



Long Beach Opera's Postmodern 'Euridice'

BY MARK SWED

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TIMES MUSIC CRITIC

Oct. 6, 1600, is the date we celebrate as opera's birthday, because that was when the first opera that has survived was performed at the Pitti Palace in Florence. Friday night, exactly 400 years later, Jacopo Peri's "Euridice" was revived at another, if more contemporary, extravagant art palace.

But in a delicious irony, the J. Paul Getty Museum, so devoted to the proper restoration of historical art, presented the world's oldest opera in a production by America's only consistently venturesome and hip opera company. And leave it to Long Beach Opera to entrust this ancient entertainment to four spirited young women--director Isabel Milenski, scenery designer Darcy Scanlin, costume designer Audrey Fisher and choreographer Sarah Swenson--at the outset of their professional careers.

"Euridice" is an opera that should require a modern audience to adjust its attitude, much as modern museum-goers must adjust theirs when confronted by painting before perspective. Ottavio Rinuccini's florid Italian libretto operates more on description than conventional drama. Emotion is present--especially the lamenting of Orfeo over the loss of his love, J
observers than enacted.

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text without stooping to submerge it in song. And so “Euridice” proceeds almost like chant, the music lying somewhere between recitative and melody, except for a formal concluding musical number at the end of each of the five scenes.

Yet the startling first impression of this “Euridice” was that all the attitude adjustment was already taken care of by the plucky attitude of the production. The Harold M. Williams Auditorium is not a promising venue for opera--its main function is as a lecture hall for the Getty Center. It lacks fly space and extensive lighting facilities, and the acoustics are dry. But Scanlin turned that to quirky advantage, interpreting the venue as a neutral space for installation art. On a mirrored floor and against a gauzy white stage (with interesting textures of canvases and screens) stood large graceful reeds, chairs, a fanciful feathery bird on a spit, Greek statue lamps and the door to a men’s room.

Ancient history was viewed with a postmodern wink. Orpheus, in striped double-breasted suit and carrying a miniature electric guitar, seemed to take his cue from Bruce Springsteen, although the gowned Euridice was less specific. Floozy nymphs and sleazy shepherds celebrated the lovers’ wedding. Later, they celebrated the return of the couple from the Underworld as if in a latter-day demimonde, a downtown club. In Hades, Pluto cooked dinner over a dirty old stove.

These are not particularly fresh ideas anymore, but even that was somehow turned to an advantage simply through the breezy casualness to the drama. One sensed that the young production team grew up in a world of Postmodern art and that its language is their natural tongue. That was also the case, although with more mixed results, with the young cast as well, even though the style of music performance was rigorously historical.

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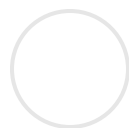
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goddess Proserpina), Paul Cummings (Aminta and Radamante), Christine Abraham (Euridice and Venus) and Curtis Streetman (Pluto)--early music vocalizing and 21st century acting were not contradictory. Orfeo was more awkward, William Hite having neither the mythic poet's smoothness nor a mythic rocker's raw vocal charisma, but he brought a certain hangdog charm of his own to the production. The various other nymphs and shepherds were a lively bunch.

Where this "Euridice" lacked spirit was in the musical direction. Andrew Lawrence-King, a noted British harpist in the early music world, led the local period-instrument group Musica Angelica positioned on the side of the stage with their lutes, recorders and early fiddles. But conducting from the harp is a peculiar and maybe doomed enterprise, since it is difficult for the player to take his eyes off the instrument and provide animated direction.

Still, there was seldom a dull moment for ear or eye. And by showing that life remains in this historic relic that inaugurated an art form, Long Beach Opera also movingly suggested that its supply of renewable energy in the art form as a whole is far from running low.



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