Masterworks #9: Carmina Burana: Festival of Fate
June 8-10, 2018

The powerful creative forces behind some of the world's most beautiful and compelling music can be as dramatic as the compositions they inspired.

Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* was inspired by a collection of medieval poems dating back to the 11th or 12th century. The poems, found in a small German monastery, depict life’s triumphs and tribulations as a fragile game of chance, with little or no control of the outcome. Inspired by the poems, Orff’s opera portrays life as a wheel of fortune, framed against the themes of spring, debauchery and love. A little-known fact: On March 27, 1957, the Hartford Symphony Orchestra recorded the first stereo recording of *Carmina Burana* on the Vanguard label, with Fritz Mahler conducting.1

Like Orff, many composers draw inspiration from a variety of sources, and themes of nature are common. Debussy’s *La Mer* and *Claire de Lune* are two powerful examples. Debussy’s words identify the source of his inspiration: “There is nothing more musical than a sunset. He who feels what he sees will find no more beautiful example of development in all that book which, alas, musicians read but too little – the book of Nature.”2 Brahms, an “avid outdoorsman,” was inspired to write the final melody of his C-minor Symphony while hiking in the Alps.2 After nearly dying in a shipwreck during a stormy voyage, Richard Wagner recreated the power of a storm at sea in *The Flying Dutchman*. The terrifying dread he must have felt on that voyage can be heard in the opening seconds of the overture.3

Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony, often called the *Pastoral*, is an expression of the composer’s profound love of nature. Beethoven’s practice of roaming the countryside was well-documented.4 He routinely moved to the country every summer, so he would be free to enjoy long walks through nature. Countess Theresa of Brunswick, a student and intimate friend of Beethoven’s, wrote: “He loved to be alone with nature, to make her his only confidante. When his brain was reeling with confused ideas, nature at all times comforted him.”5 Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* is another powerful example of nature’s influence on music. If the title of the composition is not sufficiently persuasive, inspection of the musical score leaves no doubt whatsoever. Vivaldi’s notations direct the musicians to recreate the sounds of rustling leaves, a thunderstorm, the sounds of birds, and even frigid sleet.6

Themes of debauchery, expressed in drinking songs, are abundant in opera. The bar songs from *Carmina Burana* are one example, but there are others. In Mozart’s *Don
Giovanni, the title character sings the well-known “Champagne Aria,” celebrating the dishonorable pleasures of life. A similar drinking song is found in Bizet’s Carmen, performed by the bullfighter, Escamillo, a “Don-Juan-esque” character. One of opera’s most famous drinking songs is the “Brindisi,” sung by the lovers Violetta and Alfredo in Verdi’s La Traviata. Offenbach’s comic opera, Orpheus in the Underworld, which features popular music such as the “Can-Can,” ends with the heroine joining the wine-soaked revelries of Bacchus, god of wine and ecstasy.

Orff’s third theme, love, is a compelling inspiration for any artist. Hector Berlioz’s powerful infatuation with the actress Harriet Simpson, a woman he had never even met, was the inspiration for his Symphonie Fantastique. The writer, George Sand, was not only the love of Chopin’s life, but became his muse. Benjamin Britten’s 40-year relationship with his partner, tenor Peter Pears, is reflected in his music, most notably in compositions Britten wrote for Pears’ unique voice. Gustav Mahler was inspired by his wife, Alma; both Johannes Brahms and Robert Schumann were motivated by their love for the same woman, Clara Schumann; and Charles Gounod was so infatuated with Georgina Weldon that he moved in with her AND her husband!

Beyond musical inspiration derived from nature, alcohol and love, heritage, tradition and folk tunes are also powerful influences. Born and raised a Bohemian peasant, Antonin Dvořák’s Czech roots are clearly present in his music, celebrating the folk tunes of his youth. The largo movement of Dvořák’s New World Symphony, composed to commemorate his visit to the United States, echoes the African-American inspired theme, “Goin’ Home,” borrowed from hymns the composer heard during his travels. In the early part of the 20th century, both Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály roamed the Hungarian country side, collecting and transcribing Magyar folk music, which greatly influenced their compositions. Folk influences are evident in Bartók’s Romanian Folk Dances. Unquestionably, “Simple Gifts” from Aaron Copland’s Appalachian Spring is derived from common melodies he appropriated, and his famous “Hoedown” from Rodeo reflects the music of the American west.

Music is often inspired by other art forms, including paintings and Shakespeare. “Romeo-and-Juliet-inspired music” was composed by Tchaikovsky, Berlioz, Prokofiev and Britten. Mendelssohn’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream was written when he was just 17, and 16 years later, the composer wrote incidental music for the same play, including his famous “Wedding March.” Verdi wrote three operas, Macbeth, Falstaff and Otello, also inspired by Shakespeare. Rossini also tried his hand at an adaptation of Otello. Sibelius composed incidental music for The Tempest, and Vaughan Williams, also inspired by The Tempest, composed Three Shakespeare Songs based on Shakespeare’s text. Another composition by Vaughan Williams, Serenade to Music, draws text from The Merchant of Venice.

Painting and illustrations exert powerful influences on music. At our opening Masterworks next season, we will perform Pictures at an Exhibition, inspired by the illustrations of Viktor Hartmann. A piece performed this season, Debussy’s La Mer, was inspired by a famous Japanese painting, The Great Wave off Kanagawa by Katsushika Hokusai, the very illustration we used in our program guide for the concert. A series of paintings by William Hogarth, A Rake’s Progress, the story of a young man who inherited and then squandered his father’s wealth, inspired Stravinsky to compose an opera of the same name.
Music is not composed in a vacuum. Among other things, it reflects other art forms, heritage, history, as well as the composer's moods, thoughts, travels, successes, failures and emotions. Music endures long after the composer has died, as a living memorial to its creator's soul, touching each of us in new, profound and even unanticipated ways.

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for Carmina Burana: Festival of Fate, June 8 - 10, 2018, and revel in the influences that brought 800-year-old medieval poetry to life, a powerful reminder that notwithstanding the passage of time, the shared common themes of life remain constant and unchanged.

Wondering How the Music Will Sound?
Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Samuel Barber's Knoxville Summer of 1915 is sung by Renee Fleming at the Aspen Festival in 1993, with Lawrence Foster conducting:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzDAkA67ZsY

Hear the most commonly-recognized musical theme from Carmina Burana, O Fortuna:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXFSK0oOge4

Listen to a comic version of O Fortuna with its often mis-heard lyrics:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIwrgAnx6Q8

Enjoy the entirety of Carmina Burana:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHBG_FEITBY

A discussion about Carmina Burana on NPR explains the enduring quality of the music:

And for extra fun, listen to music inspired by alcohol-induced fun, a terrifying sea voyage and folk tunes:

“Brindisi,” the popular drinking song from La Traviata:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZvgmpiQCcl

The "champagne Aria" from Don Giovanni:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T4z6MI4hkU

The overture from The Flying Dutchman, by Richard Wagner, with the terrifying sounds of the sea:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvOqRKrmH8

Dvořák's New World Symphony:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HClX2s8AgIE
(This is a recording of the entire Ninth symphony; the Going Home theme of the 2nd movement begins at 10:10)

Bartók's Romanian Folk Dances:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HAIHSqiwAA

“Simple Gifts” from Copland's Appalachian Spring:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=az667ziu538

“Hoe Down” from Copland's Rodeo:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2V6gQWh8zFo
Want the best recordings of the pieces you’ll experience on the concert program?

**Coleman Casey**, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Samuel Barber’s *Knoxville Summer of 1915* is one of this still underrated composer’s greatest works, and the first recording of it, although in mono and somewhat restricted sound, is still the greatest, featuring Eleanor Steber with William Strickland conducting (SONY). The sense of longing intimacy in the music is unforgettable.

Carl Orff’s exuberant *Carmina Burana* continues to enchant audiences, and the most exciting and unique performance with fabulous sound, belongs to Andre Previn conducting the London Symphony Orchestra (EMI/WARNER).