

Greenwich Time Review of March 15, 2009 concert:

An intimate “Carmina Burana” in Norwalk

By Jeffrey Johnson

“Carmina Burana” is as close to heavy metal as one can come without electricity. The music with which it opens and closes has become a modern cultural icon.

But the Greenwich Choral Society, conducted by Music Director Paul F. Mueller, presented a different view of this famous work in the Norwalk Concert Hall on March 15. It performed the reduction for two pianos and percussion made by Wilhelm Killmayer (and authorized by Carl Orff) in 1956. This version allows the choral and vocal elements of the work to come to the fore and created expressive opportunities that the Greenwich Choral Society developed into a memorable performance.

To perform the original orchestration, the chorus sets up behind the massive orchestra Orff requires for this work. The huge sonic force of the orchestra also makes words hard to hear in louder sections of the music. In the Killmayer reduction, the chorus is ever-present, and each word seems shaped and expressed by the singers.

The grand tutti sections of the opening and closing and in places like “were diu werit alle min (Were all the world mine)” were driven by careful attention to balances and diction. The puzzles and delights of this text, with ideas and phrases in several languages, were made clear.

Mueller paced the work to enhance the elegance of its design. He compressed movements, with minimal time between to form larger groupings. This pacing was advantageous in highlighting the infamous tavern music, culminating in the boisterous drinking toast “In taberna quando sumus (When we are in the tavern).” The “Court of Love” section that followed was effective as a contrast to the narrative tension and power created before it.

The soloists also carried the energy of this performance. Baritone Peter Clark brought a lovely lyric quality to his solos, and was just theatric enough “in the tavern” to bring charm and humor to the mixture of afterhours quasi-religion and drinking of the monks in the text. The interplay of head-voice and high register that is juxtaposed by bass register in the last three lines of each stanza in “Dies, nox et omnia (Day, night and everything)” demonstrated in the briefest sound bite Clark’s rich vocal palette.

“Carmina Burana” is a work in which it is better to be an ugly duckling than a swan. The swan sings while it is being roasted in the tavern – in the final line exclaiming that it can now “see (the) bared teeth” that will eat it. Tenor Jean Hébert sang this distorted and twisted music to give you nightmares, making the most of his brief appearance.

Soprano Tharanga Goonetilleke was enchanting. I still have chills from her high D in “dulcissime” where each pitch of the coloratura triplets leading to this culminating high pitch was perfectly in tune. It was the most extraordinary performance of this passage I have heard live.

“Carmina Burana” was preceded by a fully packed grouping of musical works on the first half of the program. We heard “One Voice” by Daniel E. Gawthrop, “Not About Cheese,” five songs with text and music by Robert Convery, the Toccata by Carlos Chávez for percussion ensemble, and Três Contos Nativos dos Índios Kraó” by Marcos Leite.

But the work that made the deepest impression was “Cloudburst” by Eric Whitacre. Set to a text adapted from Octavio Paz, the work culminated in a glorious section introduced by an incantation that was whispered: “La lluvia (The Rain).” Each member of the choir raised his or her fist and began a sequence of complex textures that incorporated hand-bells, finger-snapping and clapping with accented percussion.

This was a concert packed with engaging music across a wide spectrum of stylistic idioms. The GCS combined attention to detail with a warm friendly atmosphere.