

"The Underworld Upstairs at the Gatehouse

The upper room of a pub in Highgate might not be the most obvious venue for a production of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* but it turned out to be eminently suitable in many ways, not least the fact that the original production was in a room of the Ducal Palace at Mantua that was probably not much bigger. This production was given by Hampstead Garden Opera with the instrumental group Musica Poetica London in the 'Upstairs at the Gatehouse' theatre in Highgate (I went on 14 Nov). Director Matthew Eberhardt set the work (using very effective simple block staging) within what seemed to be some sort of contemporary cult, with the narrow-tied and besuited men and clone women of the chorus (from which emerged the various subsidiary roles) all dressed identically – incidentally, making identification of those roles a bit tricky for those who didn't know the work well. In complete contrast, the underworld was a sordid (or fun, depending on your point of view) graffitied den of seductive torn-tighted Goth sirens surrounding Pluto who, despite the enticing offerings available to him, had his head buried in what I think was 'Fifty Shades of Grey'. What was particularly attractive was the intimate setting, with the audience sitting within a few feet of the action on the wide stage. Of all Monteverdi's operas, *L'Orfeo* is perhaps the one that benefits most from such audience involvement. The orchestra were to one side, and unfortunately out of sight of many of the audience, although this did not affect the integration of players and vocalists. The four main roles had dual casts, so it is perhaps invidious to pick out individuals, although on the evening that I attended, I was impressed by the singers in the key roles; Bélen Barnaus (*Music and Euridice*), Réne Bloice-Sanders (*Orfeo*) and Ian Helm (*Charon and Pluto*). The chorus and supporting singers were also good, although perhaps not always quite in tune with period singing styles. The musical direction was by Oliver-John Ruthven, conducting the 11-strong band, making very effective use of the continuo instruments, although there were some intonation and excessive volume issues from the violins. This was an excellent and adventurous production by an enterprising company."

[Andrew Benson-Wilson, *Early Music Review*, Feb 2013]