

Orfeo in India

"Orfeo moved me as a heartfelt entreaty to the gods."

Claudio Monteverdi

Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, first performed in the Italian city of Mantua in 1607, is known as the first great masterpiece in the history of Western opera. Monteverdi's innovative genius found expression in his use of monody, the single musical line, as well as in his large variety of forms, where choruses and dances are interspersed between the arias and melodic recitatives, and in his large orchestra of 43 instruments. The opera, which was neglected in the period between his death in 1643 and the twentieth century, has now been firmly established in the operatic canon.



Soprano Camille Hesketh with dancer Mallika Sarabhai

Orfeo has as its subject the classical myth of Orpheus, a poet and singer who travels to the underworld in an attempt to bring back from death his wife Euridice. The power of his music persuades Plutone into letting her return, on condition that Orpheus should not look back as he leads her to the upper world. At the last moment he does so and he loses her once more.

On January 5th, Aurovilians and guests filled the Sri Aurobindo auditorium to watch an Indian reconstruction of *Orfeo*, a collaboration between Dutch director Miranda Lakerveld of *Les Autres Music Theatre*, Amsterdam, with Indian choreographer Mallika Sarabhai of the *Darpana Performance Group* from Ahmadabad, and American-Dutch composer Ned McGowan. The object was to create a performance in which European and Indian musicians, singers and dancers would be equally involved. As Miranda Lakerveld wrote, "This opera once was created from a necessity, from a living context, taking its roots from folk-music and rituals, thus creating a natural relation to the community. By connecting Monteverdi's opera to living traditional Indian art forms, like the tribal dances of Gujarat and the Raga-tradition, I hope to go beyond the classical mask and focus on its tribal character, thus opening the spirit of the piece to a culturally much more diverse audience."

Orfeo in India fused Western and Indian musical styles. Monteverdi's music was played by an ensemble consisting of four specialists in Western Baroque music and six Indian musicians. On stage, three western classical singers and two Indian singers mirrored the movements of the Indian dancers, who were engaged in the folkdances of Gujarat and the highly stylised *Bharata Natyam* dance form. Throughout the



From left: Euridice (danced by Pooja Purohit), Orfeo (danced by Revanta Sarabhai), baritone Arnout Lems (doubling Orfeo) and mezzo-soprano Antje Lohse (doubling Euridice).

opera, the main thread was the echo-motif.

Did it work? As always, opinion was divided. The musical quality of the performance was generally considered superb, with accolades going to baritone Arnout Lems, soprano Camille Hesketh and mezzo-soprano Antje Lohse. The fusing of the musical styles was smooth and at times surprisingly beautiful, as when the Indian flute echoed the melody of one of the baroque instruments. But the quality of the dancing was felt to be of a lesser standard. Perhaps it was the doubling of the characters that prevented the dancers of the *Darpana Performance Group* expressing themselves fully. If the singers had been part of the orchestra, doubtless the dancers would have been able to blossom more.

The stage setting designed by Rakhi

Peshwani was simple but highly effective. The separation of the upper and underworlds was achieved with a transparent cloth dividing the two worlds. A novelty for Auroville was that the text of the opera, which was sung in Italian, was projected in an English translation on to one of the side walls of the auditorium. Next time this may be improved further by projecting it above the stage for more easy readability.

Orfeo in India was the first classical opera to be performed in Auroville, and, hopefully, won't be the last. We thank Mallika Sarabhai, who is also a member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, to have Auroville included in the cities in India where this beautiful and ambitious production was performed.

Carel

Fusing Baroque and Carnatic music

American/Dutch composer Ned McGowan, who studied European classical and Carnatic music and has been coming to India for the last 10 years doing fusion projects, was the music director of *Orfeo in India*. Auroville Today asked him how he had experienced this production.

"The title 'music director' doesn't really fit," says Ned. "In fact, my job description was evolving by the day. I first had to sort out which European classical instruments could be used here in India; then how European and Carnatic musicians could play together in harmony; which sections of the original score could be played by whom and in which combination; and what additional music must be composed to make it all fit together. Finally, I also conducted and played in the performances.

"It started with finding the instruments. Monteverdi's score calls for an extensive battery of instruments, including a harpsichord, an organ, lutes and a variety of other instruments that you can't find in India. I searched the Internet and found an organisation that is dedicated to recreating traditional baroque sounds with electronic keyboards. That solved one problem: we used a midi-keyboard to control a computer programmed to create sounds that come close to those original instruments. This gave us the harpsichord, the harp, the harmonium, the organ and also a kora – a West African harp which sounds a bit like a lute. We contracted a Japanese/Dutch harpsichord player to play the keyboard and three baroque musicians from Belgium and The Netherlands who joined with a viola da gamba, a baroque violin and a number of baroque flutes. For special effects, I brought a modern instrument, a two metre high contrabass flute.

"The house ensemble of the Darpana Dance Academy provided the Indian half of the ensemble: the bamboo flute, the Indian violin, the chitravina and a variety of percussion instruments such as bass drums, cattle drums, the tabla and the mridangam."

"The main challenge of this production was how to exploit the opportunities of such a collaboration while respecting both the baroque and the Indian traditions. First of all, the two groups of musicians had to get used to each other's different approaches to music. We warmed up each morning with 30 minutes of tuning because Indian musicians hear pitch differently from European musicians. I wanted to maintain those differences in the melodic passages, but it is also necessary to have well-tuned harmonies. Then we sat together to transcribe the Monteverdi melodies. As the Indian musicians were unfamiliar with Western notation, we played the melodies and they copied them by ear into their own system of



The music ensemble for *Orfeo in India*. Ned McGowan stands left, next to the contra-bass flute

musical notation. Then we concentrated on phrasing, dynamics, rhythm and timing.

"There is a world of difference between the two musical systems and each musician, whether European or Indian, had to be open both to the other tradition and also be flexible enough to reconsider their own tradition in this context. In some ways, the European musicians had a tougher job. With a classic composer like Monteverdi, they held strong views on how to play his music, views that needed to be flexible to allow the potential of this production to flourish."

The decision about which sections should be played by whom was another challenge. "Through a process of trial and error I let my ears decide what was the best solution for each moment, for example whether a melody should be played on the baroque or Indian violin. Further, I cut the original score by 20-25%, composed a few small bridges and a new ending, and then allocated specific parts to the Indian instruments. In *Orfeo in India* there were three Western singers, a soprano, a mezzo-soprano and a baritone, and two Indian tenors. It was quite clear from the beginning that the recitatives had to be sung by the Western singers while the roles of Plutone and Charon were opportunities to explore an Indian interpretation."

Ned explains that the production does not follow the published ending composed by Monteverdi. "The director, Miranda Lakerveld, chose for this production to follow Monteverdi's first ending, in which the story ends as in the original Orpheus myth where the Maenads tear Orfeo to shreds. In Monteverdi's official score, however, Apollo comes and takes Orfeo into heaven – a happy ending which may have been desired by Monteverdi's patrons at the time. Since none of the music for the original ending has survived, I took that as an opportunity to compose a new one to function as the apotheosis of this bicultural production, where elements of Vedic chanting, Carnatic classical and tribal rhythms are combined with a *moresca*, a late medieval fight dance."

Ned is quite happy with the result. "It was quite a lot of work but it all came together well. We discovered that Monteverdi's melodies and polyphonies sound divine with the Indian classical ornamentation. Listening to the Indian musicians playing Monteverdi in their own way melted my heart. As Monteverdi himself was a great innovator who explored new things in his music all the time, I like to think that he would have approved of our interpretation."

In conversation with Carel

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Editorial team: Alan, Carel, Dianna, Elaine, Louise. Guest editor: Lesley. Proof-reading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu.

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