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Arts group has strong debut with 'Orpheus'

By **JOSEPH DALTON**, Special to the Times Union

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ALBANY -- Mosaic Arts announced its presence as an ambitious new arts organization on Friday night, Oct. 29, with a staging of the Gluck opera "Orpheus and Eurydice." The production was eloquent but modest. Along with the capable work of three fine soloists, the Aoede Consort and the Nacre Dance Company, an important role was also played by the venue, Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Rather than confining the action to the sanctuary, director Kelly Hutchinson, founder of Mosaic, often placed the cast in the aisles of the church. It enlivened the proceedings from both a visual and aural perspective.

The pivotal moment in the myth is that Orpheus must lead Eurydice out of the gates of hell while not looking at her. The church's long main aisle became the perfect space to dramatize this. Earlier, Eurydice made her first arrival on stage by the same route, accompanied by a court of young ladies, not unlike a bride. The wedding imagery was fully embraced at the opera's end, when the cast processed out with Eurydice in a flowing white gown.

The acoustic properties of the historic church were set in play from the start with the 10-member Aoede Consort singing to the right of the stage. Cast members then made entrances at different corners of the space, and the experience of sound coming from behind was a simple but refreshing device.

Aleksandra Romano as Orpheus sang with a haunting mix of chest and head voice. It was as if she carried a magic acoustic shell around her at all times. As Eurydice, Vedrana Kalas had a more traditional, though still youthful high soprano sound. An unpredictable vibrato appeared in the voice of Julie Allison Norman, who played Amore. It gave an agitating but surprisingly appropriate feel to her character.

Mostly the singers acted as if floating in a trance. Since the lush, flowing score is not about immediacy of action, it worked. The sacred environment again contributed, lending the feel of a religious pageant.

The five young women of the Nacre Dance Company had a statuesque beauty. Beth Fecteau's choreography mostly relied on classical poses, except for when the dancers portrayed the furies of hell. Dressed in black and wielding long tight scarves, they became the granddaughters of Martha Graham.

Music director Dan Foster's tireless work at the piano was the engine for the entire night.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union. He blogs at: <http://www.HudsonSounds.org>.

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