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'Orfeo'

by Wynne Delacoma Classical Music Critic

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Cheers erupted in the audience while bursts of snowy confetti fell over the happy lovers at the end of Chicago Opera Theater's stunning new production of Monteverdi's "Orfeo" Wednesday night.

Never has an ovation been more deserved. COT has done some strong work during its 27 years, but "Orfeo" moves the company to a new plateau.

In addition to COT's traditional emphasis on American opera, the company's new general director, Brian Dickie, is making it the place where Chicago finally will get to see some of the groundbreaking work being done in Baroque opera. He brought in respected British conductor Jane Glover to oversee the musical end of "Orfeo" and has forged an alliance with Mary Springfels' locally based Newberry Consort. With the Consort as a nucleus, some of the city's finest Baroque specialists were in the Athenaeum's pit.

Stage director Diane Paulus had the brilliant idea of staging "Orfeo" as a chic, contemporary party celebrating the long-delayed wedding of Orfeo, a bad-boy artist, and Euridice, the beautiful daughter of rich, worldly parents. The vision, aided by Scott Pask's airy white set and Michael Chybowski's evocative lighting, worked effortlessly. Costume designer Meg Neville dressed the men in tuxedos and the women in coolly sophisticated black-and-white gowns. The atmosphere easily combined the high spirits of a bachelor party with the allure of a formal dinner party on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

The younger cast was outstanding. As La Musica, "Orfeo's" mistress of ceremonies, Thea Tullman was both sinister and seductive. With her expressive soprano and fragile beauty, Valerie MacCarthy was a Euridice to break the heart.

Kathleen Flynn, Judd Ernster, and William Watson gave fully rounded vocal and dramatic portraits.

Tenor Laurence Dale has sung Orfeo all over the world, and his portrait of the mythic poet/singer as hip young artist, both ardent and arrogant, was compelling. Using every nuance of Monteverdi's subtle score, he peeled back multiple layers of Orfeo's psyche.

Nowhere was this more evident than in Orfeo's Act III lament, his plea for admission to the underworld to retrieve his beloved Euridice, who has died. His only hope is to sing so beautifully that the stony Caronte will pity him and allow him to cross into Pluto's realm.

Early in the opera Dale's Orfeo moved with youthful swagger. He was acclaimed as the world's greatest singer and damned proud of it. But in the Act III lament we encountered a young man smart enough to know that fancy vocalizing and swagger would get him

nowhere. Life and death hung in the balance, and nothing less than the performance of a lifetime was required.

Pressing forward in Monteverdi's slow-moving, long-lined song, we could almost hear him telling himself, "Slow and easy, slow and easy, don't blow it."

The lament's melody line doesn't jump around, but rather unfolds in tight, careful little steps. The idea was to mesmerize, to keep the song moving inexorably forward without risking any sudden movement or pauses that might break the spell. It worked like an obsessively plotted charm. And when Orfeo later reverted to youthful swagger and, as a result, lost Euridice once again, the self-discipline and cunning in that Act III lament became even more impressive.