'Is there any other way to play "Carmina Burana" than to go all out, all the way?'

A masterpiece bordering on a rock concert

By Mary Kunz Goldman

NEWS CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

You may think you know Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana." After all, you hear it everywhere from movies — particularly medieval battle scenes — to Sabres games.

But after Saturday's concert at Kleinhans Music Hall, I have to say that until you hear "Carmina Burana" performed by the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus, you do not know this piece.

What a bang-up performance this was.

The night began with BPO Music Director JoAnn Falletta leading orchestra and crowd in the national anthem, as is traditional at the start of a new season. The crowd at Kleinhans does a good job with this every year, notice? Everyone sings, and everyone is loud and on key.

Next came Kodaly's colorful "Hary Janos Suite." This made such use of the orchestra that at the end, half of the musicians stood up for solo bows.

As one nearby listener remarked, it was good to hear Kodaly. You do not hear his music that much.

Concert Review

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra
Classics Series opens with "Carmina Burana," conducted by JoAnn Falletta. Saturday evening in Kleinhans Music Hall, Symphony Circle.

The BPO reveled in the music's sparkle and texture, from the brooding cellos heard at the start to the mighty percussive splash that ended the piece. Kodaly knew how to blend and exploit the orchestra's instruments. There was so much to admire: big, walloping brass; exotic percussion; the wistful viola solo by Valerie Heywood; a softly sculpted note finessed by John Fullam. With its noise and splash, this piece was a nice hors d'oeuvre for "Carmina Burana." It got our minds going in the right direction.

Orff's over-the-top masterpiece is up there among the most dramatic pieces I have ever heard the BPO play. I will say it was definitely the loudest.

Many times the evening bordered on a rock concert. The volume packed that big of a punch. The show began with a bang, with the famous "O Fortuna" getting full-throttle treatment from orchestra and chorus. The Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus displayed clipped, biting enunciation. The music jumped out at you like it was coming out of an Imax 3-D screen.

Part of me wants to be critical and point out that there was so much loud, all the way through the piece, that you had nothing to build to. But is there any other way to play "Carmina Burana" than to go all out, all the way? It's not Beethoven's Ninth. It's a musical orgy, all about life's fleeting pleasures. As Idina Menzel sang last week at the start of the Pops season, "No day but today."

The musicians were eloquent both as a group and as individuals. Laughs greeted the desolate honk from the brass that accompanied the song of the swan roasting. Booming timpani could make your heart pound.

The chorus clearly relished its starring role. The voices changed color with the piece, projecting terror, innocence and joy. Chorus, orchestra and conductor all made the most of Orff's intoxicating rhythms.

Crescendos were overwhelming and silences were sudden. There were no breaks, no pauses. You gain understanding of this music from hearing it live and in one piece. "In Trutina," the beautifully pathetic song of the fallen angel, is almost obliterated in the primal chanting that flanks it. It is as if the woman's sacrifice is barely noticed. Soprano Amy Van Roekel sang the song with sweetness and sympathy. Everyone felt it, I think. I saw the man in front of me reach for his wife's hand.

Tenor Nicholas Phan, with his expressive voice and marvelous gestures, made a showstopper out of the song of the doomed swan. The audience loved him.

The show's superstar was baritone Richard Zeller. A big man, he knows how to use his size, and he has a commanding but also sympathetic presence. His gambling song "Ego sum abbas," punctuated by deafening outbursts from the orchestra, was a highlight among highlights. This music will echo in our memories for some time.

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