

Medieval lust and renunciation
Small forces take on a large work

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By Paul M. Somers

Schola Cantorum on Hudson, Deborah Simpkin King (conductor), Apprentice Chorus of the Newark Boys' Chorus School, Michael Sanfilippo (director), Sebastien Cornut, Lois Anderson (first and second pianos), Ken Wespy (timpani), Monica Kuligowski, Robert Romeo, Greg Giannascoll, and Frank Parente (percussion). Carmina Burana (12th century): nos. 185, 24, and 200; Orff: Carmina Burana (1936) in the version with accompaniment by two pianos and percussion. St. Michael Church, Jersey City.

Though the idea of juxtaposing the 12th century Carmina Burana with the 20th century work of the same name by Carl Orff would seem to be obvious, I had never in all my music-listening years heard it done except on the radio a few decades ago. As one can well imagine, Schola Cantorum on Hudson (SCH) music director Dr. Deborah Simpkin King's actual presentation of just that combination created a vivid connection across eight centuries.

When music groups such as the SCH, which can sing with great refinement, are given music which allows them to sound rough and raucous, they usually set to it with a will. Yet in their refinement they have learned how to keep from damaging their voices. This mix of solid technique and bawdy exterior brought the early music to life in what we can only assume to be an authentic manner. The music of seduction and praise to Bacchus, admittedly sandwiching a central song of renunciation, is unlikely to have been sung with the hallowed tones of sacred music. With the able assistance of soloists Bernadette Oberndorf, Paul R. Villarreal, Salvatore Diana, and Jim Gard, the audience was no doubt able to mentally remove themselves from the precincts of St. Michael's Church in Jersey City.

Not only were the three songs as arranged by Dr. King in themselves refreshing, but they set the tone for the 68-year old Orff work. The SCH's performance had every bit of linear beauty necessary, especially in the dreamy sweet sections. But the emphasis was on the mix of the lusty and the refined. Even with but 31 singers including only seven tenors and five basses - generally where the ensemble has found its happiest size - there was great power in the big moments: the opening and closing "O Fortuna", the declamatory "Were diu werlt alle min", and the climactic bars of the penultimate chorus at the title words "Blanziflor et Helena" were sung with the same grand sound one might more readily expect from a chorus three times SCH's size.

The rowdy "In taberna" (In the tavern) set of songs rightly found its musical sibling in the collective singing at a European soccer match. Dr. King kept it from lapsing into spring weekend at many an American center of higher education.

This solved the problem of using voices from within the chorus for solos. Mr. Spataro in the legato, contemplative songs - "Omnia sol temperata", his first, as a fine instance - showed himself to have a very nice baritone.

The high energy of tenor Salvatore Diana in "Aestuans interius (Consumed with rage) counted far more than some of the actual pitches.

Anne McNaughton found the stratospheric note in "Dulcissime" while maintaining a sweet sopranosound - no mean feat - and her "Stetit puella" and "In trutina" were affecting.

The Apprentice Choir of the Newark Boys' Chorus were in fine voice with very clear diction in "Amor volat undique" and exemplified tight ensemble in "Tempus est iocundum" as its tempi changed with well handled *accelerandos.

The grittier, more medieval sound evoked in the two-pianos and percussion version arranged by Orff himself was the perfect pairing to go with the three originals which opened the concert. The percussive energy of the music which was so radical in its time became a favored sound for Orff. His sequel Catulli Carmina (Songs of Catullus) is for two pianos and percussion accompaniment. These players were exciting, sometimes covering the singers, but only at the big moments when a loud noise was more the point.

Reviewed from an archival CD of the concert. I wish I'd been there, but I was at Newark's Prudential Hall.

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