

## *Carmina Burana*, by Carl Orff



The pulse-pounding rhythms of the amazing *Carmina Burana*, as performed by the Choral Artists of Sarasota, Sarasota Contemporary Dance, Sarasota Young Voices, and an ensemble of two pianos and percussion, will pull you into another world—an exciting world in which music and dance express basic human emotions like joy and pain, lust and tenderness, laughter and tears.

The music was written by Carl Orff, a 20<sup>th</sup> century composer who lived from 1895-1982.

In the 1930's, Orff visited a museum in Germany and came across some thirteenth-century poetry that fascinated him. The poems were written by young university



Orff as a young man

students called Goliards, who wandered the European countryside, experiencing the joys and sorrows of life in medieval times (the medieval period of history was from about 500 to 1450 AD). The Goliards wrote poetry and songs about their experiences, feelings, and beliefs, often expressing the religious thinking of their time.

Twelfth century life in Europe was very different from our life today: ordinary people seldom left their village homes from birth to death, and death usually came early, after a life of toil and suffering. Infants and their mothers often died in childbirth because the dangers of germs and bacteria were not yet discovered; bathing and cleanliness were believed to cause disease rather than prevent it; the understanding of nature, medicine, agriculture, and all the sciences was very limited. Technology did not exist, nor was there any way to communicate other than in

person or by letter. Even letter writing was limited, because so few people could read or write.

The Goliards provided entertainment and brought news and information from other places as they wandered, but they were also thought of as philosophers, because their songs and poems dealt with the great and unknowable questions of life: the unreliability of health, the cruelty or blindness of one's fate, the joys of drinking and love, and the coming of Spring. The warmth that comes with Spring is very important if you grow crops to survive, or if you have spent the winter sleeping in a space heated only by a fireplace.

Orff was fascinated by the Medieval period of history and by the poetry of *Carmina Burana*. He chose poems that illuminated Medieval life and thinking, using their original languages. The texts are early versions of modern German

and French, and so-called "vulgar" Latin, which was much less formal than the Latin used in the religious services of the early Christian churches. These were the languages spoken by ordinary European people eight or more centuries ago. Those who attend the concert will receive complete translations of the texts.

Fate or luck seemed to control nearly every aspect of 12<sup>th</sup> century life—do you ever feel that way today? In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, like the modern TV game, "Wheel of Fortune," good or bad events seem to be controlled by random luck: the wheel turns, and good things happen; the wheel turns again, and bad takes over. Sometimes it may seem that way today, even though we understand the physical world much better than anyone could in the year 1159—will the turn of the wheel bring good health or illness? Love or loneliness? Wealth or poverty? Life or death? Is it luck or is it destiny?

## Let's Look at the Music and Words

**Carmina Burana**  
**Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi**

I. O Fortuna

Pesante  
**3/8** ♩ = 60

Carl Orff  
1895 - 1982

**poco stringendo**

Soprani  
ff O For - tu - na, vel - ut Lu - na sta - tu va - ri - a - bi - lis,

Contralti  
ff O For - tu - na, vel - ut Lu - na sta - tu va - ri - a - bi - lis,

Coro  
Tenori  
ff O For - tu - na, vel - ut Lu - na sta - tu va - ri - a - bi - lis,

Bassi  
ff O For - tu - na, vel - ut Lu - na sta - tu va - ri - a - bi - lis,

Pesante  
**3/8** ♩ = 60

**poco stringendo**

**3/8** ♩ = 120 - 132

The image shows a page of a musical score for 'O Fortuna' from Carl Orff's 'Carmina Burana'. It features five vocal staves (Soprani, Contralti, Coro, Tenori, Bassi) and a piano accompaniment. The score is in 3/8 time, marked 'Pesante' with a tempo of ♩ = 60. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are 'O Fortuna, velut Luna statum variabilis'. The piano part includes a 'poco stringendo' section. The bottom of the page shows a tempo change to ♩ = 120 - 132.

## Let's Look at the Music and Words

In the first song of *Carmina Burana*, the poet cries, "O Fortune, changeable as the moon, you rise and fall. First you mistreat us, then you give us what we want; like the sun melts the ice, you dissolve both poverty and power in the same way." The subtitle, *Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi*, translates as "Fortune, Empress of the World"—power is merely luck, it claims!

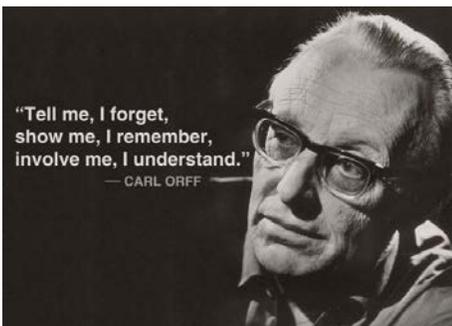
In the musical example above, find the words, "O Fortuna, velut luna statu variabilis..." Notice that each choir section, *Soprani* (sopranos—high women's voices), *Contralti* (alto—low women's voices), *Tenori* (high men's voices), and *Bassi* (low men's voices) sings those words and has its own musical staff (line) to follow. The four are connected by a bolded bracket marked *Coro* (chorus). The two staves on the bottom are also bracketed, and are what is called a piano reduction: the notes and rhythms of the orchestra are rewritten so they can be played by the piano for rehearsal purposes. When *Carmina Burana* is performed with an orchestra (as this performance will be), the conductor uses a very large score that has a separate staff for each instrument in the orchestra.

The composer has given instructions about the tempo (rate of speed) and style he expects from the performers. The word *Pesante* (pay-zan-tay), written under "O Fortuna," means to play and sing heavily, like a peasant might walk. Below *Pesante*,  $3/\circ$  means there are 3 whole notes in every measure, a very uncommon time signature, which is placed in an unusual spot on the score.

Next to  $3/\circ$  is "half-note=60," which tells the performer to count one half note each second, which is a very slow tempo. The *ff* above each staff means to sing and play very loudly. This volume is emphasized even more by the mark  $>$ , which means to attack each note heavily. These instructions and marks show you that this opening section is loud, slow, and heavy. At the end of the line, find the words *poco stringendo*; this means "speed up a little," but the final notes have *fermatas* above them, the mark that looks like a curved line with a dot in it. That means you are to hold the final chord, and then take a big breath or slight pause (the comma) before the next section. The next part, by the way, is very fast and rhythmic.

Look at the piano part, which is a reduction of the music for the orchestra. The bottom notes are played by the low instruments of the orchestra and the timpani (large drums); "*8b*" means to play an octave lower than the written notes (an octave has the same letter name, but sounds 8 notes lower or higher than a given note); at the same time there are very high notes for the right hand, which imitate the high instruments of the orchestra. The music of the orchestra is also extremely loud and heavy.

The "O Fortuna" section of *Carmina Burana* is extremely well known. You have probably heard it in a commercial or a movie. Listen and watch on You Tube: there are dozens of recordings and videos available, taken from concerts by fine choruses and orchestras, but you will also find some unusual settings or versions, like the one used in the movie "Excalibur," a flash mob video, a "metal" version, and the ones from the movies "Troy," "The Fifth Element," "Requiem for the 300," etc. Enjoy!



## Carl Orff: a long and full life



Carl Orff as a child in Germany, probably about 1910.

Carl Orff was born in Munich, Germany in 1895, and died there in 1982, but his fame is world-wide. His greatest contributions to the world are the extremely popular choral work *Carmina Burana*, and a system of music education called the “Orff Method” that is practiced in most of the countries of the western world.



Young children playing the beautiful xylophones Orff developed for his music education methods.

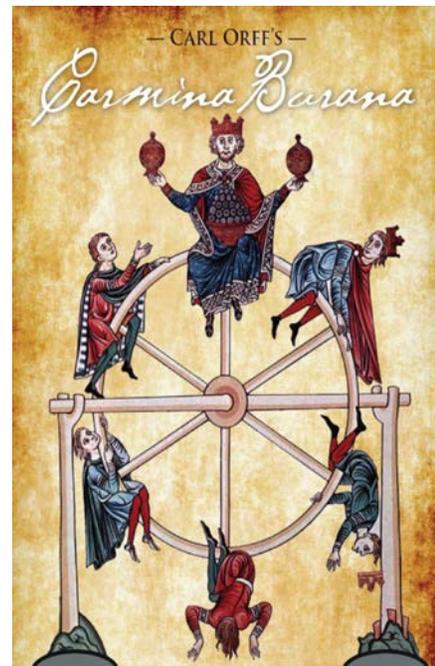
Orff went to the Munich Academy of Music. As an adult, he co-founded a school of gymnastics, music, and dance, where he and other teachers explored the relationship between movement and music. Orff believed that rhythm and movement are basic to every person and essential for life, a concept that is often neglected in traditional education. Music

teachers that are trained to teach the Orff Method use specially built instruments (drums, xylophones, and bells) that Orff designed. These instruments are easy to play and have a beautiful sound. One can make beautiful music the first time he or she tries. Students of the Orff Method are taught to improvise (compose music on the spot), to conduct, and to dance.



Carl Orff in his later years

Do you see the relationship between Orff’s work in music education and the composition of *Carmina Burana*?



An ancient image of the Wheel of Fate – the king is on top, the former kings have been replaced and are falling, while others try to ride the wheel up when it turns again.