

L'Orfeo

PORTLAND, OR

OrpheusPDX

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ORPHEUS, legendary musician, lends his name to Monteverdi's Orfeo, the first great opera, and to OrpheusPDX, Portland's new opera company, which made the Monteverdi masterpiece its triumphant first production (seen Aug. 7).

Christopher Mattaliano, former Portland Opera general director, founded OrpheusPDX with a plan to present each August two operas, one early and one modern (The Fall of the House of Usher, by Philip Glass, followed L'Orfeo by three weeks). Adopting the slogan "where opera gets intimate," Mattaliano chose Portland State University's 468-seat Lincoln Performance Hall, which he touted, correctly, as Portland's best opera space. For acoustics and sight lines as well as intimacy, it beats the three venues in which Portland Opera currently performs.

Directed by Chas Rader-Shieber with set designs by Megan Wilkerson, costume designs by Alison Heryer and lighting by Connie Yun, L'Orfeo opened at a modern garden wedding party with a prominent tree and a cloud of white balloons. In a white wedding gown as Euridice, soprano Holly Flack presented La Musica's prologue as a kind of bridal toast in bright, pure tones. All the opera's singers, some as bridesmaids in hot pink, were present, sometimes showing traits of the characters they would become.

Baritone Conor McDonald, sometimes with tenorial timbre, quickly proved an outstanding Orfeo of wide dynamic and emotional range, projecting powerfully in the space. After mezzo Hannah Penn entered as the Messaggiera bearing black balloons and news of Euridice's death, a moving scene grew lacerating: McDonald collapsed and sang crumpled on the floor; Penn stayed on her feet but in contorted positions, the Messenger as devastated as the bereaved bridegroom, her low register echoing Nicholas Fox's organ tones. Conductor Christian Capocaccia was quite right to take the scene achingly slowly.

Penn also was a poignant Speranza (Hope), whom Orfeo must leave beneath an inscription at the underworld's entrance: "Abandon Hope, all ye who enter here." McDonald was extremely passionate in Orfeo's plea to be rowed across the Styx by the almost implacable Caronte (Charon), perfectly embodied by Deac Guidi and his rigid, black bass. His boat prow penetrated darkness upstage as the set flew up and the curtain came down for intermission. Even though the role lay low for him, baritone Zachary Lenox was a strong, resonant Plutone. Soprano Abigail Renee Krawson was a solid Proserpina. When Orfeo looked back and again lost Euridice, Yun switched on red light. Tenor Steven Brennfleck was a bit stiff for sunny Apollo. The end saw Orfeo raised from the stage and headed for the firmament. An excellent chorus—Kari Burgess, Celine Clark, Dan Gibbs, Chelsea Janzen, Tim Lafolette, Carson Lott, Brandon Michael and Maeve Stier—also provided the shepherds.

Capocaccia capably conducted an orchestra of sixteen that was a mix of period and modern instruments. The continuo group—Hideki Yamaya on theorbo and baroque guitar, Adaiha MacAdam-Somer on viola da gamba, Fox on harpsichord and organ—was sensitive, eloquent and superb. Flutes, trumpets and trombones were modern. —Mark Mandel