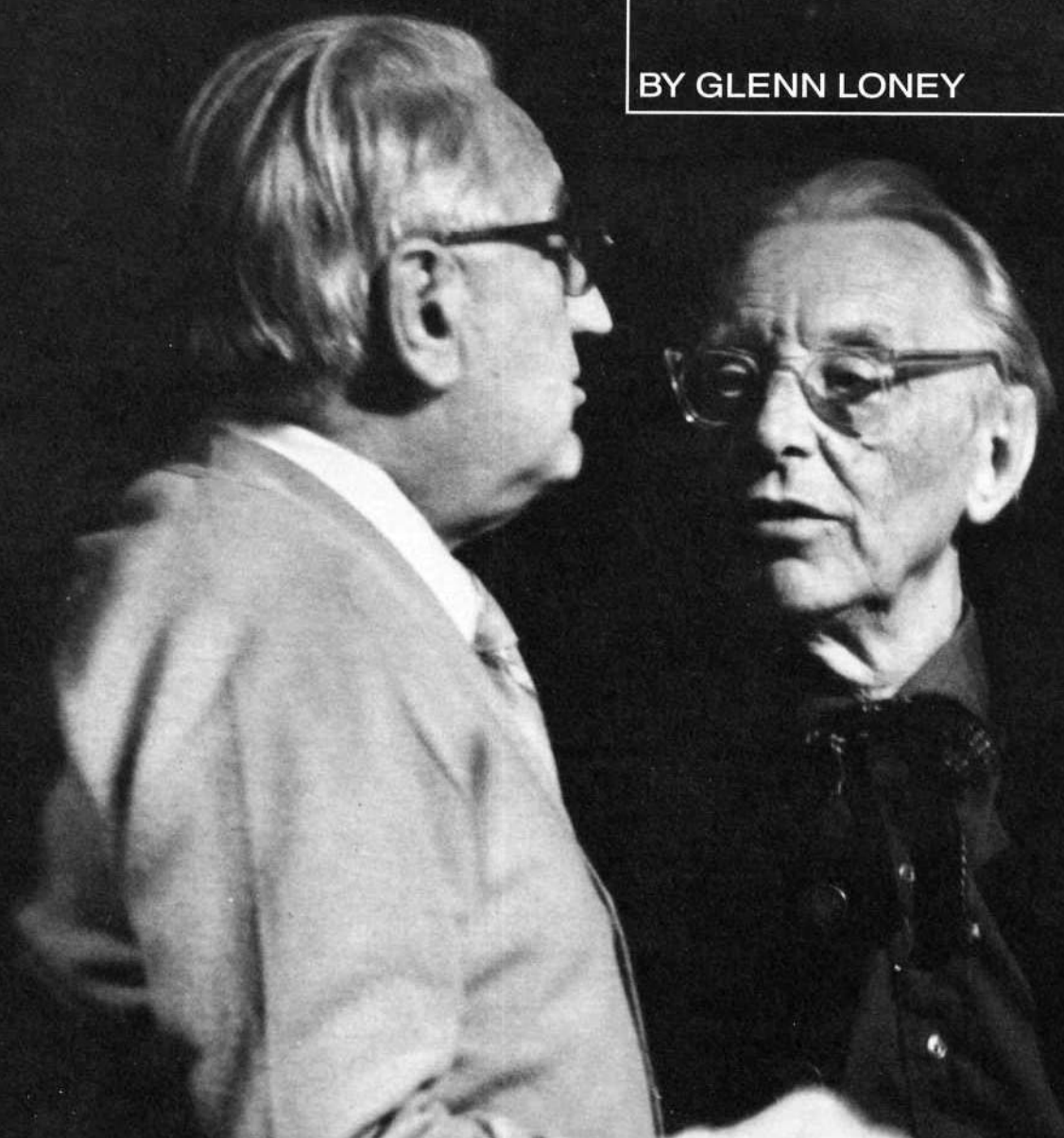


GLENN LONEY BOOKSHOP

*Beyond Carmina Burana*

# Carl Orff's Other Lives

BY GLENN LONEY



Gustav Rudolf Sellner (left) and Carl Orff at the Bavarian State Opera. Credit: Sabine Toepffer.

Carmina Burana may have been the best – and the worst – thing that ever happened to the Bavarian composer, Carl Orff. At least in America, where this dynamic creation of the musical theater is virtually the only Orff work known to its enthusiastic admirers. And even some of them, having experienced it only in recordings or concert performances, are under the impression that it is really an oratorio – or an extended song-cycle – not an opera at all.



In fact, *Carmina Burana* – which for years was paired at the New York City Opera with Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* – is actually the first element of a fascinating trilogy, *Trionfi*. Which you are not apt to see on either the City Opera's or the Met's stages in the near future, if ever. For that matter, you probably won't see Orff's own opera about the tragic Greek ruler, *Oedipus der Tyrann* [1957/59], nor the rest of the trilogy of which it is part, consisting of *Antigonae* [1947/48] and *Prometheus* [1963/67]. Especially not *Prometheus*, for its sung text is in the original classical Greek of Aeschylus! That certainly doesn't recommend it to opera repertoires, which Orff well understood, insisting that it was really a "Festival" opera.

As if two virtually unknown – in the United States, at least – trilogies were not enough, Orff also created a third, *Lamenti*, inspired by operas of Claudio Monteverdi: *Lamento d'Ariana*, *L'Orfeo*, and *Ballo delle Ingrate*, which became *Klage der Ariadne* [1925/40], *Orpheus* [1923/39] and *Tanz der Spröden* [1925/40]. The wide range in dates indicates revisions, for Orff initially was a young composer trying his stylistic hand at the innovations of various modern masters – Strauss, Schoenberg, even Pfitzner. He was to have his major breakthrough, achieving his own unique voice and style with *Carmina Burana*, but this – as did *Lamenti* – grew out of his work in the 1920s, in Munich's innovative *Günther-Schule*, founded by the famed dance-teacher, Dorothe Günther. She encouraged Orff's concept of unity in speech, music, and dance, both in the creation of new works for the Music-Theater and in developing a new, more natural method for teaching children to love and to make music.

This latter and highly successful endeavor, articulated by Orff and his colleague, Gunild Keetman, was to spread worldwide, known as

the *Schulwerk*, or *School-work*. A Munich wit once remarked that, after Carl Orff had discovered the xylophone, he never looked back! Indeed, it's a further irony for Carl Orff's reputation in North America that today many teachers and students know him mainly as the creator of the *Schulwerk*. If they also are aware that he composed *Carmina Burana*, they frequently don't know that he wrote any other works for the Music-Theater. Even though the *Schulwerk* is, in a fundamental way, intimately related to Orff's ideas about opera and music in the theatre in general.



*Carmina Burana*, 1944, Bavarian State Opera.

Carl Orff's Centenary will be widely celebrated in 1995, so it's not too soon to survey the man and his achievements, in the hope that opera-lovers may want to learn more about the *Schulwerk*, and that teachers and students of the "Orff Method" will become interested in his Music-Theater works, some of which are well-suited to school and community performances.

America's opera ensembles don't, at the moment, seem very excited about this Orff anniversary, but the American Orff-Schulwerk Association doesn't intend to let it pass unnoticed. Libby Larsen has been commissioned to write a new work for the occasion, and the National Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra have already committed to the festivities. Dr. Carolee Stewart, an officer of the association, says: "We are encouraging performances of Orff's music and hope to hear more than *Carmina Burana!*"

That may not be so easy to achieve. But the culminating event in 1995 will be the annual November AOSA Conference in Dallas, so there's still time, even for small-scale regional opera groups, to mount a variety of Orff's interesting operas. The 1994 meeting will be in Philadelphia, which might be a good time for interested groups to get involved in this project – if not before. (For more information about the conferences and the *Schulwerk*, contact Dr. Stewart in Baltimore, at the Peabody Conservatory of Music, 410-659-8131.)

This could be much more than a Centenary Celebration. It could be a Voyage of Discovery, in an American Musical Theater which has virtually atrophied. Even 50-year-old Orff works seem new by comparison with some recent American efforts. There's a reason for that, of course: Orff was quintessentially a Man of the Theater, as well as a musician and a teacher, unlike a number of modern composers, who have no idea of dramatic structure or of the theater's myriad visual possibilities.

Not to overlook the fact that the Met recently saw fit to offer a curiously slack Philip Glass opera, *The Voyage*, as one of only two world premieres in 25 years. It has never mounted an Orff opera, even though Glass himself has composed an homage to Carl Orff – who does seem a remote influence, though Orff was not a Minimalist in the current stultifying sense. Orff was far more a Universalist, even a Primitivist, going back to the roots of Western, Eastern, and African cultures – and their distinctive instruments – for his own inspirations, in both opera and music-education. What's even more ironic is the fact that some of Orff's severest American critics have long denounced him for the relatively narrow tone palette he employed and for his dependence on pronounced percussive rhythms. Compared with Glass, John Adams, and Steve Reich, Carl Orff is positively Polyphonic!

There is another American reservation about Orff's works in some

quarters, however, though it is not often openly discussed.

Considering the number of important composers, conductors, and musicians who left Nazi Germany and Austria – by no means all of



them Jews, fleeing for their very lives, not just for their artistic freedom – admirers of Orff have wondered why he also did not leave Bavaria for England or America. It has been rumored that he was, in fact, a Nazi or a sympathizer. This is surely an unspoken reason for the widespread reluctance to stage Orff's other operas – aside from fears that they might not fill the seats the way *Carmen* or *Carmina Burana* do.

I once raised this issue with Orff. He was shocked that I should even entertain the idea that he condoned anything the Nazis did. His work at the Günther-Schule destroyed by Allied bombs in 1945 – was certainly not the

Orff's *Die Kluge*, 1980, Bayrische Staatsoper München Nationaltheater. Credit: Anne Kirchbach.

kind of innovation the Nazis encouraged, but its results in music-training were exemplary. And its fruits in Music-Theater, returning to primal roots of civilization, didn't threaten National Socialist theorists in the way that such avant-garde works as Ernst Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* did.

Oddly enough, Orff's greatest triumph, *Carmina Burana* [1935/36], was conceived as an answer to the developing "Socialist Realism" of the Nazis, and, with its emphasis on medieval love-songs found in the

*Benedictbeuren Handschrift*, a monastic manuscript, and low-life tavern ditties of the distant past, this was hardly a celebration of the often prudish Aryan virtues –



*Orpheus*, 1980, Bayrische Staatsoper München Nationaltheater. Credit: Anne Kirchbach.

Children, Kitchen, and Church – that the Nazi propagandists urged on the masses.

Orff was adamant: “This annoys me very much, because, when I wrote it in 1936, I was in the opposition – *always!* – and it was, in effect, against the trends of that time.” What pained him especially at the time we spoke, in summer of 1971, was a recent production of *Carmina* in Cologne. “They’ve done *Carmina* like the 1936 Olympic Games! I’ve not seen it, only read about it.” He shook his head in mock disbelief: “At the beginning, with the *Fortuna*, she is a pregnant lady! And she unzips her track-suit, and two footballs fall out! And, at the end, the five Olympic Rings appear! And then, I have to read that a critic – who saw this production – at last understands the true origin of *Carmina Burana*!

“He wrote that it was inspired by Hitler, the 1936 Olympic Games, and Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympic film. And I don’t know what other

nonsense.” Orff was not amused at all. And he pointed out that one of his favorite works, *Astutuli*, or *The Wise Ones* – the title is deeply satiric – was designed as an allegorical indictment of the Nazi regime. Not only of Hitler – who appears in it as a *Gaukler*, deceiving people with his florid oratory and extravagant promises – but of all the “decent Germans” who were so eager to be taken in by him.

“You must understand that *Astutuli* was originally intended as an attack on Hitler! But I didn’t allow it to be produced for four years after it was written. Things were so tragic then in Germany! I wrote it in 1945. But I didn’t release it until 1953. There wasn’t any point before then.” The reality was that Germany had been so crushingly defeated that audiences didn’t need to be scolded – even in music – about their lemming-like following of Hitler as an especially murderous Pied-Piper.

Orff showed a group of typical Bavarians, boastful and beer-swilling, looking for a leader and good-times, tricked into giving up their own clothing for some new and remarkable garments. Of course, this is the old fable of the Emperor’s New Clothes all over again, with a *Lederhosen* twist to it. After a small child cries out that the adults are all naked, the shame-faced elders vow they will never be taken in again. And, if they can get their hands on him, they will really punish the rascal who cheated them and made them look like such fools. Of course, he returns in a different guise, with a different scam, to appeal to their lust, greed, and vanity. And it’s clear they will fall for it again, having learned nothing. If anything, this is even more timely now, with the appalling emergence of Neo-Nazism.

Because of the Gestapo-Terror which by then had gripped “Greater Germany” and the Occupied Territories, Orff was wise to couch his attack in allegory, just as Vaclav Havel and others had to under Soviet tyranny. It is a curiosity of recent Police States that the censors are usually under the Police Presidencies, not under the Ministries of Propaganda or “Education.”

But Orff thought, in 1971, that *Astutuli* was a universal fable, presented in a form of Music-Theater which would give enjoyment and edification to people in many lands. I also thought he was right, though I’d seen the work only in stagings which suggested its Bavarian inspiration. These made its relevance to the rise of Hitler and the subsequent Nazi debacle all the more pointed. Orff’s beloved Munich had been 90 percent destroyed in its historic interior by Allied bombing raids. He couldn’t bring himself to premiere this

sharp critique at that time, when distraught neighbors were picking bricks out of the rubble, trying to rebuild.

Orff's strong bond to Munich and the bucolic Bavarian landscape and its dramatic Alps were so much an influence on his work – or at least on the circumstances which favored its creation – that one can understand why he did not leave Germany in the mid-1980s, especially as he knew no English. [We spoke always in German, and Orff's voice in this report is in my translation.] He wasn't on a Nazi hit-list, as was Bertolt Brecht, who fled immediately. Like many another appalled German, he couldn't believe what was happening, and then it was too late. No one got exit permits. Germany was at war-on the offensive.

[One thinks of the dilemma of Richard Strauss – with a Jewish daughter-in-law and a Jewish grandson – who thought he could protect Jewish and other threatened musicians from the Nazis when he was *briefly* chief of the Reichs Music Bureau. The Nazis soon dismissed him, but this association has remained to tarnish his reputation abroad even today.]

Having seen *Trionfi* produced several times in Europe – including a stunning La Scala staging – I thought it a shame that *Carmina Burana* had not been presented in New York on a major musical stage along with *Catulli Carmina* [1942], which features the Roman poet, Catullus, and his fiercely desired Lesbia, as well as the *Trionfo di Afrodite* [1950/51], which completes the trilogy as a “Scenic Concerto.”

Failing that, perhaps an American adaptation of one of Orff's virtually unknown but accessible operas might be of interest? My first thought was of *Die Bernauerin* [1944/45], a tragic tale of Agnes Bernauer, pregnant with the son of the future Duke of Bavaria. Agnes was the beautiful daughter of a bathhouse proprietor in Augsburg, where citizens went, not only for a weekly scrub, but also for lively communal bathing in vast tubs, complete with eating, card-playing, and singing – and maybe some sinning as well – in the suds. This gave Orff a wonderful first act: the entire cast naked in a big wooden tub, with the young prince discovering his beloved Agnes. But neither the clergy nor Munich's prosperous and oafish *bourgeoises* were happy with the thought of such a girl as their future duchess, so intrigues and even sermons against her were launched.

The story is history, which by now has almost become Bavarian

legend. Every three years, in the medieval market-town of Straubing – once a Roman center – a play about her life and murder is enacted. Orff was inspired by this, and his final act shows her brutal drowning at the hands of the Iron Duke's henchmen. As she sinks beneath the waters of the Isar, *River Witches* – Orff was fond of witches in his works – chortle at her dying struggles. The rich use of percussion, the incantatory text, the vivid theatricality: all echo the magic of *Carmina*, but in a different way. Dr. Fritz Kracht, a stage director and filmmaker – and a Yale Drama graduate – whom I had met when he was Dramaturg of Munich's historic operetta and musical-comedy house, the Gärtnerplatz Theater, had already worked with Carl Orff. It was he, in fact, who initially brought us together, so it seemed right that he make an American adaptation, called *The Ballad of Agnes Bernauer*. It had its American premiere in Kansas City, at the University of Missouri, staged by Kracht.

It was an artistic success – notably in that it demonstrated that even a student cast could make it come alive – but it was also a near-scandal, thanks to local prudery. Kracht thought, considering the new American attitudes toward the human body in the 1960s, and the supposedly dawning Age of Aquarius, that real nudity in the tub might be an interesting innovation. But, before the act is over, the actor/singers have to get *out* of the tub. Well!

As things turned out, *Everything Was Not Up-To-Date* in Kansas City. A seemingly endless towel amusingly covered the performers' mid-sections at the close of the act. As far as I know, there has never been a really professional production of *The Ballad of Agnes Bernauer* in America since then – let alone a nude one – though Kracht did go on to direct other shows for the Missouri Repertory Theater.

Because I thought *Astutuli* also a powerful Orff opera, echoing *Carmina's* musical effects, I urged Kracht to try his hand with it. His version, which Orff loved, is called *The Salt of the Earth*. Kracht thought the tale of Agnes Bernauer might have been perhaps too European for American audiences, so he decided to test Orff's idea that *Astutuli* was a universal work, which could be understood anywhere. Instead of foolish Bavarian peasants, he chose to transpose the tale to the United States and make them African-Americans who are deceived by a fast-talking black con-man. This hustler, instead of selling invisible clothes – or, worse, Happy-Dust,

as in *Porgy and Bess* – is pushing hair-straightener and skin-bleaching cream. Given the central importance today of building self-esteem among minority groups, this scenario no longer seems possible – and certainly not Politically Correct.

Given Orff's charming score and central idea, however, the libretto could be adapted to focus on a group of foolish Connecticut Wasps, all clamoring for some illusory honor in the Republican Party. Or how about a group of women, eager to pay anything for a Low Fat Diet which will permit them to continue to eat all the goodies they love? *Lose Weight While Gorging!*

With Carl Orff's blessing, I did try to interest both Julius Rudel and, later, Beverly Sills in producing one or the other of these operas at the New York City Opera. Sills, while expressing admiration for Orff, suggested that both works really needed actors who could sing, more than singers who could act. [Orff disagreed, for he preferred performers who could do both well.] Rudel reminded me of the realities of filling the hundreds of seats in the New York State Theater, as opposed to the happy days at the old City Center, when many new works were premiered, with little regard for the box office. He was, of course, delighted with the continuing success of *Carmina Burana*, but he said he didn't want to have another Orff work in the repertory which might be competition for *Carmina*.

When I told Orff Rudel's response, he was surprised, even a bit annoyed. But his good-humor came to the rescue: "Ask your Maestro Rudel if Verdi is not competition for Verdi in his repertory, why should Orff be competition for Orff?"

There are certainly a number of Orff Music-Theater works to consider, even if only for the Centennial celebration. Among standards on European stages – seldom seen here – are the one-acters, *Der Mond* [1937/38], in which the moon is stolen, and *Die Kluge* [1941/42], in which a clever woman makes her mark. It's interesting that – following the example of Richard Wagner – Orff often provided his own texts. Or he set the play-texts of admired classics, such as Friedrich Holderlein's translations of Sophocles's *Antigone* and *Oedipus*. Orff set a number of Franz Werfel's religious texts to music, as well as some secularly Socialist ones by Bert Brecht, who came to admire Orff's work through a Walter Felsenstein production at East Berlin's *Komische Oper*. There are even two works for major Christian holidays: *Comoedia de Christi Resurrectione* [1955], an Easter play, with the Devil bent on stopping

the Resurrection, and *Ludus de Nato Infante Mirificus* [1960], a Christmas music-drama, replete with witches who try to prevent the birth of the Christ-child. These are clearly inspired by medieval religious dramas on similar themes. When these are performed as a double-bill – Orff called them a *Dyptichon* – he insisted that Christmas precede Easter, a progression of which Handel also would have approved.

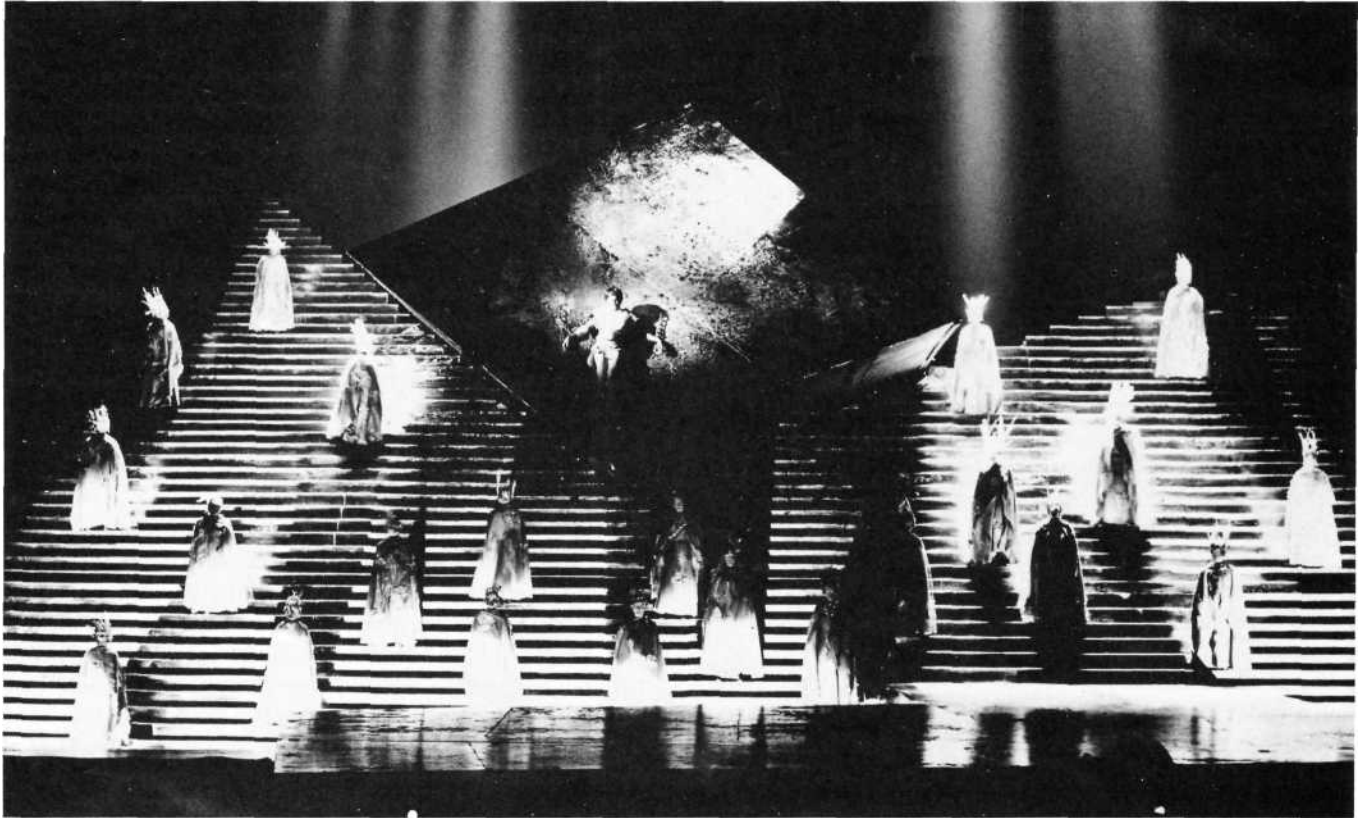
Like Verdi, Orff was a great admirer of the plays of Shakespeare, but he never attempted to make any into operas. What he did, however, was to work over the years, producing some five versions of music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Quite different from Mendelssohn, especially in Orff's setting some "demonic" moments of the play not to be found in that all-too-familiar score. He judged Mendelssohn's themes too pretty, too charming. Currently, this music may be appreciated – along with some Mendelssohn quotes, as well – at the *Gärtnerplatz Theater*, in Gunther Pick's stylish and amusing ballet, based on the play. Orff insisted he wasn't "setting" Shakespeare's words; rather, his music was inspired by them.

In fact, that's also an impetus in the *Schulwerk*. Not Shakespeare's plays necessarily, but children's games and stories as an inspiration for creating an impromptu performance, with words, music, and movement growing out of such creative play. While Orff was duly impressed with the ability of Asians to master Western musical performance, he was always a little dubious about masses of Japanese children learning to play miniature violins. He was opposed to forcing children to take music lessons. Rather, they should discover the fun of music—listening to it, making it, moving in time to it – and then go as far as they wished with it. If they were content just to dance to it, clap their hands, or to sing along, well and good. But, under no circumstances, drive a child to daily piano practice. In any case, children, Orff thought, should begin with simple rhythms, hand-clapping, wood-blocks, cymbals, even xylophones.

One of the major drawbacks to some of his operas in performance is the number and the variety of percussive instruments, some quite exotic, that Orff specified in his scores. Yet he was often very permissive about stagings, especially *Carmina Burana*: He wanted to let directors, designers, and performers discover what worked best for them.

As developed at the *Günther -Schule*, with Gunild Keetman, Orff's

Schulwerk still puts stress on the five elements: Speech, Movement, Singing, Instruments,



*Orff's Prometheus at Bayrische Staatsoper München Nationaltheater. Credit: Rudolf Betz.*

Teaching, and Theory. It's not easy to be an Orff teacher, because the learning-process is anything but a traditional rote system, drumming methods and techniques into the students. Rather, the "drumming" is something the students discover for themselves, encouraged by innovative teachers. Training of teachers, which goes on worldwide, is centered in Schloss Frohnburg, a small, handsome castle just outside Salzburg, and it is actually part of the famed Mozarteum, where Orff was long a respected professor.

Because the Orff "method" is so popular in English-speaking countries, and among those for whom English has become a kind of *Lingua Franca*, classes are not only in German, but also in English, with some very attractive summer seminars during the Salzburg Festival. There are even trips to Budapest to survey the Zoltan Kodaly Method of teaching music, which Orff respected. Work has been going on for some time at the Schloss on the role of music in

helping the handicapped enjoy fuller lives, as well as its values in enriching the life-experiences of the more fortunate.

Orff's achievements – in theory, in composition, in music instruction, in the development of Music-Theater – are studied at the *Orff-Zentrum München*, where Orff archives are preserved, seminars are held, courses given, and exhibitions mounted. [In Munich, at Kaulbachstrasse 16.] There's also an Orff Foundation, and Orff's enthusiastic and dedicated widow, Liselotte Orff, is tirelessly occupied with ensuring that Orff's rich legacy is continually in use, whether on stage or in the classroom.

A dream of Orff's may be coming close to fruition as well. Because so many of his works are so special – not basic Verdi or Puccini at all – he dreamed of a possible festival where his more demanding operas and other works could be heard and seen, especially with innovative stagings and talented young performers. Richard Wagner achieved that at Bayreuth. In fact, before his death, his grandson, Wieland Wagner had told Orff he wanted to do his *Prometheus* in Wagner's hallowed *Festspielhaus*. Traditionally, only Wagner's works are performed there, and not all of them either. But then, Wieland Wagner was a rule unto himself. When he died, suddenly and unexpectedly, Orff wrote me: "With Wieland's death, we've all lost a great deal. So many projects remain uncompleted."

Munich's Neo-classic *Prinzregenten Theater*, an opera house created at the turn of the century as a Festival Theater to give some competition to Bayreuth, had stood neglected for years. Recently, however, August Everding, as General Intendant of Bavarian State Theaters, protected it from demolition, restoring it to its former glories. It is now seen as an ideal venue for special productions of the works of Carl Orff and other composers closely identified with Munich, such as Richard Strauss.

I've always regretted I was not able to help Carl Orff find a wider American public with other works than the ubiquitous *Carmina* – which has even been used in Europe on TV to advertise Nestlé products. Orff's final opera, *De temporum fine Comoedia – Das Spiel vom Ende der Zeiten*, or *The Comedy of the End of Time* – [1969/71], I thought would be a Music-Theater sensation – thematically, musically, and visually – for the City Opera. But then, I thought the same about Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten*, which at least was finally performed in New York. Orff invited me to Salzburg in summer 1973 for the *Generalprobe*, or dress-rehearsal, of this

powerful work about the doom of the earth. Herbert von Karajan had selected it for a major festival premiere, usually a good sign indeed. August Everding had staged; John Neumeier, of the Hamburg Ballet, had devised the *Bewegung*, or movement, and Gunther Schneider-Siemssen had created the amazing visual environments.

For me, at least, it was unforgettable – an oft overworked word – but photos of the production can certainly still convey some idea of its impact. In three parts, it began with the ancient sibyls, nine frightening seeresses floating over the earth, foretelling its ultimate destruction. They sang their dire prophecies in classic Greek. Then nine hoary anchorite hermits, perched atop pillars, appeared to challenge this in Latin, convinced that Mankind is not ever entirely damned. They invoked the God of Dreams for confirmation, using Orphic – and Orffic – hymns. They begged for a vision of the end of the world, the Day of Wrath and Doom. It appeared, horrifying in its black-and-white stylization, as damned men flew off the revolving sphere of the earth into outer darkness, blinded and crying out for the vanished sun. They sang their fears and torments in German.

Just when it seemed all was lost – no forgiveness, no redemption, no paradise – a hideous winged monster appeared. It was the Angel of Darkness, Lucifer, once the Bringer of Light, before his Fall. Three times, he called out in agony: “*Pater peccavi* – Father, I have sinned.” Each time part of his ugly carapace dropped away, finally revealing a radiantly naked young man, alone in space, reborn as the Angel of Light, as he was at the dawn of Creation.

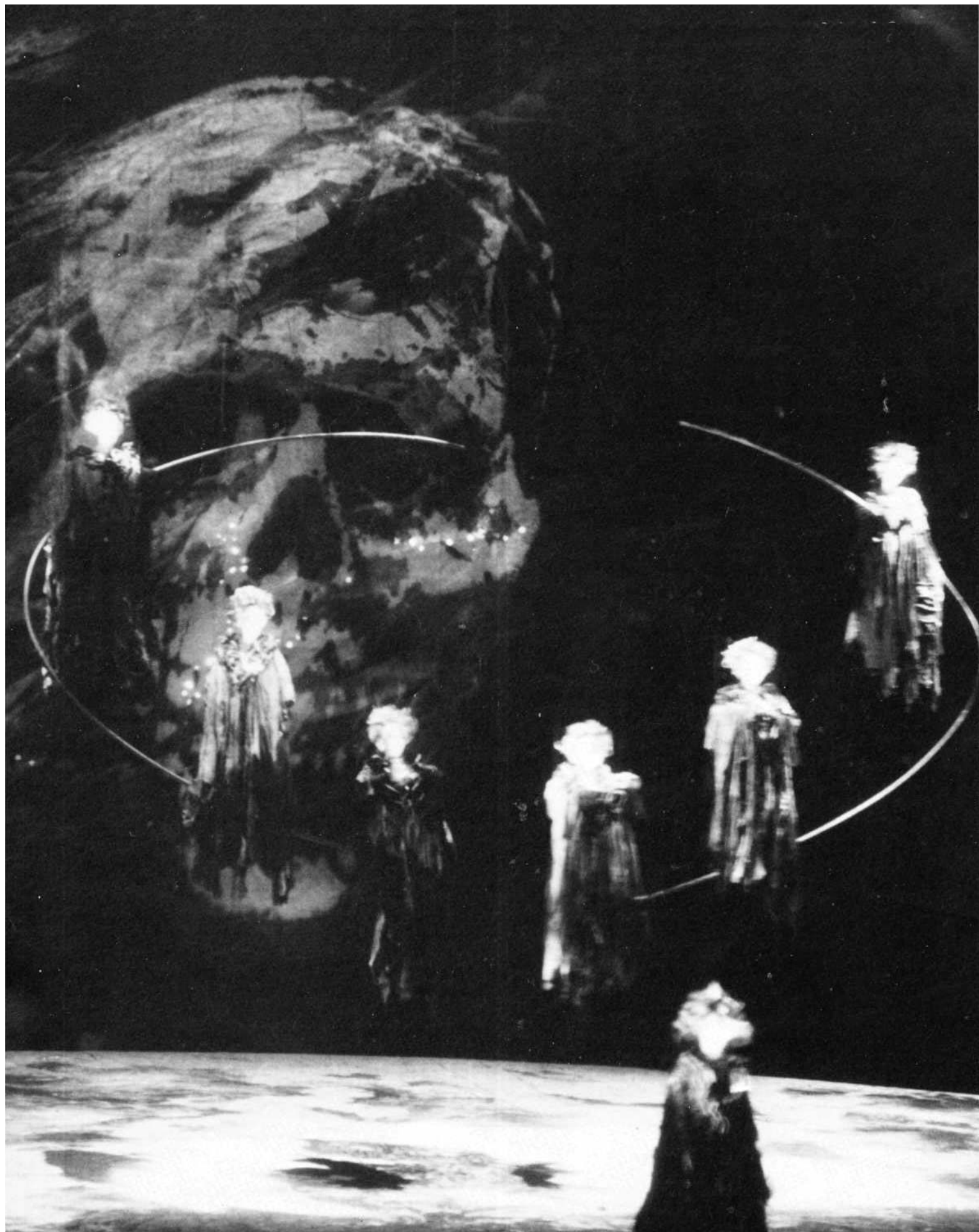
But, with texts such as “Upote mepote mepu medepote” not many of the glittering Salzburg Festival audience walked out of the *Grosses Festspielhaus* singing the lyrics. In fact, many of them were furious. It was not a comedy – but then neither is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Even worse, it was only 70 minutes long – or short, depending on how one looked at it. When Orff asked me at the dress rehearsal what I thought of it, I told him how exciting, impressive, and provocative I found it. But also that I couldn’t believe Von Karajan hadn’t provided a curtain-raiser, such as *Der Mond* or *Die Kluge*. At the Salzburg Festival, when one has paid that much for tickets, spent that much on expensive new clothing, taken the jewels out of the vault, and come so far, one expects to be able to promenade in the interval, to show it all off. And, of course, in those bygone times, to share one’s appreciation of the Maestro’s genius.

Perhaps now, when every day looks like the Day of Wrath on the

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TV news, we are at last ready for Carl Orff's last opera.



*De Temporum fine Comoedia, 1973, Salzburg Festival. Credit: PSF/Steinmetz.*

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