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Pro Musica Fuses Sound and Movement for Season Finale

by Mary Pat Robertson

It's late on a Tuesday evening, and 100 singers in Princeton Pro Musica have been rehearsing for more than two hours at the Christ Congregation Church in Princeton. Artistic director and conductor Ryan Brandau tells them, "I've saved the hardest part for last! Let's do that opening!" After he suggests an eerie feat of imagination for the singers — to picture themselves on a glass floor, with hundreds of workers busy on pulsing sewing machines right underneath them, the room fills with the stirring opening strains "O Fortuna!" from Carl Orff's 1936 cantata "Carmina Burana."

On a Friday morning, a few days later, choreographer Mark Roxey is working with several members of his Roxey Ballet in the company's airy studios in Lambertville. But this time Roxey tells the dancers take their places and prepare to launch a propulsive dance to accompany those singers — the ones imagining themselves on a glass floor.

While seemingly apart in time and place, the conductor, choreographer — along with the Princeton Girlchoir — have been joining forces to create the finale to Princeton Pro Musica's 38th concert season, "Carmina Burana," arriving at Richardson Auditorium on Sunday, May 21, at 4 p.m.

As Princeton Pro Musica's executive director Mary Trigg says of commissioning Mark Roxey and the Roxey Ballet for the event, "(Roxey's) deep appreciation of the music of Carl Orff will add an element of rhythmic intensity that is hard for the audience to feel without the movement of the dancers."

Roxey's own movement into dance came early. Born in Brooklyn, near the Clinton Hill and Bedford/Stuyvesant areas, he was raised by his mother and grandmother. His mother worked three jobs, and the family spent summers back home in Puerto Rico. In early childhood his aptitude for dance was noticed, and he was invited into an outreach program sponsored by American Ballet Theater, which brought children from Brooklyn to ABT's Manhattan studios for ballet class. But the initial exposure to dance ended badly.

"I loved taking ballet class," Roxey says. "It was my life. I loved the sound of the ballet slippers, the sound of the piano as I came up the wrought iron gate elevator, which opened to the beautiful sounds of Tchaikovsky. I loved it. But when the boys beat me up and bullied me, I came home and told my mother I never wanted to dance again."

Roxey re-channeled that enthusiasm and love into a new emerging form of movement. "I have to say that I didn't really miss it in the years in between (my first ballet classes and my teenage serious study) because I was breakdancing in New York City, during the era when breakdancing was new. It was my way of being accepted and still being a dancer until I had enough confidence to step out and be my own young man."

Then, he says, as a young teen, he was discovered at an event by Edith D'Addario, of the Joffrey Ballet School, who offered him a scholarship. His studies at the well-known New York City training institution were successful, and he advanced through the ranks of the Joffrey Ballet Concert Company, to Joffrey Ballet II, and finally the Joffrey Ballet itself, when it was still under the direction of Robert Joffrey.

Roxey also later danced professionally Dayton Ballet and with Princeton-based American Repertory Ballet — where he found more than a dance partner. Mark and Melissa Roxey have been married for more than 20 years and co-founded the Mill Ballet School, originally located in the Linseed Oil Building of Prallsville Mill, north of Lambertville. The Roxeys have two children, Maribel and Benjamin. The extended family is also involved — Roxey's mother, Nilda, has been a costumer for the company for many years and continues to be part of the wardrobe team.

The Roxey Ballet has grown and thrived since its small beginnings in the mill. The company currently has 16 dancers, many of whom hail from places far distant from Lambertville — China, Korea, Japan, Columbia, Chile, and Brazil.

Roxey says he is committed to the community aspect of leading an arts organization and constantly seeking to collaborate with other arts organizations and non-profit groups. The company is working on an ambitious production setting oral histories of breast cancer survivors to music, to be danced at Grounds For Sculpture on June 4. Roxey has also been awarded the Very Special Arts New Jersey Governor's Award, for his work with dancers in wheelchairs, and he is chair of the ADA Committee of Dance New Jersey, the state service organization.

Ryan Brandau, artistic director of Princeton Pro Musica since 2012, also relishes his role as impresario in this arts-rich environment. Brandau says he first became aware of the local arts scene during his undergraduate years at Princeton University.

About his decision to become a musician, he says it was probably “because of the many amazing musical opportunities that were offered me by attending a liberal arts college like Princeton, instead of a music conservatory. I wasn’t ready to go to a conservatory at age 18 —wasn’t ready technically and wasn’t ready to specialize in just one instrument. Being able to have leadership roles and experience so many different kinds of musical involvement was key.”

Brandau came from a family highly involved in both music and science. His mother worked in the hospital blood bank in Canton, Ohio, and his father was a physician who also sang with the Canton Symphonic Chorus. Brandau says he and his parents sang in the church choir together the whole time he was growing up, and his father studied piano during those years.

In an interesting precursor to his current positions here in Princeton, with the Pro Musica and as an adjunct professor at Westminster, he had two “wonderful” high school choral teachers who were Westminster Choir College graduates. Speaking of that experience, Brandau reflects that “the choral program had a way of bringing together students from different cliques who wouldn’t otherwise intermingle. The strong teaching united us via a pride in our musical product.”

“I didn’t come to Princeton thinking I was going to major in music — I thought I would probably be a math or science major.” But, as has been shown in many studies, a deep link exists between the structures of music and mathematics, and Brandau’s time at Princeton included such a wealth of opportunities — from leading the Katzenjammers a cappella group, to conducting the Princeton Sinfonia as a senior — and such rich academic experiences in the music department, that he ended up majoring in music. Brandau’s oldest sister had already become the next physician in the family, “so I felt free to do whatever I wanted to do,” he says.

That including winning a Gates Scholarship to Cambridge University, where he received a master’s in historical musicology while singing with the choirs of Jesus, King’s, and Clare colleges and founding a women’s chamber choir. Post-Cambridge, he studied conducting at Yale, receiving both a master’s and doctorate in musical arts. Brandau is now also leading the Monmouth Civic Chorus and Amor Artis. He says he is happy to be working with community arts groups and has fond memories of the formative influence of those groups on his musical career, and his mentors in Canton, especially the music teachers in his high school.

Carl Orff — the composer of the work bringing the dancer and conductor together — was also a proponent of involvement in music making for all. To a certain extent, he was a “one hit wonder,” with the wildly popular “Carmina Burana” far exceeding his other work in influence and performances. But he also spent years developing a theory and practice of music pedagogy that continues to be widely taught and influential on a world-wide basis.

Orff — whose work has a strong element of folk influence, intense rhythmic accents that call to mind earlier eras of music — labored to create an understanding of the inter-relatedness of the arts, similar to the efforts of the early founders of opera, or of the artistic practice of the ancient Greeks, with dance, music, gesture, poetry, and design all creating a whole, or *theatrum mundi*, theater of the world, as he called it. At the school he founded, says Brandau, “musicians were expected to create movement and dancers were expected to create their own accompaniment.”

“Carmina Burana” means “songs from Buren” and is based on a manuscript of early medieval secular poetry from a Benedictine monastery in Benediktbeuren, Germany, that Orff found in an antiquarian bookstore in 1934. Its first performance was staged by the Frankfurt Opera in 1937 and included dance.

Princeton Pro Musica, one of the area’s largest community music organizations, has a long history of collaboration with other local arts groups, especially on “Carmina.” This is the fifth production of “Carmina Burana” they have presented since 1989, all with choreography by different local dance companies, such as Teamwork Dance, American Repertory Ballet, and Reverance Dance Company.

This new production features choreography for 12 of the 25 songs that Brandau chose to give Roxey an interesting story line on which to build. Roxey, in turn, chose to follow the life cycle of a male, from youth to age. Since any performance with a staged component at Richardson Auditorium has to contend with the unusual form of the stage (rounded and thrust) and the distinctive visual components of the mosaics and architecture, Roxey has plans for Angels of Good and Bad Fortune to be visible above the stage, and for a god-like character of Fate, or Fortuna, to be seen directing the man’s life.

“I’ve done ‘Carmina Burana’ without dance, and people love it,” says Brandau. “But now that I’ve done it with choreography, it would be hard put to go back to doing it again without it.”

Carmina Burana, Princeton Pro Musica, Roxey Ballet, and Princeton Girlchoir, Richardson Auditorium, Princeton University. Sunday, May 21, 4 p.m. \$25 to \$60. Sold out as of press time. 609-683-5122 or www.princetonpromusica.org.

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