

Carmina Burana

Carl Orff (1895 - 1982)

Carl Orff composed a number of works for the theatre and concert hall but he is chiefly remembered for his far-reaching contribution to music education – his *Orff-Schulwerk*, published in 1930, is still in use today – and for his dramatic cantata, *Carmina Burana*, written in 1936. Orff came from a musical family and had a number of songs and other pieces published whilst still in his teens. His style at that time could be described as Post-Romantic, influenced as it was by Schoenberg and Richard Strauss. His ground-breaking research into the way in which music and movement are instinctively and inextricably linked in young children resulted in a radical change in how music was taught in schools throughout Europe and beyond. He became fascinated with the power of primitive rhythms and simple melodies, which gradually found expression in his own compositions. With *Carmina Burana* he finally turned his back on chromaticism and complex polyphony for a deliberately simplified style, characterised by its rhythmic energy and the repetition of short melodic phrases supported by elemental block harmonies. It comes as no surprise to learn that Orff was dismissed by the critics - one called him ‘a rich man’s banjo player’ – but the work immediately appealed to the public and has remained a great favourite ever since.

The text of *Carmina Burana* is a selection from a large collection of secular poems of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, preserved in a manuscript at the Bavarian monastery of Benediktbeuren. The poems are mostly in Latin, the international language of the day, though some are in old French or Middle High German and come from a wide variety of sources. It is somewhat surprising to learn that, apart from some poems that are of a morally uplifting nature, most are bawdy student songs celebrating such un-monklike earthly delights as drinking, gambling, dancing and lovemaking.

Orff described *Carmina Burana* as a ‘scenic cantata’. It uses a very large orchestra and was originally designed for the stage, with dancing and mime accompanying the music. It was first performed at the Frankfurt Opera House. The work begins and ends with a powerful hymn to the goddess Fortuna, the Empress of the World, seen as a monstrous whirling wheel carrying its victims first to the heights, then dashing them to the ground. In between come three main sections. The first is a depiction of Spring, *Primo Vere*, illustrated by rustic songs and dances. The second is set in a tavern, vividly described by a succession of characters including the swan on the spit (counter-tenor solo), who laments his dreadful fate. Part III, *The Court of Love*, is an uninhibited celebration of the delights of love. The final number, *Blanziflor and Helena*, leads back to the opening hymn (popularised by a well-known TV commercial), thereby not only unifying the whole work, but also acting as a pertinent reminder that our lives are ever subject to the slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune.

programme notes by John Bawden

To those using these notes

You are more than welcome to use all or part of these notes for your choral society or church programme, or for educational purposes. Please would you ensure that my authorship is attributed, and would you also kindly advise me by e-mail - info@directoryofchoralmusic.co.uk. If you wish to use these notes for commercial reproduction, e.g. a CD or DVD liner, please contact me first. Thank you.