie Yun handled lighting design.

Christian Capocaccia led a chamber ensemble of modern and period instruments, maintaining an impressive sonic balance such that the theorbo, viol da gamba, and harpsichord could always be heard and the singers were never overpowered.



The wedding banquet in OrpheusPDX's new Orfeo

Top photo: Conor McDonald as Orfeo