

## MONTEVERDI L'Orfeo – a tale in music (Malmberg)

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Gramophone, Iain Fenlon

### Gramophone

## MONTEVERDI L'Orfeo – a tale in music (Malmberg)

On the day before the first performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* on February 24, 1607, in the ducal palace in Mantua, a courtier who was to attend wrote to his brother in Rome. It was going to be a great novelty, he explained, because all the actors 'were to speak musically'. Although Monteverdi was clearly inspired by the earlier Florentine settings of the same story by Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini, he composed a score of much greater variety and dimensions, an unprecedented, rapidly changing sequence of solo singing, chorus work, dances and instrumental interludes. Ever since Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Jürgen Jürgens's pioneering recordings, the interpretational demands of what has become established as the most frequently performed and accessible of all of Monteverdi's operas have turned on questions of casting, ensemble size, the deployment of instrumental forces and improvised ornamentation.

This latest version brings together three Swedish ensembles: Lundabarrok supplies the voices, Höör Barock contributes most of the instrumentalists and Altapunta provides cornetts and trombones, making some 38 performers in total. The resulting challenge of respecting the internal balances of the work is approached with sensitivity but not with enough attention to the fact that the first performance was given by a small number of singers; some sang more than one role, and all of them formed the chorus. Here some 15 singers participate, and while some doubling takes place, the result lacks the intimacy of Monteverdi's original conception.

Fredrik Malmberg has chosen a cast of comparatively little-known soloists, an approach reminiscent of Gabriel Garrido's 1996 recording. The one exception is Johan Linderoth as Orfeo; his lithe and pleasing tenor is light and velvety in tone. Seventeenth-century Italian bass singers were legendary for their power and range, which in some cases spanned three octaves. Steffen Bruun's Caronte displays both these features but is short on focus and sometimes vocal control. Although there is a certain uniformity of approach and tonal quality among the other singers, especially those in the minor female roles, there are occasional passages of incisive and effective characterisation, notably in Maria Forsström's reading of the messenger's dramatic announcement. Apart from this critical moment in the drama, which completely alters the prevailing mood of Arcadian festivity, the sound and interpretational style, particularly of the first two acts, is rather uniform. While displaying enthusiasm and well-rehearsed ensemble in the choral sections, the approach ultimately lacks the full-bodied exuberance and sense of dramatic engagement that comes with deep involvement with Monteverdi's rhetorical language.

Any new recording of *Orfeo* faces stiff competition. In this one there is some fine instrumental playing, with the outstandingly crisp delivery and rhythmic vitality of the wind instrumentalists bringing particular pleasure. Improvised ornamentation is for the most part discrete. Malmberg's decision to involve so many understated voices, together with his choice

of mostly unhurried tempos, does create its own atmosphere and dynamic but many listeners will stick with their established preferences.

Iain Fenlon

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BBC Music Magazine's opera choice of the month October 2021

“An operatic journey to some unexpected places”

“This Swedish recording of Monteverdi's Orfeo is daring, energetic and intense”

Linderoth probes Orfeo's vulnerability from first bar to last: expanding climactic notes, dashing through passages in excitement and stopping short when overtaken by passion, he delivers raw feeling rather than the poised vocalism of star Orfeos like Ian Bostridge or Charles Daniels.”

Monteverdi - an operatic journey to some unexpected places

L'Orfeo

Johan Linderoth, Kristina Hellgren, Adam Riis, Christine Nonbo Andersen, Anna Zander, Daniel Åberg, Ann-Margret Nyberg; Ensemble Lundabarock; Ensemble Altapunta; Höör Barock/Fredrik Malmberg

BIS BIS-2519 (CD/SACD) 105:39 mins (2 discs)

This vibrant, idiosyncratic Orfeo grew out of a 2018 Lundabarock festival concert performance. Artists from that event, including Fredrik Malmberg directing from the keyboard, tenor Johan Linderoth in the title role and the 14-strong period band Höör Barock, then teamed up with the nine wind players of Ensemble Altapunta for this recording. Monteverdi's printed score famously lists 41 instruments, yet the two bands' quality more than compensates for their small numbers.

The singers' intensity – and the bold, sometimes unusual distribution of instrumental parts – distinguish this Orfeo from earlier recordings. Linderoth probes Orfeo's vulnerability from first bar to last: expanding climactic notes, dashing through passages in excitement and stopping short when overtaken by passion, he delivers raw feeling rather than the poised vocalism of star Orfeos like Ian Bostridge or Charles Daniels. He occasionally works his line a bit too hard, as in 'Possente spirto', where his seriousness pre-empts spontaneity. Among the other excellent singers, Christine Nonbo Andersen (as Eurydice) and mezzo-soprano Anna Zander (as Speranza) stand out for their delicacy and suppleness.

The band adds its own character: percussionist Per Nord jazzes up the sinfonias, lilting strings and duetting recorders convey pastoral delights, wind instruments set fanfares ablaze and sackbuts snarl ominously in the underworld scenes. Yet it is Malmberg's energy that gives this performance a brilliant edge as, appropriately for the Orpheus myth, he takes his fellow artists and his audiences to unexpected places. /Berta Joncus BBC Music Magazine

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En utsökt "L'Orfeo" med strålande vokala insatser DN 210514, Martin Nyström

"...spelar Orfeos trots mot dödsmakterna huvudrollen. Och Johan Linderoth gör denna scen, som också är opera-arians födelse, med en sådan vokal djärvhet och skönhet att man inte bara

blir gripen utan också påminns om vilken modernistisk musik detta var vid uruppförandet i Mantua 1607.”

En utsökt ”L’Orfeo” med strålande vokala insatser DN 210514, Martin Nyström  
Den första halvtimmen av Monteverdis ”Orfeo fullkomligt sjuder av livslust. Ett tillstånd av oskuldsfull lycka innan förlusten är ett faktum – då Euridice dör och Orfeo bara vill fly från solen likt ”en förhatlig fladdermus”. Men i hans röst bor något annat. Ett trots mot det omöjliga. Att gå över gränsen till det djupa mörkret och hämta tillbaka henne.

När Wermland Opera 2014 iscensatte den här nedstigningen i den tredje akten var det en visuell suggestionskraft värdig en Batmanfilm. Och när Göteborg Baroque följde upp 2018 i det ruffiga Röda Sten, emd över elva meter i takhöjd, tillkom en vidunderlig akustik.

Även i den första svenska inspelningen av ”Orfeo” som nu kommit spelar Orfeos trots mot dödsmakterna huvudrollen. Och Johan Linderoth gör denna scen, som också är opera-arians födelse, med en sådan vokal djärvhet och skönhet att man inte bara blir gripen utan också påminns om vilken modernistisk musik detta var vid uruppförandet i Mantua 1607. En musik som bar något nytt och främmande i sig, men som på samma gång uttryckte något djupt mänskligt. Om att vara förlorad, hitta sin egen röst och uttala sitt namn: ”Orfeo son io”.

I samband med 400-årsfirandet av ”Orfeo” 2007 kom två mycket fina italienska inspelningar, en dramatiskt laddad med Concerto Italiano och en mera experimenterande med La Venexiana, som jag ofta återvänt till.

Men frågan är om inte denna svenska inspelning, emd Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock och Ensemble Altapunta under ledning av Fredrik Malmberg ändå tar priset. Inte bara för det utsökta orkesterspelet, utan även för de lysande vokala insatserna av Johan Linderoth, Kristina Hellgren, Christine Nonbo Andersen, Maria Forsström, Steffen Bruun, Karl Peter Eriksson och Anna Zander.

Det märks att Monteverdis musik är älskad och har en djup förankring hos svenska musiker. Kanske för att den är så tillåtande. Som en av operans herdar säger: ”på dessa stränder får var och en stämma in med ljudet av vågorna på sitt eget vis.”

Bästa spår: ”Act II” och ”Act III”  
Martin Nyström. DN 210514

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Här är DN-kritikernas egna favoritalbum från 2021  
Martin Nyström:  
Claudio Monteverdi  
”L’Orfeo”  
Fredrik Malmberg, Ensemble Lundabarock med flera.

”Världsklass, inte minst Johan Linderoths Orfeo - han som uttalar sitt namn och finner sin röst.”  
(Bis/Naxos)

Gång på gång genom åren har man slagits av vilken känsla som svenska musiker verkar hysa för Monteverdis musik, både den musikdramatiska och sakrala. Som i denna ojämförligt sköna och sjudande inspelning av operakonstens första mästerverk.

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The Times, Friday June 25 2021

“Fredrik Malmberg here directs three fine Swedish early music ensembles in a stylish, pacy performance. As Orfeo, the tenor Johan Linderoth excels”

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Monteverdi  
L’Orfeo  
Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock, Ensemble Altapunta/Malmberg  
BIS

Richly orchestrated, cannily structured and, through its carefully wrought recitatives, conveying human emotions with unprecedented intensity, Monteverdi’s first opera, four centuries old, remains a moving piece of music theatre, and Fredrik Malmberg here directs three fine Swedish early music ensembles in a stylish, pacy performance. As Orfeo, the tenor Johan Linderoth excels, his singing of Possente Spirto, the lavishly ornamented set piece through which his character charms his way into Hades, both magisterial and passionate.

Stephen Pettitt  
The Times, Friday June 25 2021

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Diapason, Octobre 2021

”Il faut saluer la direction intelligente et précise de Fredrik Malmberg, et la vivacité avec laquelle sont dessinés les personnages de la fable”

“Johan Linderoth est un Orphée heroïque, viril et puissant.”

“Cet Orfeo s’eloigne de l’incarnation toute méditerranéenne qu’a dernièrement propose Emiliano Gonzalez Toro (Naïve, cf. no 695), mais s’avère tout aussi passionante.”

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L’Orfeo

Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock, Ensemble Altapunta/Malmberg  
BIS

Orphée quitte les champs de Thrace pour rejoindre les rives del la Baltique! Réalisé grâce à la collaboration de trois ensembles suédois, ce nouvel Orfeo opte pur une lecture da camera,

historiquement bien informée, même si les instruments (en particulier les cordes et le continuo) sont moins nombreux que l'exige Monteverdi. Les chœurs infernaux (deux chanteurs par partie) et les ensembles de cuivres (sumptueux) se voient transposés à la quart inférieure, conformément à leur notation en chiavette avec un diapason général modérément élevé (la à 440Hz). Les choix de tempo se révèlent judicieux et la diversité des timbres bien mise en valeur (mention spéciale à la harpe sonore et stylée d'Emma Huijsser). La réalisation du continuo, prolixe sans être envahissante, souligne dissonances et stravanze contrapuntiques.

Il faut saluer la direction intelligente et précise de Fredrik Malmberg, et la vivacité avec laquelle sont dessinés les personnages de la fable: une Eurydice radieuse jusque dans ses adieux, une Proserpine suave et sensuelle à souhait, un Pluton anguleux et sévère, une Messagère palpitante d'émotion. Si Apollon trouve les accents à la fois tendres et autoritaires d'un père aimant, sa vocalise ne peut rivaliser avec celle de son fils. Jusques dans ses plaintes du dernier acte, Johan Linderöth est un Orphée héroïque, viril et puissant. Il orne son "Possente spirto" avec souplesse: sa manière de prononcer les trilli (notes répétées) et d'ajouter des pasaggi (quand l'air en débord déjà) nous évoque l'art d'un Nigel Rogers, l'élégance et la variété des couleurs en moins. Sa diction soutenue, voire scandée, relève d'une éloquence démonstrative qui parfois manque de subtilité et de naturel (en particulier dans "Rosa del ciel"). Elle n'en est pas moins efficace!

Cet Orfeo s'éloigne de l'incarnation toute méditerranéenne qu'a dernièrement proposée Emiliano Gonzalez Toro (Naïve, cf. no 695), mais s'avère tout aussi passionnante.

Dennis Morrier  
Diapason Octobre 2021

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SACD Review by James V Maiello, Fanfare, Issue 54:2 (Nov/Dec 2021)

Monteverdi L'Orfeo Malmberg BIS 25195

"The present recording, a collaboration among Ensemble Lundabrock, Höör Barock, and Ensemble Altapunta under the direction of Fredrik Malmberg, is an outstanding addition to a crowded field.... I suspect this L'Orfeo will gain a reputation as one of the best in the discography"

"Kristina Hellgren offers one of the finest performances of Musica's introduction to the action I have heard yet.... Johan Linderöth's Orfeo is dramatically convincing, and his resonant tenor is simply a pleasure to hear, luminous and clear"

Monteverdi L'Orfeo Malmberg BIS 25195

Monteverdi's L'Orfeo has been one of the primary beneficiaries of the early music revival and the ever-increasing quality of historically informed and period instrument recordings.

Even if one considers only these recordings, a substantial discography of the opera is available on CD and DVD/blue-Ray disc. Among these, recordings by Le Concert d'Astrée (Emanuelle Haim) and les Concert de Nations (Jordi Savall) stand out in a crowded field. The

present recording, a collaboration among Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock , and Ensemble Altapunta under the direction of Fredrik Malmberg, is an outstanding addition to a crowded field. To my knowledge, this is also the only SACD recording of the work available; the sound is superlative.

The opening complex establishes immediately that Malmberg's take on this work is both learned and creative. The brass and percussion are full-throated – but not unfocused – in the toccata and the tempo is brisk. The ritornello brings to the foreground a highly polished ensemble of winds and strings, full of warmth and with a decidedly sensitive touch. All this leads into the prologue, in which Kristina Hellgren offers one of the finest performances of Musica's introduction to the action I have heard yet. Her voice is pure and carefully controlled, and the improvised ornaments are tasteful and historically appropriate; they also sound completely natural. In act II, the sinfonia "Ecco pur ch'a voi ritorno" is rollicking and exuberant one minute, serenely pastoral the next. One of the highlights of the performance, it also showcases the fine choral singing and wide range of instrumental colors deployed strategically by Höör Barock (notably the baroque guitar, recorder, and percussion here). As the Messenger, Maria Forsström delivers the news of Euridice's death in an appropriately anguished "Ahi, caso acerbo"

Johan Linderoth's Orfeo is dramatically convincing, and his resonant tenor is simply a pleasure to hear, luminous and clear. "Possente spirto" is the centerpiece of the opera for Orfeo (and for the orchestra too in many ways), and listeners will surely appreciate Linderoth's technical skill and his preparation. The challenging music never gets in the way of his characterization or his voice. The instrumentalists are equally impressive, especially the cornetti, harp, and solo violins. Although there are a few spots where one might wish for a bit more volume in the lowest notes, Steffen Bruun is a solid Caronte. Other standouts include Erydice's return to the underworld and the finale of the opera, in which the choral singing is again noteworthy.

I suspect this L'Orfeo will gain a reputation as one of the best in the discography. Although the overall sound is glossy and clean, it retains the warmth and texture that period instrument enthusiasts prize, and Malmberg has chosen tempos carefully, always with an eye toward the text and the drama. The cast is consistently strong, and the diction is admirably clear throughout. The orchestra provides some of the cleanest playing around, full of intelligent interpretive nuances. Some listeners may want a little more heat and grit in some spots, but that is really not the aesthetic approach here. This L'Orfeo is about refinement and subtlety, and it's worth a long listen.

James V. Maiello  
Fanfare, Issue 54:2 (Nov/Dec 2021)

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OPUS maj 2021, Carl-Henrik Malmgren

”Skånsk Barocksuccé -  
Glittrande tolkning av Monteverdis opera”

”Tillsammans med en fantastisk solistensemble mejslar Fredrik Malmberg fram dramats detaljer och de musikaliska ornament som lotsar Orfeus mot underjorden i sökandet efter Eurydike”

Skånsk Barocksuccé -  
Glittrande tolkning av Monteverdis opera

Under 1500-talets slut utvecklade Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) det italienska hovlivets festmusik. Bröllop och dop var ofta inramade av deklamation och teater, men med tiden blev ”dekorationerna” alltmer storslagna och även musiken började smyga sig in i dramatiken. Monteverdi tog de nya trenderna ett steg längre och formade år 1607 vad som allmänt betraktas som världens första opera: L’Orfeo.

När ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock och Ensemble Altapunta tar sig an verket samsas 1500-talets madrigaltradition och barockens uttryck väl. Tillsammans med en fantastisk solistensemble mejslar Fredrik Malmberg fram dramats detaljer och de musikaliska ornament som lotsar Orfeus mot underjorden i sökandet efter Eurydike.

Utgåvan är vackert genomarbetad med men en bok innehållande en kortessä av Ole-Kristina Andersen jämte musikerbiografier och libretto. Det är något speciellt att kunna ägna flera timmar åt en genomlysning med texten i handen. Monteverdis opera, speciellt i den här inspelningen, är värd stor uppmärksamhet. Ge den tid.

Carl-Henrik Malmgren  
OPUS, maj 2021

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Capriccio, Lars-Erik Larsson, juni 2021

”Mästerlig skånsk barock”

”Resultatet är minst sagt enastående... Orkestern är perfekt tidstypisk, tät och absolut exakt och sångsolisternas prestationer utsökta med rent underbar klang och mängder av känsla och kontrollerad dramatik.”

2021-06-10

Mästerlig skånsk barock

Claudio Monteverdi: L’Orfeo

Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock och Ensemble Altapunta

Dirigent: Fredrik Malmberg

Solister: Johan Linderoth, Kristina Hellgren, Christine Nonbo Andersen, Maria Forsström, Adam Riis, Daniel Åberg, Steffen Bruun, Karl Peter Eriksson



Claudio Monteverdis mästerverk L’Orfeo har betecknats som musikhistoriens första opera. Kanske lite överdrivet men utan tvivel når Monteverdi betydligt längre i dramatisk fulländning än föregångarna. L’Orfeo innehåller vidare en rad fristående instrumentala satser som fungerar som mellanspel eller preludier till enstaka scener. En nyhet är även den Ouvertyr (toccata) som inleder operan, där en fanfarartad spelöppning följs av en elegisk och uttrycksfull sats, som förbereder åhörarna på den allvarliga handlingen.

En av den klassiska musikens verkliga höjdare alltså som hade premiär i Mantua 1607, för mer än fyrahundra år sedan. Och nu har tre skånska barockensembler, Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock och Ensemble Altapunta, tillsammans med med sångare, de flesta med hemvist i Skåne och Danmark kommit med en dubbel-cd med den kompletta operan.

Dirigent är Fredrik Malmberg, också han med rötter i Skåne. Resultatet är minst sagt enastående. Det finns ingenting att anmärka på i den gedigna tolkningen. Fredrik Malmberg lägger den exakt rätt i den tid då den sena renässansen övergick i barocken i både tempo och frasering med ett väl avvägt continuo, ett bra stycke från högbarockens pregnans. Orkestern är perfekt tidstypisk, tät och absolut exakt och sångsolisternas prestationer utsökta med rent underbar klang och mängder av känsla och kontrollerad dramatik.

Lars-Erik Larsson

Recensionen har tidigare publicerats i Skånska Dagbladet

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Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barck | Monteverdi: L'Orfeo  
28.07.2021 Matthias Hengelbrock

Musik: 5 stars

Klang: 5 stars

In einer Zeit, in der Barockopern immer mehr zum wehrlosen Opfer profilneurotischer Dirigenten und Regisseure werden, stimmt diese Aufnahme hoffnungsfroh, denn Fredrik Malmberg dreht nicht weiter an der Schraube des Lauten und Spektakulären, sondern stellt

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In einer Zeit, in der Barockopern immer mehr zum wehrlosen Opfer profilneurotischer Dirigenten und Regisseure werden, stimmt diese Aufnahme hoffnungsfroh, denn Fredrik Malmberg dreht nicht weiter an der Schraube des Lauten und Spektakulären, sondern stellt eine intime, kammermusikalische Lesart von Monteverdis „Orfeo“ vor. Es sind keine Stars, die hier agieren, keine Solisten, die sich nach Kräften voneinander absetzen wollen, sondern fest aufeinander eingeschworene Musiker, die wie in einem Madrigalensemble miteinander agieren und sich auch einmal zurücknehmen können, wenn anderes gerade wichtiger ist.

So trumpft Johan Linderöth als Orfeo nicht auf, sondern begibt sich mit sanfter Sehnsucht und großem Respekt vor höheren Mächten auf die Suche nach seiner Euridice (Christine Nonbo Andersen). Kristina Hellgren umgarnt den Hörer in ihrer Doppelrolle der Musica und Proserpina mit einem subtilen Mezzoforte, Anna Zander (Speranza) schüchtert Orfeo an den Pforten zur Unterwelt nicht ein, sondern stimmt ihn nachdenklich, und auch die Hirten und Geister des Vokalensembles Lundabarock zeichnen ein feines, sehr stimmiges Gesamtbild. Gleiches gilt für die schwedischen Ensembles Höör Barock (Streicher, Holzbläser und Continuo-Gruppe) und Altapunta (Zinken und Blechbläser): Ihr Spiel ist wach, nuanciert und durchaus farbig, aber immer sehr harmonisch und außerordentlich klangschön. Man hört ihnen einfach gern zu und entdeckt dabei einige Details, die in einer lautereren Interpretation untergingen. Einmal mehr wird deutlich, dass es bei dieser Musik nicht auf die Größe, sondern auf die Genauigkeit der Gesten ankommt. Diesbezüglich kann Fredrik Malmbergs Interpretation durchaus dem Vergleich mit Andrew Parrotts Referenzeinspielung (Avie) standhalten.

Matthias Hengelbrock, Fono Forum, [www.stereo.de](http://www.stereo.de)



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Claudio Monteverdi  
L'Orfeo  
BIS 2519  
Klassik-heute.com Rainer W. Janka [10.07.2021]

BIS 2519  
2 CD/SACD stereo/surround • 1h 46min • 2019  
10.07.2021

Künstlerische Qualität:



Klangqualität:



Gesamteindruck:



Apodiktisch urteilt Gerhard Nestler in seiner „Geschichte der Musik“: „Monteverdis ‚Orfeo‘ ist das revolutionärste Werk der Musik aller Zeiten.“ Das schlägt sich auch in der Zahl der Aufnahmen nieder: Über dreißig davon gibt es beim CD-Vertrieb von jpc. Über dieser neuen Aufnahme, eine Gemeinschaftsarbeit der Ensembles Lundabarock, Höör Barock und Altapunta unter der Gesamtleitung von Fredrik Malmberg, liegt der würdevoll-feierliche Glanz einer höfischen Aufführung, eines „trionfo“, was die Anfangs-Toccat, gespielt mit allen Instrumenten, anzeigt. So scheinen die Leidenschaften, die herzerreißenden Gefühle der Trauer und des Verlustschmerzes höfisch gebändigt – wie Apollo selbst Orpheus am Ende rät, seine Freude und seine Trauer nicht im Übermaß auszudrücken. Wir Zuhörer meinen, unmittelbar dabei zu sitzen in einer der beiden Aufführungen, die es 1607 im herzoglichen Palast in Mantua gegeben hat: Die Aufnahmetechnik macht's, die neugotische Eslövs Kyrka erweist sich als passender Aufnahmeort mit kristallklarer Akustik ohne zu viel Nachhall. Quirlige Geigen und schmerzreiche Klage-

Den Orfeo könnte man sich durchaus noch drängender und erregter singend vorstellen. Doch Johan Linderoth überzeugt mit einem hellklaren Tenor von angenehmem Timbre und gut klingendem tiefen Register, der durchaus schmerz- und klagereich singt, sich steigernd in der Totenklage im 5. Akt. Lebhaft tänzerisch vor allem im Orchester und mit einem fast ausgelassen fröhlichen Orfeo ist die bukolische Idylle im 2. Akt, bevor die unheilswanger tönende Unglücksbotin (Maria Forsström) erscheint.

Liebes-innig und sehnsuchtsvoll singt Christina Nonbo Andersen als Euridice, kann dann ihren Ton als Ninfa ins leicht Kapriziöse wenden. Tiefdunkel orgelt der Fährmann Caronte (Steffen Bruun) zum Schnarrregister: Leicht kann man sich die Überraschung des höfischen Publikums vorstellen, als zum ersten Mal in einer Oper ein tiefer Bass auftaucht.

Als Proserpina bittet Kristina Hellgren buchstäblich in allen Tonarten ihren Gatten Plutone um Milde, diese kühnen harmonischen Rückungen sind im Orchester klar herausgestellt. Als Apollo bemüht sich Adam Riis so sehr um göttliche Würde, dass seine Stimme dabei etwas statisch wird.

Die beiden Orchester-Ensembles agieren höchst wendig, vor allem die Geigen richtig quirrig, alle zusammen malen bunte Orchesterfarben.  
Rainer W. Janka [10.07.2021

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“the performance is especially noteworthy for its near-infallible sense of style...”

“in sum this is a remarkable achievement and to realise just how remarkable try to imagine an *Orfeo* of this calibre given by early music ensembles based in the south of England.”

**Brian Robins**  
**Early Music Review**  
**July 20 2021**

Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock, Ensemble Altapunta, Fredrik Malmberg  
105:39 (2 CDs in a cardboard box)  
BIS-2519 SACD

**The arrival of this set gave me pause to wonder** about the number of *Orfeo*'s I've reviewed in my time. It's a fair few and I've actually lost track of the exact number, which is not that important anyway. What is important it is that leaving aside its crucial place in operatic history *Orfeo* is one of those rare operas that almost never fails to make a strong impression. The secret (leaving aside Monteverdi's great music) is surely its uncomplicated directness, the ability for the central tragedy to penetrate the heart effortlessly. Could anything carry more grief stricken resonance than the simplicity of *Orfeo*'s single word response 'Ohimè' to the Messenger's words, 'La tua diletta sposa è morta' (Your beloved wife is dead'), the exchange empty, devoid of passion?

It's a moment that comes off with the devastating effect it must in this exceptional new recording from Sweden. It combines the forces of three early music ensembles based remarkably not in the capital but the south of the country. Brought together under the direction of Fredrik Malmberg, a young conductor making a name for himself in Europe, the performance is especially noteworthy for its near-infallible sense of style (the addition of percussion, which Monteverdi's published full score does not call for, is in places an aggravating aberration). Above all it has been thoroughly prepared – no fewer than four Italian vocal coaches are credited – not only underlining the critical importance of the text but also in relation to ornamentation, which is invariably sung with great assurance, accuracy and precise articulation.

The cast is led by the tenor Johan Linderöth, a Baroque specialist who has worked frequently with Paul Hillier and has a particular penchant for music of the 17th century. If the timbre of his voice lacks the beauty of the most recent outstanding exponent of the role on record, Emiliano Gonzalez Toro (Naïve), it more than makes up for it in a totally idiomatic and sensitive account. As it must, the ornamented version of 'Possente spirito' stands at the centre at the performance and even if Linderöth doesn't quite achieve the diamantine accuracy of Gonzalez Toro (or indeed the great Nigel Rogers) it is nevertheless a formidable accomplishment. The 'second' death of Euridice at the end of act four is another heart-

stopping passage, vividly bringing home the moral that Orfeo has been punished not for disobedience, but because, in the words of the Chorus of Spirits that ends the act, he has not achieved 'victory over himself'.

While it is a truism that any performance of *Orfeo* stands or falls on its eponymous hero, many of the supporting roles make their own demands. The present performance generally fulfils these admirably, particularly in the cases of Kristina Hellgren, who sings La Musica and Proserpina, Christine Nonbo Andersen (Ninfa 1 and Euridice) and Maria Forsström (Messaggiera). Both Hellgren and Andersen are fresh-voiced sopranos and Baroque specialists and stylists of a kind we now rarely seem to encounter in the UK. Listen, for example, to the exquisite way the former ornaments the many strophic verses of La Musica, or the perfect sense of stillness she achieves in its final lines, an evocation of nature paused. Andersen is a lovely, fragile Euridice, infinitely touching in 'Ahi vista troppo dolce' (act 4). Forsström is a fine mezzo who sustains the Messenger's long story with commanding presence and a vivid communicative sense. Steffen Bruun's Charonte is rather lugubrious, but Karl Peter Eriksson is an imposing, yet sympathetic Plutone. The roles of the various shepherds, infernal spirits and so forth are all more capably filled in what is a fine team effort. The instrumental playing is of a high standard, my only minor caveat being some over-fussy arpeggiated continuo work from the plucked strings when chords would have been more telling and less obtrusive; Euridice's 'Io non dirò' (act 1) is an example. But in sum this is a remarkable achievement and to realise just how remarkable try to imagine an *Orfeo* of this calibre given by early music ensembles based in the south of England.

**Brian Robins**

**Early Music Review**

**July 20 2021**

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“Readers who are contemplating buying their first *L'Orfeo* are well advised to choose this one and those who already have a couple of favourite sets on their shelves, probably need it as a corrective. “

**Göran Forsling**

**MusicWeb International**

**Claudio MONTEVERDI (1567–1643)**

***L'Orfeo* (1607)**

Ensemble Lundabarock, Höör Barock and Ensemble Altapunta.

Fredrik Malmberg

**BIS BIS-2519 SACD**

Times change. In a record buyer's guide, issued in July 1951, covering what was available on the Swedish market then, there were only two entries on *Monteverdi*. One was a collection of madrigals and other vocal works, performed by a vocal- and instrumental ensemble directed by Nadia Boulanger (HMV DB 5038 / 42), a legendary set, recorded about a dozen years earlier. The other was more recent: *Arianna's Lament*, sung by Gabriella Gatti (HMV DB

6515). The arrival of the long-playing record, which was still in its infancy, meant that the possibilities to introduce previously unrecorded music increased, and in 1955 Deutsche Grammophon's early music label Archiv Produktion presented the first recording of *L'Orfeo* under the direction of the pioneer August Wenzinger. I believe it was a revelation then, and it reigned supreme for many years. It is no exaggeration to state that for a whole generation it put Monteverdi on the operatic map. It is still available (DG Archiv 4531762 or 4777088, both download only) and well worth hearing for, among other things, Helmut Krebs's Orfeo and, not least, for the young Fritz Wunderlich's Apollo and Pastore 2. This was, as far as I know, his first commercial recording.

Today the situation is totally different, with roughly thirty different recordings available – and not counting a handful of DVDs – which surely makes *L'Orfeo* the most recorded baroque opera. With such a plethora of recordings, prospective buyers are spoilt for choice and one can pose the question: is there really need for one more? The relevant answer is: as long as it is good it is a valuable addition to the catalogue.

Swedish BIS Records, who in two years' time will celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, have become synonymous with high technical standard, discriminating choice of repertoire and high demands on artistic excellence. Opera has not been high on their priority list but of late there have appeared a couple of productions that attracted much attention. I'm thinking of Sebastian Fagerlund's *Autumn Sonata* (based on Ingmar Bergman's film, BIS-2357 - [review](#)) and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* from Gothenburg (BIS-2320 - [review](#) - [review](#) - [Autumn 2019/1](#)).

Monteverdi is at the opposite of the time axis, but Sweden has a lot of ensembles specialising in baroque music, and here three groups of singers and instrumentalists active in the southernmost region of Sweden, Skåne, have joined forces, which also include several Danish members. All of them are deeply committed and experienced in the field of early baroque. Suffice it to mention trombonist Ole-Kristian Andersen, who also wrote the liner notes, who "has performed *L'Orfeo* on some hundred occasions and has previously participated on no less than four recordings of the work".

Recording the opera over a period of two months, the participants have obviously had time to be welded together and hone the performance. From the knock-out opening *Toccata* and all through the myriad of *sinfonias* and *ritornellos*, there is vitality and playfulness, and the rhythmic acuity is tangible. This is to a great extent a swinging *Orfeo*. The effect is enhanced through the excellent recording. It is SACD, but even listening in conventional two-channel stereo conveyed a vivid picture of the aural landscape. Apropos the *Toccata* Andersen brings out the hypothesis that it doesn't 'belong' to the opera, but instead was the personal trumpet call of Monteverdi's employers, the Gonzaga family. If so, it could have been played as a salute to the Duke when he arrived before the performance. Be that as it may, it is a riveting start of the evening, and few early baroque pieces have become so well-known.

When it comes to the singing, the soloists – most of them – also constitute the chorus, which probably was common practice in the olden days. The singers here are, as a rule, experienced choristers and their voices blend well in the many choral passages – further proof that this production is a true teamwork. The heaviest burden of the soloists rests naturally on the shoulders of Orfeo himself, and Johan Linderoth is well-equipped to encompass all the varied moods and emotions in the full-size mental portrait of the hero. The approach is from a lieder singer's point of view, and Linderoth *is* today well-established in the lieder repertoire, where

the word-meaning is so central. If you want to sample him, *Rosa del Ciel* (SACD 1 tr. 8) is a good starting point. The opening of act II (SACD 1 tr.14) is another highlight with tremendous rhythmic forward drive, while in the same act (tr. 17) his reaction to Messaggiera's mournful news, *Tu se' morta*, is heart-rending. In sharp contrast to this lament is his longest solo, the heavily embellished *Possente Spirto* in act III (SACD 2 tr. 8), skilfully executed. Any performance of this opera stands or falls with the capacity of the title character, and this performance certainly stands!

But Johan Linderoth is also surrounded by excellent co-singers. To international readers – and perhaps also to many Swedish – their names may be unknown. The best-known is probably Maria Forsström, with a wide repertoire far away from the baroque, where Mahler is one of her specialities. Some readers may have across her recital *Kaleidoscope*, to which I awarded a Recording of The Month back in 2011. Here she sings Messaggiera with a conviction and involvement that challenges Cathy Berberian (Harnoncourt, see below) and Anne Sofie von Otter (Gardiner, see below).

The first solo voice we encounter is La Musica in the Prologue, and she is excellently sung by Kristina Hellgren. She later is a brilliant Proserpina. Christine Nonbo Andersen is a bright Euridice, and before she appears (SACD 1 tr. 9), Ms Nonbo Andersen has already made her mark with a fine Ninfa 1 (SACD 1 tr. 5). Adam Riis is agreeable as Pastore 2 and Apollo, Karl Peter Eriksson is a sturdy Plutone and Steffen Bruun impresses as a black-voiced Caronte. And there is no weak link among the rest of the cast.

How does it stand comparison with existing recordings? Very well indeed! My two favourites are Nikolaus Harnoncourt (Warner Classics 2564696458, super-budget price) and John Eliot Gardiner (DG Archiv 4192502), with more starry casts, the latter almost over-the-top with Bayreuth's then reigning Wotan, John Tomlinson, as Caronte. Malmberg's more intimate and small-scale version on the new BIS is a worthy alternative and arguably more historically correct. I am happy now to have all three (plus a number of other versions that don't quite qualify). Readers who are contemplating buying their first *L'Orfeo* are well advised to choose this one and those who already have a couple of favourite sets on their shelves, probably need it as a corrective.

***Göran Forsling***

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