

CARMINA BURANA AFRICANA

Program Notes

The Bach Choir's presentation of Carmina Burana features African percussion instruments and dancers for a unique experience for audience and performers. The coupling of African rhythm instruments and dance is consistent with Carl Orff's philosophies of integrating rhythm, movement, tonality and words into a total theatrical experience.

Carl Orff co-founded a school in 1924 with the dancer, Dorothea Gunther in Munich. The school sought to train future teachers in movement and creativity. His ideas about the importance of rhythm and movement were developed during his tenure as music director at the Gunther-Schule. Following World War II, Carl applied his ideas to childhood music education. In the 1950's, Orff's book 'Music for Children' was published that explained his method. Children are introduced to music using methods that they can easily assimilate. Concepts are learned through singing, chanting, dance, drama and playing special percussion instruments. Orff was one of the key innovators that influenced how music is taught to children today.

Carl Orff opened a workshop in the late 1940's to design a group of instruments that would help children to experience music-making in ensembles. The keyed instruments such as xylophones have removable tone bars. An instrument can be programmed with just the notes that the player can accommodate at their level of skill. Other instruments included recorders, drums, bells, castanets, bongos, cymbals and triangles. Orff drew inspiration from classic as well as ethnic instruments.

In the mid 1930's, Carl Orff applied the same principles that inspired his educational work to a collection of thirteenth century poems written by a band of roving students and lapsed clerics known as the Goliards. The result was Carmina Burana that premiered in 1937 and secured his fame. The songs have been characterized as counter culture protests and deal with themes that include the fickleness of fortune, love, and the joy of nature.

The work opens and closes with the lament to the goddess Fortuna about the joys and frustrations of life's fortunes and fates. The other major section titles are translated: Spring; On the Green; In the Tavern; The Court of Love; and Blanziflor et Helena. Most of the melodic style is taken from Gregorian chant. The rhythms are relatively simple but powerful. There are numerous examples of Orff's genius where he integrates the context of the poem with the rhythm and music. In Flora Silva (no.7), the women sing about a lover who has ridden away on horseback. The rhythms reflect the galloping of a horse as it rides away.

Orff avoids the use of counterpoint melodies and complex harmonies. He utilizes repetition of rhythms throughout the piece and provides variations of 2,3, and 4 beat measures. African music is often characterized by similar rhythms and simpler harmonies. African dance like all dance reflects the rhythm in the music as well as utilizing whole body movements to express the ideas. The pairing of Carmina Burana with African percussion and dance appears to be a natural fit. Let us know what you think.