

Critic's Pick: Toksični Psalmi - Toxic Psalms: Carmina Slovenica

By Tobin Sparfeld, DMA, teacher and conductor

Toksični Psalmi – Toxic Psalms: Carmina Slovenica

Karmina Šilec, Artistic Director

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One common criticism of many choral performances is their bland visual presentation. In a multimedia world, some choirs merely *stand there and sing*. Such comments cannot be made about Carmina Slovenica, a women's ensemble that is merging choral music and theater to create powerfully moving programs.

Founded in 1964 originally as the Central Choir Maribor, the award-winning ensemble was one of the leading choirs in

Yugoslavia and changed their name to Carmina Slovenica in 1997. In addition to their public performances, the organization is also committed to connecting and influencing the youth community through music.

Their current artistic director is Karmina Šilec, a previous member who took over the choir in December 1989. Her artistic vision recalls the tradition of Greek tragedy in the choir's performances, where Šilec's roles also include those of stage director, set designer, and choreographer in Carmina Slovenica's elaborate productions.

Toxic Psalms is a 2015 recording of a production described by *TheatreMania* as "an overwhelming aural and visual experience" and "bracing yet, perversely enough, enchanting" by *The New York Times*. While not the most aesthetically pleasing title for an album of choral music, the notes describe the rationale behind the selection:

Toxic Psalms are a reflection of the spiritual anguish of today. Through music the project reflects Palestine, Syria weapons, concentration camps, blood feuds, extinctions, contaminations of religions, and creates a reflection of human brutality. The life of a man is changed into a drama here and now: men killing for the glory of their psalms. The author's poise is not one of an agitator – stirring the feeling that "something has to be done" – it is rigorously contemplative. Despite this "detachment", the violence in Toxic Psalms is politically stressed and religiously marked. Religion is one of the main reasons for murderous violence in the world. But true morality requires from us to accept full responsibility for our actions without hiding behind the figure of the big Other...

While readers may or may not find the above statement controversial, they will certainly take note of the provocative pictures of the theatrical production within the album—singers in black costume with various stage props,

contemporary dance poses, fog machine effects, stage makeup, and a woman squeezing fruit juice into her mouth.

Divorced from the theatrical staging, however, the audio recording comes across as more traditional, though one that highlights mostly contemporary Western music. The first work is *Paskutine's Pagoniu, Apeigos* (The Last Pagan Rites), an oratorio composed in 1978 by Lithuanian composer Bronius Kutavičius. This features a powerful electrical keyboard accompaniment, choir, and female soloist. The opening section, "O You Green Grasshopper" contains slowly drifting passages outlining the overtone series and is followed by "Celebration of the Medvėgalis Hill," a faster work with rhythmically interweaving minimalist lines. The next passage is the "Incantation of the Serpent." Here the soprano soloist's imperative commands are delivered over the ensemble's slithering melodies and accompanied by accordion. The final movement showcases the organ, playing non-functional chords over the choir's haunting vocal motives. The texts are simple, emphasizing the primal relationships between man and nature.

Next is Swedish composer Karin Rehnqvist's *Puksånger* (Timpanum Songs), which is sung by two soprano soloists with timpani accompaniment. The dramatic recitations feature kulning (cattle calling) both at the beginning and end of the work, a Scandinavian tradition often used by Rehnqvist.

The album continues with three other contemporary European compositions. Most notable is *Tuulet* (Winds) by Tellu Virkkalla (now Tellu Turkka), a Finnish fiddler. Though it begins placidly, with a Finnish folk-like melody sung and chanted in thirds, it soon comes alive with an exciting drum accompaniment, 5/4 meter. Carmina Slovenica's tremendous energy and bright vocal timbre make this an exciting, infectious proclamation and a highlight of the album.

Also included is Australian composer Sarah Hopkins's well known *Past Life Melodies*, first composed in 1991 and dedicated

to her father, John Hopkins. Hopkins's haunting melody and unsettling counter melody are drawn out over droned pitches. The end features overtone singing, where the overtones are made easily audible amongst the bright vowel placement of the ensemble. Unfortunately the intonation does suffer some here, as the ensemble goes sharp by nearly a half step during the final sustained note.

Along with the many contemporary selections are two historical works. The first is Rachmaninov's *Bogoroditse Devo*, the most familiar movement from his *All Night Vigil*. The treble arrangement is sung traditionally and beautifully. This is abruptly followed by John Pamintuan's *De Profundis*, a dissonant work in Latin sustained over an ostinato by altos and bass guitar. The text is from a poem by Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca.

More contemporary works follow, including *Raua needmine* (Curse Upon Iron) by Estonian composer Veljo Tormis. This intense work with text from *The Kalevala* features a call and response style of delivery between soloist and ensemble, and alternates between sections depicting a hushed mystery and loud, fanatical energy with pounding drum beats. In another dramatic change, we hear strings introduce Pergolesi's "Sancta Mater Speciosa" from his *Stabat Mater*. While the choir's tone and articulation are quite brilliant, their intonation (especially on the octave leap) and blend leave some room for improvement. The recording closes with an excerpt of American composer Jacob Cooper's *Stabat Mater Dolorosa* for string orchestra and four amplified voices. This slow, deliberate work features gradual transitions staggered across the ensemble and is reminiscent of a movie score as it slowly progresses from dissonance to eventual consonance.

While it may not make the best gift, *Toxic Psalms* is a fascinating album. Carmina Slovenica should be praised for their inventive and thematic programming and for their commitment to presenting substantive choral music as a part of

meaningful choreography and compelling visual elements. Their singing, while not exquisite, is quite strong, and they impressively alternate between vocal timbres throughout the entire program. While most of the composers in *Toxic Psalms* are not well known, their works make up an effective collection.

The direction of Carmina Slovenica's political advocacy may not resonate well with all listeners, nor may the avant-garde program, which is not exceptionally difficult. Also, some musical elements were less than perfect, such as small (but noticeable) intonation issues as well as distracting fade-outs at the end of Pergolesi's duet and Boaz Avni's *Kyrie Eleison*. But the largest problem found in *Toxic Psalms* is the medium itself. Veiled from its theatrical powers, the audio recording cannot affect the listener as powerfully as a live performance. For example, we hear percussive sounds in the instrumental opening of the "Sancta Mater Speciosa" from what seems like ensemble choreography, but the listener can only speculate as to its form and meaning. And the album photos seem to suggest intense theatrical achievements.

Though only an echo of its original utterance, *Toxic Psalms* is a moving merger of choral performance, dance, and theater. Carmina Slovenica's efforts should be examined as a potential model for other vocal ensembles in their efforts to create performances that connect with modern audiences.

Edited by Grace Kim, USA