

Celebration and Carmina Burana

by Diane Wittry

What an amazing year this has been celebrating my 20th Anniversary as the Music Director and Conductor of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra.

It was thrilling it was to open the season with Pianist Emanuel Ax. In November we also celebrated the 20th Anniversary of our renown National Schadt String Competition with violin winner Zeyu Victor Lee, and on Valentine's Day weekend, we performed a splendid night of favorite Puccini Opera arias with a stellar cast of soloists from the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. This was followed by our recent, fun filled story concert featuring Rossini's William Tell, Richard Strauss' Till Eulenspiegel, and Stravinsky's Petrushka, with dancers from the Lehigh Valley Ballet Guild.

One could not wish for a more excited orchestral season.

To top it off, on April 9, 7:30pm and April 10 3pm, we will perform Carl Orff's famous Carmina Burana for Chorus and Orchestra at Miller Symphony Hall in downtown Allentown.

In addition to Carmina Burana, we will open the concert with Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's rousing piece, "Celebration." I conducted this work in my very first season with the Allentown Symphony. This exciting concert opener has three fanfare trumpets echoing across the orchestra and features a battery of percussion instruments including 3 vibraphones, marimba, assorted gongs, hand-bells and chimes.

Rounding out the concert is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's popular Symphony No. 35, often referred to as the "Haffner" Symphony. This piece was written to honor Sigmund Haffner (1756-87), Mozart's friend, who was to be elevated to the nobility. The Emperor attended the concert and was so impressed that he sent Mozart a large sum of money.

This Haffner Symphony is still considered one of Mozart's finest compositions.

Joining the Allentown Symphony Orchestra for Carmina Burana will be the Allentown Symphony Chorus and the Bel Canto Children's Chorus of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem. We will also feature Baritone Mark Womack, Soprano Elizabeth Sutphen, and Tenor, Christopher Pfund.

Many people are familiar with the title, "Carmina Burana" - but what exactly does it mean? The words are actually in early Latin. "Carmina" means - song or incantation, while "Burana" refers to the Burana district, or the area called Beuern.

The piece is based upon poems in Latin and old German from the 12th and 13th century written by wandering scholars and defrocked priests. The manuscript was found in 1803 at a monastery in Benediktbeuern in Upper Bavaria.

Included in it are drinking songs, love songs, and songs about spring. Some of the poems are close to being X-rated, at least for that time period. At the concert, we will provide the translations on the orchestra shell so that you will be able to follow all the intricacies of these early poems.

The opening section of the piece, "Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi" (Luck, Empress of the World,) has become one of the most performed pieces of music of all time. You hear it often on commercials, T.V. shows, movies, sporting events. It is grand, chant-like, visceral, and powerful.

During the "In Taberna" (In the Tavern) part of Carmina Burana, the solo baritone plays the role of the Abbot who launches the men of the choir into a rollicking ode as they all drink.

During the Cour d'amours (Court of Love) we experience beautiful, lyrical melodies featuring the Soprano soloist who is very much in love.

One of the most memorable solos is the "Roasting Swan" song where our tenor, Christopher Pfund, sings in falsetto and we see him as the swan roasting slowly on the spit. This piece is his signature song and he has performed it over 150 times with orchestras all over the United States.

Carl Orff used a cover portrait for Carmina Burana that was particularly striking: an image of luck, shown as a revolving wheel, blindly governing people's destinies. The wheel of fate is continually turning. This image is used even today when the piece is performed.

In referring to his music, Orff says: "It is not sophisticated, not intellectual... but there is a spiritual power behind my work, and that is why it is accepted throughout the world."

This piece has not been performed by the Allentown Symphony for over 20 years and it is a spectacular way to conclude our classical season of concerts and my 20th Anniversary season.