

**ARTS & LEISURE**

June 16, 2022

by Jorge Martín

*The Addison Independent*

# Opera review: Who knew hell could be so much fun?



**DANCERS ELISA VAN Duyne (also the choreographer), Olivia Schrantz and Merrill Cameron kick up their heels in the famous Can-Can. Photo by Max Kraus**



SOPRANO BEVIN HILL performs a number in the underworld.  
Photo by Max Kraus

The friend I was with at *Orphée aux enfers* — “Orpheus goes to Hell” more or less — noted that Sir Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan fame learned well from Offenbach. Both Offenbach and Sullivan were gifted, fluent composers who lavished their exquisite musical training on crafting sublime silliness. The apex of silly fun is this tart confection, presented in four performances this month by the Opera Company of Middlebury.

In a duet in Act Two, Jupiter, the god of the gods notorious for shifting shape to shag a damsel, is turned into a fly to insinuate himself into Eurydice’s — well, into Eurydice. Orphée and Eurydice, the famed mythic couple who usually share passionate conjugal bliss, share nothing of the sort here: they come out in a froth of loathing for each other, clamoring for divorce. The very first character we meet in the opera is dowdy “Public Opinion”, clad in a boxy grey skirt suit, perfectly embodied by mezzo Stephanie Weiss, who clearly has fun playing this wet-blanket dame who shames Orpheus out of gleefully leaving his wife in Hell. Everything is stood on its head in this version, or cheerful perversion, of the story.

In between we meet innumerable gods on Olympus with endless zany twists on the well-worn Greek tropes. The trajectory is decidedly “going south”: down from those tedious heights of propriety to the nether regions where the real fun is: the Underworld!

Standouts among this superflux of gods and action are Jupiter, lustily sung by the redoubtable Joshua Jeremiah, who also brings his assured vocalism and physicality to the role, commanding, as Jupiter should, the stage and attention. Orphée is sung beautifully by Thomas Glenn, whose comic physicality brings added fun to the role.

Carina DiGianfillippo embodies Cupid just as brightly as one could ever wish, clear of voice, spry and limber, naughty and winning. Vermont tenor Cameron Steinmetz, as Mercury, hits

the stage like a comet, again physically always on the go, his clean high tenor ringing out his message. (There's a throw-away moment when he poses with a bouquet looking just like the FTD commercial.)

Three Dancers — Elisa Van Duyne (also the choreographer), Olivia Schrantz and Merrill Cameron — are deployed like glitter throughout the show, bringing even more élan and sparkle. Pluto, the heavy, lord of the Underworld, rocks a man cave. Lucas Levy played this devil-may-care role with the right mix of merry insouciance and bawdy bluster, without compromising his lovely tone.



THE GODS ON Mt. Olympus strike a majestic pose to impress Public Opinion.  
Photo by Max Kraus

In the small role of John Styx, Andy Papas wowed the crowd with his gorgeous tenor ringing out his hit ditty. As Juno, Angela Christine Smith was exactly the force you'd dread as the wife of the head god: a formidable "don't-even" Valkyrie — oops is THAT ever the wrong mythology; pardonnez-moi, Monsieur Offenbach, Verzeihen Sie, Herr Wagner— but as this is a bubbly satire, Juno can also laugh all throughout with her lustrous instrument.

As Eurydice, Anne-Marie Iacoviello stepped in during the final days of rehearsal, as the singer cast in the role fell victim to Covid. Given how brief a time she had to learn and inhabit the role, she did a great job, bringing that soubrette "I always win" energy to the central role.

The show has several beautiful melodies along the way, but the culminating final scene rejoices in the celebrated can-can. It's uncanny how composers know they have a hit tune, and in this case Offenbach teases us mercilessly throughout suggesting that catchy galop is just about to break out, but no, not until the end! The orchestra, deftly led by Clinton Smith, was quite excellent. The violinist Sofia Hirsch rose from the orchestra for a star solo turn

onstage early on, playing one of Orphée's latest compositions, which bores the living lights out of his fed-up wife.



JOSHUA JEREMIAH IS transformed into a fly by Cupid (soprano Carina DiGianfillippo).

Photo by Max Kraus

Sure-footed director Douglas Anderson is not one to ever miss a cue for making a production, whether full of pathos or hilarity, a home-run. The set design (Anderson) and lighting (Neil Curtis) are, in the tradition of this company, superb, often witty, even arresting visually. Debby Anderson cannot be praised enough for her costume design. She like her husband seems incapable of setting a foot wrong. Veritable Sherpas of the lyric stage they are.

It was a GREAT show. Who knew that hell could be such FUN?