

# Long Leaf scores with 'Orpheus and Euridice'

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CHAPEL HILL - Long Leaf Opera ends its summer festival with a dazzling production of Ricky Ian Gordon's "Orpheus and Euridice." The work's boundary-bursting combination of concert, opera and dance adds stature to the company's image.

American composer Gordon chose the Greek myth of lost love for his piece with clarinet, soprano and piano. Noted clarinetist Todd Palmer premiered the 50-minute work in 2001.

Gordon expanded the piece to 70 minutes for a 2005 Lincoln Center staging by modern dance choreographer Doug Varone, with Palmer, opera star Elizabeth Futral, and Varone's dance company. When these participants were asked to perform it for Long Leaf, they decided to revisit their work, resulting in changes substantive enough to label this version a premiere in its own right.

In Gordon's accessible, melodic piece, the clarinet is Orpheus and the soprano is both Euridice and narrator. Gordon's modern retelling in rhymed text follows the pair's meeting and marriage, Euridice's sudden death (here by mysterious virus), Orpheus' bargain to bring her back from death, and his ultimate betrayal of that bargain. Gordon's music needs more variety in the felicitous first half but it supplies appropriate anger, fear, sadness and regret in the more dramatic second half.

While "Orpheus" has merit as a chamber piece, it moves to a completely different plane as a staged work. Although Varone's conception has operatic elements, the work's current form is best classified as dance (it would not be out of place at the American Dance Festival, where Varone's company appears next month). Even though Palmer, Futral and pianist Simon Mulligan (the only new participant) perform their musical assignments with admirable professionalism, movement defines the overall structure.

Varone's eight dancers form an expressive chorus, their amazingly fluid gestures and limber couplings reflecting every musical ornament and mood change. Their manipulation of eight chairs, the only set pieces, creates many unforgettable images.

More astonishingly, the dancers constantly lift, carry and hold the soloists, Futral singing unwavering tones as she flies through the air, Palmer not missing a note as he is held upside down. Both also participate in much of the choreography. In addition, Mulligan's piano is on a rolling platform, which the dancers periodically spin in circles or sail across the stage.

There are some downsides. The text is difficult to hear with so much movement. The near-constant activity pulls concentration away from the soloists. Some eye-popping moments seem more for effect than for organic comment on the story.

Still, this a major work, one that Long Leaf can be proud of, signaling that the company is carving a permanent niche for itself.

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