



An Artist of Two Worlds, Shen Wei's Beautiful Vision of the Carmina Burana at Naples' San Carlo

By **Cristina Squartecchia** ; August 7, 2013



Shen Wei, a cosmopolitan artist, was born in Xian Ying, a city in Hunan, China in 1968, where he was educated in the art of Chinese Opera before moving to New York. His highly refined theatrical poetics fuses the flavor of eastern culture with an understanding of western splendor. Shen Wei is an eclectic identity, not only is he a leading world choreographer, he is an all-round artist, which was revealed to the world in his early works such as *Rite of Spring*, for piano four hands, *Connect Transfer* and *Folding*.

Being transcultural and versatile—a choreographer and dancer, a designer and refined calligrapher and a painter and video maker—allows him to realize on the stage a true and individual Teatro D'Art Total, that perfect synthesis of music, imagination, dance and words, with a clear-headed, truly world-class mastery of the abstract. His choreography and direction of the *Carmina Burana* of Carl Orff for Naples' Teatro di San Carlo, in which he designed and tended to every last detail of the sets, costumes, and lights, has been a true triumph of total art. The project, in progress for a number of years,

was a success both publicly and as an artistic choice for Alessandra Panzavolta, the director of the Corps di Ballet, and Sergio Caputo, maestro of the chorus.

The work of Carl Orff was first staged in Frankfurt in 1937. The manuscript, originally from the Benediktbeuren Abbey and now housed at the National Library in Munich, Bavaria, fell casually into the hands of the German composer who saw musicality in these poetic Latin texts of the XIII century; texts which suggested images, symbols and dancing visions to the point that Orff was led to compose a score from their incessant and powerful rhythms.

Halfway between the chanson of the troubadours and Gregorian chants, these sung verses treat diverse and multiple themes, ranging from the sacred to the profane, from the amorous to the satirical, and from the religious to moralistic, centering on the human condition in its continuous flow in the face of adverse or propitious fate, as sung in the well-known opening poem "O fortuna." In addition to the four sections that divide the opera (*Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi*, 1. *Primo vere*, 2. *In taberna* and 3. *Cour d'amours* and *Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi*), this Sancarlian arrangement, orchestrated by Jordi Bernácer, is enriched, by four other anonymous *Cantiones profanae* that precede every single section. As well, the addition of a children's chorus in the *Cours d'amours* (Court of Love), directed by Stefania Rinaldi, gives warmth and amazement and that touch of rarefied purity.

Originating from the desire to restore the lightness and symbolic richness present in the score, today suffocated by misuse in the media, Shen Wei fashions a minimal and abstract staging, visionary and allegorical with a refined visual structure, without any dramatic-narrative or spatial-temporal connotation. Moreover, as Shen Wei has stated in the fine book *Plural Dances / the elsewhere here* by Elisa Guzzo Vaccarino: "My work does not look to real life. It has nothing to do with what happens in the streets. ... We present the dance, the body. Everything, in art, is on a different level compared with normal life."

Following this direction, the director/choreographer distinguishes the scenic action in a space organized on multiple levels. It starts out, as in an Ascension painting, from the circumscribed orchestra pit over the space for the motionless, but alive and powerful choir, which is dominated by a modular floor occupied by the dancers, beyond which, abstract figures soar towards the other, creating dream-like atmospheres. For each section Shen Wei keeps this structure within which he realizes truly living tableaux, which are distinguished by content and atmosphere, each marked by vivid, bright and precise colors. Already in the beginning of "O fortuna," one can trace it, when a female figure soars above, surrounded by projections of natural elements like the moon and storm clouds as one finds in the iconography of "the Wheel of Fortune" ("Rota Fortunae") in the Codex Buranus, circa 1250. The dancers slowly populate the stage with the unmistakable scenic walks typical of Chinese opera, in slow motion glides, like molecules with an agreeable energy and rarefied grace. In the cantata "Springtime" ("Primo vere"), the dance urges an intense green hue while the choreography unfolds in airy flights, spiral form trajectories, like a continuous stream which allows no rest. Although in a seemingly distant relationship with the music, the music is in fact felt and pours forth from the inner body, gently pushed by the playful rhythm of the cantata. And again, the staging is enriched by references to the medieval and Renaissance imagination tinted by the oriental hues infused in the scenography, which is often sea-like in homage to the city of Naples. The fusion of these two different cultures pervades the entire Opera and one can trace it in more moments as in a round dance, ("Carola"), where many dancers are rippling in space like Ondine, weaving together simple walks that involve delicate movements with only the upper part of the torso stretched forward.

The choreography seems a cross between those circular walks found in Chinese Theater and the ancient Western European carole or round dance of the 1400's and 1500's. The dance springs forth, copious and intoxicating, in every section harmonious, interlacing bejeweled duets, trios and solos, in a constantly circulating stream, like the coursing of life, and as found in the songs of the *Carmina Burana*. A sensual fluidity and airiness permeates the movement that the San Carlo dancers relay with a vibrant agility and pliability. And the dancers prove able to break down the technical-stylistic boundaries between dance genres.

In this opera/dance Shen Wei leads the spectator to see the music and to hear the dance in a cosmic harmony that goes beyond understanding and boundaries; his transcontinental art takes us to a time and place unknown.