

THEATER

Taxonomy first: An hour-long piece for clarinet, soprano, and piano, Ricky Ian Gordon's *Orpheus and Euridice* has most often been described as a song cycle, but the press release for its performance in the American Songbook series called it an opera. As the opening night performance made clear, however, thanks to Doug Varone's choreography, what we really have here is a ballet. The strict definition would be the one used by Kurt Weill to describe his *Seven Deadly Sins: "Ballett mit Gesang,"* a ballet with singing. If Gordon's piece were for full orchestra instead of two solo instruments, it would make a lovely matched pair with the Weill work. In its curls of swing and its slow, plangent passages of romantic yearning, the score is full of danciness, probably because clarinetist Todd Palmer's request for a piece compelled Gordon, who usually begins with a text and thinks in song terms, to write with instrumental priorities in mind.

It all goes to show what an artist can do when stretched, a notion that Varone has literalized onstage by making Palmer, soprano Elizabeth Futral, and even pianist Melvin Chen become part of the dance, pulled and whirled and carried about from here to there on the stage. How Futral can sustain long, lush phrases in her sumptuously even tone while she's being tossed or glided back and forth in the arms of Varone's ensemble; how Palmer can shinny up and down long virtuoso runs without cracking a note while being spun around or led in a circle; how Chen can sustain a steady pulsing beat while his piano's wheeled platform is being whirled about, or while dancers are clustering behind him and riffing through the pages on his music rack—these are marvels to those of us for whom music in the theater generally occupies an undisturbed place in the orchestra pit.

Whether they are marvels to the same degree as the myth of Orpheus and Euridice is a different matter. Gordon's jaunty, plain-spoken lyrics give the tale not only a modern tone, but modern overtones: Euridice's death is now a wasting away (Gordon composed the piece not long after his longtime partner died of AIDS); the realm of Hades where Orpheus finds her is "like a waiting room." As if taking his cue from this line, Varone sets the event in a white gauze box, by Allen Moyer, with a single forbidding white door upstage left; the artists come and go in costumes, by Jane Greenwood, that suggest simultaneously both classical drapery and tunics, and modern bathrobes and hospital pajamas. (The shagginess of the robes also evokes the animals that dance to Orpheus's playing.) When Varone needs to create the Underworld through which Orpheus must pass, he does it in the simplest and most elegant way—by raising this world to reveal a black void below it, while the white reality hovers above.

Hearfelt in its tone, and daring as well as beautiful in its execution, in every department, the piece employs a comparatively limited palette. This isn't so much a complaint as a description. After all, it would be stupid to complain about Satie that he wasn't Beethoven. Gordon's music is gentle-souled; intense passion, high fury, and deep anguish are not in his delicate vocabulary. When the turn of the story demands them, what we get instead is a tenderness that evokes them. People who know what Monteverdi, or Gluck, or even Offenbach did with the tale may feel that something has been left out. On the other hand, we already have Monteverdi, Gluck, and Offenbach; we don't need imitations of them. What Gordon gives, and what his gifted interpreters give in response, is something different, quieter and more subtly toned, perhaps, but true to the story in its own contemporary way, and never stupid.

Because the voice must continue narrating even when Euridice has vanished for good, and the clarinet must continue playing even when Orpheus has been shredded by despair, the roles are entirely ambiguous: Futral is both Euridice and someone telling the story of Euridice; Palmer is both Orpheus and the musical continuity that narrates Orpheus's history. This justifies, to a degree, the hedges around the myth's deep emotional content. Feeling is implied and stepped back from rather than dived into. It emerges in the beautiful, stark silences that overtake the scene at climactic moments, and in the sharp images Varone makes, in which passions seem to loom behind Gordon's sweet-toned phrases. My guess is that understatement will enable the piece to age well: As it gets revived time and again, the deep emotionality it supports is likely to become more and more visible. Whether in 50 years there will be artists flexible enough in their resources to handle it with Futral's and Palmer's supreme aplomb is probably the more troubling question. Ballet companies should start training their young clarinetists and sopranos now.