

Carmina Burana – Song, Dance & Symphony

Program Notes

by Dan Kepl

Decadence is fun, as Santa Barbara Symphony Music and Artistic Director, Nir Kabaretti, demonstrates with an exhilarating season-opening curation of music celebrating the launch of the orchestra's 70th season. In collaboration with State Street Ballet and the Granada Theatre, also featuring the Santa Barbara Choral Society (Jo Anne Wasserman, Director), SBCC Quire of Voyces (Nathan Kreitzer, Director), and the Music Academy's Sing! children's chorus (Erin McKibben, Director), there's good reason to party hearty after two years of intermittent lock downs and empty theaters. The opening concert of the 2022-2023 Symphony season also rekindles a cherished collaborative tradition between the city's major music, dance, and choral groups that began in 2015 with the first co-production of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*.

The party begins in leisurely manner, with one of French composer Gabriel Fauré's most popular works, the *Pavane in F-Sharp minor, Op. 50* (1887). Performed by orchestra and dancers in the manner of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes production of 1917, State Street Ballet Co-Artistic Director and Resident Choreographer, William Soleau, has crafted new choreography for the piece. Waxing decidedly more sensuous, maestro Kabaretti and the orchestra follow *Pavane* with a *Bacchanale*, Camille Saint-Saëns' pulse-quickening scene from his opera, *Samson and Delila* (1877).

The Fauré and Saint-Saëns works are but warmups for the blockbuster grand finale of the concert, German composer Carl Orff's monumental paean to fate, fortune, springtime, eroticism, and roasted swan, *Carmina Burana* (1936). Dusting off and refreshing William Soleau's choreography from the 2015 collaboration, this reunion will find the various participating ensembles eager to make music again as a collective. It's no secret the Symphony, State Street Ballet, Santa Barbara Choral Society, SBCC Quire of Voyces, and Sing! Music Academy children's chorus are prepared to deliver an exciting performance that will be long remembered.

Inspired by the Medieval Spanish processional court dance of the same name, the *Pavane in F-Sharp minor, Op. 50* (1887) by French composer Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) quickly became one of the composer's most popular works. Originally a piano piece, Fauré envisioned additional exposure and cash flow by arranging the *Pavane* for orchestra. Dedicating the piece to his patron, Elisabeth, Comtesse Greffulhe, Fauré decided to glam it up a bit more, adding an offstage chorus singing forgettable verses by the Comtesse's cousin (ah, patronage). Fauré even allowed for the possibility of dancers, should his patron have relatives in the Paris Opera corps de ballet.

Kabaretti, seeing advantage in the unique forces at his command for this concert, has staged *Pavane* as it has seldom been seen and heard, with members of State Street Ballet onstage to interpret Co-Artistic Director William Soleau's new choreography, and an offstage chorus to bring full circle, Fauré's grand vision for the piece.

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It's a small world, and maestro Kabaretti enjoys exploring human connectedness in his programming. French composer Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was a musical prodigy, making his debut as a concert pianist at the age of 10. A virtuoso organist as well, though he didn't like church gigs much, the composer made rent for most of his life primarily as a freelancer, teaching piano (among his students, Gabriel Fauré), penning music and theater reviews, and composing.

At first a champion of nineteenth century modernity, particularly the music of Wagner and Liszt, the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) in which Saint-Saëns served as a member of the French National Guard, soured his enthusiasm for all things Germanic. His music became more conservative, melancholic, and occasionally cynical, focusing internally as well as nationalistically, on French composers, including Gabriel Fauré.

In 1877 Saint-Saëns achieved a personal compositional milestone with his opera Samson and Delilah. Parisian audiences and critics trashed the opera for daring, perhaps obscenely, to portray Biblical characters. Ironically, and on the recommendation of Liszt, the opera was staged successfully that same year in Weimar. A Paris production in 1890 finally won French public acceptance, and Samson and Delilah has since become the composer's most famous opera.

The Bacchanale from Samson and Delilah takes place near the end of the Third Act. A staged scene of slithering dance debauchery for the opera's corps de ballet, scantily clad revelers, led by Delilah herself, celebrate the downfall of Sansom, losing themselves to the intoxicating, percussion-driven dance of triumph and lust. The chained and humiliated Sansom musters one last surge of strength and brings down the Philistine temple upon himself and his godless torturers. The famous "snake charmer" tune which mesmerizes and motivates the entire scene, has become iconic.

Munich-born German composer Carl Orff (1895-1982) like Fauré and Saint-Saëns, was traumatized, psychologically and physically, by war. Saint-Saëns was a member of the French National Guard during the Franco-Prussian War, Fauré fought for the French during World War I, Carl Orff, descended from a distinguished German military family, was conscripted into the Imperial German Army in 1917, receiving severe injuries in a trench collapse. During the Nazi regime and World War II, Orff remained in Germany, composing prolifically, and ducking membership in the Nazi Party. His 1936 masterpiece for chorus, soloists, and orchestra, Carmina Burana, one of a triptych of choral works using original texts from the 11th to 13th centuries, examines cynically, bothersome issues Orff himself had lived through during the First World War, Weimar Republic, Germany's Great Depression, and the rise of fascism: fickle fortune, equally fickle wealth, drinking, gluttony, gambling, lust, and death.

Immediately popular after its debut at Frankfurt Opera in 1937, Orff's "scenic cantata" was performed throughout Germany before World War II, and after the war, worldwide. Consisting of 25 movements, divided into five major sections (a musical structure like a giant wheel of fortune), Carmina Burana is the musical progeny of an Orff concept, *Theatrum Mundi* – music, movement, and speech, connected to an action on stage. Under conductor Nir Kabaretti's leadership on the podium, and with William Soleau's choreography a major ingredient in the mix, this performance of Carmina Burana by the Santa Barbara Symphony, State Street Ballet, Santa Barbara Choral Society, SBCC Quire of Voyces, and the Music Academy's Sing! children's chorus, will fully realize Orff's intentions.