

CARMINA BURANA

Ars Nova Singers and Frequent Flyers Productions

Music and mythology do not meet single point trapeze and aerial fabric very often--or is that, orffen? Carl Orff composed Carmina Burana as an oratorio, and the Ars Nova Singers specialize in performing ancient and modern music. Children can experience Orff's legacy by pounding out rhythms on various xylophones as part of the music theory course named for the composer. Since Orff invented this curriculum to involve others in the magic of music making, he likely would have reveled in the conglomeration of airborne contortion and whirling cartwheels presented by Frequent Flyers Productions and the Ars Nova Singers at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Nancy Smith, Frequent Flyers' founder and artistic director, describes this manic opus in which Cupid, Pan, Bacchus, Helen of Troy, and Venus appear as "a unique marriage of live music and aerial dance," and according to most members of the 1,200-plus standing-ovation crowd, it was indeed. Rather than telling the direct story of the lyrics, Smith explains that the choreography aims to capture in a more poetic manner the themes of the text, moving from fortune, to spring, to the tavern, to love, and back to fortune again. Sounds like everyone gets paid in advance, and again at the end!

Actually, the fortune represented in the first section, O Fortuna, refers to fate. In the words of the Chorus, "Fate – monstrous and empty, you whirling wheel, you are malevolent" – popcorn, anyone? There is no need for popcorn in this packed presentation in which one image leads seamlessly into the next, and a detailed program guides viewers through the words of the chorus, sung simultaneously by the Ars Nova Singers, with about 100 singers and musicians lining the orchestra pit. To add to the complexity, each segment is inspired by the choreographic ideas of Smith's different collaborators, all of whom perform in the piece.

Appropriately, as O Fortuna centers around the Wheel of Fortune, the aerial dance revolves around an turning wheel, also called "The Rack," a metallic apparatus made up of an X inside a square that rotates parallel to the stage. When draped with fabric, said Rack transforms into "The Chandelier." Jennifer Vierow, who has performed with FFP for over 8 years, spun the sequencing for the turning wheel. The dancers hover just above the floor as they hang in creative configurations. Company members Darden Longenecker and Philip Flickinger lead off the turning wheel quartet with a dancery duo. Nicole Predki, who also dances with Fred Benjamin Dance Company and Interweave Dance Theater teams with Kim Townsend and Angela Delsanter in the wheel's myriad pyramids and shadowy spirals. Joshua Fink, an accomplished mover and shaker, lifts Longenecker onto the wheel to portray the role of the virgin.

Longenecker credits the choral conductor Thomas Morgan with supporting the performers in their understanding of the music and their desire to transform it to flight. Earlier in the evening, Morgan led the chorus in a rendition of modern composer Eric Whitacre's "Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine." These preceding images continue to float through the viewer's brain as Carmina unfolds its majesties on high. Flickinger descends in the form of Cupid, engaging Longenecker in a spirited contact duo. Longenecker works the double red fabric upsidedown in a split hang, then slides down with ace vaudevillian timing.

Nancy Smith worked in a smooth solo on the single-point trapeze, wearing white accordion pants and swaying elastically with her signature style. Human elasticity becomes materialized as red fabric is stretched across the stage and pulled over human forms a la Graham. A furry Pan steals the dancer's pants, leaving them in what appears to be 40s-style underwear. Longenecker, who contributed to the choreography in this section (Promo Vere, or Spring) calls these outfits "boy shorts" and claims that any resemblance to Keith Hennessey's underwear is accidental. The passionate choreography that follows she dubs "the hot pants revelation."

The Round Dance, or Reie, is led by Smith on the single-point trapeze. Longenecker explained that the work was inspired by low-flying trapeze artist Terry Sendgraff. The imagery and apparatus resemble a Maypole, but one in which "Those who go round and round are all maidens, they want to do without a man all summer long," a tidbit the program's author, Michael Moore, refers to as "medieval reverse psychology." Sure enough, along comes Eleanor of Aquitaine in the next chorus. A Christ Hang and a straddle back balance seem appropriate illustrations of England's most fiery queen, the one who put on men's clothing and joined the crusades, provoking a papal bull forbidding anything like that from ever happening again.

After the intermission, the action resumes with In Taberna, the tavern section. As four rope-and-harness cords and a Spanish Web are lowered from the ceiling, Longenecker descends as a medieval character described as the Archpoet. The words translate: "Burning inside with violent anger, bitterly I speak to my heart" – cotton candy, anyone? Of course, with Longenecker on Web the effect of cotton candy was naturally created as she spun her way to spontaneous applause from the massive audience. To wind down, Smith and Longenecker create a dramatic death effect at the end of the program, scaling double red and white fabric as the opening theme returns.

Flickinger and Fink come together for a Bacchanalian revel where ballet, jazz and modern dance combine with lighthearted antics. Andrea Deline, a New York dancer who has worked as a principle with the Boulder Ballet and currently performs with the Denver company 7Dancers, holds sway in this character-driven charade, appearing as a barefoot ballerina. Wine barrels balance on low trapeze rods as the drunken ensemble performs feats of balance sprinkled with pierrot-esque pirouettes. The original apparatus was created at a local welding shop.

It is always an added bonus when professional lighting enhances the performance without overshadowing it. J P Osnes, a longtime designer and director in Colorado, kept the audience intrigued throughout the oratorio's many atmospheric changes. Overall, the performance, music and text were so rich in detail that they cannot possibly be captured in brief. To remedy this, Frequent Flyers and the Ars Nova Singers will have to perform Carmina Burana again at their earliest convenience.

Nancy Smith, based at the Dairy Center for the Arts in Boulder, teaches low-flying trapeze and releasing technique. Smith has roots in New Orleans, and her piece "Can these bones live-O Ye Dry Bones," dedicated to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, opened the program. Smith also organizes FFP's Aerial Dance Festival, which will take place at the Dairy, the University of Colorado, and the Boulder Circus Center, August 6-18, 2006. To find out more, check www.frequentflyers.org; tel. 303-245-8272.

Cindy Marvell, July 2006