

Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERAWire

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Orfeo and Euridice: Johnson Cano Stellar in Probing Gluck's Mythical Vision of Love

By Santosh Venkataraman



It has been a particularly heavy season at Opera Theatre of St. Louis, with an absolutely splendid run of Marc Blitzstein's "Regina" and the emotionally-charged world premiere of Huang Ruo's "An American Soldier."

It was thus welcome that the final production to debut this season, Gluck's "Orfeo and Euridice," provided an uplifting ending. This production by director Ron Daniels, though sprinkled with some peculiarities, was a delightful version full of music and dance and was seen in the final week of the OTSL season at the same time the Opera America convention was in town.

Berlioz's Version

Of the many versions of Gluck's "Orfeo," the one chosen for this production is a modified 1866 version of the 1859 recreation by Hector Berlioz. The 1859 edition was cast with Orfeo as mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot as opposed to prior versions in which tenors and contraltos were employed.

Remaining consistent from this to the 1774 Paris version that is also often used is Gluck's idea of transitioning from

opera seria with his concept of a "reform opera" in which the simplicity of a work through music and a linear plot reigned supreme. The effect to a listener is a more relaxed operatic experience and the implications changed the opera world.

Big Muddy Dancers Excel

With that simplicity in mind, Daniels' production features an uncomplicated set design by Riccardo Hernandez that is true to Gluck's ideal. Act one features a large likeness of the face of Euridice in soprano Andriana Chuchman and the remainder of the opera is a largely open space in which Orfeo, portrayed by Jennifer Johnson Cano, attempts to win back her lover. The finale features block letters spelling "Amore" as the lovers are reunited.

Notable to this work are the number of ballet scenes favored by the Parisian public with dancers from the Big Muddy Dance Company employed to an eye-pleasing effect. The dancers complemented Orfeo's arduous journey through the Furies in Hades and Blessed Spirits in Elysium.

Striking among the dance scenes by choreographer Katarzyna Skarpetowska were that none were excessive as one would imagine when envisioning the tastes of French elites who demanded them back when this opera was created. Rather they were fluidly and tastefully mixed in with only the slight qualm of



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being used a bit too many times within the audience instead of just on stage.

The Leather Costume Conundrum

While a mythical time period is typically the setting for these characters, none is specified in this production. The idea may be that the themes of love and loss are universal and if there is a clue as to when the action takes place, it is revealed in the costumes.

Johnson Cano's Orfeo is seen in a leather jacket, back pants and a tie, while Chuchman's Euridice looks stunning in a flowing, white dress. The finale saw Johnson Cano sporting a different leather jacket and Chuchman in a sleeveless leather vest over a pink dress.

These outfits certainly didn't detract from the performance though they did not add much either and the same can be said for eccentric, colorful costumes in a balloon-filled finale that was rousing nevertheless.

Star Turns

It was a bonus that the mezzo-soprano Johnson Cano was not only an accomplished artist worthy of carrying such a vehicle but also a native of the area. Her hometown appeal and down-to-Earth personality no doubt added to any local fervor for this production.

Johnson Cano delivers a vocally elegant Orfeo, deftly navigating her lines with appropriate color and showing no signs of strain. Clear-sounding and purposeful, she received ovation after ovation and none bigger than after her heartfelt "J'ai perdu mon Eurydice" sung in English like every OTSL production over the loss of her lover.

While Chuchman loomed over the proceedings with her giant portrait, it was not until after intermission that the audience was treated to her lovely and enchanting voice. Chuchman shined as Euridice this past season in a Lyric Opera of Chicago production that featured the 1774 Paris edition and her interpretation conveyed an ardent urgency to see her lover. There was an overall better chemistry between her and Orfeo in this production as the lovers forged a beguiling emotional connection.

Soprano Maria Valdes was clad in ripped jeans, a backwards baseball cap as well as wings as Amore. Her voice and presence brought balance to the action in her company debut.

Absolutely Sublime

Gluck's music sounded absolutely sublime under the baton of maestro Pierre Vallet in an understated fashion that allowed Johnson Cano to flourish. This production of "Orfeo and Euridice" was altogether charming to seasoned operagoers in town for the convention as well as newcomers to the art who were no doubt enthralled by the dance scenes. While Opera Theatre of St. Louis has deservedly gained a reputation for new and rarely-performed works, this run proved that the company is versatile enough to also excel at the classics. While the 43rd season is now over, the countdown to No. 44 under the leadership of new general director Andrew Jorgensen can only be anticipated.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



June 15, 2018

ORFEO & EURIDICE at OTSL Dazzles

By Steve Callahan



You know the story: at the marriage of Orpheus and Euridice the bride dies of snake-bite. Orpheus so loves her that he proceeds to Hades to demand his wife back. The gods have dictated that she may return to life with Orpheus, but only if he *does not look back at her* as she follows him up from the world of the dead.

On the opening night of Gluck's *Orfeo & Euridice* at OTSL a terribly ironic incident occurred. The audience had been treated to an astonishing first act by Ms. Cano and her colleagues; we had enjoyed a pleasant intermission on the beautiful grounds at OTSL, and we sat eagerly awaiting Act 2. We waited. Then we saw all the patrons in an upper bay calmly leaving the area, under the direction of emergency medical technicians. In a far corner of that bay a patron had suffered cardiac arrest; EMT people were, like Orfeo, valiantly

striving to bring a loved one back across that mortal threshold.

The audience patiently waited.

Act 2 was cancelled. We were invited to attend a subsequent performance.

Christoph Willibald Gluck was an opera reformer. In his day *opera seria* had grown ornate and cluttered, filled with virtuoso flourishes and irrelevant subplots and bits of ballet--like barnacles or like parasitic vines, strangling the opera's story. Gluck's goal was to return all aspects of opera into the service of the drama--overture, arias, recitative, dance--everything. In this he foreshadowed Wagner's urge to create a truly unified art form.

Orfeo ed Euridice goes far toward this end. Nothing is irrelevant to the plot. The opera was originally written for a castrato (much the rage in Gluck's day). But it has gone through several revisions--by Gluck, Liszt, J.C. Bach,



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and (most notably) Berlioz. The central role has been given to castrati (both mezzo and soprano), to *haute contres* or counter-tenors, and finally to mezzo-sopranos.

Opera Theatre St. Louis, with conductor Paul Vallet and stage director Ron Daniels, uses the latest, polished version of the text to great success. The overall visual concept is a kind of hippie/*carnaval*. Orfeo, in black jeans, black leather jacket, skinny black tie and a pony-tail, is a rock superstar.

The set, by Ricardo Hernández, is simplicity itself--great plain walls onto which quite wonderful projections appear. These are sometimes superbly realistic huge drifting clouds, sometimes the gloomy red vapors and flames of the underworld. Once there is a great face of Euridice which only after long moments blinks, then moves ever so slightly. Designer Peter Nigrini does beautiful work with these projections. Lighting designer Christopher Akerlind gives lovely balance and flow to the evening.

We begin at Euridice's funeral. Center stage we see a gigantic head-shot of the deceased. Mourners carrying lanterns drift in through the audience--all in black, some with black balloons. Flowers and stuffed toys are laid beneath the picture of Euridice. There is gorgeous chorus work, the voices blending with the low strings, while Orfeo wails his lament for his beloved, his voice soaring above the chorus.

Amore, the god of love, appears in the form of a charming young blonde hippy teen-ager with ragged jeans, backwards ball-cap, a "LOVE" T-shirt--and with gaudily lighted wings. Here Maria Valdes shows a beautiful voice--not as powerful, perhaps, as that of Ms. Cano, but in her higher range she gives Orfeo a run for his money.

In one deeply moving aria Orfeo is alone on an empty gray stage accompanied by a live oboist (Philip Ross) standing in an upstage corner. It is a poignantly simple duet, instrument and voice.

In the underworld we see a bit of sky--distant, distant, beyond the earthen rings through which we've descended.

And here Jennifer Johnson Cano seizes one of the most challenging arias in all of opera and she flies to glory with it. In an astonishing coloratura display she warbles like a skylark. She sprinkles showers of notes with laser-like precision. It's a brilliant *tour-de-force*.

In the underworld Orfeo is confronted by a crowd of angry furies. Here the chorus is joined by members of the Big Muddy Dance Company. Costumer Emily Rebholtz gives these fiery spirits flowing shiny red slickers and caps. With choreography by Katerzyna Skarpetowska the *corps de ballet* does beautiful work throughout the evening--always at points appropriate to the plot. As furies they swirl and flurry and writhe, but then they succumb to Orfeo's musical charms. They wilt, they melt, they let him pass.

In act two we enter the peaceful Elysian Fields. All is soft gray. The dancers, in long, flowing "glamour slacks" execute many small graceful romantic *pas de deux*--suggesting the binary love of Orfeo and Euridice. Flautist Andrea Kaplan beautifully supports this dance.

And we meet the lovely Andriana Chuchman as Euridice. Miss Chuchman, who did such fine work in *Shalimar the Clown* two years ago, once again sings most beautifully. Again she dances--this time with the shades in the underworld.

We follow the lovers on their way to the mortal world, the chorus and dancers now draped in diaphanous white shrouds--like rather spooky brides. Of course Euridice pleads for Orfeo to look at her and, at last, he does so. She dies again, whereupon Orfeo draws a pistol to kill himself.

But . . .

Gluck was writing this opera to celebrate the emperor's name-day. A tragic ending just would not be acceptable. So (holy *deus ex machina!*) the god Amore arrives again to announce that he was really just kidding; Orfeo has so proved his love that Euridice will be allowed to join him again in the mortal world. Amore shrugs off his wings and saunters off stage.

The big finale is a great *carnaval* celebration. Gaudy, glitzy costumes! Great gilt letters--"A M O R E"--gleam in the background. All of the couple's fans and groupies arrive in tie-dies and cut-offs and Sgt. Pepperish festive gear to distribute bright balloons on sticks throughout the audience. There's a graceful little gavotte, and . . .

HAPPY ENDING!

Jennifer Johnson Cano, a home town girl, totally owns this role, this show. She's almost always on-stage singing her heart out. She makes this a truly . . .
GLORIOUS PRODUCTION.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

June 14, 2018

Opera Theatre of St. Louis presents a musically outstanding 'Orfeo and Euridice'

By Sarah Bryan Miller

Christoph Willibald Gluck's first "reform opera," 1762's "Orfeo and Euridice," is a landmark, changing the direction of the art form. It's based on the familiar myth of Orpheus, who went to Hades to rescue his beloved from death, with beautiful music and opportunities for dancers as well as singers. What's more, it's short, clocking in at just over two hours with an intermission. The mystery is that it isn't produced more often.

Opera Theatre of St. Louis' production, seen in its entirety Wednesday night (after a second-act cancellation June 9), is musically outstanding. The opera is largely carried by its Orfeo, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, who brings a big, rich voice that's flawlessly produced in both lyrical and fiendishly challenging coloratura passages. Dramatically, she was fully engaged, whether in mourning Euridice (she does a lot of that), charming the furies, or, finally, rejoicing. OTSL built its production around the St. Louis native, and it paid off.

Her Euridice is soprano Andriana Chuchman, who made her mark at OTSL as both Boonyi and India in Jack Perla's "Shalimar the Clown" and has a beautiful, soaring voice. Her dancing was graceful. Chuchman was a supremely sympathetic Euridice, adjusting to her new life as a blessed spirit and grieving when Orfeo wouldn't look at her, or explain why, on their passage out of the underworld.

Making her OTSL debut as Amore, the god of love, soprano Maria Valdes was

utterly charming as a boyish figure who knows he's cute. She wielded a lovely voice.

The chorus was outstanding, both in its singing and acting, moving well throughout. The excellent translation was by Amanda Holden and sung clearly by all, with the help of English diction coach Erie Mills.

In the pit, conductor Pierre Vallet led the 1859 French version of the score (supervised by Hector Berlioz) with idiomatic style. This split of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra played this graceful music with skill and true artistry; particularly notable were associate principal oboe Philip Ross, in an onstage duet with Johnson Cano, and associate principal flute Andrea Kaplan, for her solo work in the "Dance of the Blessed Spirits."

Stage director Ron Daniels' production was a mixed bag. He had some good ideas (putting Ross onstage for the duet) but sent the ensemble into the house a little too often and seemed to be trying too hard to be hip.

One of his best ideas was to work with choreographer Katarzyna Skarpetowska and the Big Muddy Dance Company. Skarpetowska's dances were effective and athletic, whether as the Furies, outraged at having to give up a soul, but unable to resist Orfeo's voice, as the happy Blessed Spirits, or in enthusiastic celebration at the end. This production will be a welcome introduction to a fine local company for a lot of operagoers.



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Set designer Riccardo Hernandez didn't have much to do; the stage, covered by a dance floor, was nearly empty, with just a few roll-on pieces: a contemporary-style shrine with a giant portrait of Euridice, decked with flowers, black balloons and the obligatory teddy bears; the word "AMORE," lit up. Much of the "scenery" consisted of projections by videographer Peter Negrini.

Emily Rebholz's costumes were in a style that Daniels calls "heightened contemporary." Orfeo and his friends

seemed to belong to a motorcycle gang; the Furies wore long, red rain slickers over black leotards. (The dancers' sleeveless dresslike tunics were more effective.) Euridice had an attractive white dress in Elysium, but her sleeveless, black, leather biker vest at the end was too much. Amore, in a "Love" T-shirt, boyfriend jeans and a backward baseball cap, sported large, fluffy wings with lights on them. Rebholz really went over the top with some cheesy outfits in the finale.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

Ladue News

June 14, 2018

Opera and Ballet Blend Delightfully in OTSL's 'Orfeo & Euridice

By Mark Bretz



Story: Orfeo is in mourning for the death of his young wife, Euridice. His uncontrollable grief and his passionate, devoted love for his late wife move Amore, the god of love. Amore then informs Orfeo that he has been granted a most unusual second chance.

The gods, particularly Jupiter, will allow Orfeo to rescue Euridice from the Underworld, but only on the condition that he not look upon her until they have reached the world above. Nor will he be allowed to explain to her why he can't gaze upon her face.

Although puzzled by this command, Orfeo agrees to comply with Jupiter's dictate. He descends into Hades, touching the Furies who at first resist his efforts to enter the Underworld until they take pity on him. He then journeys to Elysium, a place of happiness and bliss, where Euridice's spirit now resides.

Euridice is ecstatic to see her husband and lover and is thrilled to join him again in the world. Soon, however, she notices that he won't look at her. She begins to believe that he doesn't love her anymore and says that, if that is the



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case, she prefers to remain dead. Tortured by her doubts and unhappiness, Orfeo turns around and looks at Euridice, who immediately dies again.

Determined to kill himself in despair, Orfeo is stopped by Amore, who reveals that his unwavering love for Euridice has saved both of them. Amore informs Orfeo that his suffering is now at an end as he happily joins Euridice in renewed life.

Highlights: Opera Theatre of Saint Louis scores another success with this refreshing and intoxicating interpretation of the Gluck operatic version of the enduring myth of Orpheus and his lost love, Eurydice. Sumptuous ballet performances by the Big Muddy Dance Company complement the excellent work of the OTSL cast to make this a memorable rendition.

Other Info: Opera Theatre commissioned a new English translation by Amanda Holden for the libretto written by Pierre Louis Moline after Ranieri de' Calzabigi's original piece, which accompanied music composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck for its premiere performance in Vienna in 1762.

The current version of OTSL's *Orfeo & Euridice* is being given in the 1866 edition created by Alfred Dorffel under the guidance of Hector Berlioz, as noted in the program. Essays by director Ron Daniels, conductor Pierre Vallet and OTSL public relations coordinator Kelsey Nickerson provide fascinating information about the history not only of *Orfeo & Euridice* but also Gluck's determination to introduce "reform" operas in the place of opera seria, emphasizing the "noble simplicity" of the music and drama.

OTSL follows long-standing tradition by utilizing the talents of a mezzo-soprano, in this case former Gerdine Young Artist Jennifer Johnson Cano, in the role of Orfeo. She doesn't disappoint, as she

sends her powerful voice soaring in some very difficult arias in Gluck's ambitious score.

There's equally impressive work by soprano Andrea Chuchman as Euridice, who is unseen in the first half of the three-act opera which is divided into two pieces in this production, which has a running time of a little more than two hours. Chuchman's beautiful voice fills the bill for the lovely and loving Euridice, who is hurt by Orfeo's quizzical behavior and yearns to return to Elysium as a result.

The third primary role, that of the god Amore, is handled in satisfying style by soprano Maria Valdes, making an impressive OTSL debut in a whimsical portrayal of the 'messenger god' who wants to see the romantic pair happily reunited.

For this production OTSL has enlisted the invaluable services of St. Louis' Big Muddy Dance Company, which does justice to several major ballets which are performed throughout *Orfeo & Euridice*. In many ways, this work is as much a ballet as it is an opera. Director Ron Daniels and choreographer Katarzyna Skarpetowska mesh their considerable talents to keep the production moving fluidly and enchantingly forward.

Members of Big Muddy, under the guidance of artistic director Brian Enos and executive director Erin Warner Prange, include Geoffrey Alexander, CJ Burroughs, Karina Cardella, Dustin Crumbaugh, Brandon Fink, Mallory Hensel, Thomas Jacobson, Zoe Linder, Miranda Payne, Robert Poe and Ellen Reed.

Chorus master Cary John Franklin does impressive work as well leading the large and smartly tuned chorus who serve as Furies, mourners, Blessed Spirits and celebrants in various scenes, often roaming through the aisles of the Browning Mainstage.

Costume designer Emily Rebholz smartly dresses them in poncho

raincoats in Hades (honest), billowing sheets as the Blessed Spirits and a colorful panoply of revelers for the finale, freely dispensing balloons to patrons throughout the audience. She also adorns Amore in tastefully tattered jeans and a movable set of wings.

Set designer Ricardo Hernandez smartly incorporates projections from video designer Peter Nigrini on the background wall and also the floor, making it appear as a sky for scenes featuring Orfeo on his quest for Euridice, or the foreboding Hades in another scene, keenly illuminated in a

red hue by lighting designer Christopher Akerlind. Tom Watson adds a lively wig and makeup design for the revelers.

Daniels maintains an agreeable pace in the proceedings and evinces fine acting performances by his trio of primary players, while Vallet gets a spirited reading of the score from members of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra.

The tragic death of a patron at last Saturday's opening-night performance shortened that presentation to one act. Wednesday evening's effort showed how fine this rendition of *Orfeo & Euridice* truly is.