

CARMINA BURANA

NAPLES



TEATRO DI SAN CARLO. On performing Carl Orff's scenic cantata *Carmina Burana* box offices bank on its bombastic, thousand-strong choral fireworks while record companies package the 24-poem cycle as classical thunder. But Orff had intended his ubiquitous piece – extrapolated from 200 medieval poems mostly in idiosyncratic Latin – as Gesamtkunstwerk, a synthesis of dance, music and narrative that he coined 'Theatrum Mundi' – a philosophy where everything's connected.

In 2011, when Naples' Teatro di San Carlo commissioned NYC-based Chinese choreographer Shen Wei to set Orff's *Carmina Burana* to modern dance, their matchmaking skills couldn't have been better. At Wei's Manhattan company, Shen Wei Dance Arts, he teaches young dancers his theory of interconnectivity – every movement made with the hands starts with the feet.

To the press, Wei assured Italy's traditionalist core that his interpretation of the piece would be egalitarian modern dance in easily-digestible ranges. What he didn't mention was that at Italy's oldest opera house he'd have to bend to centuries-old bureaucracy, such as the placement of the chorus under a baffling architecture – a raised platform that served as a dais for dancers, truncating their feet and ankles from the orchestra perspective. Inside sources said that the chorus had refused to be relegated to the back of the stage and this was the compromise.

When the show celebrated its world première on 21st July, the crystalline "*O Fortuna*" was upstaged by a theatrical prelude, the first of four unpublished *Cantiones Profanae* (from the same codex Orff used) curated and orchestrated by Spanish conductor Jordi Bernàcer to introduce each section. The melodies, which fell between Gregorian chants and troubadour songs, were respectfully paired to Orff's original structure. Overall, Bernàcer compartmentalised and manicured the inventive work with bel canto percussion and profound, boisterous bass.

On production – as ringmaster of choreography, sets, costumes, lights, video and conception – Wei tapped into simplified archetypes: The Shadow was a primordial larva who languidly transformed as the cantata progressed. Costumes were rich in symbolism – black for darkness, white for purity and red for passion. Spring bowed with a cornflower blue

screen slashed in colorful, abstract lines, a homage to the Tyrrhenian Sea that laps Naples' ports. The "*O Fortuna*" parenthesis transformed dancers into archaic marble statues to reference Naples' antiquity.

Kinetic, intuitive choreography unfolded in meticulous exposition as the sections progressed. For Spring, thirty-two ballerinas from the San Carlo ranks (directed by Alessandra Panzavolta) and seven guest ballerinas from Shen Wei Dance Arts elegantly slipped in and out of pas de deux in cottons and silks that transformed from light grey to sea foam under stage lights. At the tavern, dancers churned floor-based moves cradled by mirrored and transparent panels.

Vocal soloists executed Wei's choreography better than they sang: countertenor Ilham Nazarov was a muscular Swan; baritone Valdis Jansons was a confident 'everyman' against meek soprano Angela Nisi's female counterpart.

Despite its liberties, Teatro di San Carlo spun Orff's leviathan *Rota Fortunae* and it landed favorably on Shen Wei. O fortuna!

Courtney Smith

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