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Rapides Symphony Orchestra

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Leopold Stokowski (1882-1977)
Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 582

For a modern symphony orchestra, performing music by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) presents quite a challenge as Bach did not write any music for the modern orchestra. Although Bach wrote about thirty orchestral works and most of his cantatas and larger choral compositions use orchestral accompaniment, the instruments that constitute these orchestras are very different from those that comprise our modern orchestra. Not only was the orchestra that Bach knew much smaller, but often it only included the winds when they were needed for special accents and typically included a continuo part played by either harpsichord or organ – two instruments absent from the modern symphony orchestra in its standard configuration.

The first solution open to the symphony orchestra wishing to perform Bach is bending their orchestra to his standards – subtracting some instruments like winds and adding others like harpsichord or organ. The Rapides Symphony Orchestra utilized this first method for its concert this January entitled "Stained Glass and Strings" where only the strings and piano soloist performed Bach's Keyboard Concerto in A major, BWV 1055.

A second solution is to arrange one of Bach's compositions for the modern orchestra. This is the solution taken for this concert as the Rapides Symphony Orchestra will perform Leopold Stokowski's orchestral arrangement of Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 582, which Bach had written for organ.

Leopold Stokowski (1882-1977) was one of the most famous and gifted conductors of the twentieth century. Stokowski spent his formative years as a conductor with the Philadelphia Orchestra, leading this group from 1912 to 1936. After 1936, he spent the remainder of his career as a guest conductor, only occasionally maintaining brief positions as principal conductor. Throughout his life, Stokowski was an advocate of both the new opportunities provided by recording technology and of new music. He made his most famous recording as the conductor for Disney's animated film *Fantasia* which advocates music appreciation while highlighting some of the best-loved classical music.

Stokowski first discovered the music of J. S. Bach as a young church organist with various posts in his native Great Britain and his adopted home of America. After resolving to pursue a career as a conductor in 1908, he searched for ways to bring the music of Bach – which he had come to deeply admire as an organist – to the concert hall for, at this time, Bach's music was seldom performed in orchestral concerts. In the 1920s, Stokowski – now the celebrated conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra – began a series of orchestral transcriptions of Bach's organ works which soon led him to begin making arrangements of other pieces by Bach.

Stokowski was far from the first to arrange Bach's music for orchestra. Bach himself arranged several of his chamber compositions for orchestra, including the so-called *Triple* Concerto in A minor for flute, violin, and harpsichord, BWV 1044, which Bach arranged from the Prelude and Fugue in A minor, BWV 894, for solo harpsichord and a movement from his Trio Sonata in D minor, BWV 527, for organ. When Felix Mendelssohn gave his celebrated premiere of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, it was in Mendelssohn's own arrangement that it was performed. In the twentieth century, several other composers and performers besides Stokowski arranged the music of Bach for the modern orchestra. Ottorino Respighi – famous for the *Pines of Rome* – arranged several of Bach's compositions for the modern orchestra, including his own version of the Passacaglia and Fugue heard on today's program. Additionally, Anton Webern the serialist created an orchestral arrangement of the opening *Ricercare* from Bach's *Musical Offering* to demonstrate his colorful technique of dividing a melody between the different instruments of the orchestra. No one, however, had managed to establish Bach's music as a staple of the concert hall repertoire quite like Stokowski achieved.

The Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 582, was one of the first pieces by Bach that Stokowski arranged for orchestra. He conducted this new transcription's premiere with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1922. It maintains much of the same feel as the organ original. In fact, Stokowski described the Passacaglia and Fugue as "in music what a great Gothic Cathedral is in architecture – the same vast conception – the same soaring mysticism given eternal form […] whether played on the organ, or on the greatest of all instruments – the orchestra." Here, Stokowski has given the Passacaglia and Fugue a new guise without compromising the majesty of Bach's original.

Carl Orff (1895-1982)
Carmina Burana

"O Fortuna" the chorus cries as *Carmina Burana* bursts to life and the goddess Fortune's wheel begins its reckless and undiscerning spin. The pagan notion that

humans are not in charge of their own destinies – that they are subject to merciless fate – dominates this first chorus and underlies every song which follows until, finally, it returns full-force when the Wheel completes its rotation and the chorus once more shouts "O Fortuna."

Was Fate ever more relentless than in the late 1930s when Carl Orff (1895-1982) composed his *Carmina Burana*? The young Bavarian had witnessed his country bombarded in World War I and further decimated by the reparations that followed Germany's defeat. While Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime were stirring many Germans to renewed optimism with their proposal of a Third Reich, the regime was already taking violent measures against those people who would not or could not conform to their ideals. Here lie the foundations for the ruthless Holocaust as well as the exile of many other dissidents. Regarding music, the regime had patience for neither the politically rebellious *Gebrauchsmusik* of Paul Hindemith or Kurt Weill, nor the atonal cacophony of Arnold Schoenberg and his followers. All three of these composers found themselves fleeing to America as did many artists and musicians at this time. Carl Orff, however, – with his simple tonal language and his frequent incorporation of German material from centuries past – found it possible to remain in Germany, although this did nothing to minimize his hardships when full-scale war erupted at the end of the decade.

There has been much scholarly debate about Orff's relationship with this regime, especially considering the immense popularity that *Carmina Burana* won among Germans following its premiere in Frankfurt in 1937. Do its barbaric rhythms and disparaging texts possibly reflect what Orff may have perceived as the horrors of his age? Or, has Orff conformed to the tonal, German-glorifying musical language demanded by the Nazis? Or, has Orff – a scholar of early music and a noted advocate of music education – merely written a piece that expresses these interests without any political motivation at all? These questions are all up for debate.

What is not in question, however, is that Orff did, in fact, base his *Carmina Burana* on songs he selected from a medieval manuscript preserved at a Bavarian Abbey called Benediktbeuren. Now dated to the late thirteenth century, this manuscript contains several hundred songs with texts in Medieval Latin and Middle High German. The German found here is of a Bavarian dialect demonstrating that these songs were at least recopied in this region of Germany if not at the Abbey itself. While most of the songs are anonymous, they are understood to have been composed by the goliards – wandering minstrels with whom the better-known troubadours of France make an easy comparison. While some of the texts are religious, others present satirical moral lectures in direct conflict to the former. Others are devoted love songs, while others are humorous drinking or gambling songs. Many of the medieval songs have been performed and recorded in modern times, and this renewed interest in the originals nicely complements the frequent performances and numerous recordings of Orff's arrangements.

For his re-composition, Orff borrowed the texts – and occasionally the melodies – from several of the medieval originals to create a new composition that is equally original. Orff scored his new work for an orchestra with an extensive percussion section including five timpani, three glockenspiel, xylophone, castanets, sleigh bells, and many cymbals and drums of various shapes and sizes plus celesta and two pianos. Then there is the chorus with soprano, tenor, and baritone soloists.

Orff divided his composition into three balanced sections framed on either side by the powerful chorus "O Fortuna." The first section – which consists of the subsections *Primo vere* (*Spring*) and *Uf dem anger* (*On the Green*) – focuses on Spring with its reawakening of both nature and love as well as the cheerful feelings associated with these renewals. With the second section – called *In Taberna* (*In the Tavern*) – begins the drinking and gambling songs which often reflect upon the rotten state of the world and the abuses in both the church and society. The third section – *Cour d'amours* (*The Court of Love*) invokes the medieval ideal of courtly love – as opposed to tainted lust. This section concludes with a hymn in honor of Blanchefleur and Helena – two heroines of pure, untainted love – before cruel Fortune inserts herself and ruins the hymn with the awaited restatement of "O Fortuna."

Some of the songs are quite humorous – and at times quite bawdy – while others are much more serious and compassionate. In the ironic "Cignus ustus cantat" ("The Roast Swan Sings"), the tenor soloist singing in falsetto portrays a roasting swan full of regret that he is no longer free to fly or swim on lakes, but that he is now becoming someone's dinner. "In taberna quando sumus" ("When we are in the tavern") describes the lively happenings within the tavern, with its male chorus proposing that everyone in the world enjoys drinking and being drunk just as much as they clearly do. Contrary to these two humorous songs, "Veris leta facies" ("The cheerful face of spring") describes a beautiful pastoral scene, while "Stetit puella" ("A Girl Stood") praises chastity.

Following the overwhelming success of *Carmina Burana*, Orff decided to expand his original conception and make this composition the first work in a larger trilogy. He titled this trilogy *Trionfi* recalling the triumphs of Ancient Rome which eventually evolved

into a kind of proto-opera involving pageantry, speech, music, and dance. The second part of this trilogy is called *Catulli Carmina* (1943) which emphasizes as its source the raucous love poetry of the Roman writer Catullus. And, the third part is called *Trionfo di Afrodite* (1951) which depicts an ancient wedding ceremony, while pulling its texts from three sources: Catullus, the Greek lyric poetess Sappho, and the Greek dramatist Euripides. With these additions, the focus of *Trionfi* becomes love in its various forms and realizations. Regardless of Orff's intentions to construct a larger work, *Carmina Burana* remains the best-known and most-performed while – at least in the United States – the other two are rarely performed despite their quality. "O Fortuna" – indiscriminating Fate has struck once more, ensuring that the seat of highest privilege remains reserved for *Carmina Burana*.

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