

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
May 5-6-7, 2023
97th Season / Subscription Program 8
J. Michael Allsen

This concert opens with the *Symphony No. 3* by Florence Price. Price's music has undergone a revival across the country recently, and this is the first performance of one of her works by the Madison Symphony Orchestra. The orchestra is then joined by soprano Jeni Houser, tenor Justin Kroll, baritone Ben Edquist, Madison Youth choirs, and the Madison Symphony Chorus for Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, a powerful setting of texts from medieval Germany.

Florence Price, an American composer whose music has undergone a renaissance in recent years, composed her *Symphony No. 3* in the late 1930s. Like much of her music, this work subtly references various styles of traditional Black music.

Florence Price

Born: April 9, 1887, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Died: June 3, 1953, Chicago, Illinois.

Symphony No. 3 in C minor

- **Composed:** 1938-40.
- **Premiere:** November 6, 1940, by the Detroit Civic Orchestra, Valter Poole conducting
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 30:00.

Background

Price struggled for recognition, even after her *Symphony No. 1* was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1932. Like many of her works, the *Symphony No. 3* was performed during her lifetime, but then largely forgotten until it was finally performed again and published decades after her death.

Florence Price was born Florence Smith in Little Rock, into a well-respected family. (Her father was the only African American dentist in this strictly segregated city.) She was able to study at the New England Conservatory of Music, graduating in 1906. Though the conservatory apparently did accept Black students at the time, Price initially enrolled as a "Mexican." She taught for several years in

Atlanta and Little Rock, but following a lynching in Little Rock in 1927, her family resettled in Chicago, where she would spend the rest of her life. It was in Chicago that Price finally began to have success as a composer. However, she struggled financially, particularly after she divorced her abusive husband in 1931, leaving her single mother to two daughters. Price wrote advertising jingles and popular songs under a pen name and played organ in silent movie theaters to pay the bills, but her classical compositions began to attract attention. This culminated in 1932, when her *Symphony No. 1* was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—the first composition by a Black woman to be played by a major orchestra. Though her music continued to be played and championed by star performers like Marian Anderson, she struggled to make ends meet throughout her life. In 1943 she wrote to Boston Symphony Orchestra conductor Serge Koussevitsky that: “I have two handicaps. I am a woman and I have some Negro blood in my veins.”

Price’s music was not entirely forgotten after her death, but much of it was simply lost. This changed in 2009, when 30 boxes of her papers and scores were discovered in a derelict, unoccupied house in St. Anne, Illinois. (This had been Price’s summer cottage, but was apparently abandoned after her death.) This collection included some 200 pieces, including many previously lost works: two violin concertos, her *Symphony No. 4*, and several other scores. This has sparked a tremendous renewal of interest in her music in the last dozen years, with many performances and recordings, and newly-available published editions of her works.

The Depression-era Works Progress Administration, designed to provide employment for millions of jobless Americans, is of course best remembered for its enormous public works projects, its work in state and national parks, and other infrastructure construction. However, the WPA also provided support to musicians through its Federal Music Project. (In Madison, for example, the FMP-sponsored Madison Concert Orchestra gave dozens of radio concerts and free concerts in the city’s schools and parks in the late 1930s.) The FMP also provided funding to composers, and Price’s *Symphony No. 3* was one of its commissions. She composed the work in 1938, and made several revisions in 1940, before its premiere by the FMP-sponsored Detroit Civic Orchestra. The performance was a success, but despite very positive reviews and even an enthusiastic mention of the piece in first lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s nationally-syndicated newspaper column, the symphony was not performed again until 2001 and was finally published in 2008.

What You'll Hear

The symphony is in four movements:

- A traditionally-organized opening, with a slow introduction and which then develops two contrasting ideas.
- A serene slow movement.
- A fast-paced movement based upon a traditional Black dance of African origin.
- A turbulent finale.

In writing about the *Symphony No.3*, Price said that it “is intended to be Negroid in character and expression. In it no attempt, however, has been made to project Negro music solely in the purely traditional manner. None of the themes are adaptations or derivations of folk songs. The intention behind the writing of this work was a not too deliberate attempt to picture a cross-section of present-day Negro life and thought with its heritage of that which is past, paralleled, or influenced by concepts of the present day.” Her subtle references to Black music begin in the opening bars (*Andante*), a brass chorale with just a tiny tinge of the Blues. The body of the movement (*Allegro*) is in a Classical sonata form, developing two main ideas, a restless main theme, and a lush second theme introduced by horns and trumpets in the style of a Black spiritual. Price develops both ideas extensively, often combining fragments of both before returning to both themes in the recapitulation. A brief flourish from the harp begins a long coda which recalls the opening chorale.

The second movement (*Andante con moto*) is peaceful and meditative: with a lush opening idea leading into a soulful bassoon solo. The opening melody is developed in the middle, eventually in a sumptuous statement by full orchestra. Some elements of the bassoon melody return in the last passage, but the end of the movement is dominated by the placid main theme.

Juba, the title of the third movement, refers to a traditional African American dance with roots extending back to Africa. The Juba is a lively dance usually accompanied by body percussion: claps, stops, and slaps against knees, arms, belly, chest, and cheeks, often known as “hambone.” (Hambone originated at a time when enslaved Africans were forbidden to make or play drums.) Price refers to the Juba in a few of her works, and here it is heard in the jaunty, syncopated texture of the opening. The middle section has a more relaxed feel, with sensuous solo lines, before the Juba dance returns briefly to end the movement.

The last movement (*Scherzo: Finale*) begins with a nervous main idea that comes in waves. This is developed with some startling harmonic twists, in an unrelenting

intense texture. A clarinet/bassoon duet brings the swirling motion to a halt, but only briefly, before it ends with a fierce coda and stern brass chords.

Carl Orff's best-known work, the cantata *Carmina Burana*, sets a collection of colorful late medieval texts.

Carl Orff

Born: July 10, 1895, Munich, Germany.

Died: March 29, 1982, Munich, Germany.

Carmina Burana

- **Composed:** 1935-36.
- **Premiere:** June 8, 1937 in a staged production by the Frankfurt Opera, in Frankfurt, Germany.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1956, 1968, 1989, 1998, 2007, and 2016.
- **Duration:** 59:00.

Background

Carmina Burana, composed in Nazi Germany, reflects an idealized view of medieval life.

During the 12th and 13th centuries, a tremendous body of Latin and vernacular poetry was created by poets collectively known as “goliards.” To group them together under a single name is a bit misleading, however, for the goliards were drawn from every rank of society. The poets include prominent churchmen such as Walter of Châtillon (1135-1176) and Philip, Chancellor of the University of Paris (d.1236), as well as now-nameless monks, students, vagabonds, and minstrels. The poetry is just as variable: there are moralistic and fervidly religious poems, as well as secular lyrics that range from love songs (including worshipful courtly love lyrics, bawdy love songs, and frankly homosexual poetry) to humorous stories and raucous drinking songs. The most famous collection of goliard poetry is the *Carmina Burana* (literally “Songs of Beuren”), a 13th-century collection of over 200 poems that was compiled at the Benedictine monastery in Benediktbeuren, south of Orff's hometown, Munich. This richly-illuminated manuscript was probably compiled for a wealthy abbot of the monastery. Most of its poems are written in Church Latin, but there are several poems in a Bavarian dialect of medieval German, and a few poems that are partially in French (for example, No. 16 in Orff's setting).

Carl Orff's "secular cantata" on texts from the *Carmina Burana* is certainly his best-known work. Orff is a familiar name to many music educators—he was the creator of a systematic method of music education for children, and the composer of an important body of *Schulwerke*, educational music. He enjoyed success as a composer in Germany, but aside from *Carmina Burana*, few of his concert or stage works are heard in this country.

The part of Orff's biography that is most fraught with controversy is his relationship with the Nazis. Unlike German contemporaries like Schoenberg, Hindemith, and many others who fled the Nazi regime, Orff remained in Germany and thrived as a composer throughout the late 1930s and the war years. The spurious claim that he himself was a Nazi has been raised more than once. The stridently modernist music he had composed in the 1920s and early 1930s, and his close association with many leftists had, in fact, marked him as "dangerous" to the Nazis. *Carmina Burana*, composed in 1935-36, is the earliest of Orff's acknowledged works—in 1937, he withdrew from publication everything else he had composed up to that time. He also seems to have suppressed any evidence of his previous ties with leftists and Communists. For example, he carefully soft-pedaled his collaboration with playwright Bertholt Brecht in the 1920s and early 1930s. As detailed in 2000 article by Kim Kowalke, Orff had assisted Brecht in several productions, and clearly considered Brecht a mentor. But in 1933, Brecht fled Germany and his works were considered suspicious. *Carmina Burana* represents a fairly new and simpler musical style that was perfectly in keeping with Nazi cultural policies promoting music that was uplifting and celebrated the spirit of the German *Volk*. Its texts were also in accord with the idealized view of medieval Germany promulgated by the Nazi Party. Most controversial of all, Orff agreed to compose a set of incidental pieces for a 1939 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Frankfurt: music intended by the cultural authorities to replace the standard incidental pieces by the Jewish-born Felix Mendelssohn. (Orff later regretted this decision.) What most of Orff's biographers agree upon is that, if he was guilty of anything during the Nazi regime, it was that he had a good sense of the cultural climate and successfully promoted himself. There is, however, no good evidence that Orff or any of his close associates ever actually became members of the Nazi Party, or subscribed to its ideology.

In speaking about his aesthetic philosophy, Orff remarked that: "I am often asked why I nearly always select old material, fairy tales, and legends for my stage works. I do not see this material as old, but rather as valid. The time element disappears, and only the spiritual element remains. My entire interest is in the

expression of these spiritual realities. I write for the theater to convey a spiritual attitude.” This sensitivity to the underlying nature of the texts is clearly apparent in *Carmina Burana*. Orff’s choice of poems—all thoroughly secular—and his ordering of these texts reflects his understanding of the medieval spirit.

What You’ll Hear

The 25 movements of *Carmina Burana* are divided into three large sections, devoted respectively to springtime, drinking, and love (of all kinds). As a prologue and epilogue, Orff uses a text saluting the goddess Fortune, a symbol of the changeability and fickle nature of luck.

The musical style of *Carmina Burana* and much of Orff’s later work owes a great deal to the neoclassical music of Stravinsky, and echoes of Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* and *Les Noces* are clear. Orff’s style is harmonically simple, with ostinato rhythmic figures repeated over long static harmonies—the entire choral prologue, for example, is set above an unchanging D in the bass. The orchestration is simple, yet colorful: Orff shows a preference for percussive effects that highlight the accents of the text and his own rhythmic figures. Melodic figures are short and frequently repeated, with very little development. There are also moments of pure Romanticism, however, particularly in the baritone’s solo lines. The melodic material used in *Carmina Burana* is, without exception, Orff’s own: he did not use any of the relatively few extant melodies preserved with goliard poetry. His original settings of these 700-year-old lyrics are imbued with both freshness and mystery.

The texts are arranged into three large sections: I. *Spring*, II. *In the Tavern*, and III. *The Court of Love*, and each of these sections is further divided. The first two texts, serving as a prelude to Section I, deal with the most potent symbol of medieval life: the Wheel of Fortune. In countless manuscript illuminations, including a prominent page in the original *Carmina Burana* manuscript, the wheel is shown being manipulated by a capricious Lady Fortune, who raises and lowers the kings, churchmen, and peasants who cling to it. Section I, *Spring*, reflects an idealized and mythological view of Nature and Springtime. Spring was an important medieval metaphor—both for resurrection and for youth—but here the enjoyment of the season is purely sensuous. In a subsection, titled *On the Green* (Nos. 6-10), the outdoor spirit is directed towards thoughts of love and dancing. This subsection contains the only purely orchestral music in *Carmina Burana*: an instrumental *Tanz* that opens the section, and a *Reie* (round-dance) inserted before the chorus *Swaz hie gat umbe*. The four numbers set in the tavern give four different perspectives of medieval merrymaking: drunken musings, feasting (sung from the

perspective of the “feastee,” a roasted swan!), a satire of a drunken clergyman (who invokes the spurious St. Decius, patron saint of gamblers), and finally the drunken and entirely democratic free-for-all of *In taberna quando sumus*. The third and longest section, “Court of Love,” reflects the twofold conception of love common in medieval thought. There is both the lofty ideal of courtly love—chaste longing for an unattainable lady heard in *Dies, nox et omnia*—and openly erotic love in *Si puer cum puellula*. In most of the texts, these two threads are cunningly woven together. This section ends with *Blanchefleur and Helen* (No. 24), a single poem, praising Venus in the same terms often reserved for addresses to the Virgin Mary. A repeat of the opening chorus, *O Fortuna*, serves as a postlude. In returning, Orff neatly encircles *Carmina Burana* within Fortune’s Wheel.

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