

## REVIEW: RWB's **Carmina Burana** has cool, pagan beat

by Dave Connors

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Carl Orff's **Carmina Burana** is **cool**. You know the music -- it's trotted out in countless TV shows and movies whenever a **pagan** flavour is needed. Think Conan the Barbarian.

And Wednesday night, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet gave a visual reckoning of just how **cool** the music is.

But this critic had some worries going in.

Last season, the ballet staged Carmen, The Passion, by the same choreographer -- Argentina's Mauricio Wainrot -- who did **Carmina Burana**.

That music is pretty **cool**, too. But the RWB tossed out Bizet's sing-along score for something a lot more ... well, something certainly a lot less catchy, anyway. Since ballet dancers (and choreographers) are kind of limited by the music they are dancing to, critics were not impressed by the total package.

Well, nobody messed with the music last night.

How can you go wrong with 180 people dancing, singing and pounding away on all those percussive and brass instruments? The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, the Renaissance Voices and Cantada Singers, and the Winnipeg Boy's Choir were all there to exuberant excess, along with soloists Kevin McMillan, Brad Diamond and Sarah Halmarson.

The audience lapped it up. As the last notes of Fortuna II ended, there was a collective "wow."

The ballet starts with a bang -- the chanting and drums of Fortuna 1 sound like the gates of hell, and maybe even heaven, have opened up. But the stuff in the middle shows why those medieval German monks on whose poetry the music is based decided to risk eternal damnation by embracing the sins of the flesh.

The third part, In Taberna, would put many hip-hop acts to shame, with the dancers dressed in urban street-chic attire as they danced the eternal pre-mating ritual.

And in Cour D'amours, Vanessa Lawson and Jaime Vargas, dressed only in their skivvies, somehow managed to go right through unbridled lust to something more sublime.

The night opened with Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, choreographed by Toer van Schayk.

Particularly inspired was the third movement, which evoked that awkward Grade 8 dance we all have to go through, with the girls dancing with themselves or giggling and watching the boys strut and pose. I've been listening to the Seventh for years, and not once did I see that in the music. But the ballet made it look like that's what Beethoven had in mind all along.

Then, in the fourth movement, all those awkward adolescents had everything worked out just fine, thank you.

If you just want the music, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra is presenting the symphony in its Masterwork program Nov. 14 and 15. But, as this critic found out, the ballet will make you see things you never saw before.

After their current home stand, the RWB is taking the show on the road, with performances in Los Angeles, Logan, Utah, and Minneapolis as well as in Brandon November 14. The ballet returns to Winnipeg for Peter Pan, starting December 19, with a detour to the National Arts Centre in Ottawa for performances of The Nutcracker in early December.

Before the performance, artistic director Andre Lewis announced that principal dancer Tara Birtwhistle, who is expecting in May, was not feeling well enough to dance the second piece of the evening. Birtwhistle became engaged to soloist Dmitri Dovgoselets over the summer.

Lewis also bemoaned the fact that the Free Press is on strike and, in lieu of their daily newspaper, he asked the audience to spread the word if they liked the ballet.

Well, we're spreading the word -- on-line, anyway.

**Carmina Burana** runs until Oct. 25 at 7:30 p.m. at the Centennial Concert Hall, with a matinee performance Oct. 26 at 2 p.m.