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For carnival 1647, Cardinal Jules Mazarin, the first minister of France, produced an extravagant opera on the Orpheus legend intended to charm the queen regent (Anne of Austria), support the child-king Louis XIV, and generally overawe the French court. Mazarin imported the artists from his native Italy, where opera had been born less than half a century earlier. With an elaborate libretto from Francesco Buti, suave music from Luigi Rossi, and eye-popping sets from Giacomo Torelli, Mazarin's Parisian *Orfeo* certainly accomplished its goals, as astonished reports attest. Today, we know better Claudio Monteverdi's more succinct and pastorally tinged *Orfeo* from forty years earlier, a product of the Renaissance humanism that produced the genre. The Buti/Rossi *Orfeo*, by contrast, manifests the opulence of the Baroque, with twenty-seven serious and comic characters, myriad lyrical episodes, and, originally, a six-hour running time. Over the last thirty years, this later *Orfeo* has confirmed its own brilliance in multiple productions and a professional recording. The performance of the Opéra National de Lorraine from 2016 is the first to be issued on video and so is especially welcome.

In the booklet accompanying the discs (DVD and Blu-ray are both included), musical director Raphaël Pichon articulates the interpretive philosophy of his team, which includes Nicolas Sceaux, performing edition, and Jetske Mijnsen, stage direction. In Pichon's view, Buti and Rossi were compromised by Mazarin's political objectives, forced to mar their work with pages of ineffectual material. As remedy, the production team cut nine characters and ten scenes (plus the prologue) and rearranged other elements to create "a new scenario [that] gives the work astounding dramatic force and density." Of course, performing this opera today without cuts is impractical, and all stage productions demand a point of view. But watchers of this video should be aware that Pichon has done more than shorten and focus the work: for better or worse, he has fundamentally changed its character. Instead of a baroque spectacle of pathos and satire, of nobility and ridiculousness, he has fashioned a simpler, darker, and sometimes more vulgar story better attuned to his apparently Romantic sensibility.



Pichon condenses the opera effectively from three acts to two, but his aims go beyond concision. The love duet that originally closed act 1 no longer receives a structural emphasis, and its joyful tone is further undermined by the interpolation (from elsewhere) of an ensuing sorrowful madrigal. In this production, the conclusions of the acts highlight death: first Eurydice's and then Orpheus's. In the latter case, the gloominess is intensified by the cutting of the final chorus and the intervention of the gods: Orpheus dies and the curtain falls. The moment is weirdly reminiscent of nineteenth-century productions of *Don Giovanni*, which ended with the Don's death.

Indeed, throughout the opera, Pichon's revised score more often interrupts and darkens the work than streamlines it. While the original opera includes many playful discussions of love, charmingly set by Rossi, these elements are the most consistently cut, making room, it seems, for insertions of instrumental and vocal music by other composers. For example, the role of the satirical god Momus is both coarsened—he becomes the Satyr's raunchy gay lover—and expanded: he generally hangs about onstage and eventually delays the action with a long *ciaccona* aria by Benedetto Ferrari (from his *Musiche e poesie varie*, vol. 3). The Satyr later gets his own added aria—from Cavalli's *Scipione affricano*—which he sings while abusing one of the Muses. Choruses from other works also occasionally intrude, or Rossi's own choruses are repurposed, as when Aristaeus's great act 3 lament, "Uccidetemi," is distended by choral bits from act 2, or the final redemptive chorus is moved to an earlier scene and given different words.

Even the overall timbre of the opera is darkened. The character Aristaeus—an unsuccessful suitor for Eurydice, introduced from Virgil's *Georgics*—sings in the same range as the sopranos Orpheus and Eurydice, but Pichon gives the role to a mezzo, like so many spurned lovers of later operatic history. Far more radically, he calls for the three Fates (Parche)—traditionally female and scored here for two sopranos and alto—to be sung down an octave by men, accompanied by martial drumming. Pluto, an appropriately imposing bass, sings throughout with an improbable trombone in his continuo (again, shades of *Don Giovanni*). The continuo itself is skillfully performed, with great variety of instrumentation, but the richness can sometimes be unrelenting, and rhythmic subdivision over longer bass notes is common. Pichon's addition of recorder lines at various points—dubiously justified as "Italianate timbres" needed to fill out the "skeleton of the score"—does nothing to lighten the weight.

This dark musical atmosphere is matched by the visual elements of the production. Ben Baur's sets are minimal: a few standing flats define a shallow space, while varying furniture—all riding on a black turntable—suggests either a banquet hall (in the first half) or a funeral parlor (the second). The lighting by Bernd Purkrabek just picks out the action from an ominous, enveloping blackness. There are no stage machines, no scenic effects, no wonder. Only some of the costumes by Gideon Davey—especially the hats for the wedding and headdresses for the denizens of the underworld—evoke whimsy.

By far the strongest aspect of this production—the reason to own the discs—is the high level of vocal artistry. Nearly all the singers present clear, attractive voices, and the consistency of the cast's textually animated vocalism surely reflects the efforts of Pichon and his team. Sopranos Judith van Wamroij (Orpheus) and Francesca Aspromonte (Eurydice) lead the way, with colorful and moving singing throughout; they embody these characters and bring Rossi's music to life.

Giuseppina Bridelli's mezzo Aristaeus is richer in tone and occasionally less clear in pitch, but she effectively modulates her vocalism according to the words and harmonies. Tenor David Tricou as Apollo (strangely costumed as a Catholic priest) deserves special mention for his handling of a treacherous tessitura (especially at A=440); his is easily the best performance of this music I have heard. Countertenor Ray Chenez, in the roles of the Nurse (Nutrice) and Cupid (Amor), is only somewhat less effective than the others. While his technique is solid, his darkened tone and poor diction undermine his efforts. He is not helped by having been assigned roles for different voice types: while the Nurse's alto range sits comfortably, Cupid's soprano precludes both subtlety and boyishness.

The case of the Old Woman (Vecchia), sung by the inimitable countertenor Dominique Visse, requires special comment. In this opera, Venus disguises herself as an old woman to secretly promote Aristaeus's suit. She is a comic character but important to the plot. Rossi writes her as a high tenor, in what was then becoming a tradition for the characterization of nurses and other old women. While Visse has frequently played such comic roles, the range of this part lies too low. Simple transposition would presumably have created problems in dialogues and ensembles, so Pichon recomposed the vocal line into a higher range, a historically valid practice. Unfortunately, the changes spoil many of Rossi's melodies and play havoc with ensemble textures. And still much of the music sits uncomfortably for Visse, with some passages being inaudible and others strident. The veteran has the flair to bring the role off, but the musical compromise is unfortunate.

Technically, the discs are satisfactory. The images are clear and the sound of high quality; the video direction (by Stéphane Vérité) is stylish without becoming obtrusive. Subtitles in English, French, and Italian are welcome, even if occasionally the English translations (at least) are inaccurate, unidiomatic, or mistimed. Frustratingly, chapter breaks are limited to the beginnings of the three acts; there are no special features.

The Buti/Rossi *Orfeo* has established itself as one of the great operas of the seventeenth century. This first video recording is worth owning: the singing is magnificent, and the interpretive vision is clear and thoroughgoing. Unfortunately, that vision has little to do with Buti and Rossi's own, and the actual text of their creation is not reliably presented. But until the work earns a more committed and truly Baroque production, we can turn to these discs for their many beautiful and moving passages.