

# **Boffo *Burana* at least allows other music a hearing**

**By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic,  
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In celebration of its 130th anniversary, the Mendelssohn Club accomplished what is, for many, the impossible: Its Sunday concert at the Kimmel Center gave you reason to respect Carl Orff's annoyingly popular *Carmina Burana*.

These choral settings of ribald poetry by sodden medieval monks have always given audiences reasons to be at least superficially excited. Whether drinking songs or dreamy odes to queens and goddesses, the tunes have the insistent simplicity (though not the charm) of folk music set off in layers of insistent trumpets and tympani. The verses can be nasty, but the musical aura Orff gave them is invitingly picturesque.

Premiered in 1937, it is an artifact of Nazi Germany, embodying the artistically conservative Third Reich's demand that music communicate with large, varied audiences, glorify common folk, and create a vision of history whose palatability takes precedence over accuracy.

In more recent years, *Carmina Burana* has become an industry-wide embarrassment for the way it turns up, like a wooden nickel, in classical disc anthologies that attempt to cross over into the heavy-metal rock market: Orff, like Metallica, worked in broad strokes. Knowing all this, you could still give the Mendelssohn Club a standing ovation. Unless the piece has worn out its welcome in your life, *Carmina Burana* works if you want it to, which was the case for most people at the well-filled Verizon Hall.

It's hard to know what constitutes a good performance, since messy choral singing (and there was some in the male voices) adds to the ambience. You wouldn't have wanted rounded tones from baritone soloist Robert Orth, whose sharp-edged voice projected the music's fierceness and always found an engaging character behind the text. The Pennsylvania Youth Chorale provided appropriately springlike tones, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia had all the necessary muscle, and music director Alan Harler made every musical paragraph end with the right kind of exclamation point.

Now the respect part. *Carmina Burana*'s box-office appeal is so sure that more ambitious programming arrived on its coattails - namely the newly composed, witty, jazzy *Fanfare Felix* by Chestnut Hill Brass Ensemble member Jay Krush, as well as a rare performance of Bartok's *Cantata Profana*, one of the great, never-heard 20th-century choral works.

Steeped in folklore and pathos, the piece tells a story of young men turning into stags with a concentration and intricacy not often heard outside the composer's great string

quartets. That, plus the challenges of singing a Hungarian text, means that performances have an element of struggle. Though the piece was performed in approximated form on Sunday, enough was heard to justify the event.

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