

Ariadne Unhinged, Gotham Chamber Opera, New York

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By Martin Bernheimer

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Neal Goren attempted something bizarre and dangerous at the intimate Abrons Arts Center on Wednesday. Ever inquisitive and ever resourceful, the conductor-impresario fused three musical disparities – none of them a bona fide opera – and gave the messy mélange a clever catch-all title: *Ariadne Unhinged*.

The point of departure was *Lamento d'Arianna*, the surviving fragment of a long-lost opus that Monteverdi created in 1609. This gave way to the jolting expressionism of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, a series of genuinely looney tunes written in 1912. Although the macabre texts have nothing to do with our forsaken mythological heroine on Naxos, their moonstruck madness supports the Unhinged label. Relative sanity returned with Haydn's mellifluous cantata, *Arianna a Naxos*, written in 1789. Intentionally compounding the disorientation, Goren chopped each offering into little pieces, then shuffled the segments back and forth. Coherence be damned.

Karole Armitage, Goren's directorial accomplice, concocted modern-dance patterns and stage images more notable for theatricality than for choreographic inspiration. While Emily Langford Johnson, the virtuosic mezzo-soprano on duty, lurched, staggered, crouched and struck brave terpsichorean poses, Armitage's dancers, mostly unitarded, added passing decoration and distraction. They flourished naive props, dabbled in mild mime, formed human frames for the distraught diva in various combinations and permutations. At one point they mustered a *pas de deux* redolent of old-fashioned barefoot ballet. Initially the fussy manoeuvres looked intriguing in front of Vera Lutter's icy abstract photograph set. Eventually they seemed superfluous.

Still there was much to admire. Clad in a crinkly silver-debris gown over furry legs and hoofs (ask not why), the marathon protagonist moved with astonishing ease, physically and vocally, from Monteverdi's expressive lyricism to Schoenberg's dissonant *Sprechgesang* to Haydn's poignant drama. Daniel Swenberg provided stylish accompaniment on the theorbo for the Monteverdi. Goren sustained clarity and point with a spiffy chamber ensemble in the Schoenberg, and played the piano elegantly for the Haydn. Often *Ariadne Unhinged* was weird and wonderful. Sometimes it was just weird. Even then it was interesting.

★★★★☆

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