

The Fall of the House of Usher

PORTLAND, OR

OrpheusPDX

8/28/22

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S 1839 SHORT STORY is a richly suggestive tale of Gothic gloom and horror. Its narrator answers a plea for help from a childhood friend he hasn't heard from for years, depressed, despondent Roderick Usher, whose decaying, tarn-side manor house proves so haunted that it drives the narrator away: "From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast." He describes its spectacular collapse into fragments and into the tarn without a sorrowful or compassionate thought for Usher himself.

Philip Glass's 1988 chamber opera, to a libretto by Arthur Yorinks, stops short of such a climax. It ends with Usher quietly addressing his sister Madeline in a translation of the French epigraph Poe affixed to his tale: "Dear sister, my heart like a lute suspended; strike it and hear how it sounds." Usher is less tender toward the narrator figure: "Why did you ever visit, William? Even as children we were hardly friends." Glass has written: "Incest, homosexuality, murder, and the supernatural hang in the air, but then again, such things may exist only in the imagination of the audience." To me, tale and opera suggest incest much more than homosexuality.

But on August 28, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the second production of OrpheusPDX, Portland's new opera company, ended with Usher and William in each other's arms, for director Kevin Newbury staged the Glass as a drama of gay love. He set it in Palm Springs in June 1969—just after Judy Garland's death by overdose and just before Stonewall. William, confident and out, struggled to keep Usher, ashamed and closeted, from taking drugs. Usher was a former Hollywood leading man who watched black-and-whites starring himself and his sister and fiddled around with film reels. (It's tough to stage those Glass orchestral passages.) No sung reference—"this house is quite old," "the stones grey and dim," "its stone crumbles," "the mold spreading on the stones of the house," "built with gravestones"—was literally true of designer Daniel Meeker's unremarkable poolside Palm Springs dwelling. Connie Yun's lighting reflected weather changes without approaching the Poe's eerie-to-fraught moods.

Passages targeting one character were addressed to another. When Usher sang "If our souls could twine like these strands of hair ... unto you my heart would flow, dearest sister," he stroked William's hair. When he accused the Physician—"You murdered Madeline, you are the murderer. You killed my sister, you bastard."—he addressed William, who had never even seen Madeline. If Newbury undermined his concept there, all logic was flouted when William sang "Where is the sun? Why did I come here? I want to leave. ... How could it be so cold and damp?" in a scene with the men in swim trunks, rubbing each other with sunscreen.

In the Poe, Madeline is rarely seen and never speaks. In the opera, she sings only vocalises, many of them, on the "ah" syllable. As I familiarized myself through the Wolf Trap recording, and absorbed what others sing—"Days and months pass and she wastes away," "There must be something we can do for her," "Her complexion pales, how tender are her limbs"—her presence seemed evanescent, the vocalises keening cries of pain. But in Portland's staging, the character, who was often onstage in a bright red dress (designed by Alison Heryer), seemed quite

corporeal and robust. And, as foreshadowed in a film Usher watched, Madeline strangled her brother to death.

Steven Brennleck (Usher), Timothy McDevitt (William) and Holly Flack (Madeleine) were as credible as the verbal/visual clashes allowed. Brennleck's sensitive tenor, McDevitt's strong baritone and Flack's high soprano were all pleasing. Flack's last note, an interpolated A above high C, matched the Met-record pitch Audrey Luna hit in *The Exterminating Angel*, but Flack not only hit but sustained it. Greg Emetaz's film footage, shot in Portland with the singing cast, was skillfully done; Flack in particular seemed a screen "natural."

But the best performance was that of conductor Michelle Rofrano. Glass, like many another so-called "minimalist," dislikes the term; he has described himself as a composer of "music with repetitive structures." It seemed much less repetitive than usual as Rofrano drove the music forward, varied dynamics and built climaxes, while maintaining immaculate clarity in the twelve-musician orchestra; this was model Glass conducting. Prominent in his orchestration are a guitar, originating in the Poe, and a synthesizer-generated celesta. —Mark Mandel