SYNOPSIS

By Sheridan Harvey

ACT 1

Eurydice's Tomb

Nymphs and shepherds decorate the tomb of Eurydice, wife of Orphée. Orphée repeatedly calls his wife's name (Chorus and Orphée: *"Ah! Dans ce bois lugubre" "In this dark wood"*). Orphée sends the others away and sings of his grief (*"Objet de mon amour" "Object of my love"*). Amour appears, telling Orphée that the gods have been touched by his misery, and he may go to the Underworld to find Eurydice. First, he must soothe the residents of Hades by playing his lyre. If successful, he may bring his wife back to the world of the living. But there are conditions: he may not look at Eurydice until they have left Hades, nor may he say why he isn't looking at her. If he looks or explains, she will die again, and he will lose her forever (*"Si les doux accords de ta lyre" "If the sweet harmonies of your lyre"*). To encourage him to face the horrors of the Underworld, Amour informs Orphée that his present suffering will be short-lived (*"Soumis au silence" "Submit to silence"*). Despite fearing that Eurydice will be suspicious if he doesn't look at her, he accepts the conditions and willingly undertakes this great quest (*"Amour, viens rendre à mon âme" "Love, restore your flame to my soul"*).

ACT 2

Entrance to Hades

The Furies wonder why a bold youth is attempting to penetrate the horrors of the Underworld and try to block his way (*"Quel est l'audacieux" "Who is the audacious youth"*). Orphée, accompanied by his lyre, begs them to be touched by his tears (*"Laissez-vous toucher par mes pleurs" "Be moved by my tears"*). At first, he is interrupted by crises of "Non!" from the Furies, but they are eventually softened by the sweetness of his singing (*"Ah! La flamme" "Ah, the passion"* and *"La tendresse" "The love"*), and allow him to pass (*"Quels chants doux" "What sweet songs"*).

ACT 3

The Elysian Fields

The act opens with "The Dance of the Blessed Spirits." Eurydice and the chorus then sing of their happiness and eternal bliss (*"Cet asile Cet asile aimable" "This pleasant refuge"*). Orphée arrives and marvels at the beauty of Elysium (*"Quel nouveau ciel" "What a fresh new sky"*), but he finds no happiness since Eurydice is not yet with him. He implores the spirits to bring her to him. They do so, and the two depart together (Chorus: *"Près du tendre objet" "At the side of the beloved"*).

ACT 4

The way out of Hades

Eurydice is delighted to be returing from the Underworld, but she does not understand why Orphée will not look at her. He, following the rules laid down by Amour, does not look at her, nor does he explain why. He must suffer in silence (Duet: *"Viens, suis un époux" "Come, follow you husband"*). Eurydice fears that he no longer loves her and refuses to continue, concluding that death would be preferable to life without his love. She sings of her grief at Orphée's behavior (*"Fortune ennemie" "O adverse fortune"*). Unable to bear her pain, Orphée turns and looks at Eurydice; she dies again. Orphée sings of his grief in the famous aria *"J'ai perdu mon Eurydice"* (*"I have lost my Eurydice"*). Orphée decides he will kill himself to join Eurydice in Hades, but Amour returns to stop him. In reward for Orphée's continued love, Amour returns Eurydice to life, and she and Orphée are joyfully reunited. All sing in praise of Amour.

PROGRAM NOTES

By Peter Russell

The first of many remarkable facts to note about Christoph Willibald Gluck's operatic adaptation of the Orpheus myth is its extraordinary longevity: it continues to warrant revivals and to resonate powerfully with audiences 260 years after its premiere. While operas by Gluck's near contemporaries Handel and Mozart share this staying power, the opera we hear this evening adds further challenges to fully staged productions that those of Handel and Mozart generally do not: the need for a first-rate choreographer and *corps de ballet*, and an interpreter of the title character who brings everything to the table by way of beauty of voice, technical virtuosity and integrity of expression to carry the burden of singing more than 90% of the solo vocal music in Gluck's score singlehandedly.

At its 1762 Viennese premiere to an Italian libretto by Ranieri de' Calzabigi (1714-1795), *Orfeo ed Euridice* was the first of Gluck's "Reform Operas," works in which he was determined to have music serve the drama rather than vice versa, countering the popularity of the formally structured and highly ornate *opera seria* works being churned out by the dozens at the time. Gluck sought an emotional simplicity and directness that would bypass an approach to composition centered on resets of the same pool of existing libretti, many of them by Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782), with long, florid *da capo* arias bespoke to the coloratura chops of the era's beloved star singers. The fact that Gluck succeeded is evidenced by the mere presence of his operas worldwide on today's stages. Scores by most of his contemporaries who stuck steadfastly to the *opera seria* style, including Antonio Caldara, Carl Heinrich Graun, Baldassare Galuppi, and Francesco Maria Veracini, among many, are mostly forgotten.

Gluck was, however, a practical man of the theater and in no way doctrinaire. After shortening his opera for inclusion in a 1769 Parma triple bill and transposing the title role upward for the comfort of a soprano castrato protagonist (a role created in Vienna by a contralto *castrato*), he retooled the score yet again in 1774 for its Paris premiere. Performance traditions during that period in the "City of Light" were very different from those in Vienna. Parisians neither approved of the act of castrating young male singers to preserve their treble voices nor of the sounds that resulted from that surgery. High-flying tenors who sang in a range called *haute-contre*, blending in a measure of head voice or falsetto in their very highest notes, usually performed leading male roles in French opera houses. And Parisians favored some florid music, so Gluck obliged by transposing the title role to *haute-contre* comfort zones and adding a coloratura showpiece for his hero to conclude the first act. Finally, it was expected in Paris that every act of an opera would contain an extensive ballet sequence (the Viennese premiere included only one during the finale). Gluck stole some dance music from a *Don Juan* ballet he'd composed for Vienna to flesh out the score to *Orphée et Eurydice*. With a new French libretto by Pierre-Louis Moline, Gluck's opera enjoyed as much success in Paris as it had in Vienna.

During the 1820s, Gluck's operas fell out of favor in Paris, as French Grand Operas by the likes of Daniel Auber, Ludovic Halévy, Gioachino Rossini, and Giacomo Meyerbeer became all the rage. Aside from a change in the audience's musical tastes, a more practical matter made the concept of performing an opera such as Gluck's *Orphée* all but impossible: concert tuning. As Parisian orchestras strove for an increasingly brighter sound, the standard for pitch by 1820 rose to about a half-step above today's standard of A = 440. This resulted in a role such as the title character in *Orphée*, which Gluck had composed for Paris at the outer limit of the *haute-contre* range, being beyond the capabilities of one of the highest-flying tenors in operatic history, Adolphe Nourrit, for whom the vertiginous tenor leads in Rossini's *William Tell* and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* were composed. Unable to sing *Orphée* in the 1774 keys during an 1824 revival, Nourrit admitted defeat and sang the score in downward transpositions.

Newly arrived in Paris at age 24, composer Hector Berlioz first encountered the music of Gluck via an 1821 performance of the opera *Iphigénie en Aulide*, and immediately fell obsessively in love with Gluck's genius as only the "hot young mess" composer of the *Symphonie Fantastique* could. He attended every performance of the aforementioned 1824 *Orphée* revival with Nourrit in the title role and became as fixated on that score as he had been on first hearing *Iphigénie*. Another of Berlioz's idols by then was the Spanish-born mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot, already a huge star throughout Europe. Meyerbeer suggested that someone should adapt the title character in *Orphée* as a showcase for her talents.

It is well nigh impossible to find a figure in today's arts and culture world comparable to the stature of Pauline Viardot throughout her long 19th century career. A masterly singing actress with a once-in-a-lifetime combination of vocal beauty and technique, she was fluent in Spanish, French, Italian, German, English and Russian. She inspired leading composers to write works specifically for her, premiering the title role in Charles Gounod's *Sapho* and Fidès in Meyerbeer's *Le prophète*. Berlioz had her in mind as the inspiration for Dido in his *Les Troyens*, as did Camille Saint-Saëns for Delilah in *Samson et Dalila*, which she declined because she believed herself too old to be credible as the character by the time he'd completed it (Saint-Saëns dedicated the score to her anyway). The renowned Russian author Ivan Turgenev became so infatuated with Viardot after seeing her in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* that he left his homeland and moved in with Viardot and her husband and family on a permanent basis. Other friends included poet Alfred de Musset, novelist George Sand and her longtime paramour Frédéric Chopin. The latter agreed with Franz Liszt that Viardot was a magnificent pianist; Chopin and Viardot frequently sat down for duo piano sessions together. She also composed numerous songs and a handful of operas. Viardot was a megastar during an era when opera was popular entertainment.

Berlioz was intimately familiar with both the 1762 Vienna original score and the 1774 Paris revision of Gluck's opera. For the most part, he retransposed and rearranged the Paris version using the key scheme of the Vienna original to restore the music to a range suitable for a low female voice rather than a tenor. However, he returned to the earlier version whenever he felt it superior or more concise musically and theatrically, and he reinstated some of the more intimate, subtle orchestration from the original that had been beefed up to fill the larger theater in Paris. He resisted entreaties from both Viardot and the impresario Léon Carvalho to modernize the orchestration; his assistant in creating the new edition, none other than Camille Saint-Saëns, quietly added more brass and timpani to accede to their demands.

The premiere of Berlioz's edition of *Orphée et Eurydice* at the Théàtre Lyrique in November 1859 was an enormous critical and public success, racking up a total of 138 sold-out performances. Lucien Petipa, dance master at the Paris Ballet and a former *premier danseur* who had created the romantic lead role of Albrecht in Adolphe Adam's *Giselle* served as choreographer; painter Eugène Delacroix, another of Viardot's besties, designed her costume and served as consultant on the décor. Composer Jules Massenet, then 17, was the orchestra's timpanist, earning special praise from Berlioz for the accuracy of his intonation and rhythm.

Whether in its Vienna original version, Gluck's Paris revision, or Berlioz's adaptation, *Orphée* is a milestone in the history of opera. Gluck elevates the role of the chorus to a prominence to rival that of his protagonist, a first among composers of his era. Rather than dividing his score between orchestrated arias and connective recitative accompanied by harpsichord (*recitativo secco*), he pioneered the use of recitative accompanied by the orchestra and fully intertwined with his set pieces. The means that he uses are frequently very simple: he employs F major, a traditional "pastoral" key, in the minuet scored for two flutes and strings at the beginning of the scene in the Elysian Fields, which repeats following a flute solo in D minor. Yet there is no more evocative depiction of nature's peaceful beauty in the entire musical canon than the *"Danse des Ombres heureuses"* (*"Dance of the Blessed Spirits"*). Orphée's entrance in this scene (*"Quel nouveau ciel!"*) yields another of Gluck's marvels, an oboe medley with a rippling triplet accompaniment from the strings, solo cello and flute, and supporting parts from solo bassoon, horn and continuo. Orphée's most famous aria at the opera's climax, *"J'ai perdu mon Eurydice,"* is a lament that is the very essence of pathos despite its major key signature. With the possible exception of the brief overture, which is more buoyant in tone than what follows, Gluck's melodic inspiration is both unflaggingly high and apposite to every dramatic mood in the story.

The success of Berlioz's new edition of *Orphée* starring Viardot resulted in a restoration of the opera to a favored place in the late 19th century operatic repertoire. In 1889, one of Europe's largest music publishing houses, Ricordi in Milan, issued a score back-translated into Italian, using the same keys as the Berlioz edition, which further boosted the opera's viability. Toscanini revered it and conducted productions during his years as music director at both La Scala and the Metropolitan Opera. For most of the 20th century, the opera continued, mostly in hybrid versions blending elements of the Vienna and Paris editions, to be performed with contraltos and mezzo-sopranos in the title role. Two tenors in the 1950s—the Swede Nicolai Gedda and French-Canadian Léopold Simoneau—had the facility and stamina at the top of their ranges to take on live performances and memorable recordings of the entire 1774 French version. Over the course of the last half-century, as countertenors have become increasingly popular, such artists as David Daniels, René Jacobs, Derek Lee Ragin and Jochen Kowalski have enjoyed successes as the mythic musician.

With such contemporary mezzo-sopranos as Stephanie Blythe, Jamie Barton, and now Kate Lindsey putting their personal imprints on the role in a variety of the available performing editions, the possibilities of reinventing the operatic Orpheus in any number of colors and flavors are more abundant than ever. Given the richness of invention lavished on the score by Gluck—and tonight, Berlioz—an opera lover can hardly go wrong with any of them.