

# Edmund Gordon for Buzz

(The Highgate Society Magazine)

## GREAT OPERA

Hampstead Garden Opera's latest Upstairs at the Gatehouse production was of Claudio Monteverdi's Orfeo. Many regard this work, first performed in 1607, as the first great opera. The performance reviewed was great opera in a more general sense.

Opera is musical drama. Though the music and the drama should ideally have equal claims on audience attention the music for most will be critical. Monteverdi's pre-eminence as a composer is not in doubt. HGO followers have come to expect high musical standards. In Orfeo Music Director Olive-John Ruthven and the 10 other players in Musica Poetica maintained, even exceeded, previous high levels of musical attainment.

The principals and all other cast members also displayed a striking uniformly high level of musicality. The role of Orfeo is particularly demanding, as the character is on stage virtually throughout. It was well sustained by René Bloice-Sanders in the performance attended. Belén Barnaus ('Music' and Euridice), Clare Ghigo ('Hope' and Proserpina), Ian Helm (Charon and Pluto), Felicity Smith, Tom Dupernex and Gregory Monk (Shepherdesses and Shepherds), Alice Usher (Nymph and Echo), Teresa Pells (Messenger), Milo Harries (Spirit of the Underworld) and George Smart (Apollo) as well as those playing followers of Orfeo, country people and denizens of the underworld supported admirably.

Important as the music may be to the appeal of an opera to its audience, Oliver-John Ruthven suggests in his Orfeo programme note that Monteverdi would have written his music to serve the words of Alessandro Striggio's libretto. In this performance they served not Striggio's words but an exemplary translation by the poet Anne Ridler.

Striggio and Monteverdi, both highly placed in the court of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga at Mantua, were pioneers in the creation of drama set to music that is now called opera. The few precedents on which they would have been able to rely were the concepts of Greek drama and approaches to its recreation that had evolved in the Florence of their time.

Matthew Eberhardt's production unobtrusively unified movement and action with the music, and allowed the quality of the translated libretto to be consistently appreciated. Rachel Szmukler's set and costume designs served the production well (though Pluto and his realm for me had the best décor even if not all the best tunes).

In his programme note the Production Director surmises the 21st century audiences largely lacking religious beliefs might react less readily than those of the 17th century to the classical and Christian references permeating Orfeo. Nearer in age than he to the 17th century and accordingly brought up not only in the nurture and admonition of the Lord but also tales from ancient Greece and Rome I felt the reaction of the audience, varying widely in age, showed his fears were unfounded. Most if not all seemed to me to greet Orfeo as an illuminating and enjoyable addition to HGO's recent successes.