

Carmina Burana - Notes on the Program

By Aaron Grad

Carmina Burana [1936]

CARL ORFF

Born July 10, 1895 in Munich, Germany

Died March 29, 1982 in Munich, Germany

Carl Orff spent the early part of his career in his native Munich, where he founded and taught at a school that combined music and movement classes, developing techniques for music education that are still used around the world under the banner of the Orff approach. His passion for early music led him to become a leading scholar and editor of the music of Monteverdi, the Italian composer who revolutionized opera in the early 1600s, and he also directed a group that performed Bach's choral works.

Orff's breakthrough as a composer didn't come until he was in his forties, with the 1937 premiere of *Carmina Burana*. This massive undertaking united all of the talents he had been cultivating: his sense of theatrical spectacle gleaned from Monteverdi, his understanding of massed voices developed from conducting Bach, and no small part of the whimsy and wonder he brought to his work with children.

Orff found his source texts for *Carmina Burana* in a manuscript of the same name that was compiled between the 11th and 13th centuries. The poems and dramatic texts, mostly in Latin (with a smattering of German and French), were probably contributed by students and young clergymen who reveled in the bawdy humor and satire of church doctrine. Forgotten for centuries, it was rediscovered in a Bavarian monastery in 1803 and published in 1847.

The central preoccupation of *Carmina Burana* is the unpredictability of one's fortunes in life, as personified by the Roman goddess Fortuna and her "wheel of fortune" that places outcomes beyond individual control. It was a theme that clearly resonated with the medieval authors who lived in a violent, disease-ridden world over which they had so little control, just as it resonated in Orff's Germany in the grips of the Nazi regime on the march toward war, and still resonates amid today's disorienting turbulence.

The goddess Fortuna is addressed directly in the movement that begins and ends *Carmina Burana*, making an arresting entrance with pounding timpani and spine-chilling choral harmonies. This movement, *O Fortuna*, has become one of those rare specimens of classical music that has fully permeated the broader culture, with a Wikipedia page citing more than 70 appearances in movies, TV shows, commercials and even college football games. A second high-energy chorus on the theme of fortune rounds out the opening section titled "Fortune, Empress of the World."

A small subset of the choir and a baritone soloist bring out different textures and moods in portions of the next section, titled *In Spring*. One constant throughout the piece is a

preference for simple modes and scales that evoke ancient church music and mystical rituals, and a style of vocal writing that keeps the multiple lines in rhythmic lockstep.

The section *On the Green* begins with an instrumental dance number that ushers in a series of rustic and frisky love songs, these set in the Middle High German language of everyday people. Returning to Latin, the next section groups together songs set *In the Tavern*. We hear from a baritone soloist who is “burning inside with anger,” a weepy tenor who is simply roasting (as he sings from the perspective of a swan on a spit that will soon be supper), a cantankerous abbot, and a male chorus that tipples through a breathless drinking song.

The wonderstruck boys choir is featured at the start of *Court of Love*, a sequence of nine short movements celebrating all manner of loves and lusts. In the penultimate section, the choir sings of Blanchefleur and Helena, a couple found in old folk stories from around Europe who defied fate to be reunited in love, leading directly into the closing reprise of *O Fortuna* that sends *Carmina Burana* off with the fateful wheel of fortune still spinning as recklessly as ever.

***Meditations on Rilke* [12019]**

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

Born December 21, 1944 in Los Angeles, California

Currently resides in San Francisco, California

The accomplishments of Michael Tilson Thomas as a conductor—including his 25-year tenure at the San Francisco Symphony, and his role as the founder and longtime leader of the New World Symphony, where he mentored Teddy Abrams—have overshadowed the marvelous contributions he has made as a composer, a craft he studied at the University of Southern California. MTT’s life in music continues the legacy of his grandparents, the Thomashefskys, who were the biggest stars of Yiddish musical theater in their day. His father was a musician too, as the composer recounts in his program note for Meditations on Rilke, a song cycle for two soloists and orchestra, using texts from the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). MTT conducted the world premiere performances with the San Francisco Symphony in 2020, and a release of their live recording won the Grammy Award for Best Classical Compendium. This performance of Meditations on Rilke—the first not conducted by MTT himself—is made all the more poignant as he continues to navigate the diagnosis of terminal brain cancer that he received in 2021.

My father told me a story that goes something like this:

Sometime in the 1920s, in a bar just outside of Oatman, Arizona, sat an old piano. Behind it there sat a seemingly older pianist. He’d been there since forever. No one could remember when he wasn’t. He played for tips and for drinks and was happy to provide whatever music anyone wanted to hear. Occasionally though, he channeled the spirits of Schubert, Mahler, and Berg. Everyone had gotten kind of

used to his musical meanderings over the years and his music had led them to unexpected places. Oh yes, he talked kinda' funny and it was said he was Jewish. But, I guess you had suspected that by now.

In the early 1930s, as a young man, my father, Teddy, and a few other WPA-lefty-artist friends drove across the country in an old jalopy. They arrived in Oatman, Arizona, a last chance, and nearly abandoned mining town. It's still there. They had run out of money and needed to get cash to buy food, gas and, most of all, to get out of Oatman. In the café/bar was a sign saying "Dance, Saturday Night—Pianist Wanted." My dad, who could play any Gershwin, Berlin, swing, rhumba, whatever number, asked for the job. "Just so long as you can play our music," said the guy behind the counter. Teddy signed on with total confidence. Imagine how startled he was on Saturday when they asked him to play the "Bear Fat Fling." Of course, he figured out how to play it. Amusingly, it was this same "Bear Fat Fling" that I later learned when I began performing Charles Ives's music.

For my father, my grandfather, and even my great-grandfather, music was a kind of lifelong journal, or confessional companion, into which new entries were always being added. It is much the same for me. In composing these *Meditations on Rilke*, whose poems are so varied in mood and character, my own lifelong "musical journal" was a lens through which to view and express this poetry.

Based on motives that recur, recombine, and morph differently in each song, the cycle opens with a piano solo evoking the story my father told me about the eccentric pianist in Oatman. It is part of the opening song, *Herbsttag (Autumn Day)*, which was the first to be written and has existed for solo voice, solo trombone, solo cello, and now this accompanied version. *Herbsttag* introduces most of the motives that are heard in the rest of the cycle. The fourth song, *Immer wieder (Again, Again)* is like a Schubert "cowboy song." My father often pointed out the similarity between songs like "Red River Valley" to many of Schubert's songs. The fifth song *Imaginärer Lebenslauf* (Imaginary Biography) is a duet inspired by the wonderful opportunity of having Sasha Cooke and Ryan McKinny as the voices for the premiere. The sixth song *Herbst* returns to the subject of Autumn. It opens with a flute solo that connects the motives from the earlier songs into one long melody.

The musical language in these songs is quite traditional. There are melodies, harmonies, bass lines, and invertible counterpoint. Much of this musical material has been with me for years, decades. My greatest concern has always been "What remains with the listener when the music ends?" It is my hope that some of these musical reflections of many years may stick with you.

—Michael Tilson Thomas

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