

Michael White for the Ham and High

HGO ROCKS TO BAROQUE SOUND

Regals, pochettes and theorbos aren't standard finds in the upper rooms of London pubs. But they were out in force for this Monteverdi Orfeo at the Gatehouse, Highgate, which came with an impressive band of period instruments that took HGO production values to new levels of ambition.

Staged in modern dress, with the men in suits and ties that made them look like close friends of the Kray twins, its austere visual simplicity had too much recourse to ritual manoeuvres (a young director defeated by the problem of finding things for his chorus to do) but nonetheless delivered the story in a dignified way. And musically it was a joy.

Not every singer had enough technique to energise the long recitative-like vocal lines which are the stuff of Monteverdi operas. But I liked Sophie Yelland's Proserpina, a full-on queen of the underworld. Edmund Hastings brought an eloquent, engaging tenderness to the title role. And the ensemble singing was superb – as was the overall musical direction of Oliver-John Ruthven who did a fine job of maintaining forward momentum and keeping the sound of his baroque band bright and lively if not totally in tune (a hazard of old instruments: your ears almost expect it).