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Four Trips To Hell And Back At the Opera

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y., Aug. 5 — Orpheus, the awesomely gifted musician and poet of ancient myth, whose lyrics and songs could entrance wild animals and alter the course of churning rivers, is the hero of countless

**ANTHONY
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**MUSIC
REVIEW**

operas, including Monteverdi's landmark "Orfeo" of 1607. With this historic work Monteverdi set the parameters and pointed the way for what was to come in the genre.

In his first summer as the general and artistic director of Glimmerglass Opera, Michael MacLeod is acknowledging the 400th anniversary of Monteverdi's "Orfeo" by presenting it, as well as three other works based on the Orpheus myth. All four new productions were offered here this weekend at the festival's wonderfully intimate opera house.

There were "Orfeo ed Euridice," Gluck's sublime 1762 version of the story, with its idealized happy ending, performed here in French in an edition prepared by Berlioz; Offenbach's impish 1858 French operetta, offered here in English as "Orpheus in the Underworld"; and Philip Glass's 1993 "Orphée," which draws its libretto almost intact from the screenplay for Jean Cocteau's 1949 film of the same title. As presented here, in a haunting production by Sam Helfrich, vibrantly conducted by Anne Manson, Mr. Glass's work was the surprise hit: a rich, complex and challenging experience.

Mr. MacLeod, who took over the festival last year after Paul Kellogg's long tenure, is now searching for a music director to join his team. Judging by the sometimes shaky quality of the musical and vocal performances this weekend, appointing someone strong is an urgent priority.

The problems were especially worrisome during Sunday afternoon's performance of the Monteverdi, though the cast might have been distracted from the business of singing by the demands of Christopher Alden's updated, high-concept and physically arduous production. The opera is set in a striking wood-paneled Art Deco salon filled with sofas and easy chairs (designed by Paul Steinberg). Here, during the prologue, the character La Musica rouses the sullen Orfeo and the sleeping Euridice, calling on them, in effect, to get up and re-enact the famous myth for the bene-

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Four Different Trips to Hell and Back at the Glimmerglass

Opera

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fit of a roster of characters, dressed in elaborate Renaissance-style costumes or modern wear, who both witness and partake in the story.

Orfeo, the young tenor Michael Slattery, is presented as a grungy rock star like Kurt Cobain, a pansexual and impulsive youth. As staged by Mr. Alden, when Orfeo sings his jaunty song to celebrate his marriage, the nymphs and shepherds who join in engage the bridegroom in a lovefest with homerotic tinges. When the Messenger arrives with the horrible news that while gathering flowers, Euridice was killed by a viper, Orfeo is being stroked by two shepherds, one shirtless and muscular, the other in a comfy robe of sheep's wool.

Though sometimes intriguing, this radical production undermined the musical performance. The conductor, Antony Walker, appears to have encouraged the young cast to evoke early-17th-century singing styles, which some scholars maintain involved using little vibrato to produce focused and austere sound. But the result here was too much singing that sounded pinched, constricted and unstable.

Mr. Slattery has it in him to sing the title role very well, but he seemed put upon by what he was asked to do. In the climax when, determined to bring Euridice back from the underworld, Orfeo performs a long aria of aching beauty to charm Charon, who guards the gateway, Mr. Slattery was a riveting, writhing, earthy presence. He did everything you could want, except singing the music beautifully. The performers who sang the most naturally fared the best, notably the lyric soprano Megan Monaghan as Euridice.

Mr. Walker did not help matters by slowing some scenes to a standstill and taking others at hyperdrive (as in the celebratory balletto in Act I, where the chorus sounded breathless and the orchestra ragged).

The festival had more success on Friday night with Gluck's opera. The director Lillian Groag's production is sometimes

Variations on an ancient theme, by composers from Monteverdi to Glass.

fussy but generally handsome, especially the baronial room where the spiritless souls who portray the Furies await the defiant Orphée. In the title role, Michael Maniaci, who calls himself a male soprano (to distinguish him from countertenors), had a few patches of vocal strain but mostly delivered the role strongly, clearly and expressively. At its best, Julian Wachner's uneven conducting had poise and grace.

It was delightful to take in Offenbach's frothy operetta, which pokes fun at Gluck's august masterpiece, the next afternoon. The new English lyrics and dialogue by Kelley Rourke sometimes indulge in cheap laughs, though anything goes in this madcap work, and Jean-Marie Zeitouni's conducting, while lively, was sometimes frenetic.

Eric Einhorn's production, with sets by Allen Moyer, is jolly and appropriately over the top. Jupiter and the other gods (his restless kids, Diana, Venus and the whole brood) reside in a stuffy manor, living on ambrosia and nectar. No wonder they cannot wait to join their dad on a trip to hell, where things are happening, and the food is spicier. Your

sympathies went out to the robust tenor Kurt Lehmann, as the hapless Orpheus, continually bossed about by the character Public Opinion, here played by the indomitable veteran mezzo-soprano Joyce Castle.

Some might find Mr. Glass's work merely a musical riff on the Cocteau film, which follows the mythic tale only metaphorically, setting it in modern times. Orphée is a famous and wealthy poet, now facing creative crisis and the backlash of critics. He has been distracted by a mysterious and alluring Princess, actual death in disguise, come to the real world with her aide, Heurtebise, a chauffeur.

In this production, Andrew Lieberman's stunning set shows the stylishly contemporary apartment where Orphée lives with his forlorn wife, who is baffled by his animosity. The characters enter the underworld, here called the Zone, through mirrors, depicted by invisible walls bordering the living room: on the outer sides, you see the same living room furniture backward, as if in reflection.

Mr. Glass may follow the film slavishly, but his hypnotically repetitive music has the effect of ritualizing the story, making it mythic. I often find his music formulaic, but not this score. It is run through with honky-tonk, jazzy bits and ancient modal lyri-

The Glimmerglass season runs through Aug. 28; (607) 547-2255, glimmerglass.org.



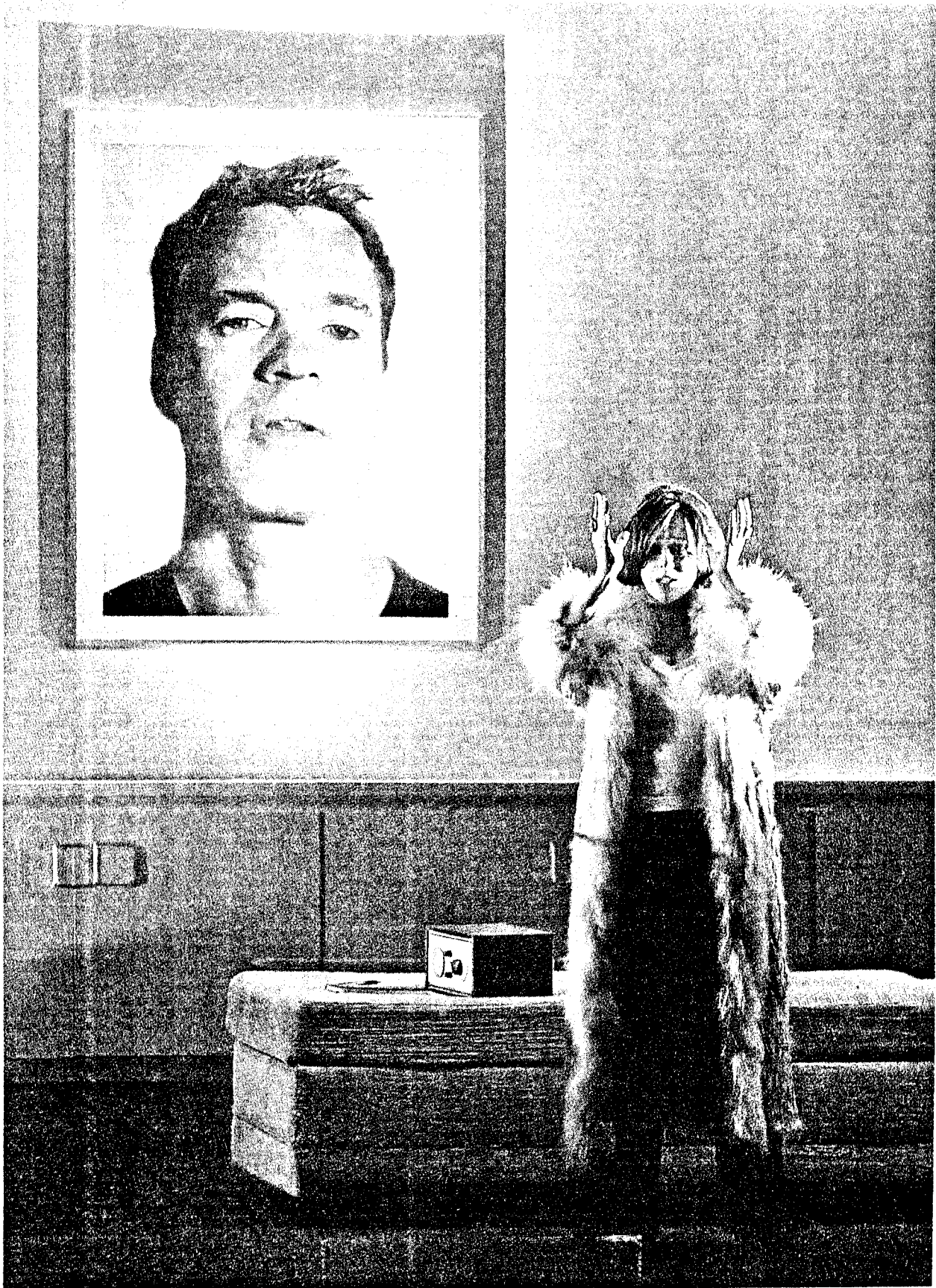
Michael Slattery, left, plays the title role in Monteverdi's "Orfeo"; Michael Maniaci plays the same role, with Amanda Pabyan as Eurydice, in the Gluck-Berlioz version of the same story.

cism, percolating with rhythmic riffs that often break into asymmetrical patterns and keep you off guard. The vocal writing is sometimes like pitched speech. But that only enhances the austere ritualism of the music.

Still, there are real problems with the score, including long passages of needlessly awkward instrumental writing. Ms. Manson somehow managed to bring balance, clarity and richness to the performance.

And whole stretches of vocal music take the singers into uncomfortably high tessituras, especially in the role of the Princess, though the soprano Lisa Saffer still managed to be mesmerizing. The appealing baritone Philip Cutlip was a tormented and volatile Orphée. Two tenors — Jeffrey Lentz as Heurtebise, and Glenn Alamilla as Cégeste, another young poet the Princess is embroiled with — gave nuanced and commanding performances.

There are some truly profound scenes, as when Eurydice has been restored to Orphée on condition that he never, ever look at her. It was bleakly comic yet painful to see this confused couple trying to inhabit their comfortable apartment while avoiding each other's glance. All through the scene, Mr. Glass's pensively subdued music churned below. In borrowing the Cocteau script, Mr. Glass wound up creating a freshly respectful homage to Gluck and Monteverdi.





PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE MOTT/GLIMMERGLASS OPERA

Jill Gardner, left, and Amanda Crider in the Glimmerglass Opera production of Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld."