



June 2004

Dear Friends,

Box office opens for *L'Orfeo* for newsletter subscribers on Monday 5 July at 10am at City Recital Hall on (02) 8256 2222 or www.cityrecitalhall.com two weeks before opening to the general public.

Performance dates Wednesday 1 December, 2004 7.30pm
Friday 3 December, 2004 7.30pm
Sunday 5 December, 2004 5.00pm (early evening performance)
Monday 6 December, 2004 7.30pm

Prices A Reserve \$95*
B Reserve \$75*
under 27 years \$45* with ID *plus booking fee

Special offer to Newsletter subscribers booking before July 19th

Any newsletter subscriber booking for OPENING NIGHT – Wednesday 1 December 7.30pm – before July 19 will be able to book A& B Reserve at a special \$5 discount per ticket. Book \$95 A Reserve for \$90 and \$75 B Reserve for \$70 for the 1st performance only. When you book for opening night just let the City Recital Hall Box Office know that you are a newsletter subscriber. Unfortunately you can't get the discount on-line so you will have to call in or phone.

Fourth Performance

You'll notice from the dates listed above that we've added a fourth performance on Sunday 5 December beginning at 5.00 pm. We're making this an early start at 5 pm so that you don't have a late night before the working week, or to enjoy a leisurely dinner afterwards in the wonderful Sydney summer evening.

The Blacket Hotel Offer to Newsletter subscribers.

Our soloists will once again stay at the Blacket Hotel, a few minutes walk from the Recital Hall on the corner of King & George Streets. The Blacket, a lovely boutique hotel in a refurbished Edmund Blacket-designed former bank, offers our subscribers the following great value package during the run of *Orfeo* - \$165 deluxe room, continental breakfast and a 20% discount at the Minc Restaurant. We are very happy to have the Blacket as a sponsor and hope you will enjoy their facilities.

Orfeo Sampler



Three weeks ago Sara Macliver, Cantillation and a number of the players under the direction of Neal Peres da Costa went to the ABC and recorded two tracks from *Orfeo* for release on a sampler which will be available soon. A fun time was had by all, and director Mark Gaal came down to meet everyone. The music is of course just lovely, and we look forward to the sampler coming out so that we can share this with you.



Flyers and posters



If you are down at Angel Place don't forget to look out for the *Orfeo* poster which is now up at the City Recital Hall. You may start seeing our flyers around the place as well (you'll get one with this newsletter if you receive it by mail). Our art work this year features a beautiful and striking image of Orpheus as drawn by Jean Cocteau. Artists in all performing and visual media have been drawn to the Orpheus legend over many centuries, and Cocteau was one of the great exponents of the 20th century. We're delighted to be able to use this image, and thank the Committee Jean Cocteau for their kind permission in allowing us to use this. Read on for a very interesting article written by Evan Williams about the Orpheus legend in film.

Celluloid Orpheus

Evan Williams, who was head of the NSW Arts Ministry and is now film critic for *The Australian*, wrote this article about Orpheus in film for us.

The influence of the Orpheus legend on the cinema extends well beyond the handful of films that have dealt with the legend itself. The elements of the story – fantasy, adventure, magic, music, death and the power of love – are all ones that cinema delights in. Orpheus – musician, poet, intrepid lover – would seem to be the ideal cinematic hero. I think many filmmakers owe a debt to Orpheus without quite knowing why.

Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950) is a work of enduring beauty and fascination. I watched an old 16mm print of it a few weeks ago, and despite washed out contrasts and lamentable sub-titling it still wove a potent spell. Perhaps it has something of the austere and delicate beauty of Monteverdi's music. Cocteau made two other films in a so-called "Orphic trilogy" – *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930) and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1959) – though both were more concerned with Cocteau's poetic obsessions than the story of the hero. Jacques Demy, one of the directors of the French New Wave, made a rock opera version of *Orphée* in 1985, now pretty well forgotten.

Perhaps the film best remembered by English-speaking audiences is *Black Orpheus* (*Orphée nègre*), directed by Marcel Camus in 1959 and shot in Rio during the Carnival. Camus worked with an all-black cast, and lately I've been wondering if the original Orpheus was black as well. Researching a little background for this piece, I came across H. A. Guerber's *The Myths of Greece and Rome* (1907), in which Orpheus is described as "tawny-skinned". His father was the sun god Apollo. Certainly Camus's black Orpheus accorded well with Hollywood fashion in the 1950s. Otto Preminger made *Carmen Jones*, a brilliant black version of Bizet's opera, in 1952, and followed it with his sumptuous film of *Porgy and Bess*, shot in the Todd-AO format for a huge screen. (Sadly no print of *Porgy and Bess* survives, owing to a dispute between Samuel Goldwyn and the Gershwin estate, but a restored DVD copy of *Black Orpheus* can be bought on the internet.)

The charm of the Camus's film, apart from its extraordinary energy and vitality, is that it treated the legend as a realistic narrative. The tone was earthy and immediate. Even the figure of Death was real: a painted reveller in a skeleton costume who stalks Eurydice through the carnival crowds. She takes refuge in a power station and is accidentally electrocuted by Orpheus when he comes to rescue her. Instead of following her to the underworld he retrieves her body from a subterranean morgue and carries it through the crowds. Taunted by a jealous woman, he stumbles backwards over a cliff with Eurydice in his arms. Ironically, it is not by looking back at his beloved that Orpheus meets his fate but by *failing* to look back and perceiving his danger.

In Camus's hands the legend loses nothing from the absence of the supernatural. What it sacrificed in magical effects it gained in power and realism. And, as with the first staging of Monteverdi's opera for the Mantuan court, little expense was spared in the production, with its dancers, singers and musicians, and two appealing lovers in Breno Mello and Marpesso Dawn. (Orpheus is portrayed as a tram conductor; Eurydice a country girl looking for fun at the fair.)

Cocteau, by contrast, brought to the story a temperament steeped in myth-making and fantasy. He was one of the most versatile figures in the history of art, and worked in almost every medium – literature, theatre, painting and ballet. But he seems to have been most engaged by the cinema, which he approached as a kind of innocent magician, with a naïve delight in the possibilities of trickery. My favourite of his films, *La Belle et la bête* (1946), is a fairytale of the utmost delicacy and beauty in which the beast is played by Cocteau's favourite actor, Jean Marais (for many years his lover). It was natural that Marais should also play Orpheus, though I think he looks a too strapping and imperial for the role, being more suited to Oedipus (whom he played in the third film of the trilogy, *Le testament d'Orphée*).

As in all Cocteau's films, the story is built around the figure of the poet. Orpheus, being both poet and musician, was the ideal embodiment of Cocteau's preoccupation with the poet and with art as a transformative experience. In all the films there are images of the poet/hero caught up in his creations and seeking an intimate relationship with an elusive death. In *Orphée* death takes the form of an elegant woman (Maria Casares), and the doors of communication to the next world are mirrors, through which the characters continually pass. For Cocteau the mirror had an intimate connection with death, since it is through mirrors that we see ourselves ageing.

With its setting in a dusty French provincial town, *Orphée* had something of the physical realism of *Black Orpheus*, but an entirely different mood. The special effects are surprisingly few. Eurydice's levitation from her deathbed, gloves that magically attach themselves to the hands, are tricks that any amateur cineaste could have achieved (I like to think of Cocteau, as a boy, trying them out with his 16mm camera, as I used to play with a camera of my own). As David Thomson observes in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*: "Far from welcoming visual mystification, sensuous fantasy, and expressive imagery, he preferred concrete, plain images, knowing that the medium itself was fantastic." It is a lesson that Hollywood could take to heart. But there are magical sequences in the hero's descent into the underworld and his later return with his beloved, in which Orpheus seems to be gliding, floating through darkened streets and up and down flights of steps. The effect, uncannily mysterious, was achieved with the simplest back-projection and travelling matte techniques. Computer technology was unknown half a century ago, and I sometimes wonder if we need it now.

Le Testament d'Orphée was a virtual anthology of Cocteau's themes and fetishes. The image of the mirror recurs, though the tone is more metaphysical and self-referential. In this exchange between the Princess of Death and Heurtebise (the dead chauffeur/guide in *Orphée*), quoted by Thomson, the voice of the Poet is that of Cocteau himself –

PRINCESS: Put that flower on the table...Where did you obtain this flower?

POET: It was given me by Cégeste.

HEURTEBISE: Cégeste?... If I'm not mistaken, that is the name of a Sicilian temple.

POET: It is also the name of the young poet in my film *Orphée*. First of all it was the name of the angels in my poem *L'Ange Heurtebise*.

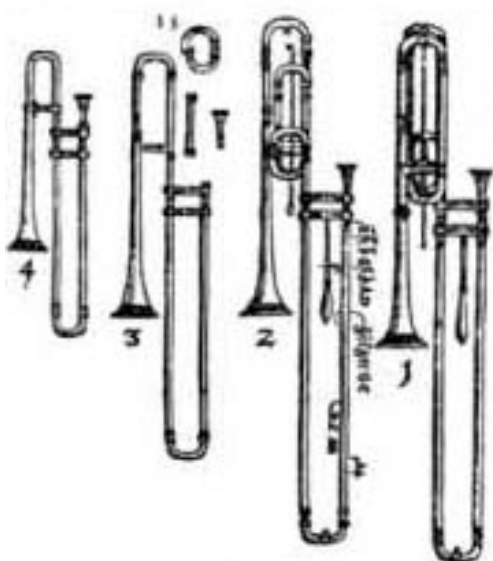
PRINCESS: What do you understand "film" to mean?

POET: A film is a petrifying source of thought. A film resuscitates dead actions. A film permits one to give the appearance of reality to the unreal (*sic*).

The central Orpheus theme – communicating with a love separated by death – has inspired many filmmakers. Not all the results have the subtlety of Cocteau. Box-office successes include Zucker's *Ghost* (1990), with Demi Moore, and Minghella's *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1991), in both of which sentiment held sway. The British cinema's most imaginative treatment may have been Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death*, made in the same year as *La Belle et la Bête*. A RAF pilot (David Niven) bails out of his blazing bomber and is presumed lost; but his death is a mistake, caused by a blunder in the heavenly records office. A messenger is sent to earth to escort the pilot back to heaven to face trial while the girl he loves, unable to travel to the spirit realm, awaits him in the real world.

Powell and Pressburger deployed all the resources of Technicolor and the post-war prestige of the Rank organisation to realise this glorious fantasy. The idea can be traced back to a Hollywood classic, *Here Comes Mr Jordan* (1941), in which a prize-fighter is accidentally sent to heaven before his time. More recently there was Robin Williams's overwrought fantasy, *What Dreams May Come* (1998), about a dead husband who wanders through heaven and hell trying to make contact with his grieving family on earth. The film was box-office failure. Perhaps audiences were yearning for the more stringent beauties of Cocteau or the more vibrant realism of Camus – or perhaps just the charms of Monteverdi.

More instruments of the Baroque Band - the Sackbut



Praetorius described the sackbut as the "instrument par excellence in music of any kind". Its success was due in part to the fact that the sackbut, using a double slide, allowed it to play with perfect tuning at any pitch, whereas instruments with finger holes usually work best at only one pitch. The sackbut was also popular as it could be played quietly to accompany voices, violins and even flutes, while also being able to accompany shawms and cornetts in louder passages.

Sackbuts developed out of a 15th century single slide instrument - the slide trumpet. With the sackbut the instrument is held still and the slide moves; on the slide trumpet the mouthpiece is held still and the rest of instrument slides. Early sackbuts, using a single slide of the new design were heard all over Europe in bands in the 15th century, usually with a shawm and a bombard (alto shawm); a trio called the *alta capella*.

Exactly when and where the double slide first appeared is uncertain, though it was probably developed to create a tenor pitch instrument for the *alta capella*. As the single-slide trumpet could not play in the tenor register, this led to some experimentation with the slide principle to find the perfect tenor instrument. This tenor emerged towards the end of the 15th century, possibly at the workshop of Hans Neuschel the Elder in Nuremberg. The bell of the Renaissance sackbut was smaller than today's trombone and it was made of lighter metal.

By 1650 the right hand grip (the vertical tube that connects the two horizontal tubes of the slide) was added, allowing the right hand to execute the sliding motion more easily. Four sizes of sackbuts were developed and gave the player considerable range; alto, tenor, bass and double bass were all used.

By the mid 1550s composers realized that sackbuts blended extremely well with the voice. More and more church music was written for choir and accompanied by sackbuts and cornetts. For over 100 years the sackbut reigned supreme as a church instrument. Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli wrote many pieces specifically for St Mark's in Venice, which had two choir lofts facing each other. Sackbuts and cornetts played to each other from these lofts known as *cori spezzati*. The sound of the sackbut also became associated with death and the underworld; and this is how Monteverdi uses them in *Orfeo*.

By the 18th century, the sackbut had fallen into disuse. It was still in use in Austria and Germany, but only in theatre and church music, gradually being replaced by the modern trombone. By Mozart's time the sackbut was all but vanished.

There's still time to make a donation and claim a tax deduction before the end of the financial year. If you'd like to help out please send a cheque made payable to 'Pinchgut Opera Public Fund' and send to PO Box 239 Westgate 2048. Our very grateful thanks to all those who have already done so.

Happy ticket buying and best wishes from the newsletter team - Alison, Ken, Liz, and Anna C.

["Orpheus inspired in me a true prayer."](#)

[Monteverdi to his Mantuan patron after the opening performance.](#)

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