
OrpheusPDX opera company debuts with 'L'Orfeo'

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Christopher Mattaliano is back with two chamber works, convinced Portland still has taste



COURTESY PHOTO: ORPHEUSPDX/OWEN CAREY - Monteverdi's opera 'L'Orfeo' opens August 4 at PSU Lincoln Hall for six performances. It all goes wrong after the wedding.

The first opera from [OrpheusPDX](#) opens Aug. 4 for three engagements. Monteverdi's "L'Orfeo" (1607) kicks off a short season for the new chamber opera company. OrpheusPDX was formed by Christopher Mattaliano, who was director of the Portland Opera for 16 years until 2019.

"There's nothing like a pandemic to make you think, 'What shall I do next?' I realized I wasn't done directing opera, bringing artists together to do their best work, and people still want beautiful, music beautifully sung," he told Pamplin Media Group. "I'm also still very connected to Portland."

Chamber operas have casts of fewer than 15, no big choruses, modest scenery budgets and less than a full orchestra.

"'Where opera gets intimate' is our tagline," Mattaliano said.

The programming model for OrpheusPDX is to create "intimate" opera in smaller theaters, such as Lincoln Hall, (Mattaliano's favorite in Portland). "We'll do one Mozart, Handel or Rossini, then we're skipping the entire 19th century: 'Carmen', 'Aida', 'La Traviata'. They're typically done in 3,000-seat halls. We're focusing on emotionally direct operas in an intimate setting."

Kicking off with "L'Orfeo," followed by "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Philip Glass, might seem risky — they don't have tunes you can whistle — but Mattaliano is dedicated to doing the best works, well.

"L'Orfeo" is considered the first opera as we know it — a single, dramatic story, mostly sung — and it can be hard work. This is the era of large wigs and rouge looking back, without irony, at Greek legends. Musician Orpheus is suddenly bereaved when his bride, Eurydice dies on their wedding day. The gods allow him to retrieve her from the underworld, so long as he doesn't look her in the eye. Spoiler alert: Orpheus blows it. However, the gods give him a second chance to reunite when he dies.

"Opening with "L'Orfeo, it's intentional. The opera is very much about the power of music to touch the soul. When Orpheus goes to the underworld, he brings tears to the eyes of all the creatures in Hades by the beauty of the music and his singing," Mattaliano said.

Ushering in Usher

The second opera follows soon: the psychological thriller, "The Fall of the House of Usher" runs Aug. 25-28 at the same venue. Mattaliano is bringing in the talent for a whole month, some from out of town, and using some of them in both operas, which he calls "cross casting."

"I've always loved that about opera festivals and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. I love going down to Ashland to see a week of performances, where we would see (actors play) Henry the Fifth one night and then do Groucho Marx the next night and then do the 'Sound the Music' the next night. I wanted to create a similar dynamic here where audiences will see the same singer and two very different types of operas." These leads are Steven Brennfleck and Holly Flack, a former Oregon Episcopal School student, now based in New York. "Those are all singers to watch out for."

OrpheusPDX aims to complement Portland Opera's programming in taste and timing, by putting on summer shows and being a bit more edgy. "Usher" is the fourth Glass opera he has produced in Portland." It is among Philip Glass's greatest works. The combination of Glass's music and the world of Edgar Allan Poe is uniquely powerful and very beautiful and very haunting," he said.

Money

When he floated the idea of a chamber opera company a year ago, Mattaliano found that people with money in Portland would welcome another professional company.

"I received a great deal of encouragement from the philanthropic community here, and I'd formed deep friendships with a lot of arts lovers and those who are in a position to support the arts over the years," he said.

Although his wife, Clare Burovac, is the general and artistic director of the New Orleans Opera and New Orleans is their home, his daughters and grandson are here and they still feel very connected to Portland.

OrpheusPDX is renting the venue. "Lincoln Hall, there's not a bad seat in the house, and Leroy Bynum (an accomplished opera singer and the dean of Portland State University's [College of the Arts](#)) has been wonderfully cooperative at PSU."

Next year Mattaliano plans to have a young artist program to help apprentice singers and musicians and give them stage time, but for now OrpheusPDX must put on two chamber operas in a month and see if the appetite for high culture is still there in Portland.

Mattaliano, who was used to the big budget world of grand opera companies, says the distributed/hybrid model is the future for modern arts companies. There's no office rent overhead, everyone is a contractor and works from home, until that month when talent flies in for three weeks of intense rehearsal and a week of shows.

Live from Portland

In 2019 Mattaliano taught baroque opera at Princeton University. When the campus closed during the pandemic, he directed an online video-based production of '[La Calisto](#)' by Francesco Cavalli.

"That was an incredibly satisfying, fulfilling experience. I had no idea that it would have evolved that way. Because literally, the soprano was in Mexico, the baritone was in Scotland, one soprano lived in Germany. ..."It was quirky and creative, but what did he learn from the pandemic? Would anyone do that today, now that the theaters are open again?

"I adore listening to a jazz quartet while sipping a glass of wine ... those are the great experiences of life, nothing comes close to the experience of being live. That said, I'm very impressed with the creativity that evolved during the COVID shutdown and how the industry responded."

While it's nice that productions can be seen online, livestreamed or archived, "If we have the option of having a singer and scenery and costumes, live before our eyes, as opposed to 'We've got a great video recording of the Barber of Seville,' I much prefer the live experience."

Mattaliano added, "My background is as a stage director and I've always prided myself on creating a rehearsal period that allows directors, conductors and singers to do very detailed work because I believe audiences feel the difference when there's been great attention to detail from scenery, costumes, makeup, staging and with the orchestra and the musicality. I wanted to create a company where we get the right artists that are interested in doing great, detailed work."

When: "L'Orfeo" by Claudio Monteverdi, 7:30 p.m. Aug. 4 and 6; 3 p.m. Aug. 7;

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

Where: Lincoln Hall, Portland State University, 1620 S.W. Park Ave.

Cost: \$45-\$99

More: orpheuspx.org