

ORPHEUS ASCENDING

Monteverdi triumphs in Brooklyn.

BY ALEX ROSS

Portraits of Claudio Monteverdi show a pale, stern man with vaguely haunted eyes. He could be mistaken for a Renaissance prelate of intellectual bent, one who tried to keep the world and its pleasures at a distance. This ascetic-looking character was, in fact, the godfather of opera in all its Dionysian delirium. Last month, the Brooklyn Academy of Music mounted a festival of the three great Monteverdi operas: "Orfeo," in a production from the Chicago Opera Theatre; "The Coronation of Poppea," from the Dutch National Opera; and, best of all, "The Return of Ulysses," from the Aix-en-Provence Festival, with William Christie and the musicians of Les Arts Florissants. At each performance I attended—there were thirteen performances in all—a full house responded with raucous cheers. Not a bad New York run for a four-hundred-and-thirty-four-year-old composer.

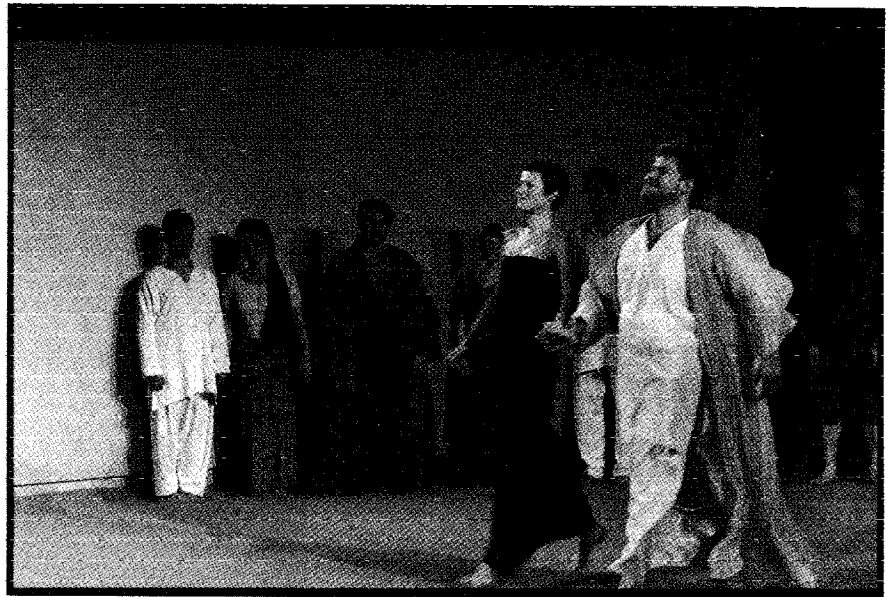
Did Monteverdi invent opera? Technically, no; practically, yes. Opera had existed for only a decade when the composer produced "Orfeo," in 1607, and he was the first to draw perfection from the form. By 1600, the theory of music drama had fallen into place; for decades, progressive scholars, among them Vincenzo Galilei, the father of Galileo, had been urging composers to abandon the arcana of counterpoint in favor of a more expressive, single-voiced style. The pioneers of Florentine opera fashioned a method of recitative singing which allowed for the exposition of plot between arias. But the earliest operas lacked narrative drive; after a while, the recitatives tended to exhaust the ears. Monteverdi, who was already writing quasi-operatic scenes in madrigal form, electrified the genre with the force of his personality. Conversational melodic lines, commanding interval leaps, sharp rhythmic contrasts, abrupt chord changes, biting dissonances, ominous roving

basses—all spell out the violence of Orpheus' emotions as he descends into the underworld.

Having begun at the summit, Monteverdi followed opera as it evolved from an aristocratic to a popular art. "Orfeo" was written for the elder son of the Duke of Mantua, and it appealed directly to the taste of a refined young no-

fray, and at the time of his death, in 1643, he was writing prolifically for the annual carnival season.

The earthy magnificence of "Ulysses" and "Poppea" points up a central fact of Monteverdi's work: every device, no matter how innovative, has a specific theatrical weight. Those Stravinskian dissonances echo the wildness of a rural band, in which players go their separate ways over a common ground. The surprise modulations, pivoting rapidly on a fixed tone, mimic the waywardness of an actor in the throes of passion. The famous lamenting basses—still a fixture of pop music—are X-rays of a shattered heart. (Sade's recent hit "By Your Side," with its four-note descending bass, is very Monteverdi-like.) The composer



Marijana Mijanovic, as Penelope, and Kresimir Spicer, as Ulysses, at BAM.

bleman; Orpheus' sensuously spiralling lamentations mirrored the fad for melancholy in the Renaissance. "Ulysses" and "Poppea" were composed decades later, in Venice, for a much different audience. By the sixteen-thirties, opera had grown so popular that a public opera house had opened in the heart of Venice, and, under new commercial pressures, composers began to incorporate the conventions of bawdy farce. Women played boys, young men played old women, servants cackled at emperors. Monteverdi, by this time the music director of St. Mark's, held himself aloof from the public opera at first, as was probably expected of a great man in his seventies. But he soon returned to the

embraces everything—the low comic and the high tragic, street theatre and psychodrama. What is great in Monteverdi cannot be separated from what is popular. This is the ultimate legacy of opera's founding master.

Les Arts Florissants' vibrant performance of "The Return of Ulysses" gave a sense of what it must have been like to witness a Monteverdi masterpiece amid the chaos of a Venice carnival. The freedom of the playing was thrilling; Les Arts seemed to be making up the score as it went along. William Christie, who founded this now legendary early-music institution in 1979, did almost nothing in the way of traditional conducting,

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keeping busy with the harpsichord, organ, and regals. In a recent interview with the online magazine *Andante*, Christie said that he modelled his ensemble on Duke Ellington's orchestra of 1929, and the comparison, however presumptuous, rang true. Like jazz soloists, his players ambled in and out of the musical spotlight, adding daubs of color before rejoining the velvet background. There were only sixteen musicians, but they easily filled the Harvey Theatre with their sound.

The cast was a throng of expert unknowns. The Croatian tenor Kresimir Spicer, in the role of Ulysses, was a robust, charismatic presence, sounding like Bryn Terfel in the powerful lower end of his voice. Marijana Mijanovic, as the long-suffering Penelope, was statuesque, coldly glamorous, a picture of contained rage. Her mezzo had a laser-like clarity in all registers. I also liked Zachary Stains, a commanding tenor with charm to burn; Cyril Auvity, an ardently lyrical Telemachus; and Olga Pitarch, a crystalline-voiced, sensuous Athena. Robert Burt feasted on the farcical role of Iro and brought down the house with his Act III solo. In true carnival spirit, he scampered uproariously around the auditorium, stopping at one point to give Christie a hug.

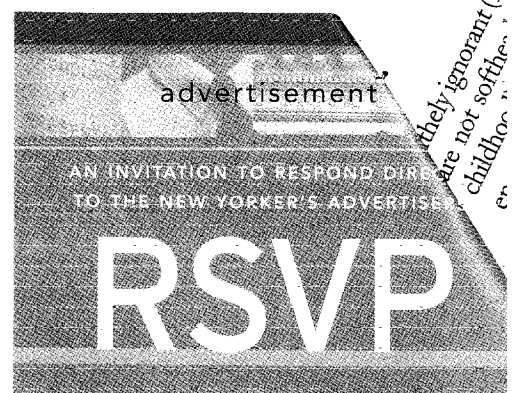
The staging was as fresh as the singing. Anthony Ward provided simple, handsome, pastel-toned sets. When the gods of Olympus descended on magic carpets to comment on the action, they managed to be both majestic and whimsical, in harmony with the spirit of the piece. The director, Adrian Noble, the retiring head of the Royal Shakespeare Company, gave the action an entrancing naturalness; there was none of the campiness, mockery, or self-consciousness that so often mars Baroque revivals. Even when silent, the singers were a delight to watch—Ulysses winking at Telemachus, for example, as the suitors tried to draw his bow. The entire show blazed with life.

Poppea," a turbulent and sardonic tale of sexual intrigue in the court of the emperor Nero, had less luck, in the hands of the Dutch National Opera. The production defused the social and psychological tensions of the piece by dressing all the characters in kooky cos-

tumes and marooning them in Martian landscapes. The countertenor Jean-Paul Fouchécourt, as Arnalta, was somehow able to sing long phrases with immaculate diction while balancing a Skylab-like object on his head. He resembled the high priest of one of those tragic civilizations that the "Star Trek" crew used to find on their travels. Others who succeeded in transcending the avant-garde fashion-show atmosphere were Brigitte Balleys, a strident but effective Nero, and Sandrine Piau, a finely shaded Drusilla. The Talens Lyrique ensemble, led by Christophe Rousset, produced a beautiful haze of sound in the cavern of the BAM Opera House.

The Chicago Opera Theatre's "Orfeo" had more life in it, even if this show also suffered from directoritis. The action unfolded at a modern-dress masked ball, with Orpheus as a kind of aging pop star whose intensity amuses the aristocrats. Intriguing in the opening scenes, the concept made nonsense of the climax: if the underworld is merely an extension of the chic world above, why should Orpheus suffer such agonies trying to bring his Eurydice out of it? Laurence Dale, a twenty-year veteran of the title role, gave focus to the evening with his strongly projected, elegantly ornamented tenor. Amid a host of worthy supporting singers, Kathleen Flynn stood out as the Messenger; she had a lush mezzo voice and hidden reserves of power. The conductor, Jane Glover, drew a wealth of color and detail from the Newberry Consort players. Alison Attar's harp solo deserves special mention.

Even if Monteverdi's later operas have more urgency, "Orfeo" is the most ravishing and riveting of the cycle. As I listened, I kept hearing foreshadowings of future music: a hint of the finale of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in the rising flourishes of the Prologue; a premonition of Tristan's death in the chilling chords that mark the passing of Eurydice; a "Lohengrin"-esque turn around the words "your beautiful Eurydice"; a touch of Barber's Adagio in the sobbing of the strings. Given that "Orfeo" was seldom performed until the late twentieth century, these echoes are probably not conscious ones; rather, they seem to come from a communal source, a well-spring of passion and lament. Monteverdi found it, took it, let it flow. ♦



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