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Review: Portland Opera takes us to hell and back

By **David Stabler**, *The Oregonian*
November 09, 2009, 9:51AM

If you think all Philip Glass music sounds the same – rush-hour traffic for the ear – **Portland Opera** would like you to meet "Orphée," a French twist on the Orpheus myth.

Glass' operatic riff opened at the Keller Auditorium on Friday in a stylish production that will almost make you take back those awful things you said about him.

Surprise, surprise, "Orphée" isn't horrible. It's not wretched or dreary. It's not Novocain. The evening took a while to heat up, but when the visual, musical and dramatic elements came together, it carried an emotional and dramatic charge.

The pensive score, shot through with honky tonk bits and seesaw harmonies, kept the ear engaged. The staging needed more spark, more danger, but a terrific cast, led by Lisa Saffer, a cougar on the prowl as the Princess of death, grounded the story with strong, clear voices.

This season, Portland Opera is presenting works composed in 1624, which isn't unusual, and 1991, which is. As we've seen with "Nixon in China," "Journey to Reims," "Street Scene" and "Rodelinda," Christopher Mattaliano, the company's general director, defines opera broadly. This very weekend, New York City Opera opens with his staging of Hugo Weisgall's "Esther," a work he had great success with at its premiere in 1993.

"Orphée," which closes its run on November 14, is no stretch for him, and it needn't be for us. Based closely on Jean Cocteau's 1949 film, it's a fresh take on an old story. It's not in the grand minimalist tradition of Glass' earlier operas such as "Einstein on the Beach" or "Satyagraha." It's shorter, smaller and more conventional – with a splendid love duet in the second act – but the burbling notes and repeating harmonies have a similar, ritualizing effect.

The story of a modern Orpheus, a popular poet, traveling to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice, can be seen as the creative journey of an artist accused of selling out. His reluctant, confusing trip is an interior journey where he finds a side of himself previously unavailable. Down "there," he confronts convention in the form of judges, he falls newly in love and returns vowing never to "look back."

The story unfolds on a single set (from the 2007 Glimmerglass Opera



Brent Wohajn/The Oregonian

Lisa Saffer plays the role of Death, aka La Princesse, with Steven Brennfleck as Cegeste, who is under her spell.

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production) resembling an upscale apartment. Beige walls, sofas and ceiling give it a "House Hunters" neutrality. The singers wear jeans, t-shirts and sneakers, with the exception of Eurydice, in a simple, form-fitting dress, and La Princesse, in a glam full-length fur coat.

The low ceiling lends a claustrophobic feel to the set, which, from a distance, looks like the rectangular, letterbox aspect of a flat-screen TV. That may be deliberate, considering where much of the action takes place.

In Cocteau's film, characters walk through mirrors to enter the underworld. It's a wonderful, creepy effect. Here, they just looked at the mirror. Much more could have been done with video projections, dramatic lighting or special effects to suggest the journey – and the tension – between this world and the next.

Sam Helfrich's staging fell flat a number of times, too. The first scene dragged as characters at a party stood around or languidly read magazines. The journey where Orpheus accompanies the Princess and the dead Cegeste, an important scene where Orpheus learns who the mysterious Princess is, lacked any of the tension the film offers. As did bringing Cégeste back to life.

Comically painful bits moved things along when Eurydice returned to life on the promise that Orpheus not look at her. She ducked behind sofas and dropped to her knees as the young couple tried to adjust to their new arrangement. He did look at her, of course, unable to resist.

Glass preserves Cocteau's happy ending, but not before the score has risen to dramatic heights. Conductor Anne Manson did an admirable job of seizing those moments, even if the smallish orchestra tended to dominate the singers. It took my ear some time to adjust to the off-balanced sound, which shifted from foreground to background depending on whether someone was singing.

But her leadership was secure, especially in those moments when the orchestra was shifting meters like crazy while the singers skimmed overhead.

Saffer's singing was powerful, moving, and fearless. Her upper register, where Glass places a lot of awkward phrases, gleamed, even as she smoldered at Orpheus. Philip Cutlip was a tormented, impulsive Orpheus and tenor Ryan MacPherson brought out the caring, loyal side of Heurtebise, the chauffeur, with bright lyricism. As Eurydice, Georgia Jarman had the difficult task of appearing as The Wife, representing domestic ordinariness. Her radiant voice conveyed compassion and distress with natural-sounding purity.

Smaller roles came across well, too, including Steven Brennfleck's Cégeste, Jeffrey G. Beruan's Poet, Konstantin Kvach's Judge, Ron Brallier's Commmsioner, Daryl Freedman's Aglaonice, Carl Halvorson's Reporter and Marc Acito's Glazier.

All in all, a worthy effort that invigorates opera.

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