

## PROGRAM NOTES

"With *Carmina Burana* my collected works begin" wrote Carl Orff to his publisher. As far as posterity is concerned, that's also where they ended. *Carmina Burana* knocked 'em dead at its premiere and has remained a worldwide favorite ever since, while the remainder of Orff's catalog languishes in obscurity. Only his groundbreaking pedagogical *Orff-Schulwerk* has retained any currency.

The reasons for *Carmina burana*'s enduring popularity are clear enough. It's tuneful, rhythmically straightforward if often propulsive, harmonically clear, and filled with fascinating poems that range from mystic to bawdy. Alone among 20<sup>th</sup> century choral works, its opening movement *O Fortuna* practically invites being sung in the shower—just as it has spawned a popular Internet game of concocting amusingly misheard English lyrics in place of the original Latin. *Carmina Burana* has proven itself to be remarkably resistant to critical brickbats ("Neo-Neanderthal!") and the faint whiff of Nazi associations that cling to composition and composer alike. (For the record, Orff was never an actual card-carrying Nazi, nor does *Carmina Burana* have anything to do with National Socialism.)

Orff intended *Carmina Burana* as a fully-staged work, and the 1937 premiere featured scenery, costumes, lighting, and dance—all a reflection of Orff's fascination with ancient Greek theater and its synthesis of music, movement, language, and visuals. That multi-sensual quality has rendered the work particularly suitable as scoring for cinema and television alike, including TV commercials. The work is so vivid that its innate theatricality comes across even in the concert performances that are the norm today.

Orff found the inspiration for the work in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century edition of medieval poetry titled *Carmina burana*, which translates as "Songs of Beuern," a.k.a. Bavaria. An illustration of a medieval wheel of fortune in the volume led to Orff's selection of 24 poems, divided into three large sections, preceded and followed by ***Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi***, which begins with *O Fortuna*, so instantly memorable—and so short—followed by the chantlike *Fortune plango vulnera*.

**I. *Primo Vere* and *Uf dem anger*:** The three spring-like poems that follow (*Veris leta facies*, *Omnia Sol temperat*, *Ecce gratum*) morph gradually from chant to full-on lyrical song. ***Uf Dem Anger* (*On the Green*)** begins with a fine orchestral dance noted for its intriguing cross-rhythmic accents, then follows the extroverted charm of *Floret silva* with its alternation of large and small choruses (not to mention abrupt alternations of tempo.) The young girl sallies forth to buy make up in *Chrumer, gip die varwe mir*, followed by a relatively dignified orchestral dance. Then comes the utterly unbuttoned glee of *Swaz hie gat umbe*, topped by *Were diu werlt alle min*—an erotic yearning for no less than the queen of England.

**II. *In Taberna*** opens with the spectacular solo baritone aria of a vice-soaked youth who, *estuans interius ira vehementi* (burning inside with violent anger), chooses the pleasures of the flesh over hopes for salvation. The near-surreal *Olim lacus colueram* follows, as a roasted swan bewails its unhappy status as dinner entrée. The abbot of Cockaigne now proclaims his credo—and it's not exactly Christian charity. The boys of the tavern burst in with *In taberna quando sumus*, an exhaustive laundry list of all the unsavory-but-delectable pleasures to be had in the tavern, many nearly shouted out in what could be interpreted as a parody of the repetitive tones used to sing psalm texts in Gregorian chant.

**III.** Then comes the ***Cour d'amours***, dedicated to that most enduring of all human preoccupations. It all begins sweetly with *Amor volat undique* (Cupid flies everywhere) piped out in innocent-ish tones, but soon enough steams up with young love (well, young lust anyway) insisting on its prerogatives, issues of modesty notwithstanding. Those fires of springtime love culminate in the glorious *Tempus est iocundum* (This is the joyful time) before a brief exhortation to Blanche fleur and Helen leads to a restatement of *O Fortuna*. But is it really all that joyous? The last line, so swaddled in its obscuring Latin, offers a stern lesson: *sortem sternit fortem* (Fate strikes down the strong man), it warns. *Mecum omnes plangite!* (Everybody weep with me!)

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