

# Entertainment

## 'Carmina Burana': Fate smiled at the center

### CONCERT REVIEW

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The stage and the seats were crowded with people Sunday afternoon when Conductor James French lifted the baton for the first powerful note of Carl Orff's cantata "Carmina Burana" in Castle Theater.

French, the Maui Symphony — plus guest soloists, chorus and children's chorus — were debuting Orff's thrilling work in Castle Theater, the 1,200-seat centerpiece of the glittering new Maui Arts & Cultural Center. In fact, Castle Theater was making a debut of its own, trying out its acoustics as a concert hall on what was to become a memorable Mother's Day afternoon.

An hour-and-a-half later, the ecstatic ovation refused to end. Audience and performers alike were

drinking in the heady sensation of a challenging job, surprisingly well done.

Soloists Maria Fortuna, James Hays Parks and Gregor Pracht added professional luster to the enthusiasm of the more than 100 mostly local singers and musicians. Together they infused vitality and beauty into the lusty poems of traveling monks in the 13th century that had inspired German composer Orff to set them to the music of his own century — the 20th.

Prefiguring the current craze of Gregorian chants on the album charts, Orff's composition is a melodramatic but effective blend of old and new. Fiery and stirring, it conveys a heightened sense of earthy drama, both in the pleasures of the flesh it celebrates, and in the musical invention Orff used to capture them.

Expanding the orchestra to include an extra grand piano as well as an arsenal of timpani and eclectic percussion instruments, Orff saw the work

as a "scenic cantata" in tribute, or wonder, at the ways of Fortuna, goddess of fate.

Divided into three cycles of a total of 25 songs, the music's "scenic" quality to evoke pictures was enhanced by having someone in a monk's habit and hood sitting onstage by the orchestra, flipping numbered cards so the audience could follow the lyrics in their programs.

From the chorus's opening incantation, "O Fortuna, like the moon, you are changeable, ever waxing and waning . . ." fate seemed to be smiling on the production. How else to explain the absolutely exquisite contribution of the soprano soloist, whose named actually happens to be Fortuna? Or the phone call two hours before the curtain began, which put a Honolulu musician on the plane to perform "Carmina's" all-important timpani part?

Under French's efficient direction, the chorus worked through the early images of spring fertility before bari-

tone Parks superbly widened the emotional texture of the music. Commanding at one moment, more reflective, almost melancholy in the next, he added nuance to the seemingly simple images in the lyrics.

While Pracht — the German artist hailed as a possible successor to Pavarotti — had gotten most of the attention in pre-publicity for the concert, his role was smaller than the other soloists. Still, the tenor achieved the plaintive, haunting pathos of the swan's lament: "Once I lived on lakes, once I looked so beautiful when I was a swan . . . Now I lie on a plate and cannot fly anymore, I see bared teeth . . ."

But it was Maria Fortuna, by herself and with the children's chorus, who carried the poetry into a chill-inducing place that would have been even closer to heaven if the concert hall ceiling hadn't impeded its flight.

Her red gown blazing in front of the black and white ensemble behind her, Fortuna's crystal soprano was an

awe-inspiring instrument when the lyrics turned to thoughts of love. "A girl stood like a little rose; her face was radiant and her mouth in bloom."

With her own radiant smile, and her face seemingly transfixed by the music, Fortuna was the embodiment of the image. Rather than performing the score, she seemed to be letting it play her. Perfectly.

With the fine, last-minute contribution of timpanist Stuart Chafetz, the other percussionists Joseph Sanvidotto, Paul Marchetti and Albert Beladro worked their way through the assorted bells, cymbals and bass drums that provide much of the score's impact. For its part, the orchestra also provided fine support. At times — as in the climactic final echo of the work's powerful opening — the musicians found power and precision, rising to the challenge of the recording microphone (the performance was being taped for broadcast on Hawaii Public Radio) with a

truly professional sheen.

The local voices of the chorus — supplemented with the irresistible ones of the children's chorus — also added to the overall effect, adding murmuring undercurrents to the array of other vocal effects. Although their ranks were thin in places, they sang with confidence and verve.

The large contingent of local singers on-stage also pointed to the greatest resource the Maui Symphony has, and the one it should seek to further cultivate: its connection to the community.

At the work's conclusion, the atmosphere on the stage — as well as throughout the audience of the glorious new facility — was one of joyous excitement. It was as though the music had unleashed its spirit in the hall, setting free the natural forces — of love and lust and renewal and beauty — and everyone was reveling in their arrival.

Fate was smiling.

Talent and hard work had something to do with it, too.

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