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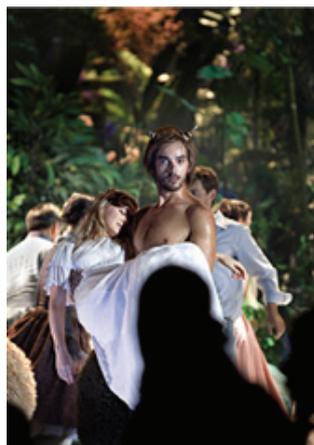
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Reviews

A Monteverdi marathon

by Tony Cooper

Monteverdi Trilogy: Orpheus, Odysseus, Poppea
Komische Oper, Berlin
September 2012



I find myself once again in Berlin, one of my favourite European capitals, attending a trio of operas by Claudio Monteverdi all in one day at the Komische Oper on Unter Den Linden: *Orpheus* (morning), *Odysseus* (afternoon) and *Poppea* (evening). Twelve hours of classic music-theatre with nearly 200 participating artists. A memorable day!

The idea for the performance marathon was the brainchild of the new General Director of Komische Oper, Barrie Kosky. A grandson of European Jewish emigrants he was born in Melbourne in 1967 but has been professionally active in Germany for some time. What a way to mark the beginning of his tenure.

And in this trilogy of Monteverdi's works it seemed, perhaps, an illogical step to perform them all in one day but Kosky pulled it off. After the operatic marathon I didn't complain. But I must confess that I became a little bit tired and jaded towards the end and thought that was enough opera for one day -Monteverdi or otherwise.

But tiredness didn't seem to enter the equation for Peter Renz playing and singing assertively (and the main link between all three operas) the central role of Amore or for that matter any other members of the large cast. Renz brought to his part tons of cheeky and waspish humour but allowed the dark and mysterious side to it to rear its ugly head, too, particularly in *Poppea* where he appeared in full drag with a quick change towards the end to a more traditional costume.

Commissioned by Komische Oper, Susanne Felicitas Wolf and Ulrich Lenz were responsible for the text while Monteverdi's score was revisited by Tashkent-born Elena Kats-Chernin, who gave to each piece tons of creative and imaginative flair offering the audience a new way of hearing (and, perhaps, approaching) Monteverdi. Traditionalists would probably have

been horrified.

Kats-Chernin's interpretation features jazz, tango, klezmer and ragtime motifs woven into Monteverdi's awe-inspiring musical fabric. She complemented the sound of traditional instruments with contributions from very modern and quite exotic instruments such as the kora (a 21-string bridge-harp) from West Africa to the oud (a pear-shaped lute) from the Middle East. Other instruments she employed included harmonium, piano accordion, bandoneon, cimbalom and even a banjo. Monteverdi played on a banjo, I hear you say. But it worked.

Each staging was pleasing to the eye in particular the set to *Orpheus*. You could have been in the Garden of Eden. Dominik Köninger (*Orpheus*) excelled himself putting in a commanding and attractive performance that matched the love of his life, Eurydice, sung with delicate ease by the Russian-born soprano, Julia Novikova.

And, indeed, both sets of lovers in *Odysseus* and *Poppea* lived up to the mark. Günter Papendell (*Odysseus*) possessed a lovely rounded rich voice while the Turkish mezzo-soprano, Ezgi Kutlu, was superb in the role of Penelope (acting as well as singing) while great fun emulated from the 'mechanicals' of Christoph Späth (Pisandro), Tom Erik Lie (Amphinomos) and Jens Larson (Antinoos) not to mention a fine and detailed performance by the Fribourg-born mezzo-soprano, Annelie Sophie Müller, as Minerva.

Roger Smeets as Nero - snappily dressed as a businessman and corrupt and evil to the core - was as mean and nasty as his role allowed while Poppea (Brigitte Geller) - equally manipulative and sinister - knew how to steer a course to keep on the winning side. But the performance that won me over was Helene Schneiderman's Octavia. She had a commanding presence on stage and a voice to match - articulate, fresh and clear. It was simply a joy to listen to.

There was not much doubling up but Jens Larson (I think a house favourite by all accounts) stayed on from *Odysseus* to sing the role of Seneca, a performance which is still with me let alone the thoughts of him and his mobile library doing the rounds on a railway-type trolley.

Barrie Kosky deserves a medal (he'll most probably get one in time) for his initiative in the marathon staging. However, it all looks well for the future of Komische Oper under his artistic control.

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