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Opera Review: Dreamlike take on 'Orpheus and Euridice'

By Jim Lowe

Staff writer

PROCTOR — Opera is taking many forms these days, but one of the most intriguing and affecting around can be experienced this weekend in a former manufacturing space at the Vermont Marble Museum.

Ricky Ian Gordon's "Orpheus and Euridice," being presented by the fledgling Vermont Opera Project at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, pretty much follows the legend, but that's about where the traditional ends. Seen at Wednesday's dress rehearsal, it proved a very operatic experience.

"Orpheus and Euridice" was commissioned by Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and premiered in 2005 at New York's Rose Theater as part of American Songbook and New Visions Series. Simply put, "Orpheus and Euridice" is a 60-minute song cycle for soprano, clarinet and accompaniment, sounding very much like the music of American composer Leonard Bernstein. But it was written to be dramatized, with the soprano as Euridice and the clarinet as Orpheus. And it works.

Suzanne Kantorski and Wesley Christiansen, both Vermont artists, are Euridice and Orpheus, joined by four dancers as a Greek chorus. They are accompanied by a pianist and string quintet from the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. But that makes it sound too simple.

Orpheus and Euridice meet, fall in love, cavort, settle down. She dies slowly. He saves but loses her, and he dies a rather unpleasant death. This takes place in the most atmospheric of staging, giving it an ethereal, untouchable feeling — like living in a dream.

Kantorski, an accomplished opera singer, delivers the lyrical vocal lines with flair. It was sometimes difficult to discern all the words due to the size of the staging, so it's best to have read the story in the program first. Still, Kantorski sang not only with depth of expression but operatic beauty and brilliance.

And it was surprising how Christiansen's clarinet sounded conversational in its back-and-forth with Euridice, its meaning quite

forthright. Christiansen played with a beautiful sound and virtuosity and his own operatic brilliance.

And the two interacted with charm and intimacy. Musically and theatrically, their coming together was gorgeous.

The very gray, rough-hewn room complemented by Liliana Duque Piñero's stylish staging with its path to nowhere and illuminated by Jeff Bruckerhoff's imaginative lighting, created that dreamlike atmosphere. Anya Klepikov's costumes emphasized the ordinariness of the characters rather than the ethereal of the background.

Directed and choreographed by Keturah Stickann, the staging proved stylish and effective storytelling. Robert Wood conducted the inviting music, including the excellent instrumentalists, with a real sense of its drama.

The Vermont Opera Project's "Orpheus and Euridice" created the effect of a beautiful animated classic painting with music. Now, that's a different way to enjoy opera.

The Vermont Opera Project

The Vermont Opera Project presents "Orpheus and Euridice," a song cycle in two acts by Ricky Ian Gordon, at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Aug. 12 and 13, at the Vermont Marble Museum, 52 Main St. in Proctor. (A talk by the composer will precede each performance at 7 p.m.) Tickets are \$45; go online to www.vtoperaproject.com.