

# Spirited *Carmina Burana* and *Five Tudor Portraits*

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G Live, Guildford

Rating: ★★★★★☆

IN 1935, two composers coincidentally started work on similar large-scale choral works based on archaic poetry, mixing Latin with the vernacular, offsetting love ballads against bawdy drinking songs and making phenomenal demands on their musicians.

One was Carl Orff, whose *Carmina Burana* has been beloved of choirs, audiences and advertising executives ever since.

The other was Vaughan Williams' far subtler, and therefore inevitably less popular, *Five Tudor Portraits*.

Last Saturday saw Jeremy Backhouse conduct his Vivace Chorus with the Brandenburg Sinfonia in a spirited rendition of both works.

The five *Portraits* are charming and energetic settings of 16th century poet

John Skelton's often ribald verse in a constantly inventive musical landscape.

The Brandenburg Sinfonia and Backhouse were at their best here, capturing the nuances of the rich orchestration, whilst featuring some beautiful solo playing from cello, flute, cor anglais and bassoon.

Unfortunately though, in louder sections, their enthusiasm often overwhelmed the choir, especially the men, who strove valiantly against the impediment of their lower numbers.

The star was mezzo-soprano Claire Barnett-Jones, who never allowed her characterisation of a drunken wench interfere with the beauty of her gloriously vibrant tone.

Having enjoyed such a rare treat, the audience settled down for the more familiar, percussion-heavy *Carmina Burana*.

Here the balance was better, owing to Orff's simpler choral textures but also,

I suspect, due to a little tweaking of the choir's amplification in an attempt to overcome the hall's highly unfavourable acoustic.

Ensemble was not quite as polished as in the earlier Vaughan Williams and we were treated to the odd tinkle and bong beyond what Orff had actually written.

However, the excellent Farnham Youth Choir and Vivace Chorus shone, especially the ladies, whose phrases, by turns warm and agile, were presented with admirable clarity.

The soloists were taken to the extremes of their voices but with never a moment's unease to the sparkling, if somewhat reserved, singing of baritone Gareth Brynmor John and soprano Rosalind Coad, while tenor John-Colyn Gyeantey's stratospherically high vocal came as the roasting swan was pitched absolutely perfectly - plaintive but never grotesque.

**Roy Rashbrook**