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ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

Don't look back: Christopher Mattaliano's OrpheusPDX

Former Portland Opera director discusses new company.

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OrpheusPDX founder Christopher Mattaliano.

Portlanders who love opera got a booster shot last week when a new opera company announced that it would open its inaugural season this summer. [OrpheusPDX](#), founded by Christopher Mattaliano, will officially kick off in August in [Portland State University's Lincoln Performance Hall](#) with two fully-staged productions: Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* and Philip Glass's *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

Mattaliano is an internationally known stage director who helmed Portland Opera from 2003 to 2019. He and his wife, Clare Burovac, now live in New Orleans where she is the General and Artistic Director of New Orleans Opera. I caught up with Mattaliano via Zoom to find out more about his new endeavor.

Oregon ArtsWatch: What made you decide to start a professional opera company?

Christopher Mattaliano: During the pandemic, most things got put on hold and that gave me a lot of time to think about this company and to test the idea. The idea came out of a whole lot of conversations I had with arts lovers and donors and the philanthropic community in Portland about a chamber opera company with a different programming model for the off-season when Portland Opera is not performing – so that there would be more opera year-around. I was pleasantly surprised to find that people would help to fund this endeavor.

So, I've been fundraising for the past year and a half. In the meantime, I signed with new management and have been accepting freelance opera directing gigs. I also have a private studio in New Orleans. But I maintain ties to Portland. My daughter lives in Portland, and I serve on the board of the Albina Vision Trust.

ArtsWatch: Will Lincoln Performance Hall be the permanent home of OrpheusPDX?

Mattaliano: Lincoln Performance Hall will be where our first two productions take place. I consider it the best theater space for opera in Portland. I have always enjoyed seeing performances there. I love its size and it has excellent acoustics. It has 475 seats, and there is not a bad seat in the house. I would never say never to another space. Who knows what might appear on the horizon? I am very happy to have Lincoln Performance Hall as our primary venue.

ArtsWatch: Will you use the PSU Orchestra?

Mattaliano: No. We will not be using the PSU Orchestra. We will have our own orchestra. We are strictly a professional company that is renting Lincoln Performance Hall. So, we are much like Chamber Music Northwest, BodyVox, Friends of Chamber Music or any other professional company.

We are paying for services. We will rehearse in one of the big studios in Lincoln Hall. There are some large spaces on the upper floors.

And the August timeline is a good one because school has not yet started.

ArtsWatch: Will your singers, conductors, and directors be local or national?

Mattaliano: We will bring talent from all of the world but also stick close to home. We will capitalize on local professionals for supporting and some leading roles. The orchestra will all be local professional musicians.

I hope that we will have singers and artists who will be in residence and can ideally perform in both operas if possible. That way, the audience will see the same singers in two very different roles.

ArtsWatch: What is your vision for programming?

Mattaliano: I have intentionally created this company to explore early repertory and more recent rep. I am skipping the entire 19th Century, which has a lot of opera that I love with my heart and soul. That includes all of Puccini, *Carmen*, *Die Walküre*, things like that. I am leaving that for my former company to do at Keller Auditorium. OrpheusPDX will do early opera up to Handel, Mozart, and maybe a little bit of *bel canto* like Bellini and then we will pick things up again in the 20th Century. I don't see us doing a reduced version of *Carmen* or that sort of thing.

From a programming standpoint, we are trying to be a complementary company. We intend to do things at a high quality but on a much smaller scale. Very experienced singers know how to handle a 3,000-seat theater, but they have to be careful with their instrument. If they are in a 500-seat theater, they can relax and sing. It's a different mindset for the performer.

One of the frustrating things about producing opera as someone who loves the art form is that you are always limited to two or three or four max operas per season that you can program. It means oh damn I still haven't gotten to opera X. I see this as an opportunity to program them, especially if I am not saddled with having to do *Carmen* and *Madame Butterfly* every two years, which is what you have to do when you are an enormous organization with a ticket revenue goal.

My hope is that with the new programming model and new operating model, I will be a little bit freer to take risks artistically. I don't need to fill a 3,000-seat house. We have a small staff, and we are all working remotely. I am hoping that this will be more sustainable given the current climate in terms of how arts companies are surviving.

ArtsWatch: Where will you create and store props and scenery?

Mattaliano: We are working with Bill Anderson Design, which has a warehouse in Northwest Portland. His company will build the scenery and costumes and properties. They will also store the items that we want to keep.

I am also in conversation with a couple of other opera companies in regards to co-producing productions and then shipping the production to the next company. There's a handful of other small-scale opera companies like Des Moines, Chicago Opera Theater, and On Site Opera. So, there may be a way of sharing expenses.

ArtsWatch: The press release mentioned a young artist program?

Mattaliano: My dream is to start a young artist training program, and layer that in in the next year or two. The plan is to engage twelve very gifted young singers who are chosen nationwide throughout the country. We would bring them to Portland for six weeks and be part of the company where they would receive ongoing master classes from our guest singers, conductors, directors, designers, etc. If there is a university that wants to house that program, I would be thrilled and open to that.

ArtsWatch: You seem to have a special affinity for operas by Philip Glass.

Mattaliano: During my years at Portland Opera, I produced three operas by Philip Glass: *Orphée*, *Galileo Galilei*, and *In the Penal Colony*. *The Fall of the House of Usher* has always been on my short list. I have been wanting to do it for a long time.

ArtsWatch: While at Portland Opera, you made recordings of 'Orphée' and 'Galileo Galilei'. Are you planning to record 'The Fall of the House of Usher' as well?

Mattaliano: No. Wolf Trap has already done a commercial recording.

ArtsWatch: What will ticket prices be like?

Mattaliano: Single tickets will range from \$50 to \$110 – but subscriptions are 10 percent less. We will save 25 student rush tickets for \$15 each for each performance. We will also have 300 free student dress rehearsal seats. Tickets will offset 30 to 40 percent of the cost of the production if we sell it out.

ArtsWatch: Good luck with everything!

Mattaliano: Thanks!

OrpheusPDX inaugural season

L'Orfeo

August 4, 6, 7, 2022. Sung in Italian with English surtitles. Cast: Conor McDonald, Holly Flack, Hannah Penn, Abigail Renee Krawson, Martin Bakari, Deac Guidi, Zachary Lenox.

The Fall of the House of Usher

August 25, 27, 28, 2022. Sung in English with English surtitles. Cast: Martin Bakari, Timothy McDevitt, Hannah Cosenz, Gregory Brumfield, Scot Crandal.