

LINCOLN  
CENTER

presents

# Great Performers & American Songbook

*Wednesday Evening, October 5, 2005, at 8:00*

*Friday Evening, October 7, 2005, at 8:00*

*Saturday Evening, October 8, 2005, at 8:00*

## *New Visions*

*World Premiere Production*

## Orpheus and Euridice

RICKY IAN GORDON, *Composer and Libretto*

DOUG VARONE, *Director and Choreographer*

ELIZABETH FUTRAL, *Soprano*

TODD PALMER, *Clarinet*

MELVIN CHEN, *Piano*

DOUG VARONE AND DANCERS

John Beasant III, Daniel Charon, Natalie Desch, Adriane Fang,  
Stephanie Liapis, Michael Sean Marye, Catherine Miller, Eddie Taketa

ALLEN MOYER, *Set Design*

JANE GREENWOOD, *Costume Design*

ROBERT WIERZEL, *Lighting Design*

Tricia Toliver, *Stage Manager*

*This evening's program is approximately 70 minutes long  
and will be performed without intermission.*

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*Steinway Piano*

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Rose Theater, Frederick P. Rose Hall  
Home of Jazz at Lincoln Center

# Note on the Program

by Barry Singer

The year was 1995. Ricky Ian Gordon's long-time partner, Jeffrey Michael Grossi, was in the early throes of AIDS.

"I found myself introduced to a clarinetist named Todd Palmer," Gordon recalls. "I knew he was one of the world's great young virtuosos on his instrument. Todd began coming to see me perform. One day he told me he wanted to commission a piece." Gordon smiles wanly. "I couldn't think straight. Jeffrey was sick. Of course I needed the money. Todd and I talked and talked about what *he* needed, just a song, a little 12-minute contemporary piece for clarinet and piano that he could play at concerts, something to follow the endless number of *Shepherd on the Rocks* that he was performing all over the country. I told him that I would think about it.

"One night I was in bed with Jeffrey. At four in the morning I just woke up and saw the whole thing. Orpheus and Euridice. That was it. A musician tries to rescue his dead wife from the land of the dead. Except that Orpheus is a clarinet player and Euridice gets a mysterious virus that robs her from him incrementally. It was the story of my relationship.

"I jumped up and started writing. Jeffrey woke around 5:00; by now I was sweating. 'What's going on?' he asked me. 'Sit down,' I said, 'I have to read this to you.' And it was practically the whole text as you hear it now." Gordon laughs. "I called Todd the next day. He certainly was a little stunned: 'Okay, I asked for a 12-minute piece and I'm getting an opera.' 'Todd,' I said, 'I can't help it. I don't know what to do. This is the piece!'"

Ricky Ian Gordon's *Orpheus and Euridice*, which opens Lincoln Center's 2005–06 American Songbook season, does not sing solely about AIDS or loss but rather about love. The production, which also kicks off Lincoln Center's New Visions series, as well as being part of the 40th-anniversary season of Great Performers at Lincoln Center, is an often exhilarating romp that descends into the abyss on the back of Todd Palmer's lilting clarinet and Doug Varone's exuberantly imaginative choreography.

In fact, Gordon found it hard to compose *Orpheus and Euridice's* music. Jeffrey Grossi's health began to decline precipitously soon after Gordon's feverish night of near-spontaneous text creation. Only well after his lover's death in 1996 was Gordon able to begin writing any music. "I was also unsure for a long time precisely what *Orpheus and Euridice* was," he admits, "even after I had a draft of the score pretty much completed. Was it a piece of chamber music? No. I came to believe that it was a theater piece. But I didn't know how. And until I knew what to do with it nobody knew what to do with it."

Years passed. Gordon was lured away by a multitude of notable projects, including an opera, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; an "operatic monologue," *Night Flight to San Francisco*, adapted from Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Angels in America*; and a number of stellar musical theater scores, including *Dream True*, in collaboration with the writer-director Tina Landau; *My Life with Albertine*, in collaboration with the writer-director Richard Nelson; and a gorgeously theatrical Langston Hughes song cycle entitled *Only Heaven*.

Finally in October of 2001, barely a month after 9/11, *Orpheus and Euridice* received its premiere at New York's Cooper Union. The opportunity to really hear the piece was a breakthrough for Gordon. "Hearing it," he says,

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“allowed me at last to see it.” The big question once Lincoln Center stepped in was: Who would now direct it?”

“A number of names were discussed,” acknowledges Gordon. “But someone sent me a videotape of a Doug Varone piece called *The Bottomland*. I was so blown away by it that I dialed information for his number and just called him. I had never seen work like that.” Gordon shakes his head. “Very early on I asked Doug, ‘Which of your dancers is going to be Orpheus and which is going to be Euridice?’ And Doug just looked at me. ‘Todd is going to be Orpheus,’ he said, ‘and Elizabeth is going to be Euridice.’ Elizabeth Futral literally dances her part now as she sings. And while Todd plays, he’s often being lifted and thrown. Even the piano moves. In Doug Varone’s world nothing is stationary. Everything is alive.”

“I’d always wanted Elizabeth to sing Euridice,” adds Gordon. “Around 1998 or so I went to see her and Renée Fleming in *Le nozze di Figaro* at the Lyric Opera in Chicago. I had two presents with me that night. I had for Renée the score of *Night Flight to San Francisco* and for Elizabeth I had *Orpheus and Euridice*.”

Throughout his career, Gordon has written great songs for great singers: Fleming and Futral, Lauren Flanigan, Dawn Upshaw, Carol Vaness, Teresa Stratas, Rodney Gilfry, Angelina Reaux, Patricia Schuman, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Kurt Ollmann, Joyce Castle, Harolyn Blackwell, Betty Buckley, Kristin Chenoweth, and, of course, Audra McDonald have all avidly sung Gordon songs. McDonald, a particular champion, featured four on her debut album, *Way Back to Paradise*.

This gift for writing music that singers love to sing is perhaps derived in part from Gordon’s mother, who sang professionally and very successfully in her youth and, according to Gordon, continues to sing still. A suburban child of Long Island in the ’60s, Gordon was something of a piano prodigy who discovered in college that he was also, in fact, a composer. “I was studying piano at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and I became obsessed with decoding the inner workings of 20th-century operas—Berg’s *Lulu*, Barber’s *Vanessa*, Menotti’s *The Consul*, Stravinsky, Messiaen, Bartók, Hindemith, Britten. I decided to try writing something serious myself. Within three weeks I’d written so much music the school’s composition program admitted me on the spot. By year’s end I was averaging nearly one new song a day. It was kind of scary.”

The future for Gordon now includes an opera of *The Grapes of Wrath* at Minnesota Opera, with a libretto by Michael Korie, scheduled for February 2007. The present, however, is filled with the promise of *Orpheus and Euridice*, at last. “I feel like this is a blessing that has been given to me,” says Gordon simply. “The piece was always about timeless, ultimate love.”

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