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Revelatory Baroque Gem

Theater an der Wien, 30.01.2026 [ENA]

On a crisp January evening at the venerable Theater an der Wien, Vienna's musical life was enriched by a rare revival of Stefano Landi's La morte d'Orfeo — a work that represents a fascinating and underappreciated chapter in the early history of opera. Staged in a concertante version with Italian sung text and German surtitles, this 1619 tragicomedia pastorale offers audiences a compelling sequel to Monteverdi.

It is following the Monteverdi's L'Orfeo and is extending the myth and providing a poignant and stylistically intriguing counterpart to its more famous predecessor. La morte d'Orfeo is not simply a historical curiosity; it is a work of dramatic imagination and musical vitality, standing at the crossroads between the nascent operatic experimentation of the early 17th century and the burgeoning Roman style that would soon dominate Italian theatre. Where Monteverdi's L'Orfeo established the expressive possibilities of monody, recitative, and the integration of music with dramatic text, Landi's score explores these innovations further, while equally embracing elements of choral and ensemble writing reminiscent of madrigal traditions.

The narrative premise immediately sets this opera apart. Picking up where Monteverdi's masterpiece concludes — with Orpheus's failed descent to the underworld — Landi's sequel finds the tragic hero renouncing earthly pleasures in despair. This philosophical renunciation, however, does not lead to stoic resignation. Instead, the god of wine intervenes, resulting in Orpheus's violent death at the hands of frenzied followers. Thus begins a metaphysical debate among gods and muses: should Orpheus ascend to Olympus or reunite with Eurydice in the realm of the dead?

This blending of mythic fate with comic interludes reflects the tragicomic essence of the pastorale, a genre that blurs conventional boundaries and invites both emotional immersion and reflective detachment. Musically, the ensemble Les Épopées, under the sensitive baton of Stéphane Fuget, delivered a performance of remarkable clarity and stylistic understanding. Fuget's direction revealed a deep awareness of early Baroque rhetoric, allowing the shifting textures — from declamatory recitative to lyrical aria and ensemble chorus — to breathe with natural inflection and dramatic purpose.

The use of period-informed phrasing and continuo playing, combined with crisp articulation from the strings and winds, ensured that Landi's idiom felt both immediate and richly expressive. In the title role, Cyril Auvity brought a commanding presence and vocal flexibility ideally suited to this repertoire. His

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portrayal of Orfeo was compelling not merely for technical fluency but for its capacity to convey the psychological complexity of a figure torn between despair and transcendence. Auvity's nuanced phrasing captured Orfeo's shifting emotional landscape — from world-weariness to visceral grief — with an intensity that resonated deeply, especially in the opera's more introspective passages.

Hasnaa Bennani as Euridice and Isabelle Druet as Calliope/Una Menade provided strong vocal contrast and dramatic color, their timbres blending and diverging in ways that illuminated the opera's layered dramaturgy. The supporting cast — including Paul Figuier, Claire Lefilliâtre, and Anaïs Yvoz — contributed memorable characterizations, underscoring the work's unusual juxtaposition of solemnity and satire. These interactions between mortal and divine characters reinforced the opera's exploration of mortality, myth, and the transformative power of music itself.

The decision to present La morte d'Orfeo in concertante form was judicious, allowing the score's architectural and rhetorical subtleties to come to the fore without the distraction of elaborate staging. However, the absence of scenic design did not diminish the work's evocative power; rather, it placed the listener's focus squarely on the music and text, reminding us of opera's origins as a conversation between poetry and sound.
Perhaps the most striking feature of this performance was how vividly it showcased La morte d'Orfeo's dual identity as both a spiritual reflection on loss and a lively dramatic creation.

The balance of tragic and comic elements — a hallmark of the tragicomedia pastorale — was executed with finesse, never tipping too far into either sentimentality or levity. Instead, the evening's musical narrative affirmed opera's unique ability to hold paradox — sorrow and celebration, earth and Olympus, lamentation and exaltation — within a single artistic frame.
For audiences familiar only with Monteverdi's operatic canon, this production offered a revelatory glimpse of early Baroque's broader expressive palette.

Landi's work reminded us that the evolution of opera was not linear; it was shaped by composers willing to experiment with form, affect, and genre, and by audiences eager to experience stories that transcended conventional dramatic archetypes.
In this light, the Theater an der Wien's presentation of La morte d'Orfeo was not merely a rare performance of a seldom-heard score, but a meaningful contribution to our ongoing rediscovery of the rich and varied tapestry of early opera. It serves as an invitation — and a challenge — for performers, scholars, and listeners alike to deepen their engagement with the formative years of a genre that continues to shape our cultural imagination.

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