

Orpheus descending

- Murray Black
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Elise Caluwaerts and Wiard Witholt give melodic voice to the Orpheus legend in Pascal Dusapin's *Passion*.
Picture: Jamie Williams

Pascal Dusapin is one of France's leading contemporary classical music composers. Yet his work is rarely heard in Australia, so the Sydney Festival deserves plaudits for bringing his music to our shores.

Passion (2009) was ostensibly inspired by the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Scored for two solo singers, a six-voice vocal group and a large chamber ensemble, it doesn't so much tell a story as attempt to evoke a representation of timeless ritual.

With the vocal group and instrumentalists set back at the rear of stage, the foreground of the City Recital Hall became a bleak landscape riddled with jagged, triangular-shaped shards of glasslike material and alternately bathed in washes of white, blue and orange light.

The two protagonists (a man and a woman) wandered through this desolate setting: sometimes sitting, sometimes circling around each other, sometimes lying prostrate. Staying apart for virtually the entire time, they recoiled when they made physical contact. Their vocal dialogues were punctuated by inward-looking, self-reflective monologues. Together, it imparted a disembodied, disconcerting quality. Dusapin's solemn, brooding score provided the ideal soundscape for this purpose. The music mostly unfolded at a slow and stately pace, occasionally punctuated by frenzied outbursts of clashing dissonance. Its colours were dominated by delicate woodwind and string figures and its textures oscillated between dense complexity and crystalline simplicity.

While the music was skilfully crafted, the libretto was not. Although it aspired to the realms of poetic symbolism, it was largely pretentious gibberish. Saturated with natural and cosmic imagery, the constant references to the Sun threatened to transform the protagonists into more obsessive sunworshippers than the Pharaoh Akhnaten. Fortunately, there were no such misgivings about the excellent performances. Belgian coloratura soprano Elise Caluwaerts impressed with her supple sense of line and strength, displaying a soaring, pure-toned top register and richly coloured lower register. Firm-voiced Dutch baritone Wiard Witholt matched her in his dramatic intensity, agility and timbral variety.

Comprising a sextet of highly-regarded local singers, the vocal group's well-blended, ritualistic intoning made a haunting, ethereal impact. Conductor Jack Symons and the instrumental ensemble realised Dusapin's intricately detailed and fiendishly challenging score with focused precision, tight-knit clarity and spectacular virtuosity.

Ironically, for an opera entitled *Passion*, it entirely lacked this attribute. The musical performance was outstanding, some moments were genuinely striking and I was periodically stimulated and intrigued. But *Passion* ultimately left me completely unmoved. Perhaps, that was the intention.

Opera: Passion

By Pascal Dusapin. Sydney Chamber Opera. Director: Pierre Audi. Revival director: Miranda Lakerveld. Conductor: Jack Symonds. City Recital Hall, Sydney. Sydney Festival. January 14.