



COMMUNICATION: REPORT

## Labours of Love: A Tribute to Caryl Clark's Vision

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'Resurrecting Haydn's *Orfeo*' marked the culmination of esteemed Haydn scholar Caryl Clark's thirty-year career as professor of music history and culture at the University of Toronto. Born out of 'labours of love', and held on 26–27 May 2023, this event fulfilled Clark's long-standing dream of staging a production of Haydn's 1791 contraband opera *L'anima del filosofo, ossia Orfeo ed Euridice*. An unusually dark retelling of the Orpheus myth, the opera was banned for its political subtext in support of Enlightenment values. This North American staged premiere, a collaboration between the University of Toronto and McGill University, was complemented by a symposium featuring talks by musicologists Emily Dolan (Brown University) and Deirdre Loughridge (Northeastern University) and a panel discussion moderated by Clark. The symposium opened with Clark's remarks about the attempted premiere of the opera in London in 1791, which was abandoned after the first rehearsal was stopped by officials only forty bars into the overture. The opera, which Haydn never finished, would not receive its first performance until 1951 in Florence, with a cast that included Maria Callas and Boris Christoff.

In her talk 'Orchestral Listening on the Operatic Stage' Dolan explored the tension between the growth and consolidation of the late eighteenth-century orchestra and its supposed sublimation to the voice and the text in reform opera. The orchestra's subservience is an illusion, Dolan argued, and in fact provides a sonic subtext to the opera. Audiences had to develop a more disciplined way of listening to hear both Haydn's representation of the external, through word-painting, and the orchestral sonification of characters' interiority. Haydn's operatic orchestration thus anticipated Wagner's eventual physical sublimation of the orchestra into the modern orchestra pit, which, Dolan argued, 'was only possible because the orchestra had been metaphorically sublimated a century earlier'.

Loughridge then examined the connection between sound and knowledge in Haydn's opera in her paper 'An Acoustemology of Haydn's *Orfeo*'. If Dolan asked how audiences learned to listen, Loughridge wondered just what audiences learned from listening. Providing an acoustically rich world in which Orfeo's voice and lyre merge with the echoing sound of the forest, *L'anima del filosofo* illustrates humanity's attempt and ultimate failure to control nature. Loughridge underlined how the opera questions whether Orfeo's voice or his lyre are considered the source of his magical power. This ambivalence is resolved at the end of Haydn's score when the sound of the lyre and the voice are united to illustrate Orpheus's hubris in the underworld, which ultimately triggers the destruction of the world.

Following Dolan's and Loughridge's presentations, Clark moderated a panel that included members of the creative team, cast and orchestra. Stage director Nico Krell explained the ecological metaphor behind his post-apocalyptic staging. He also emphasized that the character of Orpheus uses the power of his voice for change, a theme which very much resonates today. Co-designers Abby Esteireiro and Astrid Janson realized this vision using only objects found backstage – including lots of electrical lighting cable – to create 'the dark, dangerous world' that sets this *Orfeo* apart from, for example, that of Gluck. According to music director Dorian Bandy (McGill University), the necessarily reduced instrumental forces used for this performance allowed for a

more intimate and chamber-like approach to orchestral sound, while remaining within the spirit of historically informed performance. Members of the cast and orchestra highlighted the gratifying experience of the inter-institutional collaboration.

The orchestra was made up of student musicians and alumni from McGill University, and was conducted from the fortepiano by Bandy, a professor of musicology and early music at McGill University. The instrumentalists, most of whom took part on a purely voluntary basis, demonstrated considerable flexibility in covering parts written for missing instruments. Bandy displayed his ingenuity in finding creative ways to satisfy Haydn's score with more limited instrumental forces – he performed the harp solo in the much-discussed 'Rendete a questo seno' on fortepiano, and substitutions were made throughout the opera in the wind section. The performances were nevertheless energetic and conveyed the musicians' enthusiasm for reviving lesser-known works such as this once contraband opera of Haydn's.

'Labours of love' proved to be an apt description for the whole production, which, especially during the two-week rehearsal process, evinced the dedication of all involved. The thirteen-member chorus featured University of Toronto students with diverse performance backgrounds, from early-music scholars to singers from both undergraduate and graduate programmes, who were selected and prepared by conductor Ivars Tarins (director of the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir). In an opera about the magical power of the human voice, the soloists each brought to the stage pointedly animated performances – from the uniquely tender voice of Asitha Tennekoon (Orfeo) and technical precision of Lindsay McIntyre (Euridice) to the resonant baritone of Parker Clements (Creonte) and rousing coloratura of Maeve Palmer (Genio). For instance, in the showcase aria 'Al tuo seno fortunato', in which the sibyl summons Orfeo to the underworld, several members of the chorus gathered strategically around Genio as embodied extensions of her movements, their arms and legs seemingly 'fleshing out' her body to symbolize her supersized, superhuman power.

Staging a little-known and unfinished opera by Haydn, which tells an unusual version of the Orpheus myth, and particularly one with implicit references to the revolutionary times in which it was written, presents a unique set of challenges. Yet meeting these challenges aligned itself with the dominant ethos conveyed through the opera: bending nature to one's will. The men in the opera, Orfeo and Creonte, may wield their own power, but nature – whether in the form of a venomous snake or a catastrophic flood – ultimately wins.

Numerous extramusical aural cues also infiltrated the opera's soundscape: chirping bird sounds greeted audience members as they entered the University of Toronto's MacMillan Theatre; whistling sounds signified falling bombs and missiles after Creonte's call to battle; demons of the underworld hissed and moaned as if electrocuted by the disembodied voice of an amplified Pluto, enhanced by menacing tremolo figures in the orchestral accompaniment; and the simple act of rustling a plastic bag into a microphone (the same microphone used by Orfeo to attempt to communicate with his beloved following her second death) portended the chaos and natural disaster of the closing scene. What began as innocuous bag of takeaway food delivered to the lovers during their Act 1 duet turned into a deluge of plastic debris dumped from above the stage at the end of the opera, symbolizing a gasping earth on the verge of collapse as all are washed away in a violent storm.

This production was much more than a simple staging of the Orpheus myth. Through the various musical and dramatic elements employed here, Haydn's *L'anima del filosofo, ossia Orfeo ed Euridice* contributes to the social, cultural and, most significantly, environmental discourses apparent in opera stagings of recent years. From our vantage point as performers in this production, we now have an insider's appreciation of the captivating music of one of Haydn's lesser-known works, and of the dramatic viability and political relevance of this opera. The authors of this communication therefore close by thanking Caryl Clark for her vision, perseverance and skills as an opera producer, as well as for her substantial contributions to our field, and we wish her a wonderful retirement.

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