

Dark heart of a masterpiece: Carmina Burana's famous chorus hides a murky Nazi past

By Jessica Duchon

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Every day for the past 30 years, a performance of Carl Orff's Carmina Burana has taken place somewhere in the world. Few pieces of classical music have achieved such ubiquitous recognition. Its chorus "O Fortuna" has been used to advertise beer, aftershave and horror movies; performers worldwide fall over themselves to tackle the bawdy Latin texts and the panoply of accompanying percussion. In January, the work is coming to London's O2 Arena in a spectacular staging by Franz Abraham, involving 250 performers, naked dancers, fireworks, bungee jumping and more.

The first classical presentation at the O2 Arena, it's also the first time since 1926 that such a vast a classical music event will have been held indoors in the UK – nothing on this scale has been seen since the demise of the Crystal Palace's Handel festivals back in 1926. It is more than 125 years since Messiah was performed there to an audience of 87,000.

This production of Carmina Burana has now been touring for 13 years, but this is its first visit to Britain. Those who snort that the 18,000 audience capacity at O2 is too large for classical music would do well to reflect that on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the production played to some 100,000. Indications are that this is more than just an attempt to sex up a classic. The performing ensemble of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Brighton Festival Chorus and Youth Choir and an outsize company of dancers, actors and puppets will be conducted by Walter Haupt, a former student and friend of the composer, and Abraham has said that on attending the premiere Orff's widow declared that this was what her late husband "had dreamed for his masterpiece".

But now the tormented history of Orff himself has become the subject of a new documentary by Tony Palmer. His film *O Fortuna*, which premieres at the Barbican in London on Sunday, carries a message no less spectacular in its own way, but far more sober: Carl Orff effectively sold his soul to Hitler's henchmen, and paid the price in his conscience for the rest of his life.

The film contains much that will shock fans, as well some phenomenal twists of fortune. Orff emerges as a highly complex man who, according to the third of his four wives, Luise Rinser, "found it impossible to love" and "despised people", habitually using, then discarding those close to him. He would often wake in the night, screaming, and would tell her, "I have seen the Devil." She adds: "If he had been a less great person, he would have gone mad. Nevertheless, there is madness in his music." Orff's only child, Godela, gives a candid account of a father whom she declares did not want her and had no place for her in his existence. But the catalogue of lies, deception and heartlessness goes back to the very beginning.

It turns out that Orff, who was born in Bavaria in 1895, had a Jewish grandmother – a fact that, extraordinarily, he managed to conceal from the painstaking research of the National Socialists. "Once you tell one lie to cover up a lethal situation – one Jewish grandparent was enough to condemn you to death – it's a slippery slope," comments Tony Palmer. "Ever more must be done to maintain the deception."

The lies went on. Orff later claimed that the Nazis had banned *Carmina Burana*. Nothing could have been further from the truth – they adored it, and no wonder. Its simplicity, accessibility and primal force exemplified the opposite of the atonal or serialist works that the regime deemed "decadent" (*entartete musik*). Indeed, the work – premiered for the Nazi party in 1937 – helped to draw Orff to their attention and won him support from the Reich. Nor was he above writing new incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when the much-loved work by the Jewish Mendelssohn was banned.

Orff, however, was never a card-carrying member of the Nazi party and privately despised them for their crudity and philistinism. "He wasn't interested in politics," his second wife, Gertrud, recalls in the film. She adds that the war was "not our fault", but that they did not protest because it "wasn't safe".

It is telling that one of the works closest to Orff's heart was a *Märchenopera* (fairy-tale opera) that he wrote in 1939: *Der Mond*, telling of a world plunged into darkness when fiends steal the moon. It contains some of his most appealing music, but proved unstageable except by a puppet theatre. Many artists, comments the historian Michael H Kater, felt that "the regime had stolen the light" from them. Still, it was not difficult for the previously penniless and struggling Orff to see that the Reich had high hopes for him. By 1943, his name was on a special list of favoured artists; he was not to be conscripted, he received a 2,000-mark prize from the Cultural Chamber in 1942 and he was placed on an elite payroll that gave him 1,000 marks per month. Germany's two senior composers, Richard Strauss and Hans Pfitzner were ageing and would soon die; it was clear that if Germany were to win the war, Orff would quickly become the Reich's leading composer.

One can argue that, like so many living under insane and tyrannical regimes, Orff merely did what was necessary in order to survive. And perhaps it was his good fortune that when he found himself facing the "de-Nazification" process after Germany's defeat, his interrogator was a musically educated admirer. This American intelligence officer, keen to help him, asked him simply to provide something, anything, that could show he had spoken out against Hitler.

Orff's invented response at this moment would never cease to haunt the composer.

Kurt Huber, professor of philosophy at Munich University, had provided Orff with the medieval Latin texts that he set in *Carmina Burana*; the two had also worked together on *Der Mond*. In 1942, Huber and a core group of students formed the White Rose resistance movement which distributed pamphlets calling for active opposition to the Third Reich. Huber authored the sixth and final leaflet. Huber's widow, Clara, relates on camera that Orff was a close friend and used to visit them every Sunday. Yet, she adds, he had no part in the movement and never said a word against Hitler.

On the contrary, the day after Huber's arrest by the Nazis, when she told Orff what had happened, his response was: "I am ruined! Ruined!" She hoped he would use his influence to intervene on her husband's behalf; but Orff did nothing. "He thought only of himself," she recalls. She never saw him again.

Put on the spot by the de-Nazification interrogator, Orff falsely claimed that he had co-founded the White Rose movement with Huber. The group's members, including Huber, had been executed in 1943. Nobody was left alive to dispute his words and he walked out with a clear name. He only had to answer to his conscience.

Among Orff's papers, Michael Kater discovered a document in the composer's handwriting, addressed to the deceased Huber: a letter recalling their good times and begging forgiveness. It appeared to be Orff's private, desperate attempt to work through his guilt over betraying his friend. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Orff's later works included settings of Greek tragedies, for example, *Antigone* and *Oedipus*, in which guilt and the unforgiving nature of fate are recurrent themes.

Orff, though, has experienced an astonishing posthumous redemption. In 1924-1925 he co-founded the Günther-Schule for music and dance in Munich. There, with half an eye on the Hitler Youth, he devised a new approach to musical education entitled *Schulwerk* – literally, "schoolwork". Its central concept is that every child is musical and that each individual can become free to express him- or herself musically through learning simple rhythms on percussion instruments, playing and singing in groups, and building confidence through imagination and creative thinking. "When we lose our fantasy," said Orff, "we are lost."

The Hitler Youth turned up its nose at *Schulwerk*. But in time, Orff's ideas proved strikingly effective; today they are passionately advocated by musical educationalists the world over.

Palmer has filmed Orff Schulwerk classes in China, Taiwan, the townships of South Africa and, harrowingly, a music therapy group in Nottingham for children with cerebral palsy. Whatever Orff's personal failings, he devised a system that is now improving the lives of ailing children who, under the Third Reich, would have been condemned to death.

Orff died in 1982 and was buried in the monastery at Andechs on Bavaria's "holy mountain". Fortune may have been merciless to him in his own mind, but in the musical world it has smiled lavishly upon him, and continues to do so. "The good man," said Orff, "is the one who begins again, with his ideas and his life."

Tony Palmer's 'O Fortuna' is at the Barbican Cinema, Silk Street, London EC2 on Sunday at 6pm (020-7638 8891; www.barbican.org.uk). 'Carmina Burana' is at the O2 Arena (0844 856 0202; www.theo2.co.uk) on 17 and 18 January. Media partner: 'The Independent'