



Orff Carmina Burana

CHEN REISS · REGINALD MOBLEY · ANDRZEJ FILOŃCZYK
AUDIVI · DETROIT OPERA YOUTH CHORUS
DETROIT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA · JADER BIGNAMINI



Carl Orff (1895–1982)

Carmina Burana (1937)

Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi (Fortune, Empress of the World)

1	I. O Fortuna	2. 33
2	II. Fortune plango vulnera	2. 49

I. Primo vere (In Springtime)

3	III. Veris leta facies	4. 54
4	IV. Omnia sol temperat	2. 26
5	V. Ecce gratum	2. 36

Uf dem anger (On the Green/In the Meadow)

6	VI. Tanz	1. 43
7	VII. Floret silva nobilis	3. 05
8	VIII. Chramer, gip die varwe mir	3. 24
9	IX. Reie. Swaz hie gat umbe – Chume, chum, geselle min – Swaz hie gat umbe	4. 45
10	X. Were diu werlt alle min	0. 51

II. In Taberna (In the Tavern)

11	XI. Estuans interius	2. 21
12	XII. Olim lacus colueram	3. 37
13	XIII. Ego sum abbas	1. 38
14	XIV. In taberna quando sumus	3. 07

III. Cour d’amours (The Court of Love)

15	XV. Amor volat undique	3. 29
16	XVI. Dies, nox et omnia	2. 17
17	XVII. Stetit puella	1. 53
18	XVIII. Circa mea pectora	2. 01
19	XIX. Si puer cum puellula	0. 57
20	XX. Veni, veni, venias	0. 57
21	XXI. In trutina	2. 07
22	XXII. Tempus est iocundum	2. 04
23	XXIII. Dulcissime	0. 38

Blanzifor et Helena

24	XXIV. Ave formosissima	1. 59
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Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi

25	XXV. O Fortuna (<i>reprise</i>)	2. 44
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Total playing time: 61. 06

Chen Reiss, soprano

Reginald Mobley, countertenor

Andrzej Filończyk, baritone

Audivi, chorus | Detroit Opera Youth Chorus, children’s chorus

Detroit Symphony Orchestra

Jader Bignamini, conductor

Detroit Symphony Orchestra

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Jader Bignamini

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Roma Duncan*

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Monica Fosnaugh

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Triniti Rives

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Recording Carmina Burana with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in a live concert setting was an unforgettable experience. The power of the music, combined with the artistry of the DSO and strength of human voices, created something truly extraordinary in the hall.

Performing this work with the DSO, two choruses, and three outstanding vocal soloists gave the piece an immense scale — grand, dramatic, and deeply emotional.

For a conductor, Carmina Burana demands total engagement. It is music sustained by connection — between conductor, musicians, singers, and audience. In a live recording, that connection feels especially immediate, shaped by every nuance of sound and silence.

The musicians of the DSO are remarkable artists. Their commitment, expression, and trust allowed us to reach new heights together. This recording captures not only a performance, but a shared artistic journey.

The result is thrilling.

Jader Bignamini



Andrzej Filończyk

Carl Orff (1895–1982) said Fortuna, the goddess of fate, was favorable when a title in an antiquarian's catalog leapt out at him: *Carmina Burana*. The first word, accented on the first syllable, is Latin for "songs," while the second refers to the Benediktbeuern Abbey in Bavaria, where a trove of manuscripts was discovered in 1803. The texts were written mainly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by anonymous Goliards, disaffected clergy and itinerant students who wrote iconoclastic poetry in several languages, mainly Latin. Orff had similar sensibilities, breaking from his family's Catholicism and causing a rift with his uncle by pursuing music. He received the book (ironically) on Maundy Thursday, 1934, and with archivist Michel Hofmann (1903–1968) began selecting portions for a scenic cantata.

The collection opens with an illustration of the Wheel of Fate, representing an inexorable cycle of luck and tragedy, which is the subject of Orff's opening and closing chorus, "O Fortuna." Fatalism is present in Orff's early compositions, and he evoked the Wheel of Fate again in *Die Bernauerin* (1947), which sides with love over oppressive social order. For his final stage work, the apocalyptic *De temporum fine comoedia* (1973), Orff returned to a poem he had considered for *Carmina Burana* about banishing demons. Unseen, malignant powers are common in Orff's oeuvre, suggesting fearful misgivings toward authority that no doubt were exacerbated by forced military service in 1917, during which a trench cave-in caused him with lasting trauma.

Orff gave *Carmina Burana* the subtitle *Cantiones profanae cantoribus et choris cantandae comitantibus instrumentis atque imaginibus magicis*, "secular songs to be sung by soloists and chorus,

accompanied by instruments and magical images." The first production, which opened 8 June 1937 in Frankfurt am Main, was staged with dance, but the piece was next heard in a concert hall; it is also captivating without "magical images." The premiere marked the first time Orff felt he had achieved his goals, and he propagated a story about euphorically telling his publisher to destroy his earlier work, which he later conceded was meant lightly. He had nothing withdrawn at that time.

Precursors to "O Fortuna" are scattered throughout Orff's earlier work, from the 1911 song cycle *Eliland* (texts by Karl Stieler) to cantatas setting Franz Werfel and Bertolt Brecht from 1930–31 (withdrawn in 1933 due to Nazi bans of those authors). The opening of "O Fortuna" incorporates a ritornello Orff added to his 1925 reworking of Claudio Monteverdi and Ottavio Rinuccini's *Lamento d'Arianna* — he frequently employed quotations, and the

first measure of the chorus also resembles the climax of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and the phrase to which Desdemona sings *malvagia sorte* (cruel fate) in Giuseppe Verdi and Arrigo Boito's *Otello*.

Carmina Burana expands the orchestra with two pianos, celesta, and a seven-person percussion section with a pivotal role, as in the flute-timpani duet in No. 6 and castanets solo in No. 22. Nos. 20 and 22, scored for piano and percussion, recall and even quote Igor Stravinsky's *Les noces*. Orff radically departed from the Austro-Germanic tradition of chromaticism and polyphony: many movements are purely diatonic, often built upon the alternation or combination of adjacent triads. Orff drew from the "elemental music" (often called "primitivist") of his *Schulwerk*, a pedagogical method fostering creativity that he cultivated with colleagues at the Günther-Schule in Munich, especially Gunild Keetman (1904–1990). While *Carmina Burana* had great

success in the Third Reich, Orff's greatest influences included a Jewish musicologist forced into exile, Curt Sachs (1881–1959), who believed polyphony obscured melody and rhythm.

After the monumental opening of "O Fortuna," the chorus sings over an ostinato (a repeated figure of four notes, D–C–A–D), evoking an endlessly rotating wheel and laying out the work's main tonal areas. The second movement warns kings of inevitable downfall. Nos. 3–5 thaw the world from winter to spring (Orff's favorite time of year), beginning with hushed music from a reduced ensemble. The opening chord of "O Fortuna" is echoed in muted violas under the baritone, and each strophe of the lively "Ecce gratum" ends with a figure (C–D–C–A) related to the ostinato.

The next section, set outdoors, begins with a traditional Bavarian dance, the *Zwiefach*. No. 7 features text-painting of a lover



Jader Bignamini & Reginald Mobley

riding away on horseback, and No. 8 boldly reframes part of a passion play with Mary Magdalene. No. 9 comprises a round dance almost entirely built from C major and D minor triads, a chorus about dancing girls with no need of a man (a queer reading is plausible), and a largely pentatonic interlude for lovers. No. 10 declares all the territory in the world is not as valuable as being in the Queen of England's arms, with fanfares and drumroll enhancing the exuberant irreverence.

Nos. 11-14 are set in the world-weary tavern, beginning with a bitter number for the baritone with tango rhythm in the orchestra and musical allusions to the "Dies irae" plainchant. The tenor (countertenor on this recording) discomfitingly sings from the perspective of a swan roasting on a spit and being served for dinner. The vocal line is mostly octatonic (based on a scale alternating half steps and whole steps), with

grotesque and ominous orchestral effects. The baritone, marked *beffardo assai* (very mocking), blasphemously declares himself an abbot of Cockaigne, a topsy-turvy land of hedonism, flanked by blaring brass and clangorous percussion with bell plate and ratchet. In the sardonic following chorus, wayward characters are toasted alongside the pope and king, and the enumeration of drinkers includes clergy and soldiers. The depredations of fate are present through echoes of the opening chord of "O Fortuna" and the tam-tam at the climax. The final cries of defiance are marked *scatenato* (unchained).

Next is the court of love, introducing children's chorus and soprano. In No. 15, the oboe has an expressive chromatic line, and the soprano's section is primarily octatonic. The lovelorn baritone then sings over violins playing off-beats, representing his unsettled state of mind, and floats melismas above a major-mode version of the "Fortuna" chord. The soprano's

number about a sighing woman in red is accompanied by colorful string harmonics and tango rhythm. No. 18, which quotes the first movement of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, has the baritone at his most frustrated, and the *a cappella* No. 19, possibly inspired by the Comedian Harmonists, have some of the work's most ribald text. After the energetic but untranslatable exclamations of No. 20, the soprano sings the introspective "In trutina" about the dilemma between chastity and carnal love, the strophes ending with echoes of No. 15. The soprano's diffidence and baritone's desire come to a head in the propulsive No. 22, the only movement with all singers except the (long since digested) tenor. It stops abruptly, and the soprano gives herself to her lover in an ecstatic melisma ascending to high D, with text from the same poem as "In trutina."



Chen Reiss & Jader Bignamini

No. 24 is structured as a paean to the Virgin Mary, the three glockenspiel parts imitating sacring bells, but subversively leads to the apotheosis of Blancheffleur, Helen of Troy, and Venus. The culmination is cut down by the tam-tam, signaling the inevitable, despairing return of “O Fortuna.” Orff wrote a chorus to follow, ending with aggressive amens, but cut it when he realized the piece must end full circle.

Carmina Burana is the first part of a triptych called *Trionfi*, followed by *Catulli Carmina* (1943) and *Trionfo di Afrodite* (1953). The former includes Orff’s own erotic Latin, omitted from the first publication of the libretto, and the latter graphically depicts a marital consummation, giving equal voice to male and female pleasure with text by Sappho. Orff’s aim was not prurient; his triptych earnestly advocates for freedom and love. Yet it ends with a chorus from Euripides’s

Hippolytus about love controlling humans, like Fortuna — again coming full circle.

Orff respected diverse styles and was unconcerned about fitting into any modernist school, leading to misgivings from academics and fellow composers, although the eminent György Ligeti praised his independence. That *Carmina Burana* is the only work composed in the Third Reich that achieved universal recognition has led to misconceptions it represents “Nazi music,” although it was one of many successful compositions during that period and there was no unified Nazi aesthetic. After the war, Orff was classified “‘Grey C’, acceptable” by Bertram Schaffner (1912–2010), a psychiatrist with the Office of Military Government, United States, who perceived his quiet antipathy to Nazism but noted his career had blossomed under the Third Reich. *Die Bernauerin* and *De temporum fine comoedia* demonstrate Orff was troubled by questions of societal guilt and aware of his own implication.

When *Musical America* correspondent Geraldine de Courcy heard *Carmina Burana* alongside various propaganda at its 1937 premiere, she called it “[t]he one bright gem” of the festival. Following the three concerts on 7–9 November 2025 used for this recording, the audience’s grateful enthusiasm proved the piece can transcend any political ideologies that try to use it.

Andrew Kohler

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on PENTATONE**



Detroit Symphony Orchestra
Jader Bignamini

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