

Monteverdi gets the Silent Opera treatment

Jessica Duchen, Saturday 12 January 2013

We're in uncharted territory, staring at a crystal ball. This glass globe adorns a table at Trinity Buoy Wharf – the Docklands river peninsula devoted to the arts and creative industries where anything can happen and often does. But am I really looking into the future of opera?

The team behind Silent Opera thinks so. This young company, spearheaded by artistic director Daisy Evans, has made it its mission to bring an art form often misunderstood as stuffy and inaccessible to the cutting edge of adventurous, technologically enhanced theatre.

Later this month, they open a new production of Monteverdi's L'Orfeo in a converted warehouse.

"Silent" in this context means "digital". Taking their cue from theatre companies like Punchdrunk and dreamthinkspeak, they aim to create a brand-new, individual and completely immersive experience out of opera, combining technological potential with live performance.

"The opera world will never look back," declares the mission statement Isn't it rather a grandiose claim? "Opera used to be the big thing, didn't it?" says Tim Wilson, Silent Opera's executive producer. "Today, why is it not? Because it's behind a wall. But turn it into zeros and ones and you can send it down a fibreoptic cable. Then the sky is the limit."

Buy a ticket for L'Orfeo – an operatic snip at £25, or £35 to attend performances featuring arrival by a chartered boat – and your experience begins when you are handed a pair of wireless earphones at the door.

You don't have to wear the headphones if you want only to hear the live performance.

In this intimate setting, the singers will be no more than five metres away, and you may find yourself being directly addressed when not being shepherded through a sonic tunnel to hell and back.

The live performance is fed into the headphones and mixed with a pre-recorded soundtrack. The composer Louis d'Heudieres has produced an ambient world including spoken thoughts and sampled sounds from the music and elsewhere – plus a whole new ending.

Each night, one unsuspecting member of the audience will receive a "golden ticket", which bestows the right to choose which ending the company should perform: Monteverdi's or d'Heudieres'. The performers won't know in advance.

L'Orfeo' with Silent Opera, Trinity Buoy Wharf, London E14 (silentopera.co.uk) 23 January to 10 February

