

**Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom: *Carmina Burana*
with Andrew Grams (August 23)**

by Robert Rollin



On Saturday evening August 23, the Cleveland Orchestra, Blossom Festival Chorus and Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus presented an exceptional concert under talented young conductor Andrew Grams. Grams served as assistant conductor of The Cleveland Orchestra, and as music director of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, from 2004-2007. He has guest conducted many of the world's great orchestras, and showed excellent ensemble

control and remarkable interpretive skills all evening.

The highlight was a marvelous performance of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* (1936) scored for soprano, tenor, and baritone soloists, children's choir, chorus and large orchestra, mixing words from both Latin and old German. The text comes from a significant collection of 12th century Latin and old German secular poems recorded in manuscript in an abbey near Munich, where German monks preserved it for future generations. Johann Andreas Schmeller published the first edition in 1847. The first performance in 1937 was a staged version, though the large majority of subsequent performances were in concert format.

The powerful *Prologue* featured two rapid choruses, but though the *Epilogue* repeated the opening, it reprised the strident, colorful first chorus only. The *Prologue* and *Epilogue* flanked the three main sections: *Springtime*, *In the Tavern*, and *The Court of Love*. Grams took lightning-fast tempi and kept the choruses moving. Colorful tam tam and other percussion sounds brightened these stunning sections.

The exceptional vocal soloists sparkled and performed to the Orchestra's inimitable standard. Baritone soloist Brian Milligan had by far the most extensive role, and followed the delicately descriptive small chorus *Veris leta facies* with a grandiose powerful aria, *Omnia sol temperat*, that reflected nature's relentlessness. With the beauty and firmness

of a fine German heroic bass, he sang of “the sun’s glory, nature’s great renewal,” and compared intense love to “the torture of the wheel.”

The wide-ranging solo *Estuans interius* that opened Part Two (*In the Tavern*) was Mulligan’s triumph. He deftly negotiated its athletic melodic lines, but was at times swallowed up by the multitude of percussion. In the whimsical and raucous *Ego sum abbas* section for baritone and male chorus, the abbot promised during an excessive drinking episode that those who gambled with him would leave before Vespers without their clothes. Here the ensemble balance was excellent, even if the abbot’s was not.

Not only did Tenor Christopher Pfund sing *Olim lacus colueram*, his only aria, with great skill, his stage-commanding gestures helped him vividly to impersonate “the swan who is now black and roasted to a turn.”

Part Three was titled *The Court of Love*. *Circa mea pectora* had some balance and ensemble problems at the outset, but soon returned to a fine standard. *Tempus est iocundum*, for the full forces of baritone, soprano, boy choir, mixed chorus, and orchestra, scintillated and gloried in the earthiness of love’s gifts.

Youthful Soprano Nadine Sierra made her Cleveland Orchestra debut with great style. Entering finally in Part Three with *Amor volat undique*, she joined with the children’s choir and shared the luscious texture with paired flutes. In *Stetit puella*, she saucily described “a young girl in a red tunic” and “a girl as fair as a rose.” In *Tempus est iocundum*, she evidenced great vocal skill and control as she vacillated between “physical love” and “chastity,” and bowed her head in submission, “taking on the sweet yoke.”

Throughout, Grams helped maintain a bright and gleaming flow that made the performance exceptional. He exploited Orff’s wonderful percussion and coloristic variety, both in orchestration and in vocal combinations, to produce a well-paced, magnificent performance.

J.S. Bach’s *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* opened the program. Leopold Stokowski originally orchestrated the piece in the late nineteen-twenties for his excellent Philadelphia Orchestra. The Cleveland Orchestra’s great technical skill, enhanced by Grams’ fine pacing, made the performance captivating. In particular, the long rapid violin lines sounded as one instrument. The woodwinds and the brasses were flawless. The large, romantic orchestration suited the piece well because of Grams’ finely flexible beat and deft precision.

Karl Muller-Berghaus’ orchestration of Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 in C Minor*, was equally beautiful. The lovely cello solo, the bassoon and string bass doublings, the

use of paired flutes and clarinets, the percussion shadings, the attractive trumpet solo, the use of string pizzicato, all combined to produce a colorful version of the popular piano composition—made all the more attractive by Grams' flexible and contrasting dynamics and tempi.

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