

## **CARMINA BURANA CARL ORFF**

### **An introductory talk by Patrick Larley**

The famous opening chorus of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* is one of the most dramatic and powerful passages of music ever written. Those new to this work will almost certainly react to it with a knowing "Oh! So this is where that loud chanting thing comes from!". "O *Fortuna*" is one of the most recognizable pieces of music in the world, appearing in advertisements for everything from football to coffee and aftershave, and certainly most self-declared couch-potatoes, followers of Arthurian legend and even a million Michael Jackson fans would have heard it before.

The three main aspects to consider:

Firstly – the texts – the original material on which the whole thing is based.

Secondly – the man himself, Carl Orff. And.....

Thirdly – the actual musical setting.

### **THE TEXTS**

It is often the case that a historic collection or fragment of literature allows us to gain a better understanding of the society that created that work. Sometimes these are found from exhaustive searching, but more often than not they are simply found by the right person being at the right place at the right time. This was certainly the case when the 19th Century scholar, historian and Librarian Johann Andreas Schmeller stumbled across a 13th Century manuscript in a Benedictine Abbey in Benediktbeuren in Southern Germany, containing about 250 poems and songs written in Latin and Middle High German – a collection which we now refer to as *Carmina Burana*.

It was a great find for historians on a multi-social level; providing a comprehensive and much needed description of the social and religious attitudes of the thirteenth century and amazingly highlights the similarities between that time and our own. It is also one of the most important sources for the analysis of Medieval Latin and German poetry.

The poetry is filled with youth and enjoyment, without a care for moral correctness or moderation. It contains testaments to all the aspects of the 13th century life: social conditions such as religion and politics; individual conflicts in morality and eroticism; and food for the mind in verses of satire covering the concerns of that time.

The poems are always simple and clear, but sometimes very harsh in their clarity – often having a "Christian simplicity" at the surface yet a pagan lust buried within them.

Within the overall themes of Nature, Love, drinking, gambling and other vices of the flesh which figure strongly in the work, the expressive concerns of the poetry range from

tender love to explicit and highly sensual sexual eroticism, from praising the beauty of nature to the earth shattering assertions of human mortality and the power of fate.

There is dark humour in the moaning of the Roasted Swan, which is both chilling yet absurdly funny; irreverence in the lustful "If all the world were mine...I would give it up to have the Queen of England lying in my arms"; and highly evocative in *Mea mecum ludit virginitas* ("my virginity makes me frisky"). These exuberant and uninhibited words find a perfect setting in *Carmina Burana*.

### The Authors

The poets – as we may describe them – called themselves 'Goliards', which translates as Big-Mouths. These were, in the main, defrocked monks – highly literate chancers who wandered 12th and 13th century Europe and who broke free of the constraints of monastic life, launching themselves into a more hedonistic lifestyle. The Goliards adored the basic pleasures of life and believed that the goddess of fortune had complete control over the availability of these enjoyments.

Mixed in with religion, they enjoyed liberal doses of wine, women and medieval song, and this is reflected in the poetry they wrote. Among other things, it mocks ecclesiastical authority, praises drunkenness, and requests that God may cause more virgins to succumb to the temptations of the flesh.

The Goliards would drift from town to town, teaching the locals irreligious versions of Latin hymns, gambling, whoring and drinking. The poems of *Carmina Burana* are accounts of their hopes and aspirations, their fears and their reflections on the life of a rebel monk.

Monks therefore saw the verses as protest against religion, pagans saw them as religion, Kings saw them as entertainment, and scholars saw them as history.

### THE COMPOSER

Carl Orff was a German composer from Munich – a devout catholic born into a military family in 1895.

He was a passionate musical educator, founding a School of Gymnastics, music and dance, and from this came his later activity of providing materials for young children to make music using only their voices and percussion instruments.

His adult works also seek to make contact with somewhat primitive musical devices such as ostinato, pulsation and direct vocal expression of emotion.

All his major works – including *Carmina Burana* – were designed as pageants for the stage.

## **THE MUSIC**

Carl Orff was so moved by the material in the *Carmina Burana*, admitting to have been stirred by the "infectious rhythms and vividness of these poems", that he started to set some of the songs to music. He was so inspired that within a matter of weeks his *Carmina Burana* was complete, although it wasn't performed until 8th June 1937.

Orff described his music as "total theatre", and in an inscription on the score writes that these are

### **Secular songs for soloist and chorus with accompanying instruments and magic tableaux**

– in that, the dramatic power and theatre of the music must certainly be a prime consideration in any performance.

*Carmina Burana* is in the form of a scenic oratorio or cantata, which is a narrative employing arias, recitatives, choruses and orchestral music. It is usually unstaged in the concert hall (rather like an oratorio), though the work was originally intended to be semi-theatrical, complete with dance sequences: hence Orff's instruction of "Magic Tableaux".

In recent years, many have choreographed ballets and movement to Orff's music, giving new life to a piece of antiquity into which Orff himself, through his music, breathed new life.

In fact an elaborate staging set-up, costumes, lighting, gymnastic displays and dance were all part of his vision for the performances.

Some early productions even featured huge burning swans, wheels of fortune, dancing rabbles and other extravagant displays.

*Carmina burana* is, therefore, a magnificent showcase of different musical styles – from sublime soprano solos and soothing Gregorian chants to rhythmic, rousing drinking songs. A festival finale to bring the house down!

His simple melodies and distinctive pulsing rhythms are often punctuated with points of raw barbaric power. The choral emphasis and melody owes much to Gregorian plainchant, not surprising considering that Orff was himself a Roman Catholic, though the "pagan" and "blasphemous" lyrics must have shocked many in his faith.

Rhythm is the driving force behind the work – enforced by the vast and colourful percussion section that is required. This aspect of the orchestration gives the work its force and energy. At times, Orff relaxes into beautiful tone paintings which he evocatively sets besides thunderous climaxes.

This is certainly a 20th-century masterpiece in a simple "tonal", "old-fashioned" way that yet manages to break new ground for 20th century music, "

Whether loud and bombastic or sorrowful and gut-wrenching, this work is intensely dramatic.

Orff chose 24 of the poems – to be sung in Latin and German – which he framed in a monumental appeal to the goddess of fate and fortune. This invocation to Fortuna (Lady Luck) conjures up images of the Wheel of Fate dictating that our fortunes are "ever changing as the moon".

These secular songs are divided into three main sections, revolving around the themes of Spring, Tavern Life and Love.

**Part I** begins with man's encounter with nature or the awakening of spring and is filled with beautiful pastoral imagery and how nature can nurture love. This is then taken one step further by introducing a less noble picture of love – one that is more passionate and unrestrained ("Look at me, young men! Let me please you!"). Aptly beginning with a dance in odd metre, the frolicking of lovers is most picturesquely portrayed.

"Estuans Intrinsicus Ira Vehimenti" ("seething inside with rage") launches **Part II**, which deals with yet another of nature's gifts to mankind – **wine** – and is appropriately set in "The Tavern".

The rowdy atmosphere is immediately conjured up by a drunk baritone extolling the virtues of the bottle in a personal salute to drink. The "Abbot of Cucany" curses fate in a drunken stupor for dealing him an evil hand by stealing away the joys of his life.

Then follows the strangest of all the verses – The Ballad of the Roasted Swan. It is a macabre setting for screamingly high tenor, in which the swan sings about its former life while it turns on the spit. The performer delivers the swan's lament while interjecting expressions of sympathy for the bird as it cooks.

The section concludes with a raucous drinking song straight out of a Munich Beer Kellar in which, by the end, the men have drunk healths to the whole of medieval society.

**Part III** centres on the "Courts of Love", which could be seen as the love affairs of the nobility – the explicit eroticism in the context urges that the passions of man (and woman) should be allowed to be expressed freely.

The final Hymn is a somewhat irreverent parody of the Ave Maria in the form of a Chorale melody.

Hail, most beautiful and good,  
Jewel held most dear by us;  
Hail, honor of maidenhood,  
Virgin ever glorious—  
Hail, thou light above all lights,  
Hail, rose of the world—  
Blanziflor and Helena – Noble Venus

ending in a tribute to the three goddesses of love and sex.

The Wheel has turned the full circle, as the work closes with its opening "*O Fortuna*", a reminder of the fickleness of fate and how Beauty, Love, Wine, Nature and Passion are still ultimately at the mercy of the eternal laws of change.

Carl Orff's masterpiece has brought the text of the ancient *Carmina Burana* into the present time and given it a long-lived significance (though I'm sure that it doesn't quite paint the pious and holy picture that the religious leaders of the time would have wished to pass on).

The music has a here-and-now quality that captures the attention of modern audiences. Whether it holds a mystical or musical power, it certainly has its share of admirers.

But it is a puzzle how these humble 13th Century poems came to gain the popularity in our society so quickly through Carl Orff's work. Perhaps it could be attributed to our fascination with history, but it is more realistic to think that perhaps the fascination we have is the striking similarities to the present day.