



# OREGON ARTSWATCH

## ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

---

## Glass “House”: Philip’s “Fall” in Lincoln Hall

OrpheusPDX’s second production completes the company’s inaugural season of looking forward and looking back.

- **AUGUST 25, 2022**
- **BRETT CAMPBELL**
- [MUSIC](#)



*OrpheusPDX’s 2022 production of “Fall of the House of Usher.” Photo by Owen Carey.*

In OrpheusPDX’s new production of **Philip Glass’s** chamber opera *The Fall of the House of Usher*, erstwhile film star Roderick Usher spends his waning days wistfully gazing back upon fading reels of his earlier glories.

OrpheusPDX artistic director Christopher Mattaliano could have followed a similar course. After parting ways in 2019 with Portland Opera, which he led as General Director for 16 years, the 66-year-old stage director had plenty of freelance directing gigs with various opera companies around the US, teaching opportunities, and the chance to relax into retirement in his new home in [another river city, New Orleans](#), where his wife, Clare Burovac, leads that city's opera.

But after a pandemic-enforced period of downtime, "I ended up doing a lot of thinking," he recalls. "I realized I still enjoy producing operas. I love very much putting together the right combination of singers, artists, and designers and creating an atmosphere where they could do good work. I still wasn't done."

So, unlike the doomed protagonist of Glass's 1988 adaptation of [Edgar Allan Poe's](#) nightmarish tale (which [runs August 25-28](#) at Portland State University's Lincoln Hall), instead of kicking back and looking back, Mattaliano is moving forward ([read James Bash's interview here](#)). This summer, he's back in Portland leading [his newest venture](#), OrpheusPDX. [As ArtsWatch first reported](#), the company will produce two chamber operas each season, and, he hopes, create a training program for rising young opera stars. Its first production, Claudio Monteverdi's pioneering early opera *L'orfeo*, ran August 4-7 ([read Angela Allen's ArtsWatch review here](#)), and its second and final this season, Glass's *Usher*, this weekend.

The combination in OrpheusPDX's inaugural season "helps to define our programming going forward," he says. "We did a lyric opera classic with *L'Orfeo*. Now I'm excited to follow up Monteverdi and jump ahead 400 years later, to the world of Philip Glass. I'm living the dream!"

The new company fills a needed niche in Portland's classical music scene, and offers Mattaliano a chance to create a new model for an arts form that needs a fresh approach. And it's making a strong case for chamber opera in general, and Lincoln Hall in particular, as a place for opera to move forward.

## **New model**

Mattaliano wanted to maintain ties to Portland, where his daughter lives and where he first worked in 1985 and still serves on the board of Albina Vision Trust. "I wanted to give back to this community that had been so good to me," he explains.

His many years in the profession and at Portland Opera positioned Mattaliano to create a new company. His contacts among local and national musicians, artist management companies, funding sources, opera development institutions, and his deep knowledge of the Portland classical music scene equipped him with collaborators, performers, staffers and supporters.

Still, he didn't want to retrace his steps, nor compete with his old company as much as complement its offerings and those of other, small-scale opera outfits. The summer season also avoids competition with his old company, while Mattaliano said OrpheusPDX's access to national talent for solo roles distinguishes it from smaller "rough and ready" local companies like Opera Theater Oregon and Renegade Opera ([read Max Tapogna's review of Renegade's recent \*Tito\* here](#)).

And he no longer wanted to operate under the strictures that increasingly confound most large American regional opera companies. Producing shows in colossal venues (like Portland's acoustically challenged 3,000-seat Keller Auditorium, which he's previously called "a barn") forces them to frequently program the same old same old top ten opera classics, in order to fill all those seats and pay the bills for the star soloists, massive orchestras and elaborate productions many artistic directors believe their aging subscriber base demands. It's a model that's struggled everywhere in recent years.

"I'd think, 'it's been eight years since we've done *La Boheme* or *Carmen*, time to bring those back again,'" Mattaliano remembers. "No one loves Puccini and Verdi more than I do, but to do [those classics] well and financially successfully, you have to do them in a 2,000-3,000 seat hall," he explained. "That's an albatross for a regional opera company."

### **Intimate experiences**

In contrast, OrpheusPDX's smaller scale favors Mattaliano's current focus on less-familiar fare from the 17th, 18th and 20th centuries — operas that, even when he was with his old company, he often seemed more excited to produce (in alternative but still acoustically inferior spaces) than the big standbys. Those productions, including his three other Glass operas, were among my faves, too. "Now I can explore operas I love from composers like Mozart, Handel, Philip Glass," he says. "I feel very liberated."

Producing in a smaller, less expensive venue allows OrpheusPDX to stage chamber operas that require only a fraction of the musicians (most locally based) and other expenses of grand opera classics. With only a couple shows a year, it needs only a small staff, and off-season summer productions mean that accomplished leading performers are more available and affordable than they'd otherwise be.

PSU's acoustically sublime 475-seat Lincoln Hall allows Mattaliano to offer more intimate, sonically superior experiences unavailable in the capacious Keller. Its orchestra pit is large enough for the 20-40 musician ensembles that played most operas from Monteverdi's early Baroque era to Gioachino Rossini's early 19th century standards and many modern operas.

"Intimacy is not something that people necessarily associate with opera," he chuckles. "But I wanted to emphasize that emotionally very direct, enriching and intimate type of experience. For the type of programming we're doing, Lincoln Hall is just right. There's not a bad seat in the house."

Mattaliano hopes to achieve the unparalleled audience connection and intensity of Portland Opera's compelling recitals featuring only a singer and (usually) piano. "Of my 16 years at Portland Opera, those recitals at the [Portland] Art Museum [Whitsell Auditorium] are the thing I'm proudest of," he said.

### **Haunted House**

If *L'Orfeo* took us back to opera's origins, OrpheusPDX's other summer production brings the old form into the present — and in New York-based director Kevin Newbury's new staging, the 21st century, by way of 1969.

That was the year of New York's landmark Stonewall uprising and police riot, a milestone in the struggle for equal rights for queer Americans. And it's the year Newbury, now in his sixth collaboration with Mattaliano, sets Glass's *Usher*. In his 70-plus film and theater productions, the veteran director has often focused on social justice issues, especially queer history. Designer Daniel Meeker reimagined the titular dwelling as a midcentury modern poolside mansion in a Palm Springs resort area—famous as a haven from discrimination and danger for closeted Hollywood stars like Montgomery Clift and Rock Hudson.



*OrpheusPDX's 2022 production of "Fall of the House of Usher." Photo by Owen Carey.*

Mattaliano calls Poe's original elliptical 1839 short story "so wide open, more undefined and vague and mysterious in terms of what's happening, far more open to interpretation" than even Poe's other shadowy tales.

"Poe hints at much, but states hardly anything at all," Glass wrote in a [program note](#). "Is the story real, or is it a hallucination? What are the relationship between the narrator (William), his friend Roderick Usher, and Roderick's dying sister, Madeline? Has she been buried alive, or is it a demon from hell who takes such a spectacular revenge at the end? And is the vast house in which they live a living malignant entity? Incest, homosexuality, murder, and the supernatural hang in the air, but then again, such things may exist only in the imagination of the audience."

Without changing librettist Arthur Yorinks's original text, Newbury's 90-minute production suggests that the malevolent spirit pervading this haunted house is homophobia-sparked self-hatred, and that the mysterious secret that ultimately brings down the house revolves around forbidden desires – homosexuality, maybe incest, possibly both.





*OrpheusPDX's 2022 production of "Fall of the House of Usher." Photo by Owen Carey.* When we meet reclusive Hollywood Golden Age actor Roderick Usher, sung by acclaimed tenor [Steven Brennfleck](#), he's been outed by tabloid paparazzi, occasioning upheaval in both his personal and professional lives. Visiting him on the summer day [after Judy Garland overdosed](#) (a nice bit of foreshadowing), Usher's visiting, proudly out childhood friend William (baritone [Timothy McDevitt](#), who's excelled in musicals as well as opera) finds him in crisis, sipping alcohol and popping pills while obsessively and repetitively rewatching his star performances in old melodramatic noir films, like Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*.

Most of those scenes involve his co-star sister and now housemate, Madeline. Played slyly by Portland native and rising star [Holly Flack](#) as a noirish femme fatale, Madeline's evocative vocalise provides a haunting presence. Plus she gets to unleash one of her famous high notes ([read James Bash's profile here](#)). As Usher loses his sense of the line between fantasy and reality, even the audience finds it difficult to discern what's real and what's imagined.



*OrpheusPDX's 2022 production of "Fall of the House of Usher." Photo by Owen Carey.*

Glass wrote frankly too much music for the sparse amount of dramatic action in the original story, which itself leaves lots of room for interpretation. Newbury fills those gaps effectively, mostly with creative use of film and other projections, moody lighting, Meaningful Glances, and, as a last resort, characters rearranging pool deck furniture. (Besides filling time, that last bit symbolizes William trying to straighten out Usher's decaying existence, but this isn't exactly what Erik Satie meant by "furniture music.")

Created and shot by Newbury and videographer Greg Emetaz, the faux-vintage black-and-white film clips give way to full-color rear projections in which the characters from the old films seem to be replaced by those on stage, signifying Usher's mental breakdown and inability to distinguish fantasy from reality — while at the same time revealing darker, unspoken emotional secrets.

The production's extensive and creative use of film, and Newbury and Meeker's imaginative use of Lincoln's limited stage (a two-sided indoor projection room abutting an outdoor swimming pool) reinforces the concert hall's theatrical potential — in the able hands of creative designers and directors.

It also benefits the singers. Relieved of the burden having to belt or bellow to reach the balcony in a standard capacious operatic venue, singers can use the full dynamic range of their voices with a lot more dramatic nuance, which proves especially effective in this show's quieter moments. From an audience perspective, the feeling of being in the midst of the action, up close and intimate with the characters, more than makes up for lack of grandeur — or grandiosity — you can only get in a big opera house or, in Portland's case, unreasonable facsimile thereof. And there are a lot more chamber operas around than grand operas, many of them contemporary. Along with PSU Opera, I'm looking forward to more shows there, perhaps by Renegade Opera, Queer Opera, and Opera Theater Oregon.

Orpheus PDX's opening season not only proves the company's artistic worth, but also the viability and in many ways superiority of Lincoln Hall as a fertile ground for chamber opera.

### **Glass notes**

Sung in English with English surtitles (not needed by most, as the venue and singers deliver crystalline clarity), Glass's moody music, composed for five singers and 12



instrumentalists conducted here by Michelle Rofrano (who's also a leader in classical music social justice efforts), makes a mesmerizing match for Poe's haunting tale, as it did in Mattaliano's Portland Opera [production](#) of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*.

"In the inner world of Edgar Allan Poe, there's this strange underlying subtext that's implied as opposed to what's actually stated in the short stories and poetry," Mattaliano explains. "There's something about this story that seems to have elicited a deeper response from Glass, more psychologically penetrating and haunting and strangely beautiful. Something about Glass's music is an ideal fit for that undercurrent of subtext — the claustrophobic atmosphere, the strange foreboding feeling that runs through Poe's writing."

The hypnotic score is also among Glass's most colorful, he says, prominently featuring electric guitar, synthesizer, harp, bassoon and horn that at appropriate moments lend a surprising music-box melodicism and delicacy. "It's not just those churning strings people tend to associate with Glass's music," Mattaliano says. "It packs quite a wallop. It's one of his greatest scores."

That's why *The Fall of the House of Usher* has been on Mattaliano's short list for many years. Mattaliano's experience with Glass's music goes way back. He was on the directing staff of New York City Opera in 1983 when the company gave the city premiere of Glass's *Akhmaten*, part of the famed early trilogy that rocketed the composer to pre-eminence among contemporary opera composers.

But their epic scale and repetitiveness also put off some listeners. "I think he's a more effective composer when he works in miniature," Mattaliano says, which is why he successfully produced three of Glass's chamber operas during his tenure at Portland Opera: *In the Penal Colony*, [Galileo Galilei](#), and *Orpheé*.

Glass's enormous success as an opera composer — he's scored more than two dozen, and counting — might seem unlikely considering his earliest fame derived from chamber ensemble music that seemed more about its process of creation than any story subject. In fact, though, he's always considered himself a theater composer; one of his first jobs in music was providing music for his then-wife JoAnne Akalaitis's New York theater company, Mabou Mines. Like Mozart, Handel and other composers with a natural inclination toward theater, Glass writes music that enhances and enriches the story it's accompanying, whether on stage or on screen.

“The man has an innate sense of pacing and theater,” Mattaliano muses. “And he’s incredibly skillful in choosing subjects,” that fit his musical style. It’s won him a broad following. “He’d be the first to tell you: he wants an audience. Glass has found a way to connect with the general public. I’m astounded how powerful that’s been.”

Though this production concludes OrpheusPDX’s two-opera debut season, the company’s work continues. Over the next year, Mattaliano also wants to establish a six-week artist training program that would bring a dozen selected young singers to town for summer master classes from the company’s professional guest artists, while taking part in the summer productions. It’s another way that OrpheusPDX, while opening with the first great work from opera’s past, and following with another from the present, is also looking toward opera’s future.

*OrpheusPDX’s **The Fall of the House of Usher** runs August 25, 27, 28 at Portland State University’s Lincoln Hall, 1620 SW Park Ave., Portland.*