



Information Behind the Music: Carmina Burana

Carl Orff, (1895-1982) was a German composer known particularly for his operas and dramatic works and for his innovations in music education.

He studied at the Munich Academy of Music and with the German composer Heinrich Kaminski.

In the 1930's he edited some 17th-century operas and in 1937 produced his secular oratorio *Carmina Burana*. Intended to be staged with dance, it was based on a manuscript of medieval poems. As a cantata for orchestra, chorus, and vocal soloists it premiered in 1937 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Orff drew his text from a 13th-century manuscript containing songs and plays written in Latin and medieval German, which was discovered in 1803 at the Bavarian monastery of Benediktbeuern.

Dubbed the *Carmina Burana* ("Songs of Beuern") by the German philologist Johann Andreas Schmeller, the texts present a varied view of medieval life, including religious verses, social satires, and bawdy drinking songs.

Although some of the verses were accompanied by archaic musical notation, confirming that they were indeed meant to be sung, that notation remained largely undeciphered, leaving Orff free to imagine his own musical settings.

He selected 24 songs, which he arranged into a prologue, an epilogue, and three parts of roughly equal length. The first part, "Primo Vere" ("In Early Spring"), presents youthful, energetic dances. The second part, "In Taberna" ("In the Tavern"), evokes drunken feasting and debauchery. Courtship and romantic love are the subject of the third part, "Cour d'Amours" ("Court of Love").

Throughout, simple orchestration, melodies, and harmonies combine with heavy rhythmic percussion to give the music a primeval, visceral character.

The best-known song from *Carmina Burana* is "O Fortuna" ("Oh Fortune"), which serves as both prologue and epilogue. It frames the revelry of the three main movements with a stark warning about the power of luck and fate, offering the ancient image of a wheel of fortune that deals out triumph and disaster at random. The forceful first measures are among the grandest statements in all choral literature.

Credit to: Encyclopaedia Britannica