

Entertainment & Life

Review: Four Austin arts groups fuse for electrifying ‘Carmina Burana’

By Michael Barnes

Posted Sep 23, 2019 at 5:49 PM

Updated Sep 23, 2019 at 6:04 PM

It’s not every day that four of Austin’s top performing arts groups collaborate on a single thrilling series of concerts. But when those stars align, it is more than worth the marvel.

In 2005, Ballet Austin premiered Stephen Mills’ wide-screen take on the popular “Carmina Burana” in collaboration with Peter Bay of the Austin Symphony and Craig Hella Johnson of Conspirare’s choirs at Bass Concert Hall. The same Austin groups reassembled to revive the show in 2010, this time at the warmer and more intimate Long Center for the Performing Arts, which made the performances even more forceful, and essentially turned the center into a creative partner.

This past weekend all four constituent parts — including some 200 performers spaced around the Long Center stage — reunited for four iterations of Carl Orff’s 1937 masterpiece based on unearthed medieval writings that satirized church teachings.

MORE: Austin classical season: Austin Symphony goes relatively radical.

We must start with the music. Parts of Orff’s “scenic cantata” have become deeply integrated into popular culture, not just the choral and instrumental onslaught of the opening and closing sections, but numerous selections have become even more familiar through movies and commercials, as well as rock, pop and techno adaptations.

The Conspirare Symphonic Choir and Conspirare Youth Choirs were stationed upstage of the physical action, at times half-hidden behind a barricade of meshed poles. They responded to every twist and turn in Orff's fiendishly difficult choral settings with transcendent clarity and beauty. The triumphant soloists appeared on the sides of the stage, sometimes with dancers, sometimes not, sometimes fully acting their parts, at other times not. The Austin Symphony, half-hidden in the orchestra pit, would not be outdone and became the acoustic glue for the entire show.

This is, however, a Ballet Austin production, and the full company of dancers did not disappoint in the least. "Carmina Burana" belongs to an earlier period in Mills' dance-making career and thus the physical connections among the consciously disconnected scenes — some jagged and threatening, others soft and amorous, others festive and exuberant — at times fly by too quickly. Few of the scenes are explicitly about something, other than one recurring flirtation, one schoolboy romp, and the opening and closing scenes that evoke feelings of physical and spiritual imprisonment.

The big scenic elements continue to impress and, at the same time, perplex. Besides a falling and rising barricade at the back, hovering overhead is a skeletal contraption that could be church architecture, the petals of a carnivorous flower, or, if your imagination flies in that direction, some sort of conceptual spaceship.

MORE: Austin dance season: Rodolfo Mendez honored by Ballet East.

What is different about this revival are the dancers. Without sounding like a broken record, they just keep getting better and better, more physical, more courageous, more precise. Since every member of the troupe contributed mightily to the whole, it seems somehow discourteous to highlight just two, but that's in the nature of our job. Ashley Lynn Sherman embodied the brash sensuality of the show, while Morgan Stillman stood out among the men, in part because he appeared to earn a few more showcase moments than his evenly talented fellows.

To say the least, the Austin performing arts season is off to a splendid and synergistic start, given this stunner, as well as the ethereal Durufié Requiem produced by the Austin Symphony and Chorus Austin in memory of longtime benefactor Jane Sibley just last week.