

EURYDICE **Metropolitan Opera Nov. 2021**

The Met re-opened for live performances for the 2021-22 season, at full capacity. There are special COVID safety protocols – proof of vaccination and matching ID are required for entry into the building, and face masks are mandatory for the entire performance.

This opera by contemporary American composer Matthew Aucoin to a libretto by Sarah Ruhl is yet another take on the Orpheus legend which has been retold from pre-Homeric times and has fascinated opera composers for centuries, beginning with the earliest surviving opera by Peri from 1600. In the legend, Orpheus is a musician who marries his love Eurydice, but she dies on their wedding day (means of death vary in the various versions of the legend). He grieves so profoundly that the gods allow him to go to the Underworld to bring her back to the land of the living.



The title role was sung by soprano Erin Morley, one of my favorites, whom I have previously heard in many roles at Santa Fe Opera and the Met. Here, at the outset she was often covered by the orchestral tutti. But as the work progressed, either she or the orchestra (conducted by the Met's Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin) adjusted, and from the second half of the first act to the end she was in her usual strong voice, with glorious high notes cleanly sustained with dead-on intonation and no vibrato. The show really belonged to her. She sang several beautiful solo arias and touching duets – more on this later.

The role of Orpheus was sung by Canadian baritone Joshua Hopkins, who turned in a wonderful performance. His character was shadowed by "Orpheus' double," performed by Polish counter-tenor Jakub Józef Orliński. Whereas the baritone represents the human side of Orpheus, the double is supposed to exhibit his semi-divine aspect, since in some versions of the legend, Orpheus is said to be fathered by an Olympian god.

I was anxious to hear Orliński, given all the rave reviews I read about him, but this role was a disappointment – he did not sing long enough to form an opinion about his voice. He sang only a few solo phrases; most of his other utterances were in duets with the baritone, and his part was rather muted. Not his fault – that's how the composer wrote it.

The role of Eurydice's deceased father, whom she meets in the Underworld, is a newly-invented character in this version of the drama. It was sung by Canadian bass-baritone Nathan Berg, who turned in a spectacular performance. Of particular note were several duets sung with Morley, expressing touching emotions between father and daughter (at left), reminiscent of the duets of Rigoletto with his daughter Gilda.



An unusual bit of casting was the role of the villain, usually sung by a baritone or bass. Here, Hades, Lord of the Underworld, was sung by British tenor Barry Banks (right), who performed very well, although his role was rather small.



A twist to the story comes when Orpheus arrives to take Eurydice out of the Underworld, but she is reluctant to go with him, weighing whether to stay with her father. He, however, convinces her to go, and the trek begins. The gist of all versions of the legend is that Orpheus is not to look back to see if she is following him, and of course he does, and she is once again sent to the Underworld. But rather than experiencing a second tragedy, she seems relieved to be reunited with her father.

The orchestral writing is very lush, in a modern but not atonal style. It is heavy on brass, like Wagner, but also with lots of percussion. The program notes state that the orchestra had difficulty fitting all of the percussion instruments in the Met's pit.

One unexpected instance of orchestration – when Orpheus looks back to see if she is following him, I was expecting a big crash from the orchestra, because that is the point on which the whole plot turns and determines the fates of the characters. Instead, that moment is accompanied by a tranquil, quiet melody on the strings. Quite a surprise, but it worked well.



The staging, by set designer Daniel Ostling and directed by Mary Zimmerman, was quite imaginative. Characters arrive in the Underworld by elevator, in which rain falls to represent the memory-erasing waters of the River Styx which in classical mythology represented the transit to the realm of the dead. Costuming (by Ana Kuzmanic) is mainly in contemporary dress, with fashions ranging from the 1930's to the present. Sung in English, with titles projected on screens in front of each seat (in either English, Spanish or German), and, unusually, also onto elements of the on-stage set.

Overall, a most satisfying experience. I hope this becomes a staple in the operatic repertoire, taking its place as a worthy addition alongside the other acclaimed settings of this story, most notably by Monteverdi, Gluck, Offenbach and Philip Glass.