



## ORFEO ED EURIDICE OPERA ENTERTAINS THOUSANDS AT A LOCATION FIT FOR ROYALTY

**THIS SUMMER, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF JOS THIE, THE TOUCHING LOVE STORY THAT IS *ORFEO ED EURIDICE* DESCENDED ON THE BEAUTIFUL LOCATION OF SOESTDIJK PALACE IN THE DUTCH PROVINCE OF UTRECHT, FORMER HOME OF THE LATE QUEEN JULIANA, FOR A TWO MONTH RUN OF SHOWS. PAUL WATSON WAS THERE TO ENJOY THE SPECTACLE...**

It's unlikely that you will ever witness a live production quite as unique as De Utrechtse Spelen's depiction of Christoph Willibald von Gluck's opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Set entirely on water, and accommodating 1,800 people per show, it is a fusion of music, theatre, and a stunning location, literally fit for a Queen.

Based on the classical myth of the singer Orpheus, who was said to have been able to 'move even stones to tears' with his bewitching voice and exceptional string playing, the opera tells the story of Orfeo, a talented vocalist that touches nature when he sings, and his deceased lover Euridice, who is stuck in the underworld.

In the production, Amore, the God of Love, decides that Orfeo may bring his lost love back to the land of the living, but only on one condition: he may not look at Euridice until they have returned from the underworld. Evidently, he finds this a step too far.

"All Royal operas must have a happy ending

– it's just the way that it is – so in the end, although Orfeo breaks the rules by looking at her, Amore decides 'never mind, you can have her back anyway,'" smiled Ramon Snel, the show's Technical Producer.

There are three main components to the set: the 'floating' orchestra pit; the stone, which is set in the middle of the pond and is essentially the stage; and a system of underwater catwalks that enable the singers and actors to move around the set.

"The Director wanted to create a show where Orfeo is really in his natural habitat, which means we don't have a very big set – we have kept it as clear as we can," Snel said. "The catwalks run all the way to the palace, some 300 metres away, and there is also an elevator within the set that transports the cast in and out of the water, which represents the underworld."

Getting permission to use the Royal Palace took almost a year, and then another year was



Opposite: As a decision had to be final for the look of the show, it created extra pressure when positioning the lighting fixtures for the movement scenes.  
Below: A DiGiCo SD7 was at the helm at FOH position and a DiGiCo SD9 was utilised for monitors.



required for pre-production and to actually create the set. Being a much protected area, the habitats of snakes, bats, birds, and even frogs had to be respected, so a lot of investigative work was carried out before anything could physically be put together.

"The bottom of the pond is no deeper than 1.7 metres, so we couldn't drill or anchor anything, because of the potential leaking issues," Snel continued. "It was very difficult to get all of those disciplines together; we're talking about floating 1,800 people on water here, after all!"

Another man with a lot to think about was Lighting Designer, Marc Heinz. Although he has almost 20 years of experience in the industry, and has worked on large-scale operas in stadiums and arenas across Europe, working on water presented a whole new challenge.

"We all worked closely with ecologists to make sure the natural environment wasn't spoiled by the production, but on the lighting side, it was particularly stringent," he explained.

"Our working hours at night were strictly regulated and I was not allowed to hit certain areas with any light – not even with reflections from the water, which is quite a puzzle when there is a surface of 300 by 100 metres of water in front of you!"

Lighting Operator, Pepijn van de Sande, worked from a High End Systems Wholehog

3 with a DP 8000. The main lighting fixtures included 16 Stage Profile Plus; 12 Philips Vari-Lite 3500 Washes and four Vari-Lite 3500 Q Spots; four High End Studio Command 1200s and four High End City Colours; 30 S4 Profiles; 40 Par 64 Outdoors; 30 Tempo 3 Greens; two Robert Juliat 2.5kW Aramis; five Dataflash; and

re-hanging some fixtures, but here, absolutely no way."

Ampco Flashlight provided everything audio, and in terms of the sound design, it was important to retain an intimacy of sorts, and to keep the sound as natural as the set. To achieve this, 72 [omnidirectional] Omniwave

**"The Omniwave system is spread across the entire set, and lifts the whole sound around the audience – all those speakers work together to create a bulb of sound instead of a wall of sound coming towards you."**

plenty of LEDs.

"I wanted everything hidden from the audience, because I felt if you looked at the lake and saw large piles of fixtures or trussing, it would completely ruin the magic of the piece and the location," Heinz revealed. "This resulted in me putting lights in some quite irregular places - for example, some of the [VariLite] 3500 Q Spots were positioned with the lens at almost the same height as the water."

And once a decision was made, he added, it had to be absolutely final, which created extra pressure when positioning the fixtures.

"All of the decisions were completely irreversible," he said. "Everything you put in and under the water couldn't be replaced. In theatre or TV, there's always the possibility of

loudspeakers were deployed, along with 20 Synco W8L Longbow line array cabinets and two cases of three Synco W8LM mini line array elements.

"The Omniwave system is spread across the entire set, and lifts the whole sound around the audience – all those speakers work together to create a bulb of sound instead of a wall of sound coming towards you," Snel explained. "This also means SPL can be kept low, as audio is always around you, so you don't need much power. The Synco line arrays were there more for the effects, and to support and give direction to the Omniwave system."

Real animals were brought in to further replicate Orfeo's natural habitat, although Snell says because the Sound Designer (Danny

Below: To make the orchestra comfortable, some reverb from the Lexicon 300 was put on eight of the Omniwave speakers, which created a nice acoustic; the opera took place on a surface of 300 by 100 metres of water.



Hoogveld) specialised in birds, there were some quite extraordinary scenes involving the Palace's natural wildlife.

"We bring in a big owl and occasionally a seagull, and Orfeo will have a conversation with the bird and then it'll fly away again, but what was great was that the wild birds were actually responding to what Orfeo was singing too," he smiled. "There was a definite crossover of what's real and what's done by us, and the sound system supported that. Our record, in fact, was 17 wild geese choosing to accompany Euridice as she cycled on the catwalk from the Palace to the rock – that was very funny!"

For all of the shows, a DiGiCo SD7 was at the helm at FOH position, and a DiGiCo SD9 was utilised for monitors. Because of the setting, this production provided quite a number of challenges on the audio side, particularly in terms of monitoring, as engineer Jelmer Dijkstra reveals.

"Because opera singers normally rely on their inner voice and how the room and the orchestra sounds acoustically, they found it hard to stay in tune and keep focused," he said. "Many had never used in-ears before, but after rehearsals, and some tweaking and playing with reverbs [on the DiGiCo SD9], we were able to reach a workable situation where they felt safe to perform.

"The big distance over the water was a problem for normal wireless operation, so

we had a specially developed wireless system over fibre, which allowed us to get everything working like it should."

Although Dijkstra's mix position was directly behind the 'floating' orchestra pit, he says it worked well thanks to good communication with FOH and some extra video monitoring.

"Putting my console here meant we had the shortest cable runs, and they can become quite an issue at a location like this," he added, "and because the SD9 is a great, fantastic sounding console, I had all the freedom I needed. I was able to configure my mixing desk perfectly, and being such a small footprint, it was absolutely ideal for this show."

Dijkstra ran 36 inputs and eight mixes in total, including 27 stereo sends for the Sennheiser 200 Series IEMs, which he used for the opera singers and the choir. Most effects came from the DiGiCo console, however a stereo send was also sent to a Lexicon 300 for the orchestra.

"The orchestra pit was quite a 'dead' room due to the design, so to make the orchestra feel more comfortable, I put in some reverb from the Lexicon 300 on eight of the Omniwave speakers, which created a much nicer acoustic," he revealed.

For I/O, Dijkstra connected the local I/O to the DiGiCo D-Rack, taking an aux MADI out of one of the [DiGiCo] SD7-racks for the three main opera singers. He also received some sub

mixes of the orchestra and the choir from FOH engineer Harry Zwerver's SD7 to make sure he got the right blend of the two for the in-ear mixes.

Zwerver says he opted for the SD7 for its versatility and ease of use. His channel count exceeded 75, including 36 for the orchestra and 24 for the choir, and he used very little outboard due to the console's inbuilt FX. To mic up the orchestra and choir, Zwerver used an array of DPA 4060s and MMC2006s, plus a selection of AKG C414s

"Danny [Hoogveld] did a great job designing the sound for Orfeo ed Euridice; the Omniwave speaker makes a very natural sound with no direction, which when combined with the original sound of the orchestra works really well," he concluded. "I was brought in by Ramon [Snel] to do the last 20 shows of this production, and I have to say I really enjoyed it. It was a real success, and also an absolute pleasure working with such a large show and such a well motivated and talented crew."

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