

CARMINA BURANA

CARL ORFF

LATIN TEXT
WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION,
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY
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Foreword.

After the dissolution of Benediktbeuern Monastery, Upper Bavaria, a C13th anthology of Medieval Latin poems was transferred to the Hof-Bibliothek, Munich, but never catalogued. In 1803 it was rediscovered and found to contain the world's largest collection of Medieval Latin secular poetry. 43 are marked to be sung. The first modern edition was by Schmeller in 1847, but in 1931 the first volume of Hilka and Schuman's authoritative edition was published. Carl Orff's musical selection is dated 1937.

Meanwhile, in 1926, a young PhD named Helen Waddell published a highly romanticised account of 'The Wandering Scholars', which became a best-selling Penguin paperback. I cannot decide whether she was exceptionally naive or exceptionally cunning, but all the great authorities from Germany seem to have written to her to tell her how wrong she was. Usually the PhDs do all the work and the professors take all the credit, but in this case Helen Waddell was able to thank them all prettily in her 6th edition of 1932. So Carl Orff's musical setting of this obscure Latin poetry came to a ready-made English audience.

Reading *The Carmina Burana* may be compared to a stroll along the sea-shore: the beautiful wet pebbles which may turn out to be dull and uninteresting when you take them home; the exquisite little wild flowers which could never win a modern flower show; curiously-shaped driftwood which might once have graced a sailing-ship; patterned spirals of shells which lack the living bodies. We admire them only as *objets Trouves* - but what a wonderful experience, nonetheless! We may miss some of the rare examples an expert would find, but we have the more exhilarating experience of being an explorer in unfamiliar territory.

In Carl Orff the *Carmina Burana* found its rightful arranger/composer: traditional, modern, eclectic and appropriately over-the-top. I hope you will find the same pleasure that I have found in this work.

The poems and songs are grouped in a cycle, or rather three interlocking cycles: 1) The cycle of the Church year, represented by Shrove Tuesday, Easter, Whitsun and Christmas; 2) The cycle of the seasons as shown by the flowers of Spring, usually about Easter and the greening of the woods (traditionally May Day); and 3) The cycle of human life represented by Summer courtship, Christmas parties which lead to betrothals and complete the cycle with an Easter marriage. But all these are *Icantonies profanae*, songs outside the church, for they are the holiday celebrations which are associated with the great Church occasions of Passiontide, Pentecost and Advent.

My translations are mainly intended to be literally accurate, but I could not resist the doggerel verse of No.14, 'In Taberna Quando Sumus.'

Acknowledgements.

Like most English writers in this field I acknowledge an enormous debt to Helen Waddell ['Wandering Scholars' and 'Medieval Latin Lyrics']; to G.S.Lewis ['The Allegory of Love']; and to Peter Dronke ['The Medieval Love Lyric' and 'Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric']. However, my emphasis on pagan and Christian festivals comes from my Classical education and Sir James George Frazer ['The Golden Bough']

That is all you need to know, but if you are interested to explore further, please read on.....

Notes.

EXORDIUM.

O Fortuna. The cycle of the seasons, the cycle of man's life, the cycle of man's fortunes and the cycle of the Church year are all intermingled in this opening and closing number. Gambling was, of course, frowned on by the Church, but on special occasions there was licence: these occasions were usually Christmas (the Saturnalia), and the summer festival (Jupiter's festival was July 7th, but Churches had their own Saint's Day or their traditional 'Wakes Week'). Dicing had the extra stigma of pagan names for each throw, so the wheel of Fortune was less objectionable.

Fortune plango. Another wheel of fortune song. If Hecuba is a euphemism for Hecate, queen of Halloween, the king would be the May King.

I PRIMO VERE.

Spring does not arrive at the same time in Southern Italy as in Northern Britain, Easter is a movable feast, some years are later than others, and by the C12th the Julian Calendar was about nine days out of phase; so it is not surprising that there are various different Invocations to Spring in the Carmina Burana, three of which are set here. The main outlines, however, follow the pattern of Virgil's poem, The Georgics (Book II, 323-345).

UF DEM ANGER.

The greening of the woods was an old pagan festival, connected with the Green Man, and leading to May Day, where dancing round the Maypole is thought to be the relic of an old fertility ritual. This collection has both invocations to the woods, and courtship dancing. 'Ring dancing', where the girls and boys dance in separate circles, tease and taunt each other, and finally pair up, still occurs in a few places in Europe. The Queen of England in poem 10 is thought to be Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152, when she made a Royal progress through France to become Queen of England's Henry II (who was responsible for the martyrdom of Thomas Becket.) Presumably the original version was in Latin; the rhythm of this German fragment is not unlike 'Here we go round the mulberry bush' and so fits into this section of dancing.

II IN TABERNA.

'**Estuans Interius**' This poem, called 'The Archpoet's Confession', was originally dedicated to Reginald von Dassel, Barbarossa's Chancellor, while he was Archbishop-elect of Cologne, somewhere between 1160 and 1165, but it was regarded as one of the greatest poems of Medieval Latin and has found its way into various collections, including Carmina Burana in the next century. Although we do not know the name of this Archpoet, we may hazard a guess as to the man who first performed it: at the end, the disreputable figure of the monk [expelled from his monastery for bad behaviour], would have thrown back his hood to reveal a leading Church figure, perhaps the canon of the Archbishop-elect himself; for this is a poem for Topsy-turvy Day, when a young nobody would be made Master of the Feast. In England this day was traditionally Christmas Eve, when the Lord of Misrule might preside at the festivities, and it derives from a similar custom in the Saturnalia of Ancient Rome, [itself the relic of a grim custom in Pre-historic times of appointing a slave or criminal as King for one day and then making him a human sacrifice as a substitute for the real king]. However, the Saturnalia,

festival of the old and dying Sun, was mirrored in mid Summer by the festival of Jupiter, the Sun in its glory, and we know that Reginald held a great festival in Vienne one Summer, so - who knows? - it is just possible that we shall hear this song in Wiesbaden on the exact 835th anniversary of its first performance.

