

CARL ORFF

Born 10 July 1895 in Munich; died 29 March 1982 in Munich

Carmina Burana, Cantiones profanae for Orchestra, Large and Small Choruses, Children's Chorus, Soprano, Tenor and Baritone Soloists (1935-1936)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Frankfurt, 8 December 1937; Frankfurt Opera House; Bertil Wetzelsberger, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 11 November 1955, Syria Mosque; William Steinberg, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 62 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: two piccolos, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, E-flat, two B-flat and bass clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, two pianos and strings

About thirty miles south of Munich, in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, is the abbey of Benediktbeuren. In 1803, a 13th-century codex was discovered among its holdings that contains some 200 secular poems which give a vivid, earthy portrait of Medieval life. Many of these poems, attacking the defects of the Church, satirizing contemporary manners and morals, criticizing the omnipotence of money, and praising the sensual joys of food, drink and physical love, were written by an amorphous band known as "Goliards." These wandering scholars and ecclesiastics, who were often esteemed teachers and recipients of courtly patronage, filled their worldly verses with images of self-indulgence that were probably as much literary convention as biographical fact. The language they used was a heady mixture of Latin, old German and old French. Some paleographic musical notation appended to a few of the poems indicates that they were sung, but it is today so obscure as to be indecipherable. This manuscript was published in 1847 by Johann Andreas Schmeller under the title, *Carmina Burana* ("Songs of Beuren"), "carmina" being the plural of the Latin word for song, "carmen."

Carl Orff encountered these lusty lyrics for the first time in the 1930s, and he was immediately struck by their theatrical potential. Like Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson in the United States, Orff at that time was searching for a simpler, more direct musical expression that could immediately affect listeners. Orff's view, however, was more Teutonically philosophical than that of the Americans, who were seeking a music for the common man, one related to the everyday world. Orff sought to create a musical idiom that would serve as a means of drawing listeners away from their daily experiences and closer to the realization of oneness with the universe. In the words of the composer's biographer Andreas Liess, "Orff's spiritual form is molded by the superimposition of a high intellect on a primitive creative instinct," thus establishing a tension between the rational (intellect) and the irrational (instinct). The artistic presentation of the deep-seated psychological self to the thinking person allows an exploration of the regions of being that have been overlaid by accumulated layers of civilization.

Orff chose 24 poems from the *Carmina Burana* to include in his work. Since the 13th-century music for them was unknown, all of their settings are original with him. The work is disposed in three large sections with prologue and epilogue. The three principal divisions — *Primo Vere* ("Springtime"), *In Taberna* ("In the Tavern") and *Cour d'Amours* ("Court of Love") — sing the libidinous songs of youth, joy and love. However, the prologue and epilogue (using the same verses and music) that frame these pleasurable accounts warn against unbridled enjoyment. "The wheel of fortune turns; dishonored I fall from grace and another is raised on high," caution the words of *Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi* ("Fortune, Empress of the World"), the chorus that stands like pillars of eternal verity at the entrance and exit of this Medieval world. They are the ancient poet's reminder that mortality is the human lot, that the turning of the same Wheel of Fortune that brings sensual pleasure may also grind that joy to dust. It is this bald juxtaposition of antitheses — the most rustic human pleasures with the sternest of cosmic admonitions — coupled with Orff's elemental musical idiom that gives *Carmina Burana* its dynamic theatricality.

The work opens with the chorus *Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi*, depicting the terrible revolution of the Wheel of Fate through a powerful repeated rhythmic figure that grows inexorably to a stunning climax. After a brief morality tale (*Fortune plango vulnere* — "I lament the wounds that fortune deals"), the *Springtime* section begins. Its songs and dances are filled with the sylvan brightness and optimistic expectancy appropriate to the annual rebirth of the earth and the spirit. The next section, *In Taberna* ("In the Tavern"), is given over wholly to the men's voices. Along with a hearty drinking song are heard two satirical stories: *Olim lacus colueram* ("Once in lakes I made my home") — one of the most fiendishly difficult pieces in the tenor repertory — and *Ego sum abbas Cucaniensis* ("I am the abbot of Cucany"). The third division, *Cour d'Amours* ("Court of Love"), leaves far behind the rowdy revels of the tavern to enter a refined, seductive world of sensual pleasure. The music is limpid, gentle and enticing, and marks the first appearance of the soprano soloist. The lovers' urgent entreaties grow in ardor, with insistent

encouragement from the chorus, until submission is won in the most rapturous moment in the score, *Dulcissime* ("Sweetest Boy"). The grand paeon to the loving couple (*Blanzifor et Helena*) is cut short by the intervention of imperious fate, as the opening chorus (*Fortuna*), like the turning of the great wheel, comes around once again to close this mighty work.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda