

PROGRAM NOTES by ERIC BROMBERGER

Les Préludes, S.97

FRANZ LISZT

Born October 22, 1811, Raiding, Hungary

Died July 31, 1886, Bayreuth

Les Préludes has always been the most popular of Liszt's twelve symphonic poems. The composer explained its title by printing in the score a lengthy paraphrase of the *Méditations poétiques* of the French poet Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869). Lamartine's poem is a rather flowery discourse on the tribulations of life, particularly on the difference between war and the pastoral life. The paraphrase in the score captures some of its flavor: "What else is life but a series of preludes to that unknown hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death? Love is the dawn of all existence; but what fate is there whose first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm . . ." Liszt's music—which seems to depict these many "preludes to that unknown hymn"—was first performed in Weimar on February 23, 1854, and it remains a favorite with audience.

But the problem with the story of the music's inspiration is that it isn't true. Liszt originally wrote this music in 1848 as the overture to a work for male chorus called *Les Quatre Éléments* (*The Four Elements*) on a text by Joseph Autran. When he saw that he was not going to finish that piece, Liszt extracted the overture, revised it, and grafted Lamartine's poem onto it—Liszt had composed this music before he thought of the Lamartine poem or the title *Les Préludes*. That should not detract from our enjoyment of the music, but it should warn listeners not to search for connections between the music and the poem, and it also reminds us that Liszt's conception of the symphonic poem was rather general. At the end of the nineteenth century, Richard Strauss would aim for exact pictorial representation in his tone poems (Strauss bragged that he could set a glass of beer to music), but Liszt had no such aim, and his music should be enjoyed on its own merits.

And those merits are considerable. *Les Préludes* is one of the finest examples of Liszt's theory of the "transformation of themes." Classical sonata form was based on the contrast between quite different thematic material, but Liszt aimed for a more organic conception in which an entire piece of music might grow out of a few seminal themes. These themes would then be transformed across the span of the work, taking on a different character at each

reappearance. In *Les Préludes*, the principal theme is the deep three-note figure announced by the strings at the very beginning. These three notes will prove an extremely fertile idea (so fertile, in fact, that Liszt's younger colleague César Franck would later use the same figure as the basis for his *Symphony in D Minor*). Listeners can follow this fundamental theme-shape through Liszt's many ingenious transformations—*Les Préludes* is episodic, and these episodes vary from the lyric to the violently dramatic. Two subsequent ideas appear in the course of the music: a murmuring, relaxed figure for horns and violas and a more spirited section introduced by solo horn. The latter is quite attractive—there is a glistening, fresh quality to this section (Liszt's marking is *Allegretto pastorale*), and it brings relief after some of the earlier drama. As the music proceeds, Liszt proves quite adept at combining his various themes, and at the end *Les Préludes* builds to a rousing (and very loud) climax.

Carmina Burana

CARL ORFF

Born July 10, 1895, Munich

Died March 29, 1982, Munich

In the spring of 1934 Carl Orff—a young German music educator and composer—came upon a collection of very old poems that would change his life. Originally written in the thirteenth century, the poems had been found in 1803 in the Bavarian Abbey of Benediktbeuren, about thirty miles south of Munich, and published in 1847 under the title *Carmina Burana*: “Songs of Beuren.” Orff was captivated by both the sound of the language (Latin and Middle High German) and the poetry itself, with its emphasis on sensual pleasure (food, drink, sex), the beauties of nature and the cycle of the seasons, and—overriding everything—the fickleness of fortune. He selected twenty-four of the poems and quickly composed a setting for vast forces: soprano, tenor, and baritone soloists; boys choir; large chorus (with a smaller choir as part of this); and a huge orchestra that requires two pianos and five percussionists. As part of his approach to music education, Orff had tried to combine gymnastics, dance, and music, and now he conceived *Carmina Burana* as a “spectacle” that would involve scenery, lighting, and dancing along with the music. In this form, *Carmina Burana* was premiered in Frankfurt-am-Main on June 8, 1937, though most performances today present it simply as a concert piece. Even in concert form, this music achieves the spectacular dramatic impact that Orff had hoped for, and it has become one of the most popular works composed during the twentieth century.

The listener is immediately struck by the power and simplicity of this music. Rejecting the sophisticated techniques of modern composition, Orff instead employs simple repeated melodies, straightforward harmonies, and driving, elemental rhythms. This is music virtually devoid of polyphony, development, or any other complication. With his linear, almost pointilistic writing, Orff creates an archaic sound (the music is based in part on old folk tunes and dances of Bavaria), combining clarity of rhythm with brilliant blocks of instrumental color to produce an overwhelming effect in performance. Not everyone has been taken by Orff's almost total rejection of modern methods, and some critics (perhaps jealous of this music's huge popular success) have attacked his methods and intentions. When it was suggested to Stravinsky that *Carmina Burana* represented a form of neo-classicism similar to his own, that composer is reported to have sneered: "Neo-classical? That's Neo-Neanderthal!"

Orff subtitled this work *Cantiones profanae cantoribus et choris cantandae comitantibus instrumentis atque imaginibus magicis* ("Secular songs for soloists and chorus, accompanied by instruments and supplemented by magical pictures"), and certain themes recur throughout these "profane songs," chief among which is the notion of fickle fortune. Orff had been struck by the cover illustration of the printed collection of poems which showed a wheel of fortune, and the theme of the unpredictability of fortune recurs throughout *Carmina Burana*: the work opens and closes with the same brilliant chorus—"O Fortuna"—and its massive pounding may depict the inexorable turning of the wheel of fortune. Two other themes, both related to the idea of fortune, are important: the coming of spring and the pleasures of love. But even these are touched by fortune—the seasons change, love is full of pain—and the wheel of fortune is always turning in the background: one may be happy this moment, but misery will inevitably follow.

Carmina Burana divides into three main sections, framed by the chorus "O Fortuna." The first—*Primo vere* (Spring)—tells of the reawakening of the earth after winter. It begins quietly, but gradually the pace of these songs and dances quickens, and the section ends with the blazing "Were diu werlt alle min."

With *In taberna* (In the Tavern), the mood changes sharply. These are songs of those who have tasted the whims of fortune: the tenor's "Olim lacus colueram" notes that one may be a beautiful swan one moment, but roasting on a spit the next. The section ends with a spirited drinking song for male chorus. Here, at least, is one way to escape the pain.

The third section—*Cour D'Amours* (Court of Love)—consists of ten songs, some quite

brief, depicting the many faces of love—it is by turns a matter of pleasure, pain, longing, burning, joy, uncertainty. The soprano’s beautiful “In trutina”—a song of indecision, then sweet surrender—has deservedly become one of the most famous in the entire work, encapsulating several of its main themes. At the close, “O Fortuna” returns in all its massive power, and the wheel of fortune spins on, indifferent to mere men and women who celebrate one moment, suffer the next.