

Review**Cleveland Orchestra: Bach and Orff
with Walters and Feddeck (April 11)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Patrons who packed the four sold-out houses last weekend at Severance Hall came to hear Carl Orff's spirited medieval cantata *Carmina Burana*, but they were also treated to the bonus of an elegant curtain-raiser in Johann Sebastian Bach's *Concerto in A* for oboe d'amore and strings with Robert Walters on the solo line.

Bach — that great recycler — turned several wind concertos from his days as court composer at Köthen into harpsichord concertos for his coffee house concerts with the Leipzig University Collegium Musicum between 1729 and 1741. Though the originals have been lost, they can be reconstructed by clever musicologists, as an uncredited arranger did for BWV 1055.

James Feddeck, stepping in for Franz Welser-Möst last weekend, led a string section pared down to eight first violins, six seconds, five violas, four cellos and two double basses, creating an admirable balance between soloist and orchestra that allowed the expressive, vocal sound of Walters's oboe d'amore sometimes to blend colorfully with the fiddles and other times to come to the fore with a highly ornamented solo line (the soloist expertly stretched a measure here and there to get all the notes in without interrupting the flow of the music).

Walters was an eloquent and expressive soloist and his Cleveland Orchestra colleagues matched his every nuance, playing with a transparent, buoyant tone and creating finely-honed detail within Feddeck's exuberant and expansive gestures. Together, they delighted in the sprightly motives of the opening *Allegro moderato*, brought out the arresting blue notes in the slow movement and captured the ingratiating, gavotte-like spirit of the finale. Small in scale though it is, the concerto is rich in detail.

By way of a complete contrast, Carl Orff's extroverted setting of 12th century poems from a Bavarian abbey in Benediktbeuren paints its colorful medieval scenes on a huge canvas. Though the musical material is often winningly simple and repetitive — finding its vitality and exuberance in the rhythm of the original Latin and Germanic texts — the forces are extravagant: the work requires a big chorus, a children's chorus, soprano, tenor and

bass soloists, triple winds and brass, multiple percussionists, two pianos, celesta and strings.



Carmina Burana also calls for a conductor who knows how to pace the proceedings, and James Feddeck proved to be a masterful ringmaster at Thursday evening's medieval circus, setting brisk tempos, punching out incisive rhythms and pumping up huge climaxes, as well as creating whispering *pianissimos* and teasing out subtle details in the orchestration — and encouraging sudden rude comments from the brass as the poetry required. The 25 movements followed each other closely with significant pauses only between the three main sections. More than merely covering for an indisposed maestro, Feddeck put his own well-conceived

stamp on this performance.

The impressive Cleveland Orchestra Chorus sang with heft in the loud sections, beautiful supported tone in soft passages and precision throughout. Diction was astonishing — especially the sibilants in the fast *pianissimo* section after the beginning and the tongue-twisting male chorus patter in the “Bibit” section of the tavern song. Women's voices sounded golden in *Chramer, gip die varwe mir* and the randy little *Si puer cum puellula*, designated for “Six Solo Men” was tossed off to great effect by the men of the chorus. The Children's Chorus, who filed on efficiently for Part Three brought a fresh, youthful sound to some rather salacious lyrics.

Though *Carmina Burana* has all the trappings of an oratorio, it's really a theater piece. On this occasion, all three soloists had their parts memorized and were free to act them out. The agile baritone Stephen Powell ran through a vast repertory of tone from masculine-stentorian to velvety *falsestto* and floating *sotto voce* and acted out the boozy Abbott of Cockaigne with staggerings and hiccups.

Tenor Nicholas Phan (unusually) sang the role of the roasted swan in full voice, adding a dimension of sheer terror to the bird's complaints — fanning himself, plucking at his collar and finally slumping into his chair for extra dramatic effect.

Soprano Rebecca Nelsen, wearing the rustling red dress (*rufa tunica*) mentioned in one of the poems, was vocally elegant and downright seductive in The Court of Love section, finally floating a gorgeous *Dulcissime* and following it with a stunning vocalise.

The orchestra provided its own moments of theatrical brilliance: the chattering brass between verses of *Fortune plango vulnera*; the limpid fluting of Joshua Smith, subtle timpanists and raucous horns in the orchestral dance; the resonant low C's from the basses in the *Reie* or round dance; the wailing bassoonist John Clouser in the setup to the roasting swan and the razzing brass between its verses; the vamping pianists in *Veni, veni, venias*, the silvery din of the mallet players in *Blanziflor and Helena*.

This first of four performances of *Carmina Burana* was remarkably free of opening night jitters. Manning an information table for ClevelandClassical on Saturday night, I heard

the piece a second time through closed doors in the grand foyer. From what I could tell, the performances only got tighter and more brilliant (and in some movements, faster) as the weekend went on. Sunday's must have been amazing.

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