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Beneath the underworld

By David Jays, FT.com site
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This weekend, English National Opera premieres a new production of Monteverdi's Orfeo, the first real opera, at the London Coliseum. A 400-year-old chamber piece originally written for an Italian ducal palace must fill the largest theatre in London. It's a big event - for the ENO and for all those involved. So what happens in the run-up to the opening night? How does the creative team communicate such an old piece to a contemporary audience and how do an incomplete score and the director's imagination reach the stage?

The Chinese-born opera director Chen Shi-Zheng is making his UK debut with this production of Orfeo. He has planned to stage this opera since 1998, when his controversial production of the classic Chinese opera Peony Pavilion was banned in China. Monteverdi's baroque operas were contemporaneous with Beijing opera, which also fuses music, choreography and bold design. Chen is inspired by the hero's emotional endurance test. "It's set up to show how he suffers - it's beautifully harsh."

Orfeo, originally performed in Mantua in 1607, retells the myth of Orpheus, a master musician who ventures into the underworld to reclaim his wife, Eurydice. Defying a prohibition on looking back, he loses her again, but (in Monteverdi's version) is eventually lifted to heaven by Apollo. With its madrigal-style choruses and adventurous effects - brass clamours at the gates of hell, strings lull a watchman to sleep - Orfeo's music is indivisible from its drama: ecstatic, desperate, the soundtrack to human need.

Three years ago, Chen staged Monteverdi's vespers for Boston's Handel and Haydn Society. His style, rooted in Chinese opera, seizes references from across time and place. "Shi-Zheng believes we are living in a broken and chaotic world," says Mary Deissler, executive director of the Handel and Haydn Society, "where old cultural icons are dead and cultural crossover is key for new sources of inspiration for both east and west." Some of Chen's choices have been surprising: gallery-style video runs against traditional Balinese motifs; costumes reference punks and silkworms. He has incorporated Javanese court dance into the production, to heighten the rituals around marriage and death, and with Deissler's support formed a company of Indonesian dancers. But it makes perfect sense to Chen as a territory for exploring loss, change and rites of passage - the dramatic themes of this opera.

Chen has been working through his ideas for two years now, ever since the ENO decided to produce Orfeo. But rehearsals began only seven weeks ago; weeks in which the singers and orchestra have come together, the set and costumes been made, and the staging decided upon. The result at the Coliseum this weekend aims to be flawless. But how did it get there?

Week One

It's only the fourth day of rehearsal, in the sunny north London home of the National Youth Theatre. Unlike a play, where the cast might spend days discussing text or psychology, this team knows where it is heading. Chen already knows precisely what he wants to see; the singers too have learnt their music and rarely refer to the score. The ENO props team has already made Balinese-style wedding and funeral offerings, layered with fruit, eggs and orange chrysanthemums, that play a prominent role in the production.

Everything about the process feels intimate at this stage. The harpsichord jangles into life and a singer moves slowly along a path of bright flowers strewn on the floor. Wendy Dawn Thompson plays the messenger who has to tell Orfeo that his new wife has been killed by a snake bite, only minutes after we have seen them celebrate their marriage. She crouches, picks up a flower, rubs its petals between sorrowing fingers. Chen darts forward to push her fist into the pit of her stomach for painful emphasis. With murmured consultations he refines each crouch and turn.

These fine adjustments are important. When Thompson recites Eurydice's dying words, she builds "Orfeo, Orfeo!" into a dramatic crescendo. Conductor

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Laurence Cummings suggests that she gets quieter instead, producing the faltering breath of a dying woman. It is a tiny alteration, but heartbreaking ("Small points are what make the big points," Cummings says later). Even at this early stage, it's very moving: beside me, Jane Livingston, the ENO's head of press, is in tears.

Reprising the scene from the beginning, Orfeo's wedding party turns to funeral. The dancers are mesmerising, with lizard-flicker fingers and immaculate profiles. The young singers playing boozy wedding guests mimic them, adding disco hips and giggling. When a funeral procession brings in Eurydice, everyone finds their own way of comforting John Mark Ainsley's shock-still Orfeo: a kiss, a bear hug, a hand rubbing his shaven scalp. Cruel destiny toys with human feelings in Orfeo, but ritual helps make sense of it.

Week Two

By the end of the first week, the bones of the production are already in place and every scene has been rehearsed. Although the full orchestra rehearses separately, musicians from the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment are working with the singers today. The OAE's period instruments will combine with ENO's modern orchestra in an unusual collaboration as the ENO's string players use baroque bows on regular instruments. Cummings, musical director of the London Handel Festival, admits that he got his agent to lobby ENO for this production. Unlike later operatic scores, Monteverdi's work is unspecific about details of instrumentation and vocal ornament. "There are so many decisions - Monteverdi gives you so much choice," says Cummings.

Outside the studio, wardrobe staff work on designs by American Caitlin Ward. She leafs through some of the images Chen provided for reference, which relate Orfeo's journey from loss into renewed life to a metamorphosis. "Shi-Zheng is really interested in bugs," she says. "And he really loves silkworms." She developed these ideas through dozens of costume sketches, and the singers experiment with sample versions. Some clearly brandish their insect inspiration: the red panels of Eurydice's wedding dress unfold like wings, while Pluto, god of the underworld, will inhabit a vast orange cocoon. Both will be made in translucent materials through which fibres squiggle like blood vessels.

Set designer Tom Pye stayed with Chen for 10 days last summer, working with the music playing throughout. The result of their intense discussions is the simple structure of a home. Its base serves as the platform on which Orfeo celebrates his wedding, the roof reverses to become the boat that bears him to hell. Again, Chen wants translucent materials, but the craftsmen in ENO's east London workshops will need time to realise Pye's evocative sketches.

Week Four

With the arc of the production firmly established, rehearsals fine-tune apparently fiddly detail. Some of the singers look frustrated, but Chen says he loves this stage of rehearsal. "I can focus on every second," he says. "I like things to be precise - every second is accountable." Each tiny adjustment is immediately noted by scribbling stage or music staff: the production builds through a palimpsest of lists, jottings and marginal notes. This is the last opportunity to nail the inflections of performance as technical aspects of the show will soon take priority.

On the edge of the floor, John Mark Ainsley frets over the details of his performance. Orfeo is his signature role - he won the Munich Festival Prize for it in 1999 - but does the essential character differ from production to production? He agrees that they're like cousins. "I'm pretty clear about who Orfeo is. He's incredibly in love, but also incredibly self-pitying, egotistical, proud and sad - and in varying degrees every time." He had only one conversation with Chen before rehearsals, six months previously, and admits it took time to understand his contained manner. "Now I completely trust him," he says. "There are directors who are more articulate, but use words in a less honest way."

Week Six

The team has finally arrived at the London Coliseum, with two weeks to make the production a functioning reality. Unlike theatre, there are no previews; the press night is also the first public performance. The orchestra won't join the proceedings for another few days, and the first stage sessions are gritty stop-start affairs, ironing out myriad technical glitches.

ENO's auditorium, reopened in 2004 after restoration, gleams in gilt and scarlet. Just feet away, behind the proscenium arch, is a cavernous backstage working space. The set looks oddly unfinished - brushstrokes are broad, there's the odd chip, but Kevan Healey, the show team supervisor, grins: "Things do look tawdry close up, but not under the lights. That's the magic of theatre."

On stage, Orfeo descends into the underworld. The adjustments now are on a larger scale - and far more pragmatic. How long does it take to open one of the panels in the back wall? Will the baritone have time to change costumes? Chen still tries to correct gestures, but he has to boom through a microphone from the stalls rather than muttering into people's ears.

The swarm of activity is co-ordinated from the prompt corner, just beyond the audience's vision, where deputy stage manager Alex Hayesmore cues lights and singers. Getting the technicalities right is a precision art - as Hayesmore acknowledges, you can't extend a dramatic pause in opera, where the music must carry on regardless. "It's relentless," he says.

Relentless, but not hysterical. Indeed, the whole process has been

impressively even-tempered and lacking in tantrums. Perhaps it is a function of Chen's personality - he doesn't seem to thrive on chaos, instead refining images developed months before rehearsals began. Everything converges on perfecting his bold choices of form and colour, the juxtaposition of startling elements, to release Monteverdi's harsh beauty. Now Orfeo can launch his plangent yearning into a vast auditorium.

"Orfeo", in association with the Handel and Haydn Society, Boston, is in repertoire at the London Coliseum, 0870 145 0200, until April 28.

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