

Canton Symphony: Feasting on *Carmina Burana* (Apr. 21)

by Tom Wachunas



Thanks to all the pre-publicity surrounding this season-ending performance from the Canton Symphony Orchestra, there wasn't an empty seat in Umstattd Performing Arts Hall on April 21. We were promised a musical feast

of epic proportions, to be served piping-hot by 86 instrumentalists, combined choirs numbering more than 100 voices, three solo vocalists, and a modern dance troupe. So we arrived hungry.

Just a few days before, a local newspaper article about the concert quoted music director Gerhardt Zimmermann as saying, "It's 100 percent a crowd-pleaser. It's probably the most performed 20th-century choral work ever." He was referring to Carl Orff's monumental and still exceptionally popular *Carmina Burana*, composed in 1936.

An opulent repast such as this would seem to merit particularly spicy hors d'oeuvres. The CSO obliged with a curious dish: Antonin Dvořák's *Serenade for Winds*, composed in 1878.

I say "curious" only because, compared to the sheer heft of the evening's main course, the Dvořák is decidedly more humble fare. Still, this teasing morsel let the audience taste the always remarkable technical and interpretive skills of CSO musicians. Full of what the composer called Mozart's "sunshine," the charming, intimate geniality of the piece was exquisitely articulated by the small ensemble, comprised of pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and horns, all engaged in a frolicsome march over the steady lyricism streaming from cello and bass. In all, the performance was a delectable moment of breezy air and warm light — a calm prelude to the stormy ferocity that followed.

While *Carmina Burana* is not an opera in the traditional sense, it is nonetheless gripping in its dramatic thrust. Call it Epicurean theatre of the flesh. The texts — most in Latin, with a few in Low German — are drawn from 24 Medieval poems penned by a Bavarian group of rogue monks, defrocked priests, and itinerant scholars. Disillusioned with the rigid social and religious conventions of their day, they dedicated themselves to self-indulgent pursuits of worldly pleasures.

Orff's score is somewhat spartan in the way it eschews complex orchestral harmonies, favoring instead very plain but memorable melodies. Their syllabic simplicity imbues the work with relentless rhythmic patterns, all superbly rendered here with glittering immediacy pouring out from the powerful ensemble, further augmented by two grand pianos and seven percussionists.

The narrative potency of this wild cantata rests in the declamatory choral singing. Here, it was delivered with electrifying precision and sublime, heartfelt fervor by the Canton Symphony Chorus along with Malone University Chamber Choir and the children's chorus from Summit Choral Society.

Additionally, the three excellent soloists provided some particularly savory passages, ranging from unabashed bawdiness to sensual gracefulness. In "Once I lived on lakes," tenor Alfred E. Sturgis sang the anguished complaint of a swan being cooked over a fire pit ("Miserable me! Now I am blackened and roasting fiercely.") As he strutted about in nervous jerks, he inflected his words with funny squeals and squawks until he was stopped, open-mouthed and dead in his tracks, as it were, by a hilarious glower from Zimmermann.

Later, in "I am the Abbot of Cockaigne," baritone Michael Roemer was oddly alluring as he performed with all the pompous, slurred swagger you'd expect from a drunken priest. Later still, in "This is a joyful time," soprano Rachel Hall, accompanied by the youth chorus, was an elegant embodiment of conflicted emotions as she struggled to choose between chastity and surrendering to physical love. In finally choosing the latter, her voice soared amazingly to what must be the stratospheric limits of the soprano voice. "My sweetest one, I give myself to you completely!"

The dancing by ten members of Neos Dance Theatre, choreographed by artistic director Bobby Wesner, was alternately lissome, earthy, or bestial, but always enthralling. They were an embedded, kinetic presence, like so many sinewy sprites darting about the tiered stage. Their elongated, colored shadows spilled up and out onto the side walls at the front of the auditorium, evoking a sensation of ghosts rising in a moonlit forest. At times the group moved like a single, willowy creature, or a tribal unit, swaying and writhing to

the chanted melodies. Every extension of an arm or a leg, every leap, every facial expression or hand gesture was a studied, riveting punctuation mark in this ponderous ode to carnal indulgence. Even the incessant sounds of their thumping feet became another vital instrument in this work so lavishly laden with sonorous percussive effects.

Carefully balancing these diverse components enough to let them breathe freely, to sustain their individual identities, yet integrate them into a palatable whole, must surely be a daunting endeavor. In this context, you could rightly call Zimmermann the eminently successful master chef, or better yet, the wise shaman with the magic wand, keeping all those tasty ingredients from dissolving into a sloppy stew.

Carmina Burana ends as it begins, with “O Fortuna,” a thunderous howl against the oppressive cycles of “monstrous fate” that entangle human existence. “Let us mourn together!” were the last words we heard from the choir, but I don’t think anyone left the concert hall in abject mourning. We *were* indeed howling, however, no doubt overjoyed at our good fortune in partaking of this truly magnificent feast.

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