

VISIONS

Opera in the House

COBBLE HILL'S VERTICAL PLAYERS MAKE CLASSICAL MUSIC ON COURT STREET

THE BODY IS CARRIED SLOWLY into the living room and laid upon a bier, decorated with flowers. The chorus begins singing, their voices blending majestically into a solemn funeral lament, accompanied by a pianist on an old Broadwood grand piano. It's hard to believe that music this good can be made in somebody's apartment, with a budget of only a few hundred dollars.

The opera, *Orphée et Eurydice*, was written in 1762 by the German composer Christophe Willibald von Gluck and is a favorite of the Vertical Player Repertory. It has been staged twice so far, and will probably be mounted once again. The Vertical Players (named for a tall staircase in the middle of their performance space) are an opera company founded last year and dedicated to giving performances of small chamber works in the living room of Judith Barnes' apartment at 219 Court Street.

In the opera, Barnes plays the lead role of Orphée, a great musician whose bride has

died and gone to the Elysian Fields. With the help of Amour, the goddess of love, Orphée goes to hell and beyond to retrieve his bride. An audience of three dozen people sit only a few feet away from the action, on metal folding chairs.

"What's sometimes disconcerting," admits Barnes, "is when people in the audience have to use the bathroom in the middle of the performance, and they have to stand up and walk through the opera and backstage. But I like that, the mix of the performance and the behind-the-scenes world."

Barnes started out as a sculptor, and for years worked in a shop making conga drums and as an assistant to sculptor José de Creeft. In the late 1980s, she studied



In *Orfée et Eurydice*, Judith Barnes (as Orphée, lower left) uses a magic harp to sing her way past the unhappy dead imprisoned in Tartarus (below), which doubles as her living room.

music at the University of Indiana, where she married Anthony Kerrigan, a friend of her parents and an early translator of the works of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges.

"He was a wild guy," says Barnes fondly of Kerrigan, who was 40 years her senior. When he died in 1991, Barnes moved back to her old place on Court Street, and began turning it into a performance space.

"I was looking for a way to combine my interests in sculpture and

music, to pull together all the different aspects of the things I do," says Barnes, who not only directs, sings and choreographs, but also builds the sets for her opera company. This January, the Vertical Players staged *Fables*, five very short operas by American composer Ned Rorem.

The company, which operates in conjunction with the not-for-profit Flying Bridge Community Arts organization, is an assembly of friends and students of Barnes, who also teaches voice.

"I'd love to get a small Baroque continuo ensemble in here so I could do the operas of Handel, Scarlatti and Monteverdi," says Barnes. "There's a lot of room to work with those pieces. They're not as hackneyed as some of the more popular stuff."

On March 25-28, Vertical Player Repertory will mount a modern work, *La voix humaine* ("The Human Voice"), by French composer Francis Poulenc. "It's about a suicidal woman who sings into the telephone the whole time, talking to her lover who is in the process of dumping her," says Barnes. "I have this surreal obsessive vision for how the whole thing is going to look. It'll be great," she promises.

For more information, call 212-539-2696. —JF

