

Cassandra Ball

Music Appreciation

MUSI 1306

9 December 2018

Review of *Carmina Burana* 1994

German-born Carl Orff (1895-1982) taught music until he was forty-two years of age when he found himself deemed an unexpected celebrity after he composed *Carmina Burana*. A collection of thirteenth-century poems that speak of all facets of medieval peasant life about fate, love, sex, drunken debauchery, religion, politics, and misery inspired what Orff called a “scenic cantata” (Classical Net). Goliard scholars wrote the poems in low Latin and early German which were discovered in the abbey of Benediktbeuren near Munich in 1803. First performed in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1937, *Carmina Burana* was an immediate success and continues to excite mature, worldwide audiences of both genders today (“BBC Proms”).

Richard Hickox conducted the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra accompanied by soloists counter-tenor James Bowman, soprano Janice Watson, and baritone David Maxwell along with the Waynflete Singers, Bournemouth Symphony Chorus, and the Highcliffe Junior Choir. The September 4, 1994, Prom 61 production of *Carmina Burana* commenced at 7:30 p.m. in the Royal Albert Hall in London to an audience of about 6,000. The British programme featured Arnold Bax’s Overture to a Picaresque Comedy, Malcolm Arnold’s Symphony No. 2, Op 40, and Carl Orff’s famous *Carmina Burana* (“Proms 1994”). BBC TV recorded the electricity that flowed through the rambunctious audience. The performers wore black tie attire and the choirs donned matching gowns, suits, and uniforms.

The composition of *Carmina Burana* reflects a metaphor of the Wheel of Fortune. This metaphor is best thought of as pictured on the Major Arcana Tarot card X, also named the Wheel of Fortune. A giant wheel in the card's center painted with esoteric symbols around its edge is shown with a snake slithering down the left side of the wheel. Four winged creatures reading books float in the four corners of the card. An Egyptian sphinx which represents knowledge and strength rests on top of the wheel and stares toward the heavens. A devil slides downward on the right side of the wheel (Bidly Tarot). The Wheel of Fortune first appears in Greek literature according to David M. Robinson (Robinson 207). There is a feeling of out-of-control of one's destiny in *Carmina Burana's* thirteenth-century lyrics. They portray how one's emotions can lead to euphoria or despair and emotional effects on human confliction.

As a whole, *Carmina Burana* comprises harmony and exuberant rhythm ranging from largo to presto flowing in and out of pianissimo and fortissimo with the choirs perfectly singing the complicated songs. Orff scored *Carmina Burana* for flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets, trombones, a large percussion section, strings, and two pianos (Jackson). Male and female choir members sang in operatic style with their voices rising and falling to instrumental variegated monophonic, homophonic, and polyphonic texture.

The joys of springtime and young love also appear in *Carmina Burana's* first section, entitled *Primo Vere*, in consonance of music and song. The second section, *In Taberna*, highlights drunkenness, gambling, and the boisterous behavior inherent inside a tavern. Counter-tenor Bowman and baritone Maxwell emanated with drunken attitude. *In Taberna* presents a satirical view of what the peasants thought about the religious protocol of their day. It includes the popular and succinct but infernal "Olim Lacus Coluercram", a song in which a swan describes itself of roasting for a feast. The song instrumentally climbs up to a crescendo then quickly falls

into a short diminuendo giving a realistic aura of the swan's impending demise before it lies on a dinner plate.

“Taberna Quando Sumus”, widely hailed as the ultimate drinking song, began with a stout percussion rhythm and timbre peppered with accents, crescendos, and diminuendos throughout. This composition ended in a dramatic woodwind crescendo followed by a strong percussion presto.

The final section of *Carmina Burana*, *Cour d'amours*, featured light and airy woodwinds bouncing along with soloist Watson's superb soprano voice while Maxwell's baritone slips into tenor and the choirs return in verse. Exciting tempo and melodic diversity ripple through the songs of *Cour d'amours* but also slow down with powerful instrumental effects by the woodwinds.

Carl Orff chose only twenty-four of several hundred poems discovered in the abbey of Benediktbeuren when he composed *Carmina Burana* (Talbeck). The stories that intertwine through Orff's *Carmina Burana* begin with fate's irony and the hope of finding love and a fresh start in life but falls into the misery of everyday life and despair. They then climb back up to illustrate the universal reason for romantic love in delightful song inspired by instrumentation. The Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra followed Orff's score closely and splendidly moved the emotions of the audience to rise and fall with the voices of the choirs and solo vocalists in a stunning orchestral performance. Orff chose to begin and end *Carmina Burana* with the same song, “Oh Fortuna”, which signals that the Wheel of Fortune completed the circle of life.

Fans of Modern Art Music like me absolutely will want to read the song titles and lyrics of *Carmina Burana*, easily found on the internet, and watch the BBC Proms 1994, Prom 61, 1994 on YouTube.

Works Cited

BBC Proms 1994, *YouTube*, 15 Jan. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhinC9eVKR4.

“Carl Orff - Richard Hickox/LSO Carmina Burana Cover Notes.” Classical Net, Classical Net, www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/works/orff-cb/hickox.php. copyright 1995-2018

Jackson, Kevin. “Kevin Jackson's Theatre Diary.” *The Feather In The Web*, Kevin Jackson, 27 Mar. 2013, 11:23 PM, www.kjtheatrediary.com/2013/03/carmina-burana.html.

“Proms 1994 Prom 61 - BBC Proms - BBC.” *BBC*, BBC, www.bbc.co.uk/events/efjq9r.

“The Wheel of Fortune Meaning - Major Arcana Tarot Card Meanings.” *Labyrinthos*, Biddu Tarot, 7 Mar. 2017, labyrinthos.co/blogs/tarot-card-meanings-list/the-wheel-of-fortune-meaning-major-arcana-tarot-card-meanings.

Robinson, David M. “The Wheel of Fortune.” *Classical Philology*, vol. 41, no. 4, p. 207. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/267004.

Talbeck, Carol. “Carl Orff | Carmina Burana.” *Sfchoral.org*, San Francisco Choral Society, www.sfchoral.org/site/carl-orff-carmina-burana/. copyright 1998-2018