

Music of Baroque exults in rare opera

By John von Rhein
TRIBUNE MUSIC CRITIC

Classical review

It seems no less than proper that the distinction of presenting the Chicago professional premier of Claudio Monteverdi's "Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria" ("The Return of Ulysses to His Homeland") this week should fall to Music of the Baroque, which has long held a virtual monopoly on local performances of the Italian Baroque master's major works.

These concert performances mark the end of another odyssey; music director Thomas Wikman's completion of the trilogy of known Monteverdi operas, a project he began with MOB three years ago. Once again he has made intelligent choices in his musical realization, casting the opera from strength and conducting with dedication. Purists could question certain of his decisions on stylistic grounds, but how many of them have ever heard Monteverdi's glorious music so well sung?

The plot spins off Queen Penelope's virtue and constancy as she patiently awaits her hus-

band's return from the Trojan Wars. Monteverdi's recitative style moves freely between declamation and arioso, keeping lyrical expansion in check until the end. But there is much subtlety of instrumental color, not least in the courtly brass interludes.

Although the program annotations ignored the tangled issue of performance editions, Wikman's account (heard Monday at Evanston's First United Methodist Church) was based on the Gian Francesco Malipiero edition, presented virtually complete except for two scenes in the fifth and final act. He employed a smallish complement of strings and winds, along with prominent pairs of arch-lutes and theorbos, harpsichord and portative organ: a nice compromise between authenticity and modern practicality.

At the center of an opera that boasts an unusual preponderance of high male voices, tenor John Horton Murray made a firmly heroic, sometimes histrionic, Ulisse. Gloria Banditelli, last sea-

son's vocal discovery as Nerone in "Poppea," took a less showy part this time around but affectingly evoked Penelope's anguish and steadfastness with a darkly lustrous mezzo and deep musicality.

Also admirable were Patrice Michaels Bedi (fresh of timbre and spirited in her handling of ornamentation) and William Watson as the lovers Melanto and Eurimaco. Luxurious casting brought soprano Brenda Harris, in terrific vocal and expressive form as Telemaco, the son of Ulisse and Penelope.

Jeffrey Gall, Jan Jarvis and Kurt Link were fine as the pompously scheming suitors. Calland Metts (Eumete) and Edward Zelnis (in the abbreviated role of the glutton Iro) supplied broad comic relief, while Tina Currier, Douglas Anderson and Peter Van De Graaff acquitted themselves solidly as the opera's resident mythic figures.

MOB will repeat "Ulisse" Wednesday and Friday nights and Sunday afternoon. Phone 312-551-1415 for locations and ticket information.