

Carl Orff in his Time

Speech on the occasion of Carl Orff's 100th birthday

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By Hans Maier

Carl Orff's hundredth birthday had hardly begun to approach than there erupted fierce arguments about the composer. They were concerned less with his work than with his life, and particularly with his behaviour during the Third Reich and in the years immediately after the war. New investigations into Orff's life and work, to which the Orff Centre in Munich rendered an outstanding service, went round the world in crassly-expressed news flashes that raised some (false) points. This triggered off confusion and consternation: Was Orff a Nazi? Was Orff a liar - someone who, like a Bavarian Astutulus, had cunningly led the occupying authorities by the nose? This was grist to their mill for those who had always known, like Gerald Abraham, who had always maintained that there were suspicious elements in the German's work, that "rhythmically hypnotic, totally diatonic neo-primitivism" that allows itself to be so easily connected with the stamping columns of the Third Reich. And promptly on the 28th January of this year, London Weekend Television, in a polemic disguised as "Documentation" presented SS-troops marching to Orff's music and showed pictures of dead bodies in concentration camps.

O Fortuna velut luna! Carl Orff has often been portrayed and also misrepresented in his long life, though hardly ever with such malicious over-simplification as in this year of celebration and jubilation. There has never been any lack of distorted pictures, of mischievous personal descriptions of such multiform and protean characters. Already in the time of the Weimar Republic, Orff was suspiciously regarded by the conservatives as an anti-traditionalist and a taboo-breaker, largely because of the nature of his performances, but also as a music pedagogue: Alexander Berrschke spoke of Hottentot rhythm with regard to the Schulwerk. Opinions such as these lasted well into the time of the Nazis when his works were successful in spite of all opposition, but also had to survive some highly officious forms of excommunication; in this connection Goebbels' music adviser, Heinz Drewes, described *Carmina Burana* without hesitation as Bavarian Niggermusic. After the war Orff really fell between two stools; for those who belonged to the aesthetic of music attached to the Viennese School he was considered for several decades - as was his contemporary Paul Hindemith - to be a non-person. In the seventies the taboos relaxed somewhat. Orff's name surfaced again in musicological seminars and in the company of critics. The theoretical boycott had hardly harmed his works. They had remained young through being performed. In today's descriptions of music history there are frequent conciliatory attempts to attach the label "populism" to Orff - in reference books he appears as the director of a musical folkpark, in which people like Prokofiev and Gershwin go in and out, where children eagerly practise on xylophones, where open-air performances for huge audiences take place and where the fence between serious and

light music is lower than it is elsewhere. It remains open to conjecture if that is his definitive place.

A hundred years of Orff, a hundred years of judgements and prejudices. My short lecture cannot give voice to all the stupid and wise, accurate and inaccurate, intelligently witty and plainly nonsensical statements that have been made about Orff. But thirty minutes will serve at least to place Orff in his time and to make his life and work understandable in reference to his environment. Let us try then; it is partly political, partly the music history of our time, and even partly an appreciative history of his work, the time that divides us from him being so short.

When Carl Orff died in 1982 at the age of 86, he had wandered through four epochs in the course of his life: the Empire, the Weimar Republic, National Socialism and finally the time after 1945 - since 1949 leading to the second, the Bonn Republic. I say "wandered through" deliberately, for one can hardly say of Orff that he had a particular, conscious or significant relationship to time or political situation. In general, for many reasons, musicians are less fixated on politics than writers; though of course there is the exception of the political musician: one has only to think of Liszt, Paderewski or of Henze, Nono and Theodorakis in our time. Orff did not belong to this type; he was totally a musician and nothing else, concerned with musical, not political effect, obstinately and obsessively committed to the service of Music. Not once did the problems of musicians, such as copyright or organisational questions concerning the position of the music profession so decisively interest him, that he was prepared to work for them within a professional organisation - as did both Richard Strauss and Werner Egk. So we hardly find any trace of specific statements about the times, the political and social conditions in which he grew up and developed. Certainly, the times through which he wandered left their stamp on him; for him to have lived in another century is unthinkable; he was a twentieth century man, coming from, alienated and escaping from the nineteenth century. But the effects of time and politics on his biography are nevertheless more indirect, conveyed almost coincidentally; and I can only warn those curious researchers who are interested in themes such as "Orff and the First World War", "Orff and the Weimar Republic", "Orff and the Adenauer Era", that they will hardly find what they are seeking in the sparse sources. I am heretical enough to add: even the theme "Orff and National Socialism" reveals in the end little in the way of information or even anything sensational. Orff went through time, through many times with the gestures of a sleepwalker; he gladly gave the time the chance to do something for him; though he would leave it to run its course with indifference or defiant fatalism.

The time before the First World War, the time of the Empire and particularly of the Prince Regent, was indeed a time through which the descendent of a well-educated Munich officer's family, born in 1895 would have lived. It was rather like the Bavarian Belle Époque. Those familiar with the reminiscences of Hermann Heimpel and Karl Alexander or the historical writings of Karl Möckl will have gained the impression that only those who lived through this time would have known the real *douceur de vivre*. The young Orff grew up in his parents'

house free from any material worries. He was not drawn to military honours but rather to books, musical scores and old languages. He was already having piano lessons at the age of five. He made up the music to accompany his puppet theatre. The first song cycles were written. From the autumn of 1912 he studied composition with Anton Beer-Walbrunn, a friend of Max Reger's who embodied the modern trend at the Academy of Music in Munich. Orff strove for a theatrical career; he achieved this by working with Hermann Zilcher as a répétiteur with the necessary pianistic gifts. From 1915-1917 he was a conductor at the theatre called the Munich Kammerspiele. Karl Marx, later to become a friend, noticed the fair-haired young man with the characteristic profile, who passed the time during the troop medical inspection in May 1917 by studying the pocket score of Reger's string quartet in F# minor. After a short period of compulsory duty with the First Royal Regiment of Bavarian Field Artillery in Poland, where he was buried alive and became consequently ill, Orff worked as a conductor at the National Theatre in Mannheim, and then at the Court Theatre in Darmstadt; he returned to Munich in 1919 and dedicated himself to composing songs. Taking lessons (amongst others from Pfitzner and Kaminski) and giving lessons (amongst others to Werner Egk), progressing slowly, discovering much, searching doggedly, interested in old scores, he became fundamentally an eclectic and self-taught working artist.

In the stormy, culturally so productive years of the Weimar Republic, the "Roaring Twenties", one would at first glance have taken Orff to be a stranger. Was he not primarily interested in music education, a man who, with Dorothee Günther, was working at the revitalisation of Dance and Movement, who was composing songs with piano accompaniment, and who was preparing his *Schulwerk*? One thereby overlooks two points, of course: first that the school music of the Weimar Republic, as it had been newly conceived in 1920, had a thoroughly political character, that it was in fact a showcase for a political education of the people - one has only to mention the name of Leo Kestenberg. Within this scheme there was room for much of what was currently being sung, played and newly discovered, from the songs of the Youth Movement to the eagerly collected "Verklingende Weisen" of folk songs and hymns - not to forget the work and protest songs of the time. In the Memorandum concerning the total involvement of Music in school and society (1923), conceived by Kestenberg and issued by the Prussian Ministry of Culture, one reads: Music must once more become a part of the life of all our people, its practice must lead to personal activity, to singing and playing oneself. The boat builder on his boat who plays the accordion, the worker who goes from his workplace to the rehearsal room of his male choir - they are perhaps as inwardly rich as the subscribers to big symphony concerts who go on a fixed day and time to hear a familiar symphony conducted by their favourite conductor (Quoted by Heide Hammel, *Die Schulmusik in der Weimarer Republik*, Stuttgart 1990, p.140). On the other hand the music of the time, particularly the avant garde, addressed itself with educational pathos to the general public, to nation and state. Educational works were produced not only in the field of contemporary literature - Brecht, Bronnen, Kaiser - but also in the field of contemporary music. And Orff also had his place in this spectrum, formed from expressionistic world-friendliness, humanist-social involvement and a revolutionary agitprop mood, that ranged from Fritz Jöde to Paul Hindemith and Hanns Eisler; it is no surprise that he set poems by Franz Werfel, wrote choral pieces to texts by Bert Brecht, and worked together with Kestenberg and Hermann Scherchen.

Had the Weimar Republic been granted a longer life, Orff might have become a musical educator of the people within the limits of democratic conditions. None of his undertakings were foreign to the political-educational aspirations of the First Republic. He was no conductor of worker choirs; his combinations and predilections, his educational models were different; above all, they were musically, not politically motivated. But with his inclination to combine old and contemporary, to bring new life to old instruments and performance techniques and at the same time delivering some well-aimed blows at the middle class music culture as an example: degrading the pianoforte to the status of percussion instrument! Considering all this he certainly did not stand alone during these years.

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Orff was a late-developer. It was his problem, perhaps his misfortune, that he did not find his own unchangeable style in the Weimar years, but only later. The musician Orff, as we know him, was born in the thirties. In June 1937 on the occasion of the dress rehearsal of *Carmina Burana*, when in relation to his publisher he dissociated himself from his previous compositional style and disowned the early offspring of his muse, the National Socialists had already been in power in Germany for four years. The conclusive breakthrough of the composer Carl Orff, his rise to European, and later worldwide fame and significance fell (sadly) in the Nazi time.

Did this rise have anything materially to do with the Nazi time? Did an elective affinity exist? Did the new "national community" offer a sounding board for the work of the composer in his middle forties? Fierce battles have raged about this in Germany and elsewhere in most recent times - and not only then! There is no doubt that some elements can be clarified - and even the most recent controversy about Michael Kater's study *Carl Orff in the Third Reich* has contributed much to this clarification if one disregards some of the terrible simplifications appearing in the media. Orff was no Nazi. Inwardly he had nothing to do with National Socialism; he had absolutely no political aspirations, neither before 1933 nor after (and also not after 1945). He was a composer and he wanted to have his works performed. He believed in his gift, if you will: in his mission. Composers have a hard time in totalitarian regimes - the biographies of Schönberg, Hindemith and Shostakovich in our century, to name but these three, show this very clearly. For composers in this situation there is fundamentally only one alternative: to emigrate or to remain. To go underground, to appear in clandestine publications, to paint pictures in secret, this is all possible within limits for writers and painters who oppose the status quo, but remains denied to the composer. For the Gods have ordained that there shall be a performance before musical fame can be achieved. Music, particularly dramatic music, is not simply there; it consists of notes in a score. It is an arduous process, it demands preparation, contracts, rehearsals, singers, an orchestra, the contribution of many people, inclusion in theatre repertoires, advertising in the media - already a colossal collective endeavour in normal times, how much more so under the requirements of a malicious, unpredictable, capricious system, often led from different sources of power that did not agree and were in fact rivals! I know only a few leading composers of the twentieth century who deliberately withdrew from the music business and regarded their scores as private works available for future generations, quite unconcerned about their being realised.

The most significant of these was Anton Webern, tragically killed in 1945 by the bullet of an American soldier in the Occupation Forces. But this was not the normal way; it requires an extreme, idealistic understanding of musical workmanship. Most composers do not want to withdraw. Even in the "Reich des Menschenfressers" (regime of the cannibal) - according to Thomas Mann - they wanted to have their works heard and made available to others. To achieve this of course one had to make compromises. As Carl Orff also had to in the Third Reich.

Did he go too far in this respect? Orff's contribution as a composer to the Olympic Games in 1936 does not constitute a *corpus delicti*. On that occasion the representatives of all nations, including those who later fought against Germany, were sitting at Hitler's feet in the Olympic Stadium in Berlin. (Kurt Schumacher, at that time in a concentration camp, did not refrain from pointing this out with biting sarcasm in the speeches he made after the war.) Shortly before the eleventh hour in 1944, Orff was able to avoid having to compose "battle music" for the weekly cinema news reel. The fact that he was prepared to make a new musical setting for Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a suggestion that even Hans Pfitzner firmly rejected, is more questionable. To manage to become a musical replacement for the "Jew Mendelssohn" at the particular behest of a top functionary of the Nazi Party - that appears to us today as a bad example of kowtowing to the powerful of that time. Certainly, Orff's Shakespeare plans were long-standing, they went back to when he was conductor at the Munich *Kammerspiele* in Falckenberg's time. Orff's reasons were aesthetic, not political. He had never found Mendelssohn's stage music appropriate - it was too gentle, too sweet. He thought he could match Shakespeare's drama more nearly with his own. The argument that it was immaterial to Orff that Mendelssohn was a Jew (and this is verifiable in the available source material!) can hardly be accepted unexamined; it overestimates the scope of musical autonomy in a state committed to a particular *Weltanschauung*. The National Socialists merely added Orff's aesthetic arguments to their other political triumphs. They would have taken no notice of his insistence on the absolute power of music. For the Nazis there was nothing musical that was not also political.

This is how the Nazis were - and Orff had assessed the time correctly when in the fairy tale play *Die Kluge* (1943) the imprisoned father sings: Those who have power are in the right, and those who are in the right will turn it to their own uses, for force rules over everything. In this sentence one could clearly have recognised, as in the mischievous exchange of the three vagabonds (Faith is struck dead. Justice lives in great penury...), an allusion to the conditions current at the time. I only fear that Orff saw politics in this light at all times in his life. It might not always have appeared so tyrannical and criminal as in the Third Reich, but for a man who wanted to create, to produce, it could be dangerously distracting and disturbing. If the powers in control gave music full scope and freedom, all was well - that is why Orff had absolutely no problems or difficulties with either of the two democratic republics, those of Weimar and Bonn. His musical realm should remain without disturbances or disputes, this was the most important maxim. His ideal was represented by an inwardness protected from those in power (not by those in power!). And for Orff, tyranny was mainly evil and wicked because it destroyed the autonomy of the Arts, because everything was sucked into the undertow of politics.

Only these conclusions make it understandable that the friends Kurt Huber and Carl Orff, according to trustworthy witnesses, talked exclusively about music, and not about politics, on the many occasions when they met. And one also understands Orff's first reaction to Huber's arrest, as transmitted by Clara Huber: Now I shall no longer be able to compose. Politics had overpowered Music. That Carl Orff later tried nevertheless to make political capital out of his musical association with his friend, or, more accurately, tried to avert the possible harm of a ban on performances of his works imposed by the American Occupation Forces - that was rather a kind of satyric drama after the end of the tragedy. For if Orff was certainly no Nazi, and if he heartily despised the Nazis -he was also certainly no resistance fighter. Nevertheless how can one, how may one - especially when born at a later time -so ingenuously expect this from an artist living in the Third Reich?

When Orff had survived the war and the Third Reich, when his "Bavarian Play" *Die Bernauerin*, could be performed in Stuttgart in 1947, when his post-war and mature productions began: *Antigone* (1949), *Trionfo di Afrodite* (1953), *Oedipus the King* (1959), *Prometheus* (1968), the Easter and Christmas plays and finally *De temporum fine comoedia* (1973), he seemed finally to have circumnavigated the dangerous cliffs of the first half of his life. Orff was an established master. The young Republic - also establishing and consolidating itself - was adorned by his fame. In 1950-1960 he directed a master-class for composition at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik (State College of Music) in Munich. In 1961 a training centre and seminar for the development of the Orff-Schulwerk - later the Orff-Institut - was opened at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. His ideas about music education, like his dramatic works, spread all over the world. They found acceptance in kindergartens and schools, in teacher training and adult education, in remedial education and in music therapy. Orff was compensated for the withdrawal of a large number of musicologists and critics through many friendships with philosophers, historians and philologists. His home in Diessen, where he both worked and lived, became a place of pilgrimage. It was here that the composer worked in the early morning hours amongst his books and collections, here he heard the "Amixl" (dialect for the blackbird in *Die Bernauerin*) singing and here he looked at the "Mond-Eiche" (the oak tree from which the moon hung in *DerMond*) in the park. The comfortable country house with its old family pictures, his wife Liselotte's Iceland ponies, the Chinese and Javanese gongs, the cymbals, bells and drums seemed - with characteristically different emphases - to be comparable to Richard Strauss' Villa in Garmisch. Since Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss there has been no composer living in Bavaria who has achieved such undisputed world-wide recognition as Carl Orff.

We could thus say goodbye to this idyll as a happy ending to Orff's long and sometimes stormy journey through life - were there not in the end one question, as with any life's work, what remains? What remains of Orff's personality, of Orff's music? To try to answer this question we must look back again at the life of this Bavarian master - this time not confronting the political world, but looking at the musical and music historical connections with his life.

When Carl Orff began to experiment and to compose before the First World War, the language of late romanticism was prevalent in song, in chamber music and in music for the stage - in all the genres in which the young musician tried his hand. Refinement was trumps. The tonal system was extended and stretched without being broken. The ear was gripped and tickled by a subtle and appealing harmony. Extramusical objects left their mark: Oriental pictures, hanging gardens, the sensuous magic of exotic landscapes, flowers and animals. A select, precious, aristocratic world stood opposite the real ugliness of the cities, factories and machines. The musical echo of these contrasting creations ranged from Debussy to Strauss, from Pfitzner to the young Schönberg.

This late romantic world collapsed in the First World War. Strictly speaking its demise started earlier; the catastrophe only made the occurrence clearly visible and audible. In poetry, music and art there was a whirl of new experiments, new starting points and beginnings. Above all the musical cards were reshuffled. Much was clarified and simplified. In the course of time Orff's compositions also became simpler, more elemental; the linear became more prominent, rhythm, at first barely significant adapted itself to the word; dissonances, but not the kind appearing to require resolution, "Personanzklänge" as they were later called, started the replacement of functional harmony.

Hans Joachim Moser, Werner Thomas, Wilhelm Keller and Horst Leuchtmann have analysed the elements of this new tonal language: the monotony, the repetition, a consciously barren tonal landscape, a musical principle of economy, ostinato techniques, the restriction of melody and others besides. The music brings about the most concise expression, the narrowest enveloping of the words. It releases and gathers its rhythmic and musical energies. Once the musical formula is found, as Orff says, it remains the same for each repetition. The conciseness of the verbal expression makes the repetition and its effect possible. Listening to Orff's music with today's ears, with the ears of the nineties, some of it sounds like an early foretaste of something like Techno; and parallels to Rock, to Klang-art cannot be ignored. The uncovering of musical energies in pulsing, almost toneless rhythm, in stamping, thundering and drumming seems in no way to have exhausted all its possibilities. Carl Orff may be considered as one of the forerunners of those placing such a concentration on the value of rhythmic movement in music. Melodies become sequences of notes. The flow of speech is stemmed, breaks up in pieces till only sounds, crackles and hisses remain. Of course a possible surplus of monotony in Orff's music dramas is carefully balanced through new forms of recitativo secco and arioso, through melody that is freely modal and through orchestral primary colours produced by an orchestra that, in contrast to that of the classic-romantic period, consists of xylophones, percussion, double basses, woodwind and brass.

This is no longer traditional music. In the music dramas of his mature years, as spacious as they are concentrated, Orff distances himself ever more decisively than before from the dominant music schools of thought of the twentieth century. His way is different from the musical constructivism of the Viennese School - but he also leaves the great stimulus and source of his youth, Igor Stravinsky, somewhat far behind him. In a certain sense, in turning away from opera and turning towards drama, he is continuing the work of Richard Wagner - except that he supports the words much more radically than the master of Bayreuth, and in

contrast to him avoids using the symphonic commentary of an orchestra opposite the singing and reciting human voice. In the end, practically all that remains is the language, Greek or Latin, old Bavarian or old French, and it is both inexhaustible and at the same time the hidden source and storehouse of all tonal and rhythmic energy. "There would be no sound, where the word is lacking" - One could thus adapt Stefan George's verse in relation to Orff.

Orff's music, his *mousike* - I use the Greek expression purposely - offers less to the ear than traditional opera. But on the other hand it includes all the senses; for it is not only tone but also dance, not only sound but also play, not only song but also scene, theatre - it is music in the sense of an art that unifies and embraces all the other arts, as the Greeks first conceived it.

The idea of such a music, one that is constantly renewing itself through its language forms, is perhaps the boldest idea that the musician Carl Orff has left to posterity. It reaches far beyond his own work and its future historical evaluation. Therein lies its significance for the future. In a world that grows ever closer its separate individualities are maintained through their languages. Out of all languages, every single one - this is Orff's idea - music can be made. Such a music would no longer be an artificial creation of its own, removed from the visual and language arts, it would remain closely connected with the cultural archetypes of mankind, their languages and speakers. And it would thus to some extent be both universal and individual, both archaic and modern: a foretaste of the new music of one world.

Translated by Margaret Murray

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