

Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*

From the very first bars of Orff's *Carmina Burana* we feel as though we are entering a completely different world. It is as though this music strikes a chord in us that we long ago suppressed: with magical power, these extraordinary sounds seem to be speaking to us on the most basic level, as the elemental force of the thunderous opening chords force us to lend an ear. The implacably pounding rhythm will not leave us alone, but hammers away with primal force. Harmonies of primitive directness bypass our intellect and reason and find their way straight to our heart. And the mythic appeals of the opening chorus take hold of us at once, tempting us to add our voices to a hymn that seems to well up from another, prehistoric age: "O Fortuna", the goddess of fortune both good and ill. A whole new world opens up as we listen to the *Carmina Burana* and before our eyes we see figures in brightly colored costumes assembling at dawn on a mountain summit for a curious Mass. Blasphemous, swaggering drunkards engage in their favorite pursuits, raucously high-spirited and maudlin by turn; and lovers, flirts and lechers vent their feelings on their fellow humans, each in his or her own way. We laugh and suffer with them, sharing their feelings of lust and tenderness, cursing and celebrating with them as the music runs its inevitable course.

But such involvement must give us pause for thought. After all, the work is a setting of poems from Benedictbeuern that are seven centuries old and written, moreover, by Italian, French and German poets in Latin and Middle High German – languages in which few of us are fluent today. Not only that -- when Orff set these texts in 1936, he was unfamiliar with the tunes to which these songs were originally sung and had to invent every note, every sound and rhythmic pattern, no matter how brief. This naturally begs the question how such a monumental setting of virtually unintelligible texts, that are several hundred years old and are accompanied by extraordinary music that manages to perform a balancing act between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century, could become one of the most successful works in the whole history of art. Why is it that our emotions are so powerful and irresistibly stirred by the archaic sounding music? And how is it possible that, at the end of the twentieth century, we are still capable of feeling such a range of emotions at this music, emotions that extend from extreme tenderness to the most drunken frenzy?

As so often, the answer to all these questions is as simple as it is obvious. At a time when composers like the arch-Romantic, Richard Strauss, were striving to produce increasingly sophisticated sonorities and when Arnold Schoenberg had long since achieved notoriety with his highly conceptualized twelve-note system, Orff staked everything on the appeal and expressive power of music at its most elemental. His aim in *Carmina Burana* was not to create a modernist masterpiece, nor even to conjure up the world of the Middle Ages. Rather, he used medieval poems and a magical musical language to appeal to an aspect of human existence which, independent of the age in which we live, is fundamental to our character. Here is a world of elemental feelings, a world of tender desires and outbursts of passion, a world of love, longing and suffering. The phrase that come to mind here is "sophisticated simplicity"; a cliché, certainly, but one uniquely applicable to Orff's work, for it is this that constitutes its tremendous impact. This also explains why Orff selected and arranged his texts so as to produce the most straightforward structure. The first part is headed "In Spring" and "In the Meadow", the second "In the Tavern" and the third "The Court of Love". These three sections are framed by the "Fortuna" chorus. And Orff's method of setting these texts reveals two things above all else. First, he achieves an astonishing variety with his principle of simplicity and, secondly, this simplicity is expressive to a remarkable degree. The melodies have a succinctness and memorability that recall authentic folk traditions. The rhythms are so lively and enthralling that they affect us on an almost physical level. And the harmonic language is consciously "primitive". Although Orff uses little more than the sort of orchestra normally associated with the Classical and Romantic repertory, he manages to coax from it sounds that might have been heard at the dawn of history and that cast their immediate spell on the listener.

Thanks to the simplicity of these devices, the *Carmina Burana* created the impression of a self-contained and secluded world far removed from modern life. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why we are so directly affected by the work when we listen to it and feel a strange mixture of euphoria and nostalgia. In its open and honest way, this music conjures up a world of natural feelings that have largely been forgotten today. After all, does this music not tell of the hidden roots and lost traditions of our lives? Do these melodies, rhythms and sounds not conceal an elemental vitality only rarely encountered in our everyday humdrum lives? It is no wonder then, that Orff's *Carmina Burana* is one of the most successful works of music in the world today.

- - **Thomas Kahicke**