

OPERATHEATER  
presents

# ORPHEUS AND EURIDICE

BY CHRISTOPH WILLIBALD VON GLUCK

## An interview with Artistic Director Jonathan Eaton



*Why did Opera Theater's Artistic Director Jonathan Eaton want to present this opera?*

With Orpheus, Gluck threw out the old and ushered in the new. That is why I have always wanted to stage the work. It is a revolutionary opera. It marks a new start for modern music drama, where the music – sung and played – serves the drama: the music tells us about the character and the plot, and if it doesn't, then it shouldn't be there. This doesn't sound so radical now, but in 1762 it was: in the decades prior to Gluck's Orpheus, opera had become an orgy of Baroque excess: singers adding in arias of their choosing from other operas, indulging in crazy (because unmotivated) vocal display – the medium was subordinated to the star system. And so the message often got lost.

Gluck tried to (re)-instate an art form of 'noble simplicity', where the music was harnessed to character and action. The music had to reflect the character's innermost feelings. Out with recitative accompanied by tinkly harpsichords, designed to get through plot requirements as quickly as possible; in with recitative accompanied by the full emotive range of the orchestra. Out with the Da Capo 'ABA' aria, a formal structure of statement, counter statement, followed by a floridly decorated repetition of the original statement (the superstars loved this part); in with a music whose flowing structure followed the character's heartbeat much more closely. This closer harnessing of music to mood and motivation is a very modern notion, very human, of opera as theater, and that is why we are so excited to present it at Opera Theater.

*Why is Opera Theater performing it in a mansion and not in a theater?*

Opera is so often a long-range affair: but how personally can we take characters who are pouring their hearts out 300 yards away? Orpheus is a 'modern' music drama of very real, often private human feelings. So we have chosen to perform it in a ballroom, an intimate venue, up close and personal. The intimacy of it is the key to its humanity. Audiences share the space with the performers, they live the drama alongside them. It's a completely different experience to long-range opera. It is the intimacy that brings this work to life. And the William Penn Snyder mansion is the perfect intimate setting for it.

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*Why is the story interesting to us today?*

We all love a good love story, and this is one of the best: that love can overcome death. Can we see ourselves in Orpheus and Euridice? I think so. Regardless of the divorce rate being sky high, we most of us are still looking for 'the one'. Human nature hasn't changed much since Greek times – or the 18th century. And this story operates with timeless psychology that is strangely 'modern'. Orpheus is 'tested' by Amor. He is allowed to bring her back from the realm of the dead but there is a condition. He is not allowed to look Euridice in the eye as he leads her up from the underworld – or she will die. What pressure does this impose on the relationship? How can she trust him if he won't look at her? Why won't she see how important it is that, just for once, she agrees to do as he asks? But she doesn't, and they have a huge, 'fatal' fight. Ultimately Orpheus gives in – he can't cope with the grief she throws at him – and thereby he kills her all over again. It is the story of a relationship that has a way to mature, in which trust has its limits, and unconditional love has not yet blossomed. Do they get there in the end? Ah, that would be telling...

*Why is Orpheus's aria "Che faro senza Euridice" ("I have lost my Euridice") so well known?*

This is the great aria from the work that has been passed down to all music lovers throughout the ages. It's a perfect melody. Its power has to do with the power of selfless love: Orpheus and Euridice have succumbed to mistrust and conflict, and this has killed Euridice. Orpheus is bereft, stricken with guilt, and seared by sorrow. Only now does he find the selfless love deep down inside that can be poured out in the music of Che faro. And it works: selfless love has the power to transform, to revive, to regenerate...

### *Orpheus and Euridice*

Fri Nov 5 at 8:00 pm

Sat Nov 6 at 8:00 pm

Sun Nov 7 at 2:30 pm

Preshow talk 45 minutes prior.

Postshow discussion.

William Penn Snyder Mansion ballroom  
850 Ridge Avenue, Allegheny West, North Side  
Pittsburgh, PA 15212

Free private parking