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## Arts & Entertainment

Sunday, January 16

### 'Carmina Burana' based on bawdy poems

By Charles Passy, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer  
Sunday, January 16, 2000

Here's what the legendary conductor Leopold Stokowski had to say about Carl Orff's Carmina Burana when he introduced the work to New York and Boston audiences in 1954: "I believe that Orff's genius -- an extraordinarily personal blending of pagan and modern feeling -- will be recognized by future generations as a major departure in the development of the art of music."

And here's what Florida Philharmonic Music Director James Judd has to say on the occasion of the orchestra's performances of the choral classic this week: "It's a hugely wonderful, empty work. It's sheer entertainment."

In a way, both conductors are right. Carmina Burana, which premiered in 1937 when the German-born Orff was 42, is now recognized as one of the quintessential musical testaments of the 20th century. Combining the ritualistic modernism of Stravinsky with an almost minimalist aesthetic, it served as a model for numerous other composers, including such greats from the late 20th century as Philip Glass and Henryk Gorecki.

But it's a work of disarming simplicity and ribald pleasures -- and thus one of a handful of classical pieces that have truly crossed over into the pop mainstream. You can hear Carmina Burana almost everywhere these days: in soundtracks to movies ranging from Excalibur to The Doors to The General's Daughter. In dance clubs, where it's often mixed with a disco beat. Even Michael Jackson used it to open his Dangerous tour.

And if you caught the trailer to the South Park movie, that's Carl Orff's music that was accompanying the news of Kenny's death. Of course, Carmina Burana has become such a fixture in movie trailers, its usage in this instance was intended to mock its usage elsewhere. It's like a sure-fire way of saying, "Attention must be paid."

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"I think it goes to the same reason that people like Wagner," says Dan Goldwasser, an editor of the Soundtrack.net Web site. "It's large, powerful music that captures the essence of an emotion."

### Connections to Hitler's regime

But most of the listeners who have heard Carmina Burana in a pop context -- and even then, they're probably hearing only the opening chorus, O Fortuna, its most famous excerpt -- are likely to know little about the full, hourlong work or its composer. Indeed, even classical buffs may be caught off guard when they hear details about Orff's past, including his connections to Hitler's regime and his ground-breaking educational methodology combining music and movement.

And if anyone bothered to read an English translation of the lyrics to Carmina Burana, which are in Latin and what's called Middle High German, they might need to brace themselves. They're not exactly G-rated.

"If the news went out that all these commercial forces are using this obscene work, it would be rather amusing," says Judd. "An obscene work by a Nazi, no less."

Carmina Burana is based on a group of poems from the 13th century; the title translates as Songs of Beuren, a reference to a region in Germany where they supposedly originated. Written by defrocked monks and minstrels, they are hearty tales of love, sex, drinking and gambling -- the very stuff that defined medieval times.

### Distinct musical vision

By contrast, Orff (1895-1982) was hardly that adventurous. A devout Roman Catholic and lifelong resident of Munich, he was a man who, in the words of one of his musical associates, "loved the simplicity of life."

"His house was not filled with precious antiques, but farmer's furniture," says John van Kesteren, a world-renowned tenor, now based in Tequesta, who worked with Orff numerous times.

But Orff had a distinct musical vision. Although clearly a product of the 20th century, he was not a modernist per se and refused to follow the atonal path of Berg, Webern and Schoenberg. Instead, he preferred a sonic world of almost primitive passion: While he was clearly influenced by Stravinsky in this regard -- it's no accident the Florida Philharmonic will play The Rite of Spring on the same program -- he was also drawn to non-Western music, especially the rhythmically rich African and Indonesian traditions.

Orff established his career in the 1920s when he created the Orff-Schulwerk method, an educational discipline that combined music, dance and gymnastics. Even to this day, it remains a popular way to introduce children to the arts: "Orff instruments" are frequently found in kindergartens and pre-schools.

In the '30s, Orff sought to expand his concepts, bringing them to the stage for an adult audience. Despite the fact that it's typically presented today in a concert setting, Orff always intended Carmina Burana to be a work of theater, a "scenic cantata" as he called it, making full use of dance and scenery. The piece is subtitled, Profane songs for singers and vocal chorus with instruments and magical pictures.

But because of the strength of the music -- Orff set about 25 of the 250 poems in the manuscript -- orchestras have been able to dispense with the visual accompaniment. Responding to the primal message of the text, Orff created a ferocious animal of a score. The appeal can be summarized in a word: "Carmina has the rhythms," says van Kesteren of the pulsating piece. And given the emphasis that pop music has

placed on rhythm over melody, the tenor says it's no surprise that it's found a place in the mainstream.

Not that the German public always appreciated Orff, particularly the Nazis, who found the pagan element in his music very "un-German." Van Kesteren believes that Orff wrote the work partly as a diatribe against the Nazis. "He saw it as a fight against the establishment. The Nazis were very clean . . . Orff was much more interested in having fun," he says.

Still, Orff did make his peace with the German government and accepted musical commissions from Hitler's henchmen, even if he tried to distance himself from the Nazis after World War II. Van Kesteren believes, "Orff was a free-thinking man . . . He was neutral as far as he told me," but he adds that the composer might have gone along with the Nazis for the sake of survival.

#### Children's chorus

Is Carmina Burana a challenge to perform? Not really, says Judd, who explains that the music has a blunt, straight-from-the-page quality. "It's in rather block form," he adds, noting that the rhythms rarely change mid-section. The biggest difficulty the conductor has is finding a good children's chorus -- again, Orff's roots were in education, so it's no surprise he included a place for young singers in Carmina. And the conductor notes that the solo vocal parts -- for soprano, tenor and baritone -- are "grotesquely high," placing some unique casting demands.

Van Kesteren adds that tenors often make the mistake of trying to "finesse" the work. In contrast, Orff wrote the part that way precisely because he wanted it to sound crude. "It should not be sung beautifully," he emphasizes, noting he just accepted an engagement to sing it in Ottawa next year.

#### 'Carmina' clones

While Carmina established Orff's international reputation, it was hardly the end of the line for the composer, who lived well into his 80s. The choral work became the basis of a trilogy, Trionfi, that included Catulli Carmina (Songs of Catullus, 1943) and Trionfo di Afrodite (The Triumph of Aphrodite, 1953). There were other choral works and operas as well, but nothing that enjoyed the reputation of Carmina, which was also the basis for a 1959 ballet by John Butler and a 1970s film by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (Van Kesteren appeared in it). And then there are the ancillary usages -- in movies, TV, etc.

It's gotten to the point that filmmakers have started asking composers to create Carmina clones in order to avoid paying royalties, explains Dan Goldwasser, the soundtrack expert. Thought you heard Carl Orff's score in the Civil War movie Glory? Actually, it's a knock-off by Titanic composer James Horner.

"Sometimes it sounds like it, but it isn't it. They change four notes," says Goldwasser.

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CARL ORFF'S "CARMINA BURANA": PRESENTED BY THE FLORIDA PHILHARMONIC: At the Kravis Center, 8 p.m. today; at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, 8 p.m. Thursday. Tickets: \$17-\$80. Phone: (800) 226-1812.

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