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Wedding Above the Abyss

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Some opera productions illustrate a story; others discover a theatrical image capable of expressing its entire emotional universe. Tom Morris's L'Orfeo at the Vienna State Opera belongs, in its conception, to the latter category. With sets and costumes by Anna Fleischle, Monteverdi's drama becomes a celebration poised above an abyss: a world in which love and communal joy.

But the proximity of death also occupies the same extraordinary space. The production's most appealing idea is its invitation. Morris takes seriously the work's origins in courtly festivity, treating the audience not simply as spectators but as guests at Orfeo and Euridice's wedding. This is more than a charming theatrical greeting. It establishes an emotional community before tragedy strikes. The lovers' happiness belongs to everyone; consequently, its destruction becomes a collective wound rather than a distant mythological misfortune. The State Opera describes this atmosphere of shared celebration as central to the staging.

Fleischle's stage setting gives that invitation a wonderfully imaginative home. The wedding unfolds in a stylised woodland environment, where sculptural trees, festive tables and elaborate costumes suggest a meeting between pastoral ritual and contemporary fantasy. Published descriptions evoke pagan headpieces, woven figures and exuberant colour. Rather than reconstructing an archaeological antiquity, the design creates a persuasive alternative reality: recognisably human in its festivities, yet sufficiently enchanted to accommodate gods, spirits and the impossible journey to come.

What makes this visual world especially compelling is its relationship with the opera's dramatic structure. After Euridice's death, the stage rises to reveal the underworld beneath the wedding landscape, with exposed roots hanging overhead. The transformation is not merely spectacular machinery. It makes grief spatially intelligible. The realm of death has been beneath the celebration all along; the earth supporting human happiness also conceals its terrifying opposite. Few scenic metaphors could serve Monteverdi's confrontation between life and mortality more eloquently.

The roots are particularly resonant. Above ground, trees signify growth, shelter and the promise of continuity; below, their inverted forms acquire an unsettling, almost skeletal presence. Fleischle therefore connects the two worlds rather than presenting unrelated decorative tableaux. The descent into Hades becomes an exposure of what ordinary life keeps hidden. This continuity gives the setting intellectual substance without diminishing its immediate theatrical pleasure. The design invites interpretation while

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remaining accessible through the simplest visual language: light and darkness, flourishing and decay, surface and depth.

Costume contributes equally to that transformation. The wedding's colourful, nature-inflected exuberance establishes a vocabulary that can subsequently darken. Accounts of the production describe figures returning as shadowed versions of their earlier selves, turning recognition into unease. Nina Dunn's video design extends the atmosphere without overwhelming the performers, while James Farncombe's lighting forms part of the production's carefully integrated visual framework. The achievement lies in collaboration: scenery, costume, projected imagery and movement serve a shared dramatic imagination.

Such visual richness is particularly appropriate to a work whose musical identity embraces remarkable variety. The Staatsoper points to Monteverdi's synthesis of late-Renaissance madrigal writing, courtly influences, dance, instrumental episodes and expressive recitative. Morris's festive conception offers a theatrical equivalent to that abundance. Yet the woodland spectacle has a deeper purpose: by giving happiness colour, texture and communal energy, it makes the subsequent withdrawal of that happiness dramatically legible. The beauty is not an escape from the tragedy; it prepares the conditions through which the tragedy can matter.

This wonderful performance brings Rolando Villazón to the title role, with Concentus Musicus Wien providing the instrumental ensemble. Their contributions must, of course, be judged on the evening itself. What can already be appreciated is the strength of the production's central proposition: opera begins not in remoteness, but in the recognisable human impulse to celebrate, to love and to resist loss. Here, the stage setting becomes the drama's eloquent partner, giving visible form to the fragile ground beneath every celebration.

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