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Review: At S.F. Opera, an extraordinary 'Orpheus' grapples with death and loss



Joshua Kosman | November 16, 2022 Updated: November 16, 2022, 6:55 pm



Jakub Józef Orłinski (left) and Meigui Zhang in Gluck's "Orpheus and Eurydice" at San Francisco Opera.
Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera

As soon as the curtain rises on the magnificently potent new production of Gluck's "Orpheus and Eurydice" that opened at the **San Francisco Opera** on Tuesday, Nov. 15, the audience is plunged into a landscape of overwhelming grief.

Before the first notes of the score have even sounded, Jakub Józef Orliński, the extraordinarily gifted Polish countertenor making his company debut as Orpheus, lets loose with a physical torrent of choreographed emotion – his limbs flailing in all directions, his entire body whirling with the force of the cataclysm that's hit him with the death of his beloved Eurydice. Then he unleashes a silent scream that would give Edvard Munch the chills.

By the time the music actually gets under way, it's as if a traumatic Big Bang has already occurred. The remainder of the opera – a taut 80 minutes of vocal pyrotechnics, choreographic invention and subdued visual splendor – is concerned with processing the fallout.

In a **centennial season** that has already witnessed an important world premiere (John Adams' "Antony and Cleopatra"), a powerhouse revival of Poulenc's "Dialogues of the Carmelites" and the introduction of a beautiful new production of Verdi's "La Traviata," this final fall offering may surpass everything.

San Francisco Opera 100th season: The past, present and future



Jakub Józef Orliński (center, left) and Meigui Zhang in Gluck's "Orpheus and Eurydice."
Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera

The Orpheus myth, in which the greatest musician of his age retrieves his lost beloved by charming the denizens of the underworld, has a number of aspects worth exploring. Historically, opera has focused primarily on the musical angle; a plot that calls for music sublime enough to melt the hearts of the dead is an irresistible challenge for any opera composer.

That vein of the narrative is present on the stage of War Memorial Opera House as well. But director Matthew Ozawa has made the fascinating decision to place Orpheus' frenzied grief squarely at the forefront of his dramatic conception, using Rena Butler's exquisitely expressive choreography as a vehicle.

Throughout the piece, both Orpheus and Eurydice are shadowed by three other pairs of dancers who echo and mimic their grief. In costume designer Jessica Jahn's elegant scheme, the bright red and blue of the two main characters' loose-fitting garments are mirrored in variously dimmer shades by their counterparts.

The import is clear: Orpheus' consciousness has splintered under pressure, conjuring up a variety of alternate worlds in which death is absent, or at least less wrenching. Butler, a Chicago dancer and choreographer making her first operatic assignment, draws these supporting figures into tight, consolatory patterns, then sends them outward again in far-flung solo ventures. (The excellent corps of dancers comprised Alysia Chang, Brett Conway, Marian Faustino, Livanna Maislen, Christopher Nachtrab and Maxwell Simoes.)



Jakub Józef Orliński in "Orpheus and Eurydice" at S.F. Opera.
Photo: Matthew Washburn/San Francisco Opera

The rest of the physical production, minimalist in its gestures and full of deeply probing insights, supported this reading. Yuki Nakase Link's lighting design shifted tellingly from the shadowy darkness of Orpheus' earthly grief to an eerie green luminescence for the descent into the underworld; the set and projections by Alexander V. Nichols shifted uneasily throughout.

Orliński, in a thrilling and overdue company debut on opening night, took the weight of this undertaking on his lithe shoulders and transformed it into something radiant and magical.

His powerful falsetto – crystalline and strong in the role's sustained vocal sections, superbly nimble in its more athletic passagework – brought out the resplendent vitality of Gluck's writing. In "Che farò senza Euridice?" ("What will I do without Eurydice?"), one of the simplest and most gorgeous melodies of the entire operatic repertoire, Orliński turned an expression of sorrow into something vibrantly pure.

And Orliński, who remains onstage throughout the entire production, provided an astonishing physical counterpoint to the role's musical components. An accomplished break-dancer, Orliński brought acrobatic virtuosity to the role, whirling and writhing in surprising combinations that in turn gave an external shape to the character's turmoil.

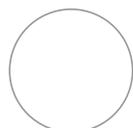
Jakub Józef Orliński in Gluck's "Orpheus and Eurydice."
Photo: Matthew Washburn/San Francisco Opera

Soprano Meigui Zhang, fresh from her triumphant company debut in June’s “**Dream of the Red Chamber**,” was a poignant, strong-toned Eurydice, as well as a supple choreographic partner. Soprano Nicole Heaston, descending from the heavens in billowing yellow as the embodiment of love, turned in a brief but alluring performance. The Opera Chorus, led by John Keene, made a rich-toned group of mourners and ghostly shades.

Overseeing the performance was Irish conductor Peter Whelan, an early-music specialist whose first appearance in San Francisco revealed an artist of delicate but unmistakable mastery. Under his guidance, the Opera Orchestra sounded robust in the show’s explosive sections and translucent in its more intimate scenes.

Grief and death are often the province of opera, whether tragically elevated or simply misguided (the Grim Reaper figures prominently in all five works on the **Opera’s fall season**). But it’s rare to witness the subject treated with such unforgettable immediacy and force as in this remarkable “Orpheus.”

“**Orpheus and Eurydice**”: San Francisco Opera. Through Dec. 1. \$26-\$410. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., S.F. 415-864-3330. www.sfopera.com. Live stream available at 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 20. \$27.50. www.sfopera.com/digital



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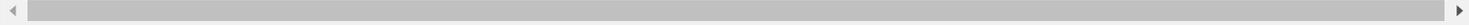
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