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FEATURED

Peninsula Ballet Theatre joins with Masterworks Chorale for hypnotic performance

By David Bratman Daily Journal correspondent
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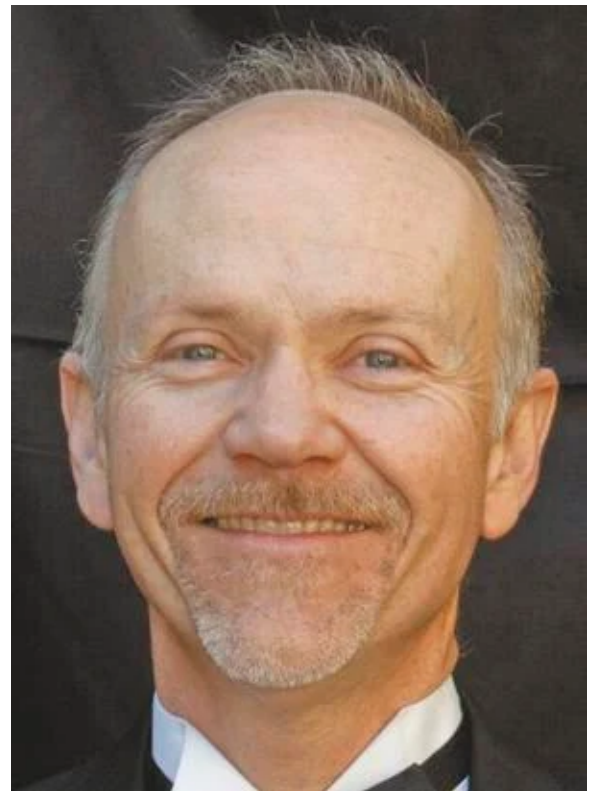
'Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi' in Carl Orff's 'Carmina Burana.'

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“Carmina Burana,” Carl Orff’s famous choral work based on medieval German poetry, is usually given as a concert piece.

But Orff intended it as a spectacle with dance and visual design. Accordingly, it made sense for Peninsula Ballet Theatre to take it up and present it as a fully-staged ballet, with new choreography by the theater’s artistic director, Gregory Amato. It was performed on Saturday, Sept. 24, at the San Mateo Center for the Performing Arts.

To provide the music, PBT brought in a host of local soloists and ensembles. Vocal parts were given by the Masterworks Chorale, supplemented by the Ragazzi Boys Chorus, and with soloists discussed below. There was no orchestra; instrumental accompaniment, in the pit, was provided by two pianists, Inara Morgenstern (Masterworks’ usual accompanist) and Paul McCurdy, supplemented by the Pacific Sticks Percussion Ensemble. Bryan Baker, Masterworks’ artistic director, conducted the whole.



Bryan Baker

As a ballet, this was simply spectacular, especially in the costuming. Amato’s design was inspired by the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, which he conveyed without the grotesquerie. As the music began with “O Fortuna,” the curtain opened on a scene as grand as the music. Below a projection of a shining moon, dancer Lena Alvino, magnificently clad, stood on a pedestal, surrounded by other dancers as if they were her acolytes. The Chorale, also in medieval-Renaissance costume, lined the sides of the stage, as if they were the congregation. There they stayed throughout the performance, with Ragazzi and the soloists, likewise costumed, joining them as needed.

The dancing, though somewhat limited in its repertoire of gestures, was as noble and hypnotic as the music which it took care to reflect. Variety in dance movements was also reflected in the casting and costuming, all at the service of the shifting music. Courting dances of country peasants featured in several dances in the sequence “In the Meadow.” Juan Carlos Magacho and Kelley Hashemi as a pair of lovers clad in white reappeared frequently in the last section, “The Court of Love,” performing strikingly elaborate pas de deux.

These were the only real virtuoso display dances in the ballet, but there was plenty of other variety of action: solo dances, group dances, an actual swordfight during “In taberna quando sumus.” The most striking number was “Olim lacus colueram.” As tenor Corey Head sang the lament of the roasting swan, dancer Stuck Sanders, wearing only trousers, enacted the swan being roasted with stunning effect, shuddering and twisting in place.

The chorus members wore masks, the only onstage performers to do so. This had a serious dampening effect on the balance of their volume against the instruments, but did not prevent some impressive turns of sound, notably in “Circa mea pectora,” probably the most challenging tongue-twister in the lyrics.

The soloists, who did not wear masks, were outstanding. Zachary Gordin, with the bulk of the solo parts, gave them with a continually strong and forthright baritone. Shawnette Sulker simply outdid herself with the strength and caressing beauty of her soprano parts. Corey Head, who had just the one number, performed well as the swan. The Ragazzi Boys Chorus was in strong and confident voice.

The instrumental parts were dominated by the two pianos more than the percussion. They were tireless and always rhythmically propulsive.



Shawnette Sulker
HVargas

Carmina Burana was preceded by a variety program of six brief ballets by four PBT choreographers, mostly using recorded music. Some of these were notably graceful dances, especially the ones choreographed by Marika Brussel and Aline Carili, the latter set to soft music for strings, including a weirdly gentle arrangement of “Sweet Dreams” by the Eurythmics. When they weren’t graceful, they were funny, in two pieces choreographed by Amato: one, titled “Bad Sushi,” depicted the dancers in intestinal pain after eating some; the other had a large group of dancers taking rigid high-steps while dressed in the odd combination of dinner jackets and running shorts.

Unclassifiable in either category was Stuck Sanders, giving a dance of his own creation in a style mixing Michael Jackson with hip-hop, to a recording of Sam Cooke singing “A Change is Gonna Come.”

This was a fine evening with a company that still maintains that grace, beauty, nobility and a little humor are the essence of ballet. And the music was also well worth the hearing.



Zachary Gordin
