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Choral Society Gives Unusual Work Its Due

By Fred Volkmer

The Choral Society of the Hamptons, under the baton of Mark Mangini, harked back to medieval Germany this past Sunday at the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church—or at least medieval Germany as imagined by Carl Orff in his hugely popular choral work, “Carmina Burana.” It was a colorful, vital, and thrilling musical panorama, and, as someone very close to me said, “a damn good performance.”

In the interests of full disclosure, I have to confess that I am myself a member of the Choral Society, though I was not able to sing this program. So the scrutiny applied to Caesar’s wife will have to be applied to me.

The program began with one of Johannes Brahms’s great works for four-part chorus, “Nänie.” An elegy or threnody written on the death of his friend, the artist Anselm Feuerbach, it is set to a poem by Friederich Schiller and begins with the words, “Even the beautiful must die.”

This is a profoundly touching work, harmonically rich, like clotted cream and quite beautiful in itself. It laments the transitory nature of life, but also celebrates the kind of immortality bestowed by art. It ends, “Even to be an elegy in the mouth of the beloved is glorious.” The accompanist for the work was the elegant Liliane Questel, playing with great sensitivity.

“Carmina Burana” is a curious work, unlike anything else in 20th century music. The texts are taken from a collection of poems from the 13th century written by the Goliards, or wandering scholars of the medieval period, that were found in the monastery of Benediktbeuren near the foot of the Bavarian Alps. The Goliards were students or lapsed clergy who thumbed their noses at propriety, morality, convention, and authority. They were the hippies of their day.

The poems are written in a macaroni of low Latin and early German, with a few old French lines thrown in for seasoning. The source of their ideas was as often pagan as Christian, and Orff begins and ends the work with the driving chorus apostrophizing the inexorable and often malevolent wheel of fate.

The poems, as Orff arranged them, celebrate the beginning of spring, when the sap, figuratively speaking, is rising. A second section, “In Taberna” portrays the joys of drink and conviviality. A third is given to the joys of love. The lyrics are rude and often delightfully bawdy.

Orff’s musical ideas, thought over for many years, came to fruition in “Carmina,” and he disavowed almost everything he had written before it. The musical language is stripped down: Melodies are simple or nonexistent, and harmony, too, is pared to a minimum. But it is rhythm that carries the day in the work, and the rhythms are vital, visceral, and primitive. In many ways, Orff, with his repeated phrases, prefigured the minimalism of Phillip Glass and Steve Reich.

Maestro Mangini chose to use the two-piano version of “Carmina,” which includes four percussionists. The pianists were Ms. Questel and Katya Sonina. I have praised both of them in these pages before, and they did not disappoint. Never before has the Choral Society had such able accompanists. The accompaniment necessarily favors the percussive capabilities of the piano, and they played with gusto, a wonderful unanimity of purpose, and

a digital finesse. The very fine percussionists were Dean Witten, Scott Simpson, Larry Spivack, and Andrea J. Lustig.

The soloists for the evening were soprano Darynn Zimmer, tenor Alex Richardson, and baritone Dominic Inferrara. We heard from Mr. Richardson only once, and that was in the wonderfully comic song "Cignus ustus cantat" (The roasted swan sings). The poor swan laments his fate as he turns on the spit. The song is in the horrendously difficult stratosphere of the tenor range and Mr. Richardson sang it with a full-voiced skill, completely capturing the spirit of the song.

Mr. Inferrara was astonishing. He is a singer of such power, such agility, and such expressive ease that I am certain we will be hearing more of him. He is an extraordinary artist and took an obvious delight in the use of his instrument, bringing a lieder-like sensitivity and tonal shading to his singing. And Ms. Zimmer was quite simply ravishing. Her "In Trutina" (In the Balance), a delicious song of uncertainty—poised between modesty and desire, was splendid, and on the "goose bump scale" in music her four-bar melisma "Dulcissime" was almost off the chart. "Oh sweetest one, I give myself to you totally." Was there ever a greater declaration of love? And how can one resist the children's chorus of the Choral Society, singing with a heart-breaking innocence about the bitter fate of a girl without a lover?

And the chorus? They acquitted themselves admirably with only a few shaky moments. One tenor had an irresistible urge to be heard above the rest. The basses were a fraction of a beat behind in a few measures, but one can forgive this given the rhythmic challenge of Carmina.

The chorus as a whole was quite grand, performing with a kind of swagger and often with wit. They wrapped their 21st century mouths around the 13th century German and Latin like linguistic gymnasts, and moved through the rhythmic rapids like white water rafters. The choral balance was very good, in my view. And Mark Mangini had his eyes and ears everywhere, marshalling his forces with hand and baton for a thrilling and unforgettable evening, a moving celebration of life and its pleasures.