NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

# NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

**BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2024**

# Xian Conducts *Carmina Burana*

## ONE-MINUTE NOTES

**Zoltán Kodály: *Dances of Galánta***

Zoltán Kodály spent seven years of his childhood in the Western Hungarian market town of Galánta. Decades later, he returned to the area on one of his folksong research trips. In 1927, he had been introduced to a Viennese collection of music from Galánta published in 1800. The tunes, largely dance music, featured the Hungarian *verbunkos*, an 18th-century dance performed by Romani bands that left a strong imprint on 19th-century Hungarian folk music. Kodály used the *verbunkos* tunes as the basis for his *Dances of Galánta*, a brilliant orchestral rondo. The piece features splendid cameo solos for cello, horn, clarinet and other players. An extended coda merges a half dozen independent dance melodies in a reckless whirlwind.

**Johann Sebastian Bach: Concerto for Oboe d'Amore in A Major**

The oboe d'amore, which sounds a minor third lower than it is notated, was a fairly new instrument in the early 1700s. Johann Sebastian Bach first wrote for it in 1723. His Concerto for Oboe d'amore may have originally been a keyboard concerto, but some scholars believe it was originally for the woodwind instrument. It has an exceptionally detailed solo part, challenging the oboist with intricate and complex lines. The slow movement is a breathtakingly lovely Larghetto with elegant melodic phrases. The outer movements are joyous and upbeat.

**Carl Orff: *Carmina Burana***

Carl Orff's reputation rests almost exclusively on *Carmina Burana*, which catapulted him to international fame in 1937. He took the texts, which are in medieval German, Latin, and old French, from a manuscript discovered at a Bavarian monastery in 1847. They deal with love, religion and moral issues, the worldly and the metaphysical.

*Carmina* divides into three principal segments, preceded by "Fortune, Empress of the World," which returns to

conclude the work. The first section, “Spring,” is a celebration of youth and the promise of the season. It introduces the theme of love and the eternal games played by young people seeking to attract one another.

Part II, “In Taberna (In the Tavern)” belongs to the men: the tortured hypocrite with a craven heart (baritone solo); the swan roasting on the spit, lamenting his former domain as he contemplates being devoured by the hungry men who fill the tavern (tenor solo and men’s chorus); the corrupt abbot who—among other vices—drinks (baritone and men’s chorus) and finally “In taberna,” one of the great drinking choruses.

In Part III, “The Court of Love,” Orff presents a mini-drama of contemplated love, indecision (“In trutina,” soprano solo), seduction, and the joy of ultimate surrender to passion (“Dulcissime,” soprano solo). Following the exultant “Blanziflor et Helena” hymn, Orff’s repetition of the “Fortune” chorus reminds us that all human happiness is transitory.

## Zoltán Kodály: *Dances of Galánta*

**Zoltán Kodály**
**Born:** December 16, 1882, in Kecskemet, Hungary
**Died:** March 6, 1967, in Budapest, Hungary
**Composed:** 1933
**World Premiere:** October 23, 1933 in Budapest; Ernst von Dohnányi led the Philharmonic Society Orchestra.
**Duration:** 16 minutes
**Instrumentation:** two flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, snare drum, triangle, glockenspiel and strings

Galánta is a western Hungarian market town on the route from Vienna east to Prague. Now part of the Czech Republic, it was still in Hungary from 1885 to 1892, when Zoltán Kodály spent seven years of his childhood there. Galánta is where Kodály was given his first instrument (the cello) to study; it was where he first heard chamber music and home and folk music on the street. Decades later, he returned to this area on one of his folksong research trips; the *Dances of Galánta* that we hear at these performances are the principal fruit of that labor.

Along with his close friend Béla Bartók, Kodály laid the foundations of both modern Hungarian music and the science of ethnomusicology. As important for his contributions in education and folk music research as he was for his compositions, Kodály was a versatile talent who played violin, viola, piano *and* cello as a child, in addition to singing and composing. By the time he was a teenager, his original works were already being performed at school. Many a choral singer knows his name from the popular "Angels and the Shepherds" that surfaces with fair regularity on school and church Christmas programs. Symphony-goers will likely be familiar

with his popular *Háry Janós* Suite (1927) and the fine Concerto for Orchestra (1940). These Dances are a fine complement to those orchestral works.

In 1927, the Hungarian musicologist Ervin Major showed Kodály a Viennese collection of music from Galánta that had been published in 1800. The tunes, largely dance music, featured the characteristic Hungarian dance, *verbunkos*, whose origins lay in the eighteenth century. Traditionally performed by Romani bands, the *verbunkos* was used to recruit soldiers until Hungary instituted military conscription in 1849. The dance remained popular and left a strong imprint on Hungarian folk music of the nineteenth century.

The *Dances of Galánta* were written to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Budapest Philharmonic Society. Kodály took the Viennese collection as his starting point, using the *verbunkos* tunes as the basis for a brilliant orchestral rondo in a single, 16-minute extended movement. He completed the score in 1933.

The piece opens with a rich cello melody: strong in profile, with a pronounced dotted rhythm. This opening idea is a sort of *ritornello* whose return throughout the *Dances* helps to unify the work and defines its contrasting episodes. After initial commentary by the strings, we hear the same theme echoed by French horn, then passed around the orchestra. The next declamatory soloist is the clarinet, which has a brief cadenza before offering its own rendition of the stylized theme.

The intervening episodes tend to emphasize sharp keys (as opposed to the decidedly flat keys of the initial segment). In one, the flute introduces an idea strongly reminiscent of the Berlioz *Rakóczy* March; a later episode features oboe and flute brightened by triangle and glockenspiel. The syncopated third episode is the first hint of the crazed *verbunkos* spirit that dominates the *Dances of Galánta*'s close. An extended coda merges a half-dozen independent dance melodies in a reckless whirlwind. Kodály spins us around faster and faster, challenging our balance with violent syncopations, until we are certain that the music cannot possibly accelerate further — then it does. His madcap orchestral chase sprints forward, demanding the utmost from both orchestra and conductor, until the brilliant and climactic close.

## Johann Sebastian Bach: Concerto for Oboe d'amore in A Major, BWV 1055

**Johann Sebastian Bach**
**Born:** March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany
**Died:** July 28, 1750, in Leipzig, Germany
**Composed:** 1723 or later
**World Premiere:** undocumented, but probably in Leipzig in the 1720s
**Duration:** 14 minutes
**Instrumentation:** solo oboe d'amore, strings and continuo

There is some mystery surrounding the origins of Johann Sebastian Bach's A Major Concerto, BWV 1055, as it exists in a version for solo harpsichord as well as the version for solo oboe d'amore that we hear in these performances.

Music historians have traditionally regarded Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, with its prominent harpsichord role, as the most important antecedent of the solo keyboard concerto. More recent scholarship has argued convincingly in favor of the various concerti for one, two, three and four harpsichords that date from Bach's Leipzig years (1723-1750). Supplementing his extraordinary schedule of obligations to the Thomaskirche in Leipzig was his work with the Collegium Musicum that had been founded by Telemann in 1704. Here, making music for pleasure among friends and students, Bach found another outlet for his inexhaustible creativity, balancing the emphasis on church music required of him as Kantor.

Most of the harpsichord concerti are believed to have been arranged for performance at the Collegium concerts. Ironically, and adding to the confusion and mystery of Bach scholarship, almost all of them were originally solo concerti (primarily for violin) that he arranged for keyboard instruments.

Some evidence suggests that Bach's original version of this A Major concerto may have been originally written for oboe d'amore, however. If that is in fact the case, then we may pinpoint the date of BWV 1055 as 1723 or after. As Bach's biographer Malcolm Boyd has pointed out, the oboe d'amore was a fairly new instrument in the first quarter of the 18th century. So far as we know, 1723 was the first year in which Bach wrote for oboe d'amore, in his Cantata No. 23. The instrument sounds a minor third lower than it is notated. Slightly larger than the standard oboe, it is smaller than the English horn, which sounds a fifth below the oboe. We may think of oboe d'amore as the mezzo-soprano of the double reed family.

This A-Major concerto is noteworthy for its exceptional detail in the solo part, which provides the oboist with the challenge of intricacy and linear complexity. We are most keenly aware of this challenge in the breathtakingly lovely Larghetto. A siciliana in 12/8 meter, it highlights both Bach's inexhaustible gift for long melodic lines and the soloist's musicianship in shaping those gently vaulting phrases.

## Carl Orff: *Carmina Burana*

**Carl Orff**
**Born:** July 10, 1895, in Munich, Germany
**Died:** March 29, 1982, in Munich, Germany
**Composed:** 1935-1936
**World Premiere:** June 8, 1937 at the Frankfurt Opera in a staged production; Bertil Wetzelsberger conducted.
**Duration:** 65 minutes
**Instrumentation:** three flutes (second and third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet, another doubling E-flat clarinet), two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, castanets, ratchet, sleigh bells, triangle, crotales, cymbals, tam-tam, chimes, tambourine, bass drum, three glockenspiels, suspended cymbals, two snare drums, two pianos, celesta, soprano, tenor and baritone soloists, mixed chorus and strings

Carl Orff's music has been regularly performed, yet it is little known. That paradox results from his reputation resting almost exclusively on *Carmina Burana*, which catapulted Orff to international fame in 1937. It has remained in the standard repertoire ever since. His other stage and choral compositions are curiosities, infrequently recorded and rarely performed. His most enduring legacy other than *Carmina Burana* is the educational materials he developed for schoolchildren. *Carmina* remains his crowning achievement as a composer.

**An ancient manuscript: the sacred and the profane**

The manuscript from which Orff took his texts for *Carmina Burana* was discovered at the Benedictbeuern monastery in the Bavarian Alps by one Johann Andreas Schmeller, who published the collection in 1847. Dating from the 11th through 13th centuries, the texts are in medieval German, Latin and old French. They deal with love, religion, and moral issues, the worldly and the metaphysical. Their style ranges from naïve to vulgar, from cynical to philosophical. Authors of wide educational and cultural backgrounds contributed to the compilation. The texts are highly dramatic.

Like Janáček, Orff was a late bloomer as a composer. He studied at Munich's Akademie der Tonkunst. For many years he worked as a theatrical rehearsal pianist, thereby learning the mechanics of drama. In the 1920s he adapted several works by Monteverdi for the stage. He later directed the Munich Bach Society. Through these experiences, he cultivated his strong interest in early music.

**Reconciling old and new**

In the early 1930s, Orff became acquainted with the Benedictbeuern manuscript. Its medieval languages fascinated him. So did the beautifully illuminated cover, depicting a wheel of fortune. Its musical manifestation was the massive hymn to Fortune that frames *Carmina Burana*. The texts warranted treatment consistent not only with the medieval poems but also with the vocabulary of twentieth-century music. He bypassed the French texts in favor of those in German and Latin. In his music, he sought to echo the simple and naïve style of the poems, thus *Carmina Burana* contains primarily strophic songs with little or no variation in verses. Orff's melodies are diatonic and frequently scalar; a couple are strongly flavored by Gregorian chant.

His rhythm, by contrast, is enormously complex. Vibrant, driven, and atavistic, the primitive pulsation of *Carmina Burana* unites medieval peasantry with sophisticated effects available from a bevy of modern instruments. An expanded percussion section provides much of the vivid color so essential to *Carmina*'s impact. Orff's two orchestral pianos flavor some choruses (*Ecce gratum*) and dominate the musical fabric in others (*Veni, veni, venias*).

**The big picture: a journey from spring, to the tavern, to love**

*Carmina* divides into three principal segments, preceded by *Fortune, Empress of the World*, which returns to conclude the work. The first section, *Spring*, is a celebration of youth and the promise of the season. It introduces the theme of love and the eternal games played by young people seeking to attract one another.

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Throughout *Carmina Burana*, Orff's vocal tessitura is abnormally high. We notice this characteristic more in the melismatic solo numbers, particularly those for soprano and tenor. But the soloists never obscure the prominent role of the chorus, which is central to the work's narrative, sensual and musical power.

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