

OPERA NEWS

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Orphic Moments

NEW YORK CITY

MasterVoices

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COUNTERTENOR ANTHONY ROTH COSTANZO is a creative thinker with the knack for bringing ideas to life. In 2014, Costanzo sang the world premiere of *The Orphic Moment*, a dramatic cantata by American composer Matthew Aucoin for countertenor, violin and orchestra that offered a new perspective on the myth of Orpheus. *The Orphic Moment* expressed the character's inner thoughts at the very instant at which he turned to face his wife Eurydice, thus losing her for all time. In 2016, at National Sawdust, Brooklyn's innovative performance venue, Costanzo produced *Orphic Moments*, an evening of theater that offered the New York premiere of *The Orphic Moment* as prologue to a complete performance of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Christoph Willibald Gluck's cherished opera.

Subsequently, this coupling of *Orfeo ed Euridice* and *The Orphic Moment* has undergone a series of performances and refinements. In May, the most recent iteration of this combination of works arrived at Lincoln Center's Rose Theatre, courtesy of MasterVoices. The new production, staged by Zack Winokur and produced by Costanzo and Cath Brittan, presented the full Aucoin cantata as an interlude within the third act of the Gluck opera, with MasterVoices artistic director Ted Sperling conducting (seen May 6). The violinist for the Aucoin was Keir GoGwilt, a veteran of previous *Orphic* productions, as was solo dancer Bobbi Jene Smith.

In most respects, the evening was a great success. Under Sperling's sensitive, flexible direction, MasterVoices produced the glowing, highly musical performance that one has come to expect from them, and the Orchestra of St. Luke's played very well. Zack Winokur's stage direction was quietly elegant and dynamic, as was the movement direction of Julia Eichten. Scenic designer Douglas Fitch's design was cleverly economical, albeit physically messy, with debris strewn across the stage throughout. Fitch and lighting designer Marcus Doshi were particularly impressive in their depiction of the murky, threatening aura of the underworld.

In a brief but eloquent program note, composer Aucoin posited his theory that Orpheus actually makes a deliberate choice in turning to face Euridice, preferring his own artistry to his love of her. Such was the dramatic character conveyed in Aucoin's music for *The Orphic Moment*. Accompanied by dissonant, frenetic, highly chromatic music, Orpheus explains what he wants, leading to Euridice's death. It is unfortunate that Aucoin's words for *The Orphic Moment* were not displayed in supertitles, as was much of Gluck's libretto for *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Given the acoustic of the Rose Theatre and the busyness of Aucoin's

instrumental music, it was impossible to comprehend most of the text, even though it was set and performed in English. The extreme modernity of *The Orphic Moment* conveyed a malevolent, jarring effect that seemed out of place when spliced into the sound world of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. The overall impact of *The Orphic Moment* was to cast Orpheus in a sinister, megalomaniacal light, depriving the listener of any sense of empathy for him.

To me, Orpheus—typically a heroic character of mythic stature as the greatest musician of all time—seemed undramatic and pedestrian in this production; for example, the tempo taken in the opera's cornerstone aria, "Che farò senza Euridice?" was a bit too brisk, robbing it of its tragic power. Costanzo gave a virtuosic vocal performance that was particularly impressive in his ornamentation of the Gluck recitatives. It is also noteworthy that while being tossed about by the male dancers Costanzo was able to maintain a rock-solid sense of tempo and dynamics, a feat requiring tremendous physical and vocal control.

Keira Duffy was a lovely Euridice, vividly capturing her character's distress at Orfeo's coldness. Duffy brilliantly depicted Euridice's evolution from a living, loving woman into a spirit who is now more comfortable in the world of the departed. Soprano Lauren Snouffer was a fresh-voiced, charismatic Amor.

A few caveats and technical complications aside, *Orphic Moments* is worthy of high praise for its creative energy and artistic industry. It is a vital, original take on a timeless story. —*Arlo McKinnon*