

Program Notes by Don Adkins

Carmina Burana (1936)

Carl Orff (1895 – 1982)

Carmina burana comes from a collection of songs found in the library of a monastery in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps. The original source, a 13th-century Latin codex, was brought to light when the Abbey of Benediktbeuern was secularized by the Austrian Emperor in 1803, a move undertaken in the spirit of enlightenment to redistribute wealth from the church back to the people. The codex was published in 1847 under the title later chosen by Orff for his work. The song texts are a collection consisting mainly of works by travelling musicians. These lively poems, about 200 of them, come from France, Germany, England and Italy and deal with all areas of human existence – sacred, secular, social and personal. The topics include the sensual pleasures of food, drink, romantic and physical love; satires on church, state and social interaction; and complaints about money and declining moral values.

Although we do not know most of the authors, the intellectual elite of the 13th century, both settled and nomadic, appear to be responsible for most of the Latin poetry and song texts. Troubadours who were trained and respected poets and musicians, and also often nobility, performed this style of music. Some of the texts mixed German and Latin or French and Latin. A few of the poems in this collection can be ascribed to some of the greatest thinkers of the time, such as Archipoeta who wrote, among other things, numerous love and drinking songs. Orff chose 24 of these texts for his work. The spiritual unity and exuberant life found in this material reflects the excitement of the 13th century and strongly attracted him: "In all my work, my final concern is not with musical but spiritual exposition." The poetry also sketches a picture of humanity that is still recognizable today.

The illustration used as the frontispiece of the collection, a reproduction from the original manuscript, caught Orff's imagination. A wheel of fortune is depicted, a symbol of constantly changing human experience. He decided to begin and end with the chorus "O Fortuna" and divided the rest of the texts into three sections depicting man's encounter with different aspects of physical existence: 1. "Spring" and "On the Village Green," 2. "In the Tavern," and 3. "Court of Love." Orff was once questioned about his choice of texts: "Sometimes I am asked why in the main I choose old material for my stage works. I do not feel it to be old, but only valid. The dated elements are lost and the spiritual strength remains." Spirituality was essential to Orff's artistic concepts, not as a way of expressing ancient ideas, but as a vehicle for depicting the mood and essence of his own contemporary experience.

The subtitle of the work, "Secular songs for soloists and chorus, accompanied by instruments and magic tableaux," demonstrates Orff's conception of this piece as a theatrical production. The first performances were staged in a wide variety of styles, ranging from a cosmological

music-drama to an allegorical medieval mystery play. Orff's entire musical output can be categorized as school or stage works: he considered all of his work to be theatrical. One acquaintance wrote: "Orff's first reaction to the collection of *Carmina burana* was as a man of the theatre, who saw it as a colorful dance and song drama. The function of Orff the musician was to work out a setting for this dramatic inspiration. The mimed events are the primary source of the music, which is, consequently, rhythmic and incredibly concentrated." If we depended on large theatrical performances for the only live presentations of this music, the opportunity to enjoy Orff's creation would be extremely limited. Even though staging can make the symbolism easier to understand, most performances today are concert versions sometimes with minimal production elements.

Orff's mature style is evident in all aspects of *Carmina burana*. The song forms are usually strophic, a repetition of the same music for the different verses. The orchestra creates static blocks of sound through the use of simple ostinatos, repeated accompaniment patterns, and unchanging tonal colors. This simplification is often given the label primitivism, a term that was strongly associated with the earlier music of Stravinsky and often pertained to the prominence of rhythmic drive. Orff used this approach to express what was important to him. Otto Oster wrote: "Rhythm is not merely the medium of Carl Orff's art; it is the spiritual foundation of his musical architecture." Orff felt that all of his theater works were dependent upon artistic primitivism: "The nearer one comes to the essence of the statement, the near to absolute simplicity, the more immediate and powerful is the effect."

The musical styles include Bavarian folk songs, Gregorian plainchant, Italian opera and Lutheran chorales. The unifying factor that draws everything together is his simple approach to rhythm, pitch and orchestral color. His use of the voice is an essential element of his overall sound and one of his most important contributions to musical practice. Orff is highly sensitive to the tonal sub-structure of language: the musical qualities found in the spoken word. He uses the naturally occurring rise and fall of the text as the basic contour of his melodies. Even though many composers have done the same, Orff's approach is so sensitive and effective that it is an indispensable element of his style.

From the first performance, *Carmina burana* has enjoyed tremendous success. It was first seen as a controversial but successful example of the new world-theater striving to present stage works outside of the standard European approach. As a large-scale choral work it has become one of the most performed internationally due, in large part, to its simple presentation of the universal concepts of fortune, nature, beauty, wine and love.