



## Composer Profile: Carl Orff (1895 – 1982)

Born in Munich, Carl (Karl Heinrich Maria) Orff's family was Bavarian. His father was an army officer who had strong musical interests and his mother was a trained pianist.

Carl began playing the piano at the age of five, later studying the cello and organ. At the age of eight he began attending concerts and found a great enthusiasm for opera. In his early years he composed a few songs and music for puppet plays, and had two vignettes published at the age of ten.

As a teenager, Carl wrote several dozen Lieder on texts by German poets, with his music-making being in the style of Richard Strauss and other German composers of the day. Some of his songs were published in 1912 and in the same year he wrote the large work 'Zarathustra' for baritone, tenor-bass choruses, winds, percussion, harps, pianos and organ; based on a passage from Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical novel 'Also sprach Zarathustra'.

He studied at the Munich Academy of Music and with the German composers Anton Beer-Walbrun and Heinrich Kaminski.

Carl was 'forced' into the German army in August 1917, which he wrote of at the time as a crisis for him. The following Autumn he was severely injured and nearly killed when a trench caved in, suffering amnesia, aphasia and paralysis on his left-side, enduring a difficult recovery.

Decades later, after his ultimate death, his daughter wrote that she believed this wartime experience "made him think and rebel yet more revolutionarily".

After recovering from his battle injuries, Carl became known particularly for his operas and dramatic works and for his innovations in music education; holding various positions at opera houses and later returning to Munich to pursue his music studies. In 1924 he co-founded a school for gymnastics, music and dance; developing his theories on music education.

In the 1930's he edited some 17th-century operas; including that of Claudio Monteverdi, although this was not lucrative and reactions were met with incomprehension and ridicule.

Carl was married four times, with three divorces by 1959. His final marriage, of 22 years, was to his former secretary, and lasted until his death from cancer, in Munich.

## Programme Notes: *Carmina Burana*

Carl produced his most famous work, the secular oratorio, 'Carmina Burana', as a cantata for orchestra, chorus, and vocal soloists, based on a manuscript of medieval poems.

It premiered in June 1937, in Frankfurt, Germany, became highly popular and proved more of a commercial success to him than his other works.

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, the 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.

### 1. **O Fortuna**

This is the most recognizable music from *Carmina Burana* and has been used in many other contexts to denote events of an epic or foreboding nature. Orff uses an endlessly repeating orchestral accompaniment to suggest the relentless turning of the Wheel of Fortune.

### 2. **Fortune plango vulnera**

In the first verse, the goddess Fortuna is depicted with hair on the front of her head but none on the back, signifying that you can grasp an opportunity if you see it coming, but not once it has passed. Hecuba, whose name is written below the hub of the wheel, is an object lesson in the capriciousness of fate. She was the wife of King Priam of Troy, and during the long Trojan War she saw her husband slain, her family destroyed, and the city razed. She herself was given as spoils to Odysseus. Thinking to save at least one member of the family, she sent her youngest son to the king of Thrace along with a large sum of money. The king basely slew the boy and stole the money. Hecuba exacted her revenge by blinding the king and killing his two sons. As the king's men pursued her, the gods finally pitied Hecuba and turned her into a dog, allowing her to escape. She threw herself into the sea and was drowned.

### 3. **Veris leta facies**

Spring opens gently with long, languid, chant-like lines set for unison voices. Phoebus is the Greek sun-god, Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers, and Zephyrus, the god of the west wind. Philomena, the

nightingale, and her sister Procne were Greek princesses who were brutally abused by another king of Thrace. As they fled his wrath the gods turned them into a swallow and a nightingale.

4. **Omnia sol temperat**

5. **Ecce gratum**

A vocal fanfare heralds spring's arrival in earnest. Paris in the last line was the son of Priam and Hecuba. In return for judging Venus the fairest of the goddesses (as if there were any contest!) he was granted the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately for him, that turned out to be Helen, wife of King Menelaus of Sparta. Paris abducted the willing Helen, the event which precipitated the Trojan War.

6. **Tanz**

An instrumental number, this is a vigorous dance propelled forward by alternating duple and triple meters.

7. **Floret silva nobilis**

This is a charming vignette of flirtation, written in Latin and then repeated in German. The women idly wonder where their former lover has gone. The men are quick to reply that he has ridden away. The women somewhat archly respond "I wonder who will love me now?" Orff takes advantage of the opportunity for some musical tone painting, with the timpani providing the horse's hoofbeats and a gradual diminuendo in the chorus as the lover rides away.

8. **Chramer, gip die varwe mir**

Women of somewhat dubious virtue are advertising their charms to the young men, who provide a wordless response as they consider the offer.

9. **Reie**

This is a three-part dance section. The first is a rather courtly dance set for orchestra alone. Swaz hie gat umbe is a dance round, like a Maypole dance, employing a bit of medieval reverse psychology: the women who dance ostensibly want to go the whole summer without a man. Chume is a bit more seductive, if the reverse psychology does not work. The men join in soft accompaniment. Their rhythm contrasts with the rhythm of the melody, which is as close as Orff gets to polyphonic texture.

10. **Were diu werlt alle min**

This fixation with the Queen of England bears some explanation. The queen in question was Eleanor of Aquitaine, the richest, most beautiful, most ambitious and certainly the most notorious woman of the 12th century. She inherited vast wealth at the age of fifteen. Her court was a magnet for the budding troubadour movement, and the rules of medieval chivalry were developed there. She first married the prim Louis VII of France. When he went on crusade, she joined him, leading a company of women bearing armour and wearing clothes cut after a manly fashion. It was not only a great scandal but a great fiasco, prompting the pope to write a bill forbidding women to ever accompany a crusade again. When she returned to France, she promptly had her marriage to Louis annulled (another scandal) and just as promptly married the much younger Henry of Anjou (an even bigger scandal), who became Henry II of England two years later. And with another turn of the Wheel of Fortune, her marriage to Henry set into motion events which directly led to the Magna Carta and the Hundred Years' War.

11. **Estuans interius**

This is the only poem in Carmina Burana which can be linked with a specific person, in this case the man known only as the Archpoet (c. 1130-1165). He was born a gentleman, enjoyed the patronage of the Archbishop of Cologne, travelled extensively and died of illness at a young age. His poetry was known for its cleverness, word plays, sardonic wit and self-deprecating humour. His Confession, from which these five verses are taken, might serve as a credo for the goliard movement.

12. **Olim lacus colueram**

Rather inebriated and out of focus music accompanies this tenor solo, sung from the point of view of the unfortunate main course at dinner.

**13. Ego sum abbas Cucaniensis**

This satirical song is set in a parody of Gregorian chant, punctuated by alarm bells rather than cathedral chimes. Cockaigne was a mythical, nonsensical place. Decius was the spurious patron saint of gamblers. The gambler who is (quite literally) fleeced cries out “Wafna!” – an exclamation of dismay.

**14. In taberna quando sumus**

This is undoubtedly the most all-inclusive drinking song in the history of music. It opens with a description of the typical behaviour in the tavern and follows with thirteen toasts encompassing every group of people imaginable. Then there is a comprehensive list of who is drinking, and the poem ends with a parody of a phrase from the Requiem Mass, “Let those who slander us be confounded and let their names not be recorded in the Book of the Righteous.” Orff sets this as a virtuoso patter song for three-part men’s chorus. He takes advantage of the percussive qualities of repeated words like quidam and bibit to reinforce the march-like beat of the music.

**15. Amor volat undique**

**16. Dies, nox et omnia**

This is a rather affected and foppish love song complete with coloratura passages set for the baritone in a mixture of Latin and French, a parody of the chivalrous style.

**17. Stetit puella**

**18. Circa mea pectora**

The baritone solo tries his hand at a seduction which is unlikely to have a successful conclusion as he lets slip what is truly on his mind. The women mock him with the refrain *manda liet* which the men sarcastically echo. They exact meaning of *manda liet* is a bit obscure, but the sense is “you’d better keep singing, it’s not working.”

**19. Si puer cum puellula**

This is a slightly risqué song with some obvious double meanings, set for three-part men’s chorus.

**20. Veni, veni, venias**

The amorous heat is turned up a bit in this setting for double chorus. The men and women tease each other by calling them goats and bleating *nazaza*, referring to that animal’s legendary sexual proclivity.

**21. In trutina mentis dubia**

Set for soprano solo, *In trutina mentis dubia* contains a melody of simple but exquisite beauty.

**22. Tempus est iocundum**

The baritone solo, soprano solo, chorus and children’s choir all stammer in anticipation of amorous bliss.

**23. Dulcissime**

The soprano solo finally surrenders to her passion in an impossibly high coloratura line that reaches D above high C.

**24. Ave formosissima**

This grandiose song is a parody of the Ave Maria, using similar titles to honour his beloved rather than the Virgin Mary. The final lines compare her to *Blanchefleur* (the heroine of a popular 12th century romance), Helen of Troy, and even Venus herself.

**25. O Fortuna**

The music comes full circle as the opening chorus is reprised, reminding us that the Wheel of Fate continues in its inexorable turning.