

Chicago Tribune

'Orfeo' gamble pays off

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Chicago Opera Theater is taking something of an esoteric gamble by presenting Claudio Monteverdi's "Orfeo," an early Baroque work that is considered more a connoisseur's opera than a standard crowd-pleaser—on that requires careful scholarship as well as special commitment from performers to breathe musical and dramatic life into it. Also, let's face it, Monteverdi is far from the easiest sell in a town that prefers its opera familiar, humable and starchy.

Yet general director Brian Dickie's enterprise paid off handsomely Wednesday at the Athenaeum Theatre, where COT began its 27th season with a stunning new production of "Orfeo." Incredible as it may seem, this 1607 masterpiece had to wait until now to receive its first professional staging in Chicago. But this is exactly the sort of specialized repertory the city's second opera company should be doing. And it was worth the wait to have a production, conducted by the British scholar-musician Jane Glover and directed by off-Broadway's Diane Paulus, that resonates so stylishly to the sounds Monteverdi would have heard, yet lives so fully in the present.

From the moment the trumpets and sackbuts stationed in the theater's side boxes call the house to order, the final tableau of rejoicing at Orfeo's apotheosis, we are transported to a world not our own but one whose basic emotions are very much our own. The timeless tale is simplicity itself: Boy marries girl, boy loses girl, boy again loses girl, boy regains her in immortality. Monteverdi's music, with its serene, quivering vocal lines and madrigal-like choruses for vocal ensemble, colors the words from a discreet distance. Plenty of musical and dramatic blanks remain to be filled in by resourceful artists, of whom COT has assembled a bumper crop.

Paulus, in her operatic directing debut, sets the aboveground action in a brilliant all-white drawing room where the passionate lovers (Laurence Dale and Valerie MacCarthy) are surrounded by masked revelers at a high-society ball. After Orfeo travels down to Hades to rescue his dead wife, he finds her at the banquet table of Plutone (Andrew Funk), dressed in a red silk smoking jacket. With the vocal ensemble never far from the center of the action, the stage is alive with fluid, stylized movement that takes its dramatic cues from the gut strings and valveless brasses in the pit.

"Orfeo" marks the debut of COT's original instruments orchestra, created in conjunction with the Newberry Consort by that ensemble's director, Mary Springfels, who plays viola da gamba, along with harpsichordist David Schrader, violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock and other stalwarts of the region's rich talent pool of period instrumentalists. It was fun on Wednesday to see the two theorbos poking their giraffenecks from the pit, and wonderful to hear what subtly colored sonorities, crisp

articulations, expressive phrasings and flexible tempos Glover— working from her musical edition— secured from these 24 skilled and caring musicians.

Glover's conducting breathed with the singers, danced and wept with the drama. It was as if she and her colleagues were creating the opera on the spot, and we were the original Gonzaga court. What a rejuvenator for the city's early music movement it would be if we could keep her here on a permanent basis! (Music of the Baroque, are you listening?)

Inevitably there were a few moments of unsettle ensemble and intonation. Still, our "period band" is off to a promising start, and one early awaits its return in COT's "Acis and Galatea" next June.

An experienced Orfeo, Dale sang powerfully and affectingly even if her forced his tenor a few times. Other singers who contributed to the success of this "Orfeo" were Kathleen Flynn (a splendid Sylvia), Judd Ernster (a superb Caronte), William Watson (Apollo), Thea Tullman (La Musica), Jacqueline Zander (Proserpina) and others from COT's Young Artists Program.