

THE PRINCE GEORGE CITIZEN

Groundbreaking, earth shaking

Frank PEEBLES / Prince George Citizen

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PGSO conductor Kevin Zakresky falls into the moment with guest soprano star Caroline Markos as they performed Carmina Burana this past weekend. - Citizen Photo by Frank Peebles

After watching the Saturday show, several PGSO fans turned around and bought Sunday matinee tickets as well. They had to see one more production of Carmina Burana.

It would be arguable, subjective, but more than one audience member murmured that this was the best show the Prince George Symphony Orchestra had ever done. That's strong language, the PGSO has made a lot of music over their many years, but they made it clear this show was special and opened the creative weirs.

There were so many members of this cast, the children's choir had to be arranged along Vanier Hall's walls because no more room existed on the stage. There were so many instruments - all of them used heavily - that it looked like garage sale day at the Metropolitan. But the sounds...I have to sit back in my chair and take a pause just to think about it again.

Carmina Burana could scarcely be done in half measures. It was written to be a showstopper. It originated as a collection of medieval poetry and folk songs collected from several writers and locations all over Europe. The collection was discovered in a monastery in Germany in 1803. Then, in 1936, composer Carl Orff took the cream of the crop, shaped and arranged them to his music as a set of small movements, and a power-concert was born.

Starting and finishing the piece is the famous O Fortuna number. If you have a battle you need to pump your soldiers up for, or a stormy sea you have to plow into, this is your song. So epic is this choral event that the PGSO had to call on the services of three different choirs - the Vancouver Chamber Orchestra, the Prince George Cantata Singers and the District 57 Tapestry Singers (directed by Jon Washburn, Damian Dorschner and Carolyn Duerksen respectively). There were approximately 120 voices.

Plus orchestra, and that was also beefed up from its usual numbers (two pianos!).

Together, when they hit the money notes, I thought the need for a performing arts centre was about to become immediate. I feared for Vanier Hall's very foundations. The power of their sound had a physical effect similar to an earthquake or jet passing 10 feet overhead.

So forceful and evocative is this music, it almost felt too scary for young ears. Despite this purely emotional thought, no, it is a scarier thought that someone would have missed this show. It was a rare and breathtaking night, made even more memorable by the performances of the soloists.

The first we met was baritone Dale Throness, and he was a singing clinic to behold. His ability to convey sensitivity and infuse enunciation doubled his smooth singing skills.

Next we met tenor Steven Blanger who stepped forth from the men's choir to deliver a sweet solo. And then the soprano made a trio of appearances.

Caroline Markos was already an anticipated presence, many remembering her from past Prince George appearances as the lead singer in jazz group The Peters Drury Trio, but this was her operatic debut in this city. It could not have been a more dazzling reintroduction. Carmina Burana is built to showcase the soprano, but she delivered every droplet of vocal drama and led us all into the blastfurnace of a final chorus. I hope she has already been booked by PGSO artistic director Kevin Zakresky for future engagements.

The audience was left partly stunned, but mostly bowled over. Expressions ranged from wide-eyed delight to smirks of happy disbelief. One audience member visiting from elsewhere in B.C. (here for the Canada Winter Games) commented "we used to have seasons tickets to the PGSO when we lived here years ago, and we went to watch the symphony in our new hometown, but it just didn't compare to what Prince George had so we stopped going. That was years ago, so I came to see this thinking that things could have changed. Well they're even better now."

The show might also be part of Zakresky's fitness program. He looked like he'd just finished an endurance event when he finally dropped the baton at the end of the show.

"It is the most epic and athletic of the compositions we could have chosen," he said, explaining why he chose it for the Canada Winter Games period. "I know I worked up a sweat - the closest thing to an athlete I'll ever be."

There were fears that the Games activities would cause the PGSO show to be upstaged, but the strong attendance numbers for both days of Carmina Burana should have been a relief. It also helps that everyone poured out of the exits stuttering to find the words for their enthusiasm.

In anticipation of this, the PGSO booked a strong followup performance. When orchestra fans next gather it will be March 14, one show only at 7:30 p.m., and the centrepiece will be the Ralph Vaughan-Williams's popular The Lark Ascending.

"When BBC Radio asked its listeners to choose their favourite piece of music, it was an online vote, they chose this.

When you hear it, you'll understand why," he told the audience.

It is rooted in violin, and when the PGSO does their version it will be guest star Dale Barltrop doing the honours, making his first Prince George appearance. The PGSO will also spotlight him for Ravel's homage to the gypsy violin in the piece entitled Tsigane.

Also on the agenda that night, Eileen Padgett's Tide Unleashed, a world premier commissioned work, and Franz Schubert's Symphony No. 8 in B minor ("Unfinished").

SYMPHONY KID STUFF

When the PGSO performed Carmina Burana, this past weekend, it was the culmination of significant preparatory work by many more people than just the orchestra.

A rare opportunity to work with the Vancouver Chamber Choir was built into the experience, which meant our two local choirs had to be ready to sing the piece and ready to integrate with an incoming group - a group sometimes called the best choral ensemble in Canada.

"They were so generous and professional and humble and open to working with the kids," said District 57 Tapestry Singers director Carolyn Duerksen. "They were able to come to Prince George on a grant that was specifically given for them to provide mentorship and collaboration with youth. For us, it was just such a gift."

Like minor hockey players who get to skate with their favourite Prince George Cougars on rare occasion, the chance to sing in amongst such accomplished voices does more than simply do a bit of coaching. Prince George Symphony Orchestra conductor Kevin Zakresky said it also provides an emotional boost, an upsurge to the singing esteem of the younger musicians. It turns up the level on their aspirations, when they see so closely not just what their voices can become but who as people they can become, because the recorded voice is one-dimensional and the singers coming into the room in person and sharing that space is three-dimensional.

Some of the kids' parents mentioned later that the VCC contingent admitted to being surprised by the level of talent the Tapestry Singers kids possessed already.

"Well," said Duerksen, "we did work really, really hard to be ready for them when they arrived."

With the Prince George And District Music Festival coming up March 14 - 22 (showcase recital and festival gala on March 28), it won't be long before the choir and many other talented city musicians will be once again in a major spotlight.

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