

The light that once put the sun to shame: Orpheus in Portland

New opera company OrpheusPDX debuts at Lincoln Hall with a magnificent new production of the Monteverdi classic.

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MUSIC



OrpheusPDX's production of "L'Orfeo" in Lincoln Hall. Photo by Owen Carey.

Claudio Monteverdi's 1607 *L'Orfeo*, credited as the first operatic masterpiece, is based on a magnificent myth and captivating story. But four centuries ago is a long time! Yet, OrpheusPDX's debut show Aug. 4 at Portland State University's almost full 475-seat Lincoln Hall illustrated a successful revival, ensuring the opera's staying power.

This *L'Orfeo* production embodied so many elements that a good opera with a good story should have: beautiful, and in this case tuneful music; imaginative staging; and several brilliant singers, most notably the talented lead baritone Conor McDonald as Orfeo. He could give the mythological Orfeo a run for his lyre. A powerful lead must carry a powerful opera, and he did it exceptionally well without blowing out his vocal cords. Small venues can be a blessing to singers—artists don't have to sing so loud.

Produced by former Portland Opera General Director Chris Mattaliano's new summertime opera company, this 95-minute version delivered an opening night of delight. It looks as if Mattaliano is back in town from his New Orleans home to stay at least during the summer—speaking of staying, or returning, power.

Since the 17th century, countless *Orpheus and Eurydice* (also spelled Euridice) operas have been staged. This year, several have been making the rounds, including Matthew Aucoin's (with playwright Sarah Ruhl's

libretto) *Eurydice* written from Eurydice's point of view, which premiered in Los Angeles and continued on to the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Seattle Opera staged a Gluck *Orpheus & Eurydice* in January this year, and hired a countertenor for the Orfeo role, which was a bit unsettling, at least to me. The Portland production counts as my third *Orpheus/Orfeo/Eurydice* I've heard in less than a year, and it was my favorite—a tall order when you consider the competition.



Photo by Owen Carey

Short, fairytale-ish, cleverly staged, and well sung and conducted, the opera was a good choice for Artistic Director Mattaliano to begin with. He plans to stick with intimate operas suitable to a small space like Lincoln Hall, and to skip entirely 19th-century operas that work better in larger halls with bigger casts.

Mattaliano had plenty to work with. For starters, everything is simplified when just about everybody knows the Orpheus story, but just in case you don't, here goes. Orfeo and Euridice marry. All is bliss until she gets bitten by a snake and dies. Orfeo undergoes an arduous journey to the underworld to retrieve her, and when he tries to bring her back, he glances over his shoulder at her. A backwards glance is forbidden (perhaps another version of original sin or just plain old hubris), and pouf, she's gone again, this time to heaven. Orfeo mourns her and then joins her. In this opera, he's transported by a pulley ride up to heaven, toes pointed down to Earth.

"Til Death Do Us Part" is scribbled across the blindingly bright blue sky in the first scene, which opens with the garden-party wedding of Orfeo and Euridice (well cast colatura soprano Holly Flack). At first glance, the writing seems a bit silly and obvious because the two are marrying, but instead, the script turns out to be clever. It changes with mood and circumstance, and when Orfeo enters the underworld, the lighting shortens the writing to "Death Part."



Photo by Owen Carey

The stage direction by Chas Rader-Shieber, who has a niche in and a knack for directing Baroque operas, joined to make a fresh fairytale with Megan Wilkerson's pared-down scenic design and Connie Yun's saturated lighting. The sky is far too blue to be "real" in the first scene, but then again, the couple's marital happiness is overblown and the intentional blue blueness indicates we might be in for some reversals. About 20 minutes into the opera, elements presage treachery: The sky turns orange then gray-green, and the Messenger (sung by expressive Portland mezzo Hannah Penn—you may remember her jumping in on short notice and singing the huge role of Carmen during the 2007-08 Portland Opera season) enters to tell of the bride's demise. Festooned now with black balloons, the wedding party turns into a grief fest. "The light that once put the sun to shame is dim."

The first act—a condensation of Monteverdi's first three acts—runs for about an hour. It takes a long time for Orfeo to reach Hell, or the "City of Pain." Even with his immense musical talent and charm-inducing lyre, he has to navigate a lot of obstacles, and McDonald with his baritone voice and giant lyre conquers them all. McDonald is not a big man, but he owns a big voice and a huge stage presence.

The last act, close to 30 minutes, dwells on Orfeo's and his wedding party's grief because Orfeo blew it and couldn't bring Euridice home. Throughout, McDonald is able to use the old-world "goat trill" to vary his voice and to wow the audience, though the technique would not have been as effective in a larger house. Finally, Apollo (crystal-clear-voiced tenor Steven Brennfleck), Orfeo's music mentor and "father," talks Orfeo into leaving his sadness behind and taking a ride up to heaven to join his late bride. Their duet is tuneful and terrific as both singers pull off the thrilling goat trill.

Conor McDonald as Orfeo in OrpheusPDX's production of "L'Orfeo" in Lincoln Hall. Photo by Owen Carey.



Not to shortchange the other singers, who were mostly men. After a surreal second-act scene where the men sing in wedding dresses and veils, they change back—onstage —into their street clothes and unleash a splendid nonet. As I said, there's a lot to this short opera, and stage director Rader-Shieber keeps things original and whimsical without being too wacky. And he likes the look of simplicity: singers move the props and scenery, and a table turns seamlessly into a boat without much interruption.



Photo by Owen Carey

L'Orfeo was sung in Italian under Italian conductor Christian Capocaccia, who energetically (sometimes on his toes) conducted a 16-member ensemble that included a harpsichordist (Nicholas Fox, doubling as assistant conductor and chorus master), theorbo player (Hideki Yamaya), a viola da gamba musician (Adaiha MacAdam-Somer), and instrumentalists who played a mix of brass, flute and strings. Not every instrument was of Baroque times, but those period instruments are tough to keep tuned, and the musicians managed.

Looking ahead

The bar is set high with *L'Orfeo*, but look forward to one more OrpheusPDX opera this first season. Philip Glass's evocative music and Edgar Allan Poe's thriller story merge in the upcoming *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The opera will run Aug. 25-28. For tickets see the OrpheusPDX web site.

Expect to see this company staging more high-quality operas with up-and-coming singers for the next three years, at least. Mattaliano has asked his donors to invest for three years, and bets are, they'll be in for more time than that.