

OrpheusPDX brings an old hand and a new vision to Portland's opera scene

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The cast of "L'Orfeo," the inaugural production by the new opera company OrpheusPDX. Courtesy of OrpheusPDX/Owen Carey

By Brett Campbell | For *The Oregonian/OregonLive*

Christopher Mattaliano could have eased his way into retirement. After parting ways in 2019 with Portland Opera, which he led as General Director for 16 years, the 66-year-old stage director had teaching opportunities, freelance directing gigs with various opera companies around the United States, and the chance to kick back a bit in his new home of 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 recalled. "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."

This summer, Mattaliano is back in Portland leading his newest venture. OrpheusPDX 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," runs Aug. 4-7, and its second, contemporary composer Philip Glass's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Aug. 25-28. 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.

New model

Mattaliano wanted to maintain ties to Portland, where his daughter lives, 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 said.

Mattaliano's 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.

But 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. And he didn't want to operate under the strictures most large American regional opera companies face. Producing 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 10 opera classics, in order to fill all those seats and pay the bills for the star soloists, massive orchestras and elaborate productions they 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 Bohème' or 'Carmen,' time to bring those back again," he remembered. "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."



Christopher Mattaliano, seen in this 2013 file photo, returns to Portland with a new chamber opera company, OrpheusPDX, which will stage its first productions this August. Brent Wojahn, *The Oregonian*

An experience of intimacy

In contrast, OrpheusPDX's smaller scale favors Mattaliano's focus on less familiar fare from the 17th, 18th and 20th centuries — operas that, even when he was with his old company, he seemed more excited to produce (in alternative but still acoustically inferior spaces) than the big standbys.

"Now I can explore operas I love still from composers like Mozart, Handel, Philip Glass," he said. "I feel very liberated."

Producing in Portland State University's acoustically sublime, 475-seat Lincoln Hall allows Mattaliano to offer more intimate, sonically superior experiences unavailable in the massive Keller. Mattaliano hopes to achieve the unparalleled audience connection and intensity of Portland Opera's 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. "Intimacy is not something that people necessarily associate with opera. 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."

Although Lincoln lacks some technical theatrical features, 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. And they require only a fraction of the musicians (most locally based) and other expenses of grand opera classics. With only a couple shows a year, OrpheusPDX 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. The summer season also avoids competition with his old company, while Mattaliano said OrpheusPDX's access to national talent for solo roles distinguished it from smaller "rough and ready" local companies like Opera Theater Oregon and Renegade Opera. He drew on his long history of relationships and connections in both Portland and the national opera community to enlist supporters, collaborators and performers.

"Frankly, I'm pulling in some favors," he said. "I can tell artist managers, 'I know the fee isn't competitive with what the Met pays, but will you do this for me?'"

Often enough, the answer has been yes.

Legendary love story

Monteverdi's relatively short 1607 opera provides an ideal opener for OrpheusPDX, and not just because it's the company's namesake. The tragedy of the beguiling singer Orpheus trying to rescue his beloved Eurydice from hell through the power of his voice alone has been set to music many times throughout history, including American composer Matthew AuCoin's 2020 "Eurydice" staged just last year at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

"The Orpheus legend is one of the great love stories," Mattaliano said. "Monteverdi's music really does touch the soul in a way you can't really experience in a 3,000-seat theater."

Setting the story at a modern garden wedding party, director Chas Rader-Shieber "is taking a joyful, charming approach to the piece," Mattaliano said. "It's got a buoyant look, fun and colorful." And he believes that baritone Conor McDonald, who plays the title character, is headed for a major operatic career. To compensate for Lincoln Hall's technical limitations, the actors will move the scenic elements around the stage.

During 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 staging the first great work from opera's past, is also looking toward opera's future.

If you go

"L'Orfeo": 7:30 p.m. Aug. 4 and 6, 3 p.m. Aug. 7

"The Fall of the House of Usher": 7:30 p.m. Aug. 25 and 27, 3 p.m. Aug. 28

Where: Lincoln Hall, 1620 S.W. Park Ave.

Tickets: \$50-\$110, www.orpheuspdx.org or 503-308-4828; season subscriptions available at \$90- \$198.

Note: "L'Orfeo" is sung in Italian with English surtitles; "House of Usher" is sung in English with English surtitles.

- Brett Campbell is a Portland freelance writer.