

## **Opinion: A Brilliant, Highly Sensitive 'Burana'**

**By John Jonas Gruen**

Quick! Name the one and only bona fide musical masterpiece to have come out of the Nazi era.

The answer, of course, is Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana," written in 1935 and premiered in Frankfurt am Main in 1937. Orff (1895-1982) had a somewhat shadowy political past (he claimed to have joined the resistance in the late 1930s, but there is little evidence of it), and in the censorious Germany of the period, he produced iconoclastic works that have brought him worldwide fame and adulation.



Indeed, "Carmina Burana," hypnotic, bawdy, and quite bizarre, has become one of the world's most performed choral works, and its immense popularity was once again in evidence last Sunday at the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church, when the Choral Society of the Hamptons offered an absolutely smashing performance of it, entirely deserving of its standing ovation.

Under the energetic yet highly sensitive direction of Mark Mangini and with first-class soloists, Darynne Zimmer, soprano, Alex Richardson, tenor, and Dominic Inferrera, baritone, this "Carmina" was performed in the more abbreviated though never skimpy two-piano and percussion version, with the pianists Liliane Questel and Katya Sonina and the percussionists Dean Witten, Scott Simpson, Larry Spivack, and Andrea J. Lustig offering exciting and exacting performances.

Also on hand was the Choral Society's children's chorus, lending a golden vocal touch to the usual complement of grown-up choristers. These forces seemed to inspire one another as soloists drew fire from the chorus and the chorus moved the soloists toward their own ecstatic and evocative vocal realms.

What is it about "Carmina Burana" that so raises the temperature of concert hall, stage, dancing space, or church? Surely, it's not just those sexy, 13th-century poems, all sung in ancient and archaic languages, that speak of love, longing, orgiastic drunkenness, or sexual abandon.

And it cannot only be the rhythmic tumultuousness of the music (so redolent of Stravinsky!) that gives the audience its chills and thrills. Perhaps it is more the utter peculiarity of the way words are melded to music, of the way human voices are stretched to their limit to encompass sudden and abrupt changes in range, volume, and timbre. Orff is dealing with the elements of shock, surprise, and a goodly amount of wit as he lurches from subject to subject, be it pastoral or sensual or downright lewd.

He produces small worlds of uninhibited passion, especially challenging his solo singers in the ways of highly complex vocal dexterity. All of the soloists proved superb in their designated songs, but the ringing, surging, beautifully placed baritone voice of Mr. Inferrera proved a particular joy.

As for the choral singing, it was never less than exhilarating. With its propulsive, often neurotically repetitive thrusts, its sweeping seas of pure or acid sound, the choral writing is at the very heart of "Carmina," and the choral society met its demands with charismatic aplomb.

Had it only been so with the opening work on the society's program - the ravishing, one-movement choral work, "Nanie" by Johannes Brahms. Deftly and intensely accompanied on the piano by Ms. Questel, this deeply romantic elegy, based on a poem by Schiller, is but one of Brahms's large choral output, a form in which the composer displayed his genius for polyphonic writing, and, in this case, lovingly lingered on the subjects of love, beauty, and death.

Mr. Mangini tried his very best to summon the needed vocal fervor and tremulous layered clarity of this music, but the chorus did not achieve the romantic undercurrents or the vocal smoothness required, especially when it came to the higher reaches of the score.

Be that as it may, with its brilliant interpretation of Orff, a bit of bungled Brahms can be easily forgiven and forgotten.