

CARMINA BURANA - Carl Orff  
Program notes by Professor Paul Zweifel

Let us now turn to Carl Orff and the major work of tonight's concert Carmina Burana. Having sung this twice myself, I find it to be one of the most interesting pieces ever written. It was intended to be semi-staged, like a passion, or mystery play (a medieval musical form involving religious themes in semi-staged settings, usually presented in churches on important feast days. Present-day opera evolved from such presentations.) Orff had preceded this work with semi-stagings of the Passions by Bach and others, although many if not most traditionalist objected violently to this approach, considering it sacrilegious. So that might have been a motivation for writing his own piece. Unfortunately, at least in the United States, Carmina is rarely done as a stage work, and it certainly won't be presented in that way tonight, so none of us will have the opportunity to see it presented the way Orff intended.

Before discussing Carmina, let me tell you how Orff "semi-staged" his passions. [This is the south German peasant style --think of Oberammergau) referred to again a little later.] In the darkened hall was a half-lit stage. On the front left stood the Evangelist behind a lectern; Christ was on a bench in the middle; to the right, opposite the Evangelist, were the other characters - - Peter, Pilate, etc.) Above this front stage, on a semi-circular balcony, there was a small choir which sang the part of the crowd. On the background, above the choir, were projected color woodcuts by Tyrolean masters of the 15th century, illustrating the scenes of the Passion-- Ecce Homo, the Crucifixion etc. On both sides of the stage, choirs were grouped close to the audience to sing the opening chorus and chorales. In front of the stage, beyond the stage lighting, was the orchestra. While this description refers to a particular Passion by J. S. Bach, Carmina was intended to be staged in much the same way, although as we shall see individual performances in different cities were staged in many different ways. The important thing to remember here is that it was intended as a dramatic work, to be staged (or, better, semi-staged) and during the years close to its creation (1936 - first performance Frankfurt am Main, June 8, 1937) this is how it was done. The use of this piece as a concert presentation is a post-World War II phenomenon.

Carmina Burana means "Songs of Benediktbeuren." Benediktbeuren is a monastery in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps where, at its secularization in 1803, a Latin Codex of 13th Century songs was found. It was published under the title "Carmina Burana." The songs have evidently been written down by a collector, and consist of the works of anonymous jesters and minstrels from many lands including France, Germany, England and Italy. Thee lively poems touch every sphere of human activity - -

church, state society and the individual. The defects of the church, state and manners are satirized and there are complaints on the omnipotence of money and the decline in moral values. There are also lyrics on spring and love, dance songs and the poetry of nomadic peoples celebrating the sensual joys of food, drink and physical love. Most of the Latin poems are the work of the 13th Century intellectual elite (Wolfram von Eschenbach, perhaps, but definitely the famous Archipoeta) who composed and sang such songs. With these Latin poems are mixed middle-high-German dance and love songs, as well as mixed texts in German and Latin, and French and Latin.

The spiritual unity of Europe as well as the exuberant life of the time is embodied in these songs. They express a timeless humanity in all its moods, bright and dark, coarse and tender. Orff came across these poems in 1935-- his theatrical imagination was fired by the very first page -- "O fortuna velat luna" (sometimes humorously translated "Oh wheel of fortune"). He arranged the selection in three parts: 1. "Im Fruehling" and "Uf dem Anger"; 2. "In taberna"; 3. "Cour d'amours." The whole is enclosed within the powerful "Fortuna" chorus ("Fortuna, imperatrix mundi"). The symbolic significance of the various songs, choruses and dances comes into real prominence when they are staged.

The early performances of the work took various extreme forms. It was performed in Hamburg as a cosmological music drama, in Vienna as an epic of the world theater, in Darmstadt and Hamburg as a country manor "Minnespiel" [Note: "Minne" in German denotes profane or sexual love as distinguished from "Liebe", holy or at least pure love. The so-called Minne singers of medieval Germany (von Eschenbach for example, and Heinrich Tannhäuser) sang about courtly love, the Middle Ages' version of Monica Lewinsky.] In Darmstadt, Carmina was staged as a Hessian-Bavarian peasant play and in Berlin as an allegorical medieval mystery play. The Berlin version is, in my opinion, the closest to what Orff designed the work to be.

In Carmina, romantic tone color is replaced by an orchestration forming blocks of sound. Orff's style had developed from the ripe romanticism of Richard Strauss to a pointillist style derived from Debussy.

Some of the poems making up Carmina Burana were considered too risqué for the musical work. Here is an example which Kent Holliday helped me download from the internet. It was originally written in a mixed style, i.e. some of the lines were in Latin, others in German (remembering the famous hymn "In Dulci Jubilo" we may infer that this was a popular song form of the time). Anyway, here is the English translation:

ICH WAS EIN CHINT SO WOLGETAN

He laid his hands on my white flesh,

not without timidity.  
He said, "I'll make a woman of you;  
you have a lovely mouth!"  
Hoy and oe!  
Shame upon the linden trees  
that stand beside the road.

He removed my underthings,  
my body was exposed.  
He broke into my little door  
with his upright lance.  
Hoy and oe!  
Shame upon the linden trees  
that stand beside the road.

Let me now quote a couple of excerpts which *are* included just to give you an idea--  
although I would guess that the English translations are in the program. First, from No.  
14 "In taberna" ("When we were in the tavern"):

They drink to the Pope and king alike,  
The mistress drinks, the master drinks,  
The soldier drinks, also the man of God.  
The man drinks, the woman drinks,  
The manservant with the serving maid,  
The energetic man drinks, the lazy man drinks,  
The white man drinks, the black man drinks,  
The stay-at-home drinks, the roamer drinks,  
The idiot drinks, the wise man drinks.  
The pauper drinks, the invalid drinks,  
The exile and the unknown drink.  
The boy drinks, the old man drinks,  
The bishop and the deacon drink,  
Sister drinks, brother drinks,  
The old hag drinks, the mother drinks.  
This one drinks, that one drinks,  
A hundred drink, a thousand drink.

From "Si puer cum puella" ("If a boy with a girl"), No. 19:

If a boy and a girl linger together,  
Happy is their union.  
Increasing love leaves tedious, good sense  
Far behind.  
And inexpressible pleasure fills  
their legs, their arms, their lips.