Choral Contrasts
by René Spencer Saller

This program presents two choral works, one sacred, the other secular. One is extremely famous; one considerably less so. One is in Hebrew; one is in Latin. One is based on well-known psalms from the Bible; the other on obscure, mostly anonymous texts from medieval scribes and vagabond poets.

The two featured composers, respectively, were Jewish and Catholic (albeit with a secret Jewish grandmother who could have easily gotten him killed). One was a Massachusetts native who cranked out songs for Gershwin's former employers before being named assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic on his 25th birthday. Within three months, the energetic young maestro was a celebrity, after masterfully filling in for Bruno Walter on a few hours' notice. The other composer, a graduate of the Munich Academy of Music, devised an original approach to music training that incorporated chanting and movement; many of his ideas remain in common practice all over the world. In an intensely reactionary time and place (Nazi Germany), when being flagrantly original was a dangerous risk, he developed a singular musical idiom, beginning with the iconic cantata that occupies the second part of the program.

This concert, like the two pieces that begin and end it, celebrates cultural assimilation, in all of its rich complexity. Composed almost exactly 30 years apart, Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* and Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* resonate in fascinating ways. *Chichester Psalms* isn't performed in translation because Bernstein maintained that the Hebrew words—the sound of them, their unique cadences—were an essential part of the listening experience. His music, on the other hand, was more diverse: a collage of ancient and modern modalities with leftover bits from stage ventures. He managed to recycle several pieces of music from a recently abandoned project based on Thornton Wilder's surreal 1942 comedy *The Skin of Our Teeth,* as well as a fight song from the musical *West Side Story*. Orff's *Carmina Burana,* arguably the most popular choral work in the repertoire, is another rich mishmash of influences. This "scenic cantata" draws from sources at least as eclectic as Bernstein's: from ancient Greek drama to Stravinsky's *Les noces,* from

Gregorian chant to Bavarian folk tunes, from 17th-century opera to 20th-century jazz.

Psalms and Stories

In December of 1963, the Very Reverend Walter Hussey, dean of a medieval cathedral in Chichester, England, sent a letter to Leonard Bernstein asking whether he'd be interested in a new commission. The proposed work would be debuted on July 15, 1965, at the annual summer festival, a collective effort among the cathedrals of Chichester, Winchester, and Salisbury: "The sort of thing that we had in mind was perhaps, say, a setting of the Psalm 2, or some part of it, either unaccompanied or accompanied by orchestra or organ, or both. I only mention this to give you some idea as to what was in our minds." Hussey, a dedicated champion of the arts, had no intention of cramping Bernstein's style. He added a diplomatic suggestion: "Many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of *West Side Story* about the music."

Bernstein accepted the commission immediately but struggled with the composition during what proved to be a busy phase of his life. This was his first work since his anguished and elegiac Third Symphony ("Kaddish"), from 1963, which he dedicated to the memory of his recently assassinated friend, President John F. Kennedy. Bernstein, who was currently on sabbatical as music director of the New York Philharmonic, hoped to complete at least a few more composition projects.

Although Hussey had originally suggested a single psalm, Bernstein picked out six of his favorites, setting them in Hebrew. Like "Kaddish," *Chichester Psalms* consists of transliterated Hebrew texts, but its tone is more optimistic. Unlike "Kaddish" and most of the 12-tone experiments that he attempted during his break from conducting, the harmonic language of *Chichester Psalms* is unapologetically tonal. Or, to quote from some charming doggerel that Bernstein published in the *New York Times* around the time of the premiere:

"These Psalms are a simple and modest affair,/Tonal and tuneful and somewhat square, /Certain to sicken a stout John Cager,/With its tonics and triads in B-flat major."

To Dr. Hussey, he described it as "popular in feeling," noting that "it has an old-fashioned sweetness along with its more violent moments." Some early critics took issue with its tuneful and accessible surfaces, but soon enough *Chichester Psalms* became Bernstein's most popular choral work. Singers tend to love and dread it in equal measure, thanks to its mercurial time signatures and often unfamiliar language. Because it's the only major choral work in the standard repertoire that's in Hebrew, choristers often require extensive coaching. Fortunately, the St. Louis Symphony Chorus boasts no fewer than four cantors, so you can expect precise diction during these performances.

A Closer Listen

Bernstein's orchestration calls for strings, three trumpets, three trombones, two harps, and a formidable array of percussion instruments. As originally conceived, it featured exclusively male voices, with prepubescent boys (also known as trebles, now a gender-neutral designation) handling the soprano and alto roles. Two weeks before the official premiere in England, Bernstein led the New York Philharmonic and the Camerata Singers, a mixed choir of men and women, in a preview performance at what is now Avery Fisher Hall. Despite his flexibility in re-assigning many of the vocal lines, Bernstein remained firm on one point. As he explained in a note to the published score, David, whose aria based on the Lord's Prayer anchors the central movement, must be voiced by either a boy alto or a boy soprano; if neither is available, a countertenor is acceptable, but no girl or woman should ever sing the part of the young shepherd.

The work is cast in three movements, each consisting of paired psalms (100 and 108, 2 and 23, 131 and 133) and unified by a recurring theme. The first movement introduces a crucial motive, the five-note "Awake, psaltery" subject. Rousing and joyous, urgent and ecstatic, this opening salvo—a plea for peace—gives the mezzo-soprano members of the alto section the chance to hit a rare G5. Overall, this movement is outrageously demanding, with its oddball intervals (those persistent minor sevenths in particular), taxing registers, and strategic shifts in time signature. Although the setting of Psalm 108 is only ten bars long, the meter changes in every bar but the last, from 6/4 to 3/4 to 3/8, then 5/4, 2/4, and 5/8. The rest of the movement ("Make a Joyful Noise") is

in the unusual and lively meter of 7/4, which comes as sweet relief after so much metrical displacement.

The second movement, also in 7/4, revolves around David, who sings a tender solo based on Psalm 23 ("Adonai roi-i," or "The Lord Is My Shepherd"). Bernstein marks its simple, harp-laced opening "senza sentimentalita," or "without sentimentality." At one dramatic juncture around the middle of the second movement, Bernstein makes a rare departure from his usual Italian indications to describe the altos and sopranos as "blissfully unaware of threat" while the tenors and basses provide fierce counterpoint. Demanding to know why nations rage, the male voices are a harsh foil to the radiant shimmer of their female counterparts, whose subtle bluesy echoes—divided soprano voices staggered a single bar apart—refract the melodies like sunbeams on a crystal prism. The last syllable of the movement, a shockingly dissonant chord, is prolonged for a lung-bursting eleven bars as the orchestra churns up clashing tritones and other portents of doom.

The finale is marked *attaca*: it begins without pause after the second movement. The brief and wrenching opening revisits the "Awake, psaltery" theme from the first movement. After all this tumult, serenity returns with swaying palm-tree rhythms and a moving recapitulation of the original theme. Highlights include a luminous part for cello and a short solo quartet consisting of soprano, alto (with the alto line sung by a countertenor here), tenor, and bass. At the end of the piece Bernstein mimics tolling bells during the meltingly long (24 beats, topped with a fermata!) final *Amen.* Bernstein's last directive might be his most important: *Tutti unis,* or "all voices in unison."

Fortunate Beginnings

After the successful premiere of his self-described "scenic cantata" *Carmina Burana,* Carl Orff issued the following instructions to his music publisher:

"Everything I have written to date, and which you have, unfortunately, printed, can be destroyed. With *Carmina Burana,* my collected works begin." Orff, who spent his entire life in or near his native Munich, was then 42 years old. In the decade before his breakthrough, as he matured as a composer, he supported himself by conducting and teaching music. He was also honing his remarkably original pedagogical theories, later

compiled in *Orff-Schulwerk,* an influential text still widely used in music education.

Both his teaching approach and his musical idiom stressed the primacy of rhythm and movement, the radical physicality of sound. His distinctive short melodic patterns and block harmonies might seem simple at first, but, as any singer will tell you, this simplicity is deceptive.

Profane Magic

Completed in 1936 and premiered the following year, *Carmina Burana* is based on a collection of poems by itinerant monks, scholars, and other speakers of Latin, the lingua franca of the medieval age. Touches of Old French and Middle-High German, along with macaronic hybrids, add linguistic variety to these stubbornly earth-bound verses, which touch on the corruption of the clergy, the joy of hedonism, and the sorrow of love. Orff's compositional structure is circular, beginning and ending with an ode to the omnipotent wheel of fortune that determines our destinies. The original manuscript was lost for centuries before hundreds of the songs resurfaced in 1803, at a Benedictine abbey in Bavaria. The collection was first published in 1847 under the title *Carmina Burana (Songs of Beuern).*

Orff found the volume, which bore the subtitle "Latin and German Poems of a 13th-Century Manuscript from Benediktbeuern," in a second-hand bookstore, and felt immediately inspired. "Right when I opened it, on the very first page," he later recalled, "I found the long-famous illustration of 'Fortune with the Wheel,' and under it the lines: 'O Fortuna velut Luna statu variabilis....' [A] new work, a stage work with choruses for singing and dancing, simply following the pictures and text, sprang immediately to mind."

Within four days, he finished three numbers for his musical setting, including the mighty opener, surely the most familiar tune in the 20th-century choral repertoire. With the help of Michel Hofmann, a classics enthusiast, Orff chose two dozen extracts for his musical setting. “It’s not sophisticated, not intellectual,” he wrote, “and the themes of my work are themes that everyone knows.... There is a spiritual power behind my work, and that’s why it is accepted throughout the world.”

Orff's original score includes a descriptive Latin subtitle, which in translation reads "Profane songs to be sung by soloists and chorus with an accompaniment of instruments and magic tableaux." Exactly what he meant by "magic tableaux" is open to interpretation, but he valued drama and spectacle, the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total art work"). It's no surprise that Orff's *Carmina Burana* has inspired so many flashy productions over the years, although it works equally well as a concert cantata. It still pops up reliably in movie soundtracks, computer games, and television commercials—proof that even when it's completely recontextualized, Orff's music packs a powerful punch.

A Closer Listen

Carmina Burana comprises a brief prologue ("Fortuna imperatrix mundi," or "Fortune, Empress of the World") succeeded by three main sections demonstrating the forces of fate. The first section is in two parts: "Primo vere" ("Spring") and "Uf dem anger" ("On the Green"). The second and third sections are, respectively, "In taberna" ("In the Tavern") and "Cours d'Amour" ("The Court of Love"). By turns crude and celestial, the score reflects Orff's passion for early music, especially the plainchant of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. As anyone who has ever sung it will attest, some passages amount to vocal-cord torture. The aria "Olem lacus colueram," for instance, is sung almost entirely in falsetto, straining the poor tenor's voice to the breaking point—which makes perfect sense when you recall that the lines are sung from a roasting swan's perspective. A wildly erotic passage in "Cours d'amour" forces the soprano soloist to reach beyond the upper limits of her range, ratcheting up the tension by exquisite increments. In "Veni, veni, venias," Orff conjures up what one hostile Nazi critic condemned as a "jazzy atmosphere." By the end of the section, a chorus celebrates the lovers Blanziflor and Helena, and then Orff concludes with a reprise of his Empress Fortuna theme.

"In all my work," Orff wrote, "my final concern is not with musical but with spiritual exposition." This claim might surprise listeners who thrill to the driving, borderline orgiastic qualities of *Carmina Burana*—the Nazis briefly considered suppressing it, mostly for this reason. But like the medieval poets who inspired him, Orff knew that the spiritual and the carnal aren't contradictory but complentary. They're as intimately

connected as music is to the body.