

Orpheus at Glimmerglass

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For his first season as general and artistic director of Glimmerglass Opera, Michael MacLeod decided to mark the 400th anniversary of Monteverdi's "L'Orfeo" (1607), the earliest surviving opera, with four operatic versions of the Orpheus story. If this sounds tediously repetitive, it is not: The works, with dates spanning four centuries, are very different musical and theatrical confections. Indeed, the two latest ones are only loosely based on the story of the great singer who travels to the Underworld and uses music to reclaim his beloved Eurydice from death.

Producers tend to be afraid that the Monteverdi opera, which is very static and full of pastoral choruses, will bore the audience. The director of the work at Glimmerglass, Christopher Alden, must have been very worried, because he corrupted it completely, grafting on a new, gimmicky scenario. His Orfeo (Michael Slattery) became a rock star with a dissolute entourage, some in quasi-Renaissance garb, all lying around (or jumping) on mismatched furniture in what looked like a paneled basement lit a bilious yellow (Paul Steinberg designed the set; Doey Lüthi, the costumes; and Adam Silverman, the lighting). The wedding to Euridice (Megan Monaghan) did not seem to be cause for much rejoicing, as the two spouses clearly didn't like each other. Euridice got taped to a wall, Caronte read a newspaper, Pluto raped Proserpina. Orfeo's famous plea to Caronte to allow him to cross the Styx was rewarded with applause and money. So much for the power of music. It was all very ugly.

Pauline Viardot in the role of Orpheus—earlier versions were scored for castrati and high tenor—but Glimmerglass cast the male soprano Michael Maniaci. Mr. Maniaci has some spectacular high notes, which enabled him to actually sing the showy aria "Amour, viens rendre à mon âme," which Gluck first added for the hero (then a tenor) in 1774. However, the aria's flashy ornamentation—just the sort of thing that Gluck



In Glimmerglass's production of Monteverdi's "L'Orfeo," the title character, played by Michael Slattery, becomes a rock star.

There was musical corruption as well. The orchestra, led by Antony Walker and buttressed with some period instruments, had good energy. But it often went too far, and some of the continuo instruments were miked, making it sound aggressively like a rock band, while slow sections sagged interminably. Even worse, the singers were coached into some blatant belting and crooning, which spoiled the exquisite music. Since Glimmerglass has never produced "L'Orfeo" before, it seemed especially pointless to offer it in a form that bore so little resemblance to its 17th-century origins.

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Gluck's Orpheus opera went through numerous revisions after its 1762 premiere in Vienna; Glimmerglass chose to present it in the edition created by the composer Hector Berlioz for Paris in 1859. "Orphée et Eurydice," sung in French, was a vehicle for the mezzo-soprano who wrote his "reform" opera to eliminate—sounded like a siren, a party trick rather than an expressive element. Indeed, Mr. Maniaci didn't quite have the charisma to carry the opera.

Soprano Amanda Pabyan, in the relatively tiny role of Eurydice, made a better, more heartfelt connection; Julian Wachner's conducting was prosaic.

Director Lillian Groag and designer John Conklin opted for a classical frame of arches and columns; the Furies looked like Bedlam inmates in Constance Hoffman's homespun gowns; and the Elysian Fields were an Enlightenment paradise with the Shades doing art and admiring astronomical models. The production hinted at the artist's struggle between passion and rationality, but it did not successfully solve the problem of what to do about all that dance music when you have only two dancers. Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Troy Gillen, choreographed by Nicola Bowie, gave it their best shot, but it wasn't enough.

Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld" (1858), sung in English, was frothy operetta fun, its excellent tunes kept bubbling by conductor Jean-Marie Zeitouni. In this story, the philandering title character annoys his wife with endless saccharine violin solos; she runs away with a shepherd who turns out to be Pluto. Orpheus is thrilled, but Public Opinion insists that he must retrieve her. Trips ensue, both to Olympus, where Jupiter's progeny squabble and complain about their boring diet of nectar and ambrosia, and the Underworld, where Pluto throws a party, complete with the famous can-can.

Glimmerglass went all out on the costumes for this one: Gabriel Berry did bright colors and multiple layers (in the first scene, Eurydice's stiff polka-dot dress got ripped off to reveal a candy-pink ball gown; the final party scene was a riot of transvestitism). Eric Einhorn's directing was as detailed as the costumes, **Allen Moyer's set** cleverly suggested all three worlds. Unlike earlier operatic versions, this is Eurydice's show, and Jill Gardner was forceful, if lacking in nuance. The vocal standout was one of the company's young artists, the sparkling Joëlle Harvey as a scene-stealing Cupid.

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The best show of the season turned out to be the most recent: Philip Glass's "Orphée" (1993). Based on the 1949 Cocteau film, this moody piece has a cinematic flow, with theatrical scenes that dissolve musically from one to the next, and conversational vocal writing that floats through the propulsive orchestration. Here, too, the story is altered: The poet Orphée is seduced by Death (a.k.a. La Princesse), who kills others, including Eurydice, to get to him, but finally sacrifices herself to his artistic immortality.

Sam Helfrich's precise directing and Andrew Lieberman's set—an elegant, modern apartment, with mirror-image spaces to evoke the movement between worlds—and Kaye

Orpheus Festival

Glimmerglass Opera
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Voyce's costumes, modern with surrealistic touches, were beautifully appropriate to the work. So was Ann Manson's skillful conducting, which maintained the pulse of the opera and kept the orchestral writing clear.

"Orphée" also had the most consistently top-flight cast: Lisa Saffer was extraordinary as La Princesse, combining the vocal acrobatics needed for the role's high tessitura with deep emotional power; Jeffrey Lentz was touching as her loyal chauffeur, Heurtebise, who falls in love with Eurydice; Phillip Cutlip gave a subtle performance as the confused Orphée; and Caroline Worra was forthright and warm as Eurydice, an ordinary girl saddled with a genius.

The production proved that high concept has its place. If this theme season was intended to spark reflection about the power of music, it worked best when all the pieces combined to let the music speak.

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