

## To Hell and Back, with Musical Accompaniment

by Steve Zilles

Opera is serious business. The hero or heroine (or both) are beset by events they cannot or fail to control and we are engaged by the music which highlights their feelings and the situation. Take, for example, the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus is the son of Apollo and is such a great musician that he can charm the beasts of Hades. He falls in love with the beautiful shepherdess Eurydice and they are married. But, just before they can settle down to a life of bliss, she is bitten by a snake, she dies and is transported to Hades.

Now Hades is not hell. You may recall from your reading of Ulysses that in the Greek underworld spirits are not tormented; they just become shades of themselves. That is, they continue to exist, but in a diminished state and a darkened world. You may also recall that Hades, the underworld, is ruled by the Greek god Pluto, who, being a god, is able to grant favors.

Back to Orpheus, who is very upset at losing Eurydice. He is so upset that he decides to go to the underworld to get her back. Now, this guy is clearly of the heroic type. The average guy would mourn for awhile and get over it and start looking for a new shepherdess. After all, who wants to tackle Cerberus, the three headed dog that guards the entrance to Hades. But, Orpheus is different and he does have that ability to play music that charms the beasts of the underworld. So he gets in to see Pluto and, with his music, charms him as well. Pluto is so charmed that he offers Orpheus a gift. Always beware when the gods offer you a gift. There is usually a catch somewhere. Pluto offers to let Orpheus take Euridice back to earth where she

would become her original self, but the catch is he must lead her back to earth without turning around to see if she is following. Things go pretty well for a long while. They are almost back to the surface when Orpheus begins to wonder if Eurydice is still following. Finally, he is so concerned that he has to turn around to see if she is following. He does see that she is following. And, he also sees her vanish and return back into the underworld. Clearly this is an operatic story.

Being an operatic story someone must have made an opera out of it. But, of course. One of the most famous operatic versions of this story is *Orfeo et Eurydice* by Christoph Willibald Gluck. This opera, presented in Vienna at the Court of Empress Maria Theresa, is a beautiful example of Baroque opera. It is interesting in that it has only three major characters: our hero, his love, Amore (the god of Love himself), and the Chorus. This being a French Baroque opera it also has many opportunities for dance interludes. The music is sweet and moving

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### **Reminder: SJOG Election Day Board of Directors**

Members of the San José Opera Guild will elect directors and officers at a general membership meeting to be held at 10:00am, November 6, just before our scheduled San Francisco Opera Guild Lecture at the JCC.

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and was wonderfully sung and played by West Edge Opera this summer. It was clear that they understood the myth because they even changed Gluck's ending to fit the story above. You see, this opera premiered on the name day of the reigning Holy Roman Emperor, Francis I, and, therefore, must have a happy ending, so Gluck had Amore restore Eurydice to life and to return to earth with Orpheus where they and the other shepherds celebrate their reunion.

But this is a serious Greek myth. Not something to take lightly or abused unless you are a French composer in 1858 who has a theater to fill. A composer and librettist see a real opportunity in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Recall that this was a time of serious art: the then conservative Salon in painting, the Grand Opera at the Opera Garnier, etc. It would be an affront to society to take such a sacred myth and parody it. But that is just what Jacques Offenbach and his librettists, Hector Crémieux and Ludovic Halévy, did.

In *Orphée aux enfers*, we find that Orpheus is a violin teacher (and not the son of Apollo), his wife Eurydice is not only NOT happily married (they are, at this point, married), but she hates the kind of music he plays. And, Pluto is not in Enfers/Hades, but is playing on earth as a neighbor of Orpheus. Why is Pluto on earth? Because he is interested in seducing Eurydice. In fact, he and Orpheus scheme together to put snakes in Eurydice's bed so she will be transported to the underworld and Orpheus can then marry the young shepherdess in which he has taken an interest.

But, this being theater, things are not going to be that easy for either Orpheus or Pluto. You see, much like Gluck, Offenbach adds an extra character to the story. This character is Public Opinion (a Mezzo-soprano, of course). Public Opinion (or the character that represents it) forces Orpheus, against his wishes, to go and rescue Eurydice.

Orpheus shows up on Mount Olympus (with the help of Public Opinion) and requests (with an excerpt from Gluck) help in retrieving Eurydice.

Jupiter agrees that something must be done and, since everyone on Mount Olympus is bored almost to death, he offers to take all the gods, goddesses and Orpheus to Hades for a lark. They agree and the transition takes place between the first and second acts.

Hades turns out to be a pretty lively place and Jupiter being Jupiter is curious to see this human that so attracted Pluto. We know that Jupiter is the master of transformation, turning into a swan for Leda, a bull for Europa, etc., In this case, because Eurydice is locked in a room by Pluto, he turns himself into a fly to be able to go through the keyhole.

This opera/operetta, too, was played this summer, at the Salzburg Festival in Austria. The direction was by Barry Kosky, an Australian with a wonderful sense of humor, great attention to detail and a desire to leave no opportunity to



*Donna Petersen (Merola 1957)  
Public Opinion in Orpheus in the Underworld  
Pocket Opera 1999  
Photo by Bob Shomler*

elaborate the story untouched. He is irreverent and inventive, a perfect complement to a story that is irreverent and inventive.

I bring that up now because I want you to imagine how to direct a fly seducing Eurydice. Kosky is not afraid to be very direct in scenes of sexual attraction and action and he comes through with a hilariously entertaining consummated seduction between a fly and a woman, a seduction in which Eurydice seems to be as much the perpetrator as Jupiter.

So why isn't this work better known? Yes, yes, you know the overture, but what about work itself. With one major exception the music is not well known nor particularly inspiring, but the words and music do much to carry the story along when the production is as joyful as the one done in Salzburg. Oh yes, there are all those words between the musical bits. Opera singers are not known for their speaking voices, especially when they have to project to a large opera house. Furthermore, not all of the singers were natural German speakers. Kosky solved this problem by hiring a famous German actor, Max Hopp, to do all the speaking parts (which were mimed, beautifully, by the singers). He was, therefore, on stage for the whole production adding suitable sound effects to the singer's actions and making the audience always have a smile in their faces if they were not laughing wholeheartedly.

The story of this operetta is also a lesson in marketing. When it opened it was mildly successful, but very quickly sales began to fall. It was only when a well known critic, Jules Janin, became offended by this frivolous parody of a sacred myth and began to write and appeal to the authorities to close the show as an affront to society (his society, of course) that the population's interest was peaked to see what the fuss was all about. This led to a very successful run of 228 performances, stopped only because the singers were exhausted.

OK, I did say there is one piece of music from this operetta that you probably know. This is

French work and, as such, it must have dancing. Jupiter proposes a minuet, but that was too boring and Pluto introduces a *Galop Infernal*. After Offenbach's death, this music was adopted by the *Moulin Rouge* and other dance halls to accompany the Can-Can (a dance very different from a galop) and that is how most of us know this music.

Since a parody (and especially a parody as irreverent as this one is, both in book and direction) can have a happy ending, we find out that Eurydice ends up not with Pluto, nor Jupiter, but as a Bacchante in celebration of Bacchus and, of course, wine. Controlled by Public Opinion, Orpheus does attempt to retrieve Eurydice, but Jupiter helps release her by throwing a thunderbolt that makes Orpheus turn. This leads to a festive conclusion that includes a reprise of the *Galop Infernal*.

We have established that it is OK to reinterpret the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and a very successful variant has been playing on Broadway this past year. This show, *Hadestown* by Anais Mitchell and Rachel Chavkin, was so successful that it won eight Tonys this past June. This is a telling that is set in a New Orleans bistro on earth and in an industrial Hades below. *Hadestown* is designed, like *Les Miz*, as a sung through theatrical, a folk opera. Musically, there is a mix of idioms: folk, bluegrass, blues.

The cast of characters is expanded. Remember Pluto (here called Hades). Besides running Hades, he also abducted Persephone, the goddess of Spring, who turns out to be a powerful force in this telling of the story. Hermes, the messenger of the gods acts to narrate the story and the Three Fates remind the characters of the constraints on them. Orpheus is a musician with a dream that the song he is writing will change the world if only he can find the ending. Eurydice is not a shepherdess, but a wandering waif that is barely surviving whom Orpheus recognizes as the Muse that will help him finish the song.

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# November Calendar

by Connie Zilles

## San José Opera Guild's Lecture Series

Please note: San José Opera Guild's Lecture Series meets on Wednesdays unless otherwise listed. Lectures are held at the JCC of Silicon Valley, 14855 Oka Road (cross street Lark Avenue) Los Gatos, 10am to noon. SJOG and JCC Members free. Non-members \$10.

**November 6**, Lecture with Simon Williams on *Hansel and Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck.

## Opera Performances

**November 16, 17, 21, 24, 26, and December 1**, Opera San José presents *Hansel and Gretel*, California Theatre, 8pm except Sundays at 3pm. Tickets: 408-437-4450 or [www.operasj.org](http://www.operasj.org). Introduction to Opera Talks 1½ hours before the opera performance.

**February 15, 16, 20, 23, 28, March 1**, Opera San Jose presents *Il trovatore*. See above for further information.

**February 14, 16, 22, and 23**, West Bay Opera presents *Macbeth* by Giuseppe Verdi at the Lucie Stern Theater, Palo Alto, Friday at 8pm and Sundays at 2pm. \$70/65, Call 650 424-9999 or visit [www.wbopera.org](http://www.wbopera.org). Piano preview Feb. 6, at 8pm, Palo Alto Art Center.

## Metropolitan Opera Simulcast in HD

Showing at Century Oakridge 20, 408 225-7340 or Santana Row 6, 408 554-7000. Please confirm with theaters to verify that they will be showing a particular opera. (Prices may vary for the various HD operas.). For more information contact Met Opera Broadcasts.

**Saturday, November 9, 9:55am**, *Madama Butterfly* by Puccini, Encores Nov. 13, 16.

**Saturday, November 23, 9:55am** *Akhnaten* by Phillip Glass, Encore December 4.

**Saturday, December 7**, *The Magic Flute* special holiday encore at select theaters.

**Saturday, January 11, 9:55am**, *Wozzeck* by Alan Berg, January 15.

**Saturday, February 1, 9:55am**, *Porgy and Bess* by The Gershwins, Encores February 5 & 8.

Encores are generally the following Wednesday evening at 6:30 but may vary. Please verify with the theater.



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# Career Updates

by Susan English

Opera News continues to include numerous Merolini in their articles and reviews. Their July edition presented a review of Houston Grand Opera's premiere of *The Phoenix*, an HGO commission by composer Tarik O'Regan and librettist John Caird. Thomas Hampson (Merola 1980) made his HGO debut as the older da Ponte, "with irrepressible energy as entrepreneur and showman." The production "made this opera a stirring homage to the great Italian librettist." The music, "a vaguely classical style for Vienna ... and jaunty folklike music for America – all deftly performed by the HGO Orchestra, led by Patrick Summers." (Merola 1986-87) This same edition considered HGO's production of *Don Giovanni*, beginning "It was the singers who made HGO's *Don Giovanni* persuasive." One of those singers, Allyn Perez (Merola 2005), was reviewed with: "playing a compromised but determined Donna Anna, [She] is a thrilling soprano who has the power and brilliance to bring off an incisive "or sai chi l'onore."

One more review in this July edition focused on Dallas Opera's production of *Falstaff*. **Mark Delavan** (Merola 1985) made his house debut as Falstaff. "Bass-baritone Mark Delavan was admirably smooth in the title role, his hardy legato lines reflecting Falstaff's hubris. He was joined in the production by another Merolini, **Quinn Kelsey** (Merola 2002). Baritone Quinn Kelsey's Ford sounded rich and velvety ... Kelsey's desperate anguish helped compel the shift to Verdi's best serious music and style at the close of the scene, with its dramatic change in pacing, more expressive melodies and darker orchestration."

September's Opera News featured a "Season Forecast" with "Women on the Verge – A dozen singers to watch in the 2019-2020 season." Two Merolini were included: **Daniela Mack** (Merola 2007) and **Leah Crocetto** (Merola 2008) Ms Mack will be singing Rosina in Minnesota Opera's

*Barbiere*, Juno in Opera Philadelphia's *Semele*, Romeo in Bellini's *Capuleti e Montecchi* at Opera Omaha, and Varvara in *Kat'a Kabanova* at the Met. Ms Crocetto also has a busy season. She will sing Desdemona at Washington National Opera, Liu at Palm Beach Opera, Elisabetta di Valois at Dallas Opera, and Bellini's *Norma* at Pittsburgh Opera. In January, she sings Verdi's *Requiem* for Opera Philadelphia.

San Francisco's summer season ended with Dvorak's fairy-tale opera *Rusalka*. Opera News' review noted: "San Francisco Opera saved the best for last in its three-opera summers season with an excellent *Rusalka*, scoring an unqualified hit..." The review called out two Merolini: **Sarah Cambridge** (Merola 2016) and **Laura Krumm** (Merola 2011). "Sarah Cambridge was an articulate, insinuating Foreign Princess ..." As reviewed by Kosman: "Soprano Sarah Cambridge, just out of her time as an Adler fellow, showed the outlines of a promising Wagnerian career to come in her fine, muscular performance as the Foreign Princess." Opera News wrote: "Laura Krumm's Kitchen Boy made the most of [her] Act II scene, pulling wet-looking entrails from a carcass while gossiping about the Prince's impending nuptials."

San Francisco Opera's fall season began with a *Romeo et Juliette* that brought Merolini **Pene Pati** to the forefront. Joshua Kosman's review was titled: "... The Tenor Understudy Walks Off With The Show." He goes on to write "Pati got a chance to show what he could do. The answer, it turns out, is 'pretty much everything.' He's got a vigorous, full-bodied sound with a lustrous mid-range and glorious, perfectly placed top notes, including one long-held stratospheric closer that would have sounded like showboating if it hadn't been so magnificent. Pati sings in a gleaming, sensuous stream of sound, with heroic accents in more athletic passages and a warm, tenderly inviting depth for moments of romantic intimacy." Mr. Pati

will again sing Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* this time with Opera National de Bordeaux. He will travel to New Zealand's Festival Opera to sing in *Madama Butterfly*, then to Hawaii Opera Theatre to sing Alfredo in *La Traviata*, back to New Zealand to sing Nemorino in *L'Elisir d'Amore*, back to Bordeaux to sing the title role of Mitridarte, Re di Ponto. Clearly we will be seeing many laudatory reviews to come!

This production brought many Merolini to the stage: Kosman noting, "And Pati wasn't content merely to contribute a star turn on his own – he also brought out the best in everyone around him." Among those in the cast was his wife and fellow Merolini, **Amina Edris**, who sang Juliet in the last performance of the opera. Friar Lawrence was sung by **James Creswell**, Tybalt was sung by **Daniel Montenegro**, and the Duke of Verona was sung by **Philip Skinner**. Kosman considered their performances with: "Bass James Creswell was a booming, authoritative presence as Friar Lawrence, and so too, in his one late scene, was Philip Skinner as the Duke of Verona. The Opera Chorus, directed by Ian Robertson, mustered a darkly compelling sound as they mourned the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt." **Hadleigh Adams** sang Count Paris and joined numerous Merolini in SFO's next production, *Billy Budd*.

Britten's *Billy Budd* opened in September featuring nine Merolini. According to Kosman, "The cast could scarcely be improved on. As Vere, the opera's flawed voice of conscience, **William Burden** (Merola 1991) deployed his crystalline, fluid tenor with a combination of graceful ease and pained, halting expressivity ... and in the title role, baritone **John Chest** (Merola 2009) made an impressive company debut with a performance of freshness and vitality." He goes on to write: "There were standouts, too, amid the large all-male cast (no women to be found on a man-'o-war). ... **Philip Skinner** (Merola 1986-87) gave a gruffly alluring performance as the grizzled old sailor Dansker." Also included in the cast were **Philip Horst** (Merola 1999), **Christian Pursell**

(Merola 2017), **Christopher Colmenro** (Merola 2019), **Edward Nelson** (Merola 2014), **Eugene Villanueva** (Merola 2008), and **Hadleigh Adams** (Merola 2013-14).

From Metroactive: OSJ's fall production of *Die Fledermaus* was a rousing success: "Opera San José hits it out of the park, reveling in the hilarity and preposterous premise as the cast moves from one opulent, high-ceilinged room to another." The cast included many former and current Resident Artists: Eugene Brancoveanu (Merola 2004 and current Resident Artist) sang von Eisenstein. The review went on to say: "The cast is lively and compelling, and makes the characters memorable. Brancoveanu's Eisenstein is brash and witty, with a voice to match." Maria Natale sang Rosalinde, Metroactive noted: [She] "is equally charming, but with an elusiveness that effectively captures her character's particular situation." Former Resident Artist soprano Maria Natale made her company debut in the 2018-19 season appearing as Nedda in (Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*) and Cio-Cio-San (Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.) Additional former resident artists appearing in the opera included baritone Brian James Myer singing Dr. Falke, Jesse Merlin singing Frosch and Alexander Boyer (also Merola 2009) singing Alfred. He will appear as Manrico in Verdi's *Il trovatore* later this season with OSJ.

Mr. Boyer appeared this past summer in *Breaking the Waves* with West Edge Opera's Festival Opera season. This opera company brings its summer festival to the Bridge Yard, a newly renovated industrial facility where the Bay Bridge meets the Oakland waterfront. Their stated mission is: "The company strives to look at opera in a fresh and innovative way, enhancing the experience for both performers and audience. Repertoire includes new and unusual works as well as both favorite and lesser-known works by well-known composers." *Breaking the Waves* was reviewed by Joshua Kosman with: "Kudos are due to West Edge for bringing the piece here with such alacrity, and for presenting it so superbly."

The review continues with: “soprano **Kristin Clayton** (Merola 1993) combined implacable steeliness and tonal beauty as Bess’s censorious mother. **Alex Boyer’s** lovely tenor lent poignancy and charm to the role of the English doctor who tends to both Jim and Bess ...” The two additional operas of West Edge Opera’s Festival also featured Merolini. *Orfeo and Euridice* featured **Maria Valdes** (Merola 2013 and OSJ Resident Artist) as Euridice. She will sing with Atlanta Opera in *Frida* this fall. *The Threepenny Opera* offered by West Edge included **Catherine Cook** (Merola 1990) as Mrs. Peachum. San Francisco Opera will tap her to sing Marcellina in *Marriage of Figaro* this fall, and Opera Parallele will have her singing Mama in *Harvey Milk*.

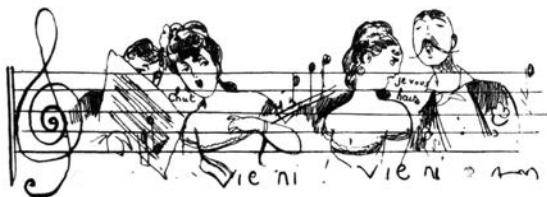
San Francisco Classical Voice considered another “festival” opera company — Walnut Creek’s Festival Opera. This summer it included three Merolini in its production of *Susannah*. The article noted: “*Susannah* was a good choice for Festival Opera’s rebirth: tuneful, powerful, musically sophisticated, and unmistakably timely.” Merolini Philip Skinner sang Reverend Blicht, with SFCV noting: “bass-baritone Philip Skinner used his fine, big voice and tall stature to great effect, showing us the charisma and power of the evangelist, especially in the harrowing scene in which he attempts to make *Susannah* confess her “sins.” Skinner was convincing, as well, in his portrayal of the preacher’s soul-destroying lust and guilt.” Another role for busy Alex Boyer was *Susannah*’s brother Sam. SFCV observed: “tenor Alex Boyer performed with a goofy, inept sweetness toward his sister, a love that morphs tragically into drunken revenge on the preacher.” Eugene Brancoveanu (Adler 2005-06) sang Little Bat’s father. ♪



*Continued from page four*

*Hadestown* is a retelling of the Orpheus myth for the 21st century in several ways. First, it animates the female characters of the myth. It gives Eurydice choices to make rather than solely be at the mercy of fate. It gives Persephone, the goddess of the seasons and the wife of Pluto (called Hades in this story) a role to play and emotions to feel. Persephone (and Orpheus) represent the world of possibility, of belief that the world will provide, of hope of a better future. Hades (and Eurydice here) represents the industrial world of today, the world of practical safety, of not gambling on something different, of insuring food and shelter, of protecting what we have. In this telling, neither approach really succeeds: Orpheus fails to rescue Eurydice, but Hades, too, is full of discontent at the end. The audience is challenged to decide how they will approach life.

It is interesting to see how this single Greek myth has inspired three very different treatments of the same story, different in time (1762, 1858 and 2019), different in form (opera, operetta and folk opera), and different in focus (Orpheus and Eurydice’s great love for each other, a parody on that, and a story contrasting following a dream with following safety). In each, we see that musical theater has much to show us and to ask us. And, seeing any of these will give you a Hell of a good time. ♪



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## An Invitation to Join

Established in 1947, the San José Opera Guild was formed to promote the appreciation and enjoyment of the operatic arts and to provide both volunteer and financial support to opera.

The Guild incorporated in September 1958 as a non-profit corporation under the laws of California. The original purpose of the Guild has not changed over the years since its founding. The Guild sponsors singers each year at Opera San José, the Merola Opera Program, San Jose State Opera Workshop and supports Starting Arts.

Throughout the year, the Guild sponsors lectures and previews to coincide with the San Francisco Opera, West Bay Opera and Opera San José seasons.

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