



Carmina Burana

Music drawn from an opera about Los Alamos physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer — John Adams’s *Doctor Atomic* — opens this weekend’s concerts. Carl Orff’s ever-popular *Carmina burana* makes up the second half.

JOHN ADAMS

Born 15 February 1947; Worcester, Massachusetts

Doctor Atomic Symphony

Composed: 2007

First performance: 21 August 2007; London, England

Last MSO performance: March 2010; Giancarlo Guerrero, conductor

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes (3rd doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (2nd doubling E-flat clarinet, 3rd doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 4 trumpets (4th doubling piccolo trumpet), 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (chimes, crotale, glockenspiel, bass drum, snare drum, thunder sheet, tam tam, suspended cymbals, tuned gong), harp, celeste, string

Approximate duration: 25 minutes

Born and raised in New England, John Adams learned the clarinet from his father and played in marching bands and community orchestras during his formative years. He began composing at age ten and heard his first orchestral pieces performed while still a teenager. After graduating from Harvard, he moved in 1971 to the San Francisco Bay area where he has lived ever since.

Adams’s orchestral scores are among the most frequently performed and influential compositions by an American since the era of Copland and Bernstein. Works such as *Shaker Loops*, *Harmonielehre*, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, and his Violin Concerto are by now staples of the symphonic repertoire. His operas and oratorios, including *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Doctor Atomic* — many with themes drawn from recent American history — have made a significant impact on the course of contemporary opera and are among the most produced by any living composer. Recent works include the Passion oratorio *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*, *Absolute Jest* (for string quartet and orchestra, based on fragments of Beethoven), and *Scheherazade.2*, a “dramatic symphony for violin and orchestra,” written for Leila Josefowicz.

Doctor Atomic Symphony is a purely instrumental work drawn from the 2005 opera. The following synopsis is reprinted with the kind permission of Boosey & Hawkes:

The symphony is cast in a sustained, 25-minute single-movement arch, not unlike Sibelius’s Seventh Symphony, a work that has had an immense effect on Adams’s compositional thinking. The opening, with its pounding timpani and Varèse-like jagged brass fanfares, conjures a devastated post-nuclear landscape. The frenzied “panic music” that follows comes from one of Act Two’s feverish tableaux that evoke the fierce electrical storm that lashed the test site in the hours before the bomb’s detonation.

The ensuing music is taken from moments that describe the intense activity leading up to the test. One hears the U.S. Army General Leslie Groves, here impersonated in the boorish trombone music, berating both the scientists and his military subordinates, music that gives way to the ritual “corn dance” of the local Tewa Indians. The symphony concludes with an instrumental treatment of the opera’s most memorable moment, a setting (originally for baritone voice, here played by solo trumpet) of John Donne’s holy sonnet, “Batter my heart, three-person’d God.” This is the poem that the physicist hero of the opera, J. Robert Oppenheimer, loved and that inspired him to name the desert test site “Trinity.”

Recommended recording: David Robertson, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (Nonesuch) 🎧

CARL ORFF

Born 10 July 1895; Munich, Germany
Died 29 March 1982; Munich, Germany

Carmina Burana

Composed: 1935-36

First performance: 8 June 1937; Frankfurt, Germany

Last MSO performance: June 2015; Andreas Delfs, conductor

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (2nd and 3rd doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (3rd doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (2nd doubling E-flat clarinet, 3rd doubling bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, chimes, castanets, cymbals, glockenspiel, ratchet, snare drum, sleigh bells, suspended cymbals, tam tam, tambourine, triangle, finger cymbals, xylophone), celeste, 2 pianos, strings

Approximate duration: 59 minutes

The German composer Carl Orff is best remembered for his concepts of music education for children — a developmental approach called Orff Schulwerk that engages mind and body using a mixture of singing, dancing, acting, and playing percussion instruments — and for the “scenic cantata” on tonight’s program.

In 1803, a manuscript was discovered at the abbey of Benediktbeuern, about 40 miles south of Munich. It contained c200 secular poems penned by the goliards, peripatetic monks and scholars active in the early medieval period. Set in Latin, old French, and old German, their topics range from personal tragedy to raucous drinking songs to orgiastic rites to mock piety.

Johann Schmeller published this codex in 1847, in a collection he titled *Carmina burana* (“Songs of Beuern”). Orff first encountered these libidinous lyrics in 1935. He was instantly captured by their dramatic possibilities. He chose 24 poems and cast them into three sections, with “O Fortuna” (the same text and music both times) serving as the supporting pillars at the very beginning and the very end. The structure of the piece looks like this:

- O Fortuna
- I. Prima vere (Springtime)/Uf dem anger (On the Green)
- II. In tabera (In the Tavern)
- III. Cour d’amours (Court of Love)
- O Fortuna

Orff set these engaging texts using a musical language that is deliberately uncomplicated: the melodies and harmonies are diatonic; the choral textures are usually either single melodic lines or chordal harmonies, with little contrapuntal writing; there’s a ritualistic repetition of rustic tunes and of rhythmic patterns; the musical forms are simple, harkening back to medieval song. At the same time, the orchestral scoring is quite colorful: strings and brass provide rhythmic and timbral effects, woodwind solos offer further tonal variety, and the enormous percussion section (five players!) presides over it all.

Following the opening chorus — familiar from its use in film soundtracks and television commercials — the first section (“Spring”) describes nature and love rising from their winter sleep, depicting the spirited revelry of various social groups in “Uf dem anger,” a sequence of dances and roundelays interspersed with gentler, more melodious scenes. The second section (“In the Tavern”) ruminates on the deplorable state of the world and on the ever-present decadency within the Church. Of particular interest here is the tenor soloist’s “Olim lacus colueram,” the sad tale of a beautiful swan that now turns on the roasting spit. The third section (“The Court of Love”) portrays amorous games at court, then leads to the final scene: the apotheosis “Ave formosissima” and a restatement of the opening chorus.

With the reprise of “O Fortuna,” we are reminded once again that the wheel of fortune rotates unceasingly. One day may bring joy, but the next day may bring devastation. Thus has it ever been. Such is our lot as mortals. Orff’s music conveys that message powerfully. Since its 1937 premiere in Frankfurt, it has delighted audiences everywhere with its easy tunefulness — and with its electrifying brawn and vitality.

Recommended recording: Judith Blegen, William Brown, Håkan Hagegård; Robert Shaw, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (Telarc) 