

Oberlin Opera Theater: The Dark Side of Orpheus

by Stephanie Manning

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The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has appeared in art for centuries, in everything from books, to paintings, to music. So why do we keep telling it? That question weighed on Stephanie Havey's mind as the stage director began planning for Oberlin Opera Theater's production of *L'Orfeo*.

“There's something very relatable in that doubt that Orpheus has,” Havey says about the bard's quest to rescue his wife from the underworld. “That fear of losing his loved one, and also doubting himself—I think

these themes are all very universal.”

Written at the turn of the 17th century, Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is one of the earliest examples of opera as an art form. But it's not the only operatic take on Orpheus. Havey, Oberlin's visiting assistant professor of opera theater for 2023-24, has directed the versions by Gluck and Offenbach at other points in her career. But she says Monteverdi's has a distinct perspective on the dark side to Orpheus' musical power.

“This is not just a story about how he uses his lyre to win, to vanquish gods and beasts,” she says. “There's something about how he has to vanquish himself.”

All of this culminates in a darker, modern-era staging of the tale, which will be presented on March 14 to 17 in Hall Auditorium. Havey doesn't want to give too much away, saving some surprises for opening night. But she notes that Orpheus' lyre has been replaced with a “weapon” — one that he hides behind and “sort of symbolizes ego.”

Havey credits Alessandro Striggio's libretto as a key element in exploring the flaws and vulnerabilities behind the Greek hero. The new production is a psychological exploration of Orpheus' point of view, which is plagued by fear and doubt.

The underworld setting, for example, is populated by distorted versions of characters from the opera's opening wedding scene. "The man who Orpheus saw flirting with his wife at the wedding is now the king of the underworld who's holding her captive," Havey explains. "And some beautiful woman who made a toast is now the queen." This twisted view is supplemented with "larger and exaggerated" choreography (Holly Handman-Lopez) and "otherworldly" lighting (Jeremy K. Benjamin).

Creative thought also went into the placement of the orchestra, which will be visible onstage behind the singers. That location poses some logistical challenges for the cast and musicians (cue extra cameras and monitors), but Havey isn't too worried.

"This is very much driven by the text and driven by the performer," she says. Rather than the singers needing to follow the conductor's exact pattern, "it's really that the continuo are following the singers and how they want to convey the text."

Conductor Christian Capocaccia agrees, adding that the beauty of Monteverdi's music is tied to the simplicity of the text. "Sometimes the line is a repetition of the same notes," he says. "But even when there's almost no melody, it's the articulation, it's the elegance, you know—it's incredibly touching."

The small ensemble of period instruments under Capocaccia's baton was created in collaboration with the Conservatory's Historical Performance program. The conductor has been working with the students on creating their own musical interpretations, emphasizing the expressive freedom inherent in the Baroque style.

"Interpreting music, it is an expression of an opinion. When you make a choice, people sometimes are afraid to make a statement that is personal," he says, referencing how musicians can sometimes feel compelled to prioritize 'perfect' performances to advance in their careers.

He applies the same thought process to opera performances more generally. "Sometimes we are forgetting to tell the stories in a fresh way, and if you don't do that, people get bored. But if you are engaging and eloquent and you focus on the storytelling, I think it might make a difference."

Capocaccia particularly enjoys working with students for this reason. "I always find it beautiful to work in schools, especially this caliber of school," he says. The musicians

“retain the unjaded quality of people that haven’t had to deal with the profession yet, which is great. They’re still having a blast doing it.”

The conductor is also focused on making sure he’s enjoying himself while on the podium. “When people ask me, ‘How do you think it went?’ I say, ‘I wasn’t in the audience, so I don’t know how it sounded. But for me, I think it went great because I had a blast.’ And typically, if I had a blast, I always get good feedback.”

TICKET INFORMATION

\$10 reserved seating (\$8 students)

Tickets are available online and by phone at 800-371-0178. Patrons may also purchase them in person between noon and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, at Oberlin College's Central Ticket Service, located at 67 N. Main Street, in the lobby of the Eric Baker Nord Performing Arts Complex.

[Online Box Office](#)

PRODUCTION DETAILS

Thursday, March 14 - Saturday, March 16 at 8:00 p.m.

Sunday, March 17 at 2:00 p.m.

Oberlin College Hall Auditorium

67 N. Main Street

Oberlin, Ohio

This production will be available via [livestream](#) on Thursday and Friday, March 13 and 14 only.

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