

ERIC FRIESEN

# Carmina Burana

## THE BIG MAC OF CLASSICAL MUSIC?

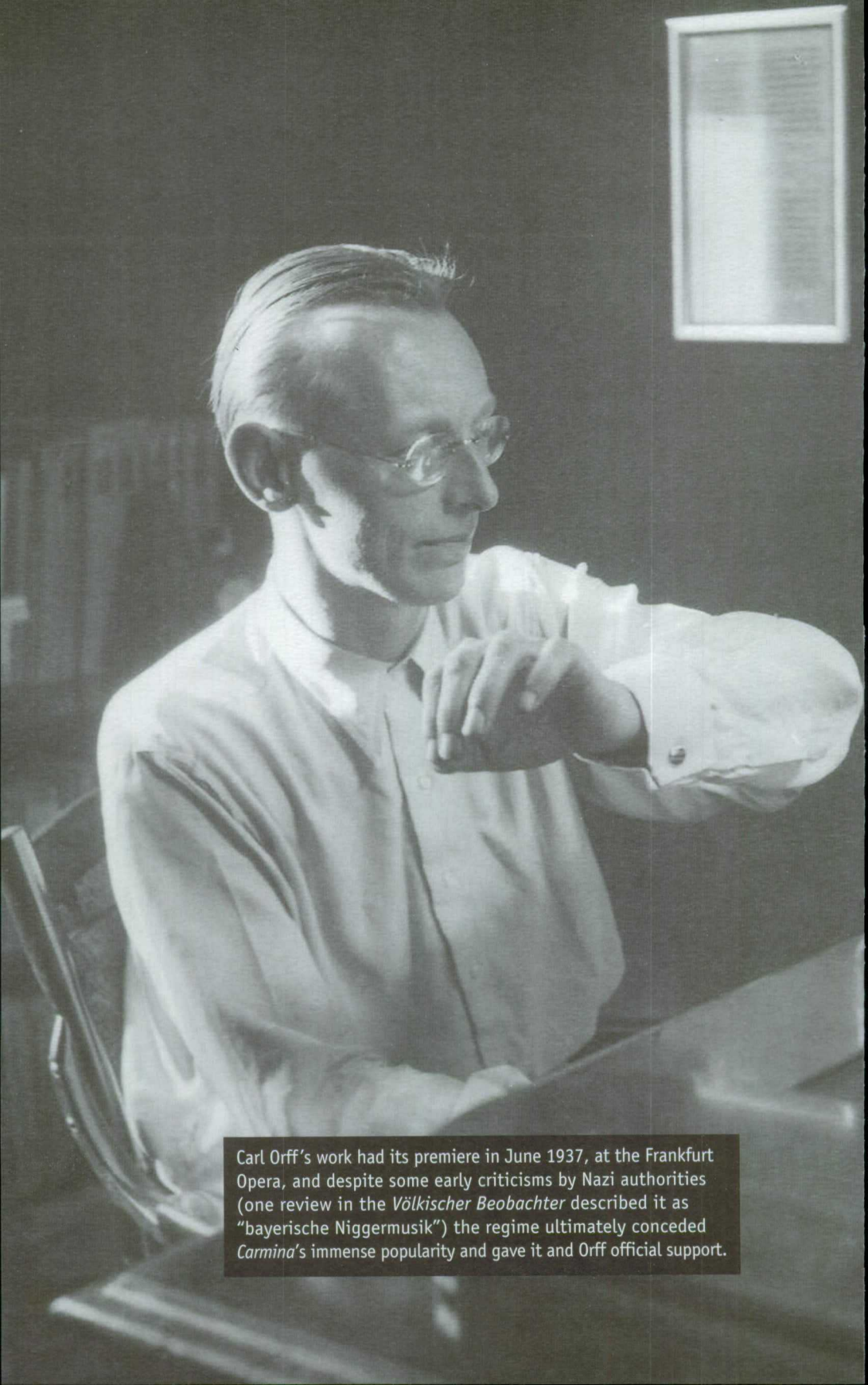
... love, lust, the pleasures of drinking and the heightened moods evoked by springtime. These primitive and persistently relevant themes are nicely camouflaged by the Latin and old German texts, so the listener can actually feign ignorance while listening to virtually X-rated lyrics. (*Veni Veni Venias! Come, come, come now!*)

MARIN ALSOP, Music Director,  
Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

ONE of the most deliciously subversive pieces of classical music I know is Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and my mind often turns to it as our Canadian winter finally breaks off into a hesitant spring. *Carmina* is, among other things, a raucously joyful, lusty celebration of spring, and for years I would highlight the best of the rhythmically ecstatic spring choruses on my radio programs. But my most memorable personal experience with this piece goes back to an evening in April 1993, when I hosted a live national broadcast of *Carmina* on NPR stations across the US, with the Minnesota Orchestra and the Minnesota Chorale conducted by Edo de Waart.

Before I tell that story, however, a brief primer on *Carmina*. It's a setting of medieval poems known as *Carmina Burana*, Latin for *Songs from Beuern*, from a collection found in the Benedictine monastery

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Carl Orff's work had its premiere in June 1937, at the Frankfurt Opera, and despite some early criticisms by Nazi authorities (one review in the *Völkischer Beobachter* described it as "bayerische Niggermusik") the regime ultimately conceded *Carmina's* immense popularity and gave it and Orff official support.

of Benediktbeuern, near Munich. The poems were written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by students and clergy known as Goliards, who satirized and mocked the Catholic Church, mostly in Medieval Latin, but also in Middle High German and Provençal French. In the mid 1930s the German composer Carl Orff selected 24 poems from the larger collection of 254 and set them to music. The work had its premiere in June 1937, at the Frankfurt Opera, and despite some early criticisms by Nazi authorities (one review in the *Völkischer Beobachter* described it as “bayerische Niggermusik”) the regime ultimately conceded *Carmina*’s immense popularity and gave it and Orff official support.

*Carmina* is not without controversy. Anything that was popular in Hitler’s Germany comes under suspicion, and both Orff and his work certainly have. While Orff was never a party member, he was also not a resister to the regime (despite his efforts to cast himself as such after the war) and benefited from its blessing. He is best described as one of those whose response to totalitarian regimes is in Primo Levi’s “grey zone,” a zone between resistance and compromise, one who got along with the authorities. (For more on Orff during the Nazi period, read Canadian historian Michael H. Kater’s *Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits*.)

Despite the shadier aspects of Orff’s character and actions, none of it has detracted from the ongoing popularity of *Carmina*. The music is instantly appealing: powerful, pulsating rhythms; huge forces (a chorus of 200, an orchestra of 100, and 3 soloists); inspired melodies; theatrical in effect; full of send-up humour; and a simple, direct musical language. There are parallels with early Stravinsky (*Carmina* is most like Stravinsky’s ballet cantata *Les Noces*), but Orff’s music is less complex and more approachable. Above all, it is a gas to sing, to play, and to conduct, and audiences love it. I count at least 50 interpretations of *Carmina* still available on CD.

**O**RFF called his work a “scenic cantata,” but given its hour length and scope, it’s probably closer to oratorio. *Carmina* opens and closes with its most famous chorus, “O Fortuna” (“O Fortune”), an ominous warning about the fickleness of Fate (“... like the moon you are changeable, ever waxing and waning”), a chorus that has been used endlessly in movies and TV commercials. In between comes the celebration, in three parts. Part One, “Primo vere



– *Uf dem Anger* (“Springtime – On the Green”), begins with a hushed dawning-of-spring chorus, followed by several more including my favourite, “*Floret silva nobilis*” (“The noble woods are burgeoning”). The focus shifts from a young woman on the make (“Shopkeeper, give me colour to make my cheeks red so that I can make the young men love me against their will”) to a young man pining for those “sweet rose-red lips to come and make me better,” and a fantasy about bedding the Queen of England. (I kid you not.)

Part Two, “*In taberna*” (“In the Tavern”), gives us the experience of walking into a bar where there is an equal mixture of bravado and barely suppressed violence. First we hear from an angry baritone who drowns his sorrows in the pleasures of the flesh (“I am eager for the pleasures of the flesh more than for salvation, my soul is dead, so I shall look after the flesh”). This is followed by a bizarre tenor masquerading as a swan roasting on a spit, who gives way to a portrait of a disgraced, drunken Abbot (“I am the abbot of Cockaigne and my

assembly is one of drinkers”), and concludes with a dizzy drinking song that catalogues all who drink, from libertines to Christians to loose sisters to the Pope to the mistress to the old lady to mother; *everyone* drinks – and damn those who object.

Part Three, “Cour d’amours” (“The Court of Love”), is a panorama of young lovers “seized by desire,” one weeping for beauty that has “a heart of ice,” and another expressing a macho hope to “loose the chains of her virginity.”

But there is also the tender tension “between lascivious love and modesty” so beautifully expressed in the short soprano aria “In trutina” (“In the Balance”) where an unspoiled young woman is on the verge of surrendering her virginity, and does so with her whole heart. The finale begins with a glorious chorus to the power and fulfilment of love (“Hail most beautiful one”), but just as we imagine it might resolve into a blissful ending, the heavy hand of the opening chorus “O Fortuna” slashes into this ecstatic pastoral fantasy to warn us one last time that the wheel of Fate can turn malevolent, that nothing this good is certain to last.

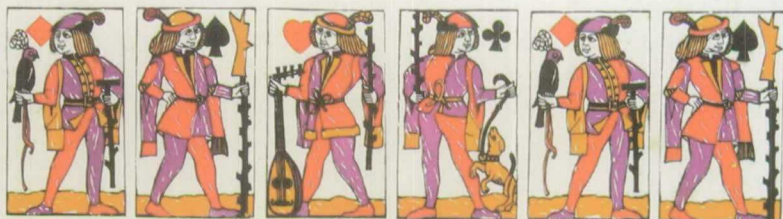




In April 1993, Minnesota Orchestra Music Director Edo de Waart shares his thoughts on *Carmina*: sometimes he simply feels the need to “treat myself to a Big Mac.”

**W**HICH brings me back to that Friday night in April 1993, my most memorable performance of *Carmina*. I discovered early on that then Minnesota Orchestra Music Director Edo de Waart, in his early fifties at the time and already a veteran orchestral leader, had never conducted the work. This surprised me because Edo loves the chorus-and-orchestra repertoire, as well as conducting stage performances of opera. At our weekly pre-broadcast meeting I asked him why he had avoided it. Citing his memories of the last years of the war in occupied Holland, Edo muttered something unprintable about Orff’s apparent Nazi associations. So, I said, “what are we going to talk about when I interview you onstage?” “I don’t know,” he said, and abruptly ended the meeting, obviously unhappy about having agreed to conduct *Carmina* in the first place. He steadfastly refused to discuss our upcoming interview right up until concert time. And so we walked onstage unprepared to a sold-out Orchestra Hall Minneapolis, a national US broadcast audience, and a stage crammed with the Minnesota Chorale and the Minnesota Orchestra.

I began my interview by asking Edo why he had waited so long in his career to conduct *Carmina*. "Well," he said, moderating his tone a little before a large audience, "I grew up in Amsterdam during the last years of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, and those of us who remember that terrible time find it hard to forgive certain German artists their support of the Nazi regime. I remember during the winter of 1945 all we had to eat was boiled tulip bulbs." "Okay, I can certainly understand that," I said, "but, Edo, do you *like* this piece?" He paused, and I saw a certain look on his face, a mischievous look which meant he was about to say something provocative. (What I loved about Edo as an interview was his ability to give the most pungent sound bites when talking about anything related to orchestral music, and his blunt fearlessness in speaking his mind.) "You know," he said with that look on his face, "every once in a while, when I'm in some large European city, say Paris, I'll be walking along and find myself hungry, and I'll spot those golden arches of McDonald's. I'll turn in and treat myself to a Big Mac. *Carmina Burana*, Eric, is the classical music equivalent of a Big Mac." Well, of course, the audience howled with laughter at that, and then, having found release from his inner conflict about taking



Carl Orff

# CARMINA BURANA

André Previn

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA · LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA CHORUS

ST. CLEMENT DANES GRAMMAR SCHOOL BOYS CHOIR · SHEILA ARMSTRONG · GERALD ENGLISH · THOMAS ALLEN



on the piece, Edo turned to the orchestra and chorus and conducted an absolutely inspired performance of *Carmina Burana*.

Thinking back on it all these years later, I'm convinced Edo's reluctance to take on *Carmina* had less to do with Orff's Nazi associations than with his own aesthetic inner voice telling him that this was the musical equivalent of fast food. After all, he never had any qualms about conducting Wagner's music, which was Third Reich theme music par excellence. There are musicians who want always to take the high road, even when some of their instincts are to enjoy slumming in the popular music of a composer like Carl Orff. (The contemporary English composer John Rutter similarly divides performers and audiences.) How would we feel about the *New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman admitting to an occasional desire for a Taco Bell seven-layer burrito?

There may also be a kind of aesthetic puritanism at work here, a true discomfort at the frankly erotic nature of some *Carmina* poems. It might be the same feeling some would get reading Sappho's poetry, or D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, or watching a movie like *Last Tango in Paris*. Dionysian excess is scary for the Apollonian soul, which is why the Goliards' songs and poems must have been so threatening to medieval authorities, ecclesiastical and temporal, or why the musical *Hair* was one huge anthem for dissent in the 1960s. Would *Carmina* be as popular if its lyrics were less provocative? Is conductor Marin Alsop right that audiences can "feign ignorance" about those X-rated lyrics while secretly enjoying them? I suspect so.

*Carmina Burana*: the musical equivalent of a Big Mac? It's a vivid sound bite for sure, but perhaps just a bit of a cheap shot. I think of *Carmina* as more of a gourmet burger, the best of the genre, made of 100 percent organic beef and topped with the freshest of local ingredients and served on a just-baked brioche bun. My point is that in considering the place of *Carmina* in the huge pantheon of classical music, the work must be judged for what it is. As Daniel Harding, one of the younger generation of conductors who has recorded this work, puts it: "the old argument over whether this is really great music gets us nowhere, for the piece never claims to be anything other than what it is." Precisely.

*Carmina Burana* cannot be compared to the *Missa Solemnis* or the *Mass in B Minor*, nor did Orff intend it to be anything like those great sacred masterpieces. *Carmina* is a secular, theatrical, musical entertainment, a highly original example of its kind, and of the highest quality of its kind. The *Washington Post* music critic Tim Page would agree: "nobody but the most antiseptic musical snob need apologize



for enjoying – and admiring – *Carmina Burana*.” Besides, Page insists, this work “looks forward to a number of compositional trends yet to be born,” including Copland, Bernstein, Górecki, and even the minimalism of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. I think Page is onto something. The development of a body of popular contemporary music in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, much of it tonal and melodic and as rhythmically percussive as a touring rock show, has at least one of its roots in early Stravinsky and in Carl Orff.

**W**HILE there are those conductors who turn up their noses at *Carmina*, or at least avoid it as much as possible, many more have embraced it. From legendary luminaries like Eugen Jochum, Günter Wand, Robert Shaw, Wolfgang Sawallisch, and Herbert Blomstedt to contemporary masters such as James Levine, Riccardo Chailly, Riccardo Muti, Michael Tilson Thomas, Charles Dutoit, Seiji Ozawa, and André Previn, *Carmina* has been recorded with obvious joy, pleasure, and conviction. Local choral societies will continue to program it, to the delight of their singers, and soloists will continue to be drawn to the swagger, the mockery, and the tender lyricism of its arias. *Carmina* is, in the end, an enduring and irresistible phenomenon, a powerful synthesis of finely crafted accessible music supporting a celebration of earthly pleasures, a near perfect harmony of sound and sense.



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