

Concert Report: Cleveland Orchestra & Choruses: Boito and Orff (May 7)

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For their concerts of May 6-8, the Cleveland Orchestra reached down deep into the barrel of the choral repertoire to pull out two audience hits, Carl Orff's perennial favorite, *Carmina Burana*, and the "Prologue in the Heavens" from Arrigo Boito's opera *Mefistofele*. There were

four first-rate vocal soloists, the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus and Children's Chorus, and the orchestra's Director of Choruses, Robert Porco, conducted. This report is based on the Friday evening performance, which seemed to be mostly sold out with an enthusiastic audience that gave each half of the program its own standing ovation.

Richard Rodda's excellent program notes referred to the works as "spectacular" and they are, both calling for a huge orchestra, large chorus and vocal soloists. Both works were originally for the theater, although Boito's opera is rarely produced, and Orff's cantata is almost always heard in concert. The Cleveland Orchestra used projected supertitles above the stage for the texts of both works, which added to the visual aspect of the performances. The result was not entirely successful, because in some cases where there was repetition of musical material and text, the supertitles were not repeated, thus leaving a listener to wonder what was going on. It was a curious decision, because the work of translation was already done, and the choice to display the repetitions was inconsistent, especially in *Carmina Burana*.

Arrigo Boito is remembered mostly for his librettos for Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff*; however, he undertook many other literary endeavors, as well as a number of large-scale compositions, including

Mefistofele, based on Goethe's *Faust*. The Prologue opens with offstage trumpet fanfares and ethereal choral music praising God. Suddenly the character of the music changes and Mephistopheles himself appears, here in the black-clad person of Ohio-born bass Raymond Aceto (above), who strode onto the stage and acted out the devil's intention to win the soul of Faust, literally shaking his fist at God. Mr. Aceto sang with full-bodied power but still beautiful tone in the devil's rant against the heavens. He would seem an obvious choice for some enterprising impresario to play the title role in a complete staged performance of *Mefistofele*. When the devil leaves, the chorus prays to the Virgin Mary and the prologue ends with a majestic hymn of praise featuring an antiphonal brass ensemble playing from the Severance Hall balcony, as well as the full power of the hall's Norton Memorial Organ, the children's chorus and the adult chorus. The piece may be cheesy, but it was thrilling--a true sonic spectacular. Special credit goes to the sweet sounding Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus and their director Ann Usher for articulating so well Boito's ream of fast-moving Italian text.

The opening few measures of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* must be among the most used (and imitated) movie and advertising music of all time. (I confess to being grateful to have the orchestra's weeklong promos on radio done.) But after the first minute of music, there is still almost another hour of much more varied music, both tender and lyrical as well as bombastic. When the work was first performed in 1937, the Axis nations were consolidating their power in the lead-up to the Second World War; the United States was still emerging from the Great Depression; it was the year of the first performance of the torso of Berg's unfinished opera *Lulu*. Indeed, Carl Orff's alleged association with the Nazis has always been controversial, in his search for a simple Germanic national musical language and also manifested in his great body of work for German music students.

The twenty-four texts of *Carmina Burana*, in Latin, old German and old French, are selected from

a 13th-century Bavarian codex of ribald secular poems celebrating love, drink and the implacability of Fortune. The music strips away the German Romantic style in favor of simple chords, unison vocal lines, and precise, more or less regular rhythms.



It is an axiom that the seemingly simple, whether in art, music or literature, is upon greater scrutiny much more complex than it might appear at first glance. Such is the case in Carmina Burana, which, for all its diatonic musical invention and straightforward

rhythmic pulse, is quite difficult to perform. The tunes and rhythms and multitude of tricky entrances must be precise, or the thing can turn into a sloppy mess. The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus seemed well-prepared and sang with explosive consonants (something of a lost cause, since it is unlikely that many in the audience understood the Latin, German and French texts, and they were not provided in the program book), as well as an admirable variety of texture and dynamic. The Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus also sang their short part with

purity of tone. The Cleveland Orchestra itself seemed a bit ragged around the edges, with some imprecise entrances. It is hard to speculate about the reasons for this lack of precision: Imprecise cues from the conductor? Lack of rehearsal time? Just an off night? But at their best, the orchestral clanging and banging was impressive. Mr. Porco did draw out some solo textures that are not always heard in large venues or on recording, which is where most of us experience Carmina Burana.

The performance was blessed with three fine soloists, soprano Lisette Oropesa, tenor Christopher Pfund, and baritone Ljubomir Puškarić (left). Mr. Pfund has made the impossibly high tenor solo a speciality, and performed it here with witty theatricality, turning his back to the audience at several points during the number's dialogue with the chorus. Ms. Oropesa was especially impressive in the "In trutina" solo and the last exclamation "Dulcissime" ("Sweetest boy") and its daring leap to a very high note that then goes even higher in the next phrase, the vocal equivalent of crossing a deep gorge on a high wire without a net. The baritone soloist in Carmina Burana has the most to do, and Mr. Puškarić acquitted himself nobly, with lyricism and, when called for, bawdy humor. The audience approved, giving the assembled forces their second ovation of the evening.