Four of Milwaukee’s most dynamic performing arts companies are joining forces to present Carl Orff’s explosive cantata, Carmina Burana. Skylight is elated to work with artists from Danceworks Performance Company, Milwaukee Opera Theatre and Chant Claire Chamber Choir to bring this magnificent work to life for the first time in our nearly 60-year history.

Although Carmina is most often presented in the concert hall, Orff himself called it a scenic cantata, consisting of “secular songs for singers and choruses to be sung with instruments and magical images.”

It is in this spirit of interdisciplinary collaboration that the creative team has approached the production, conceptualizing the piece as “total theatre” in which music, dance and text are inseparable.” Skylight Artistic Associate and Carmina Stage Director Jill Anna Ponasik describes it this way: “Is it an opera? No. Is it a musical? No. Is it a concert? No. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime event that unites theatre, dance, music, and visual images in performance.”

Carmina Burana consists of 25 musical sections, the most famous being the instantly recognizable, thundering choral anthem “O Fortuna,” often used in television commercials and film scores. Each of Carmina’s movements relates to the turning of Fate’s wheel and the unpredictability of the human condition, touching on the full scope of existence from birth to death, and everything including joy to despair, love, fear, the seasons and the moon.

Indeed, it is the moon which has inspired Lisa Schlenker’s haunting scenic design and serves as the production’s predominant visual metaphor. Illuminated by Jason Fassl’s brilliant lighting, the moon serves as a timeless reminder of Fate’s ever-changing whims. In contrast, Shima Orans’ modern, urban costume design underscores the contemporary relevance of the cantata’s themes. Tying the visual and linguistic elements together are a series of projections which serve to augment and elucidate the action onstage.

Amid this evocative milieu, an intergenerational cast of 62 performers - 17 Skylight artists, seven Danceworks dancers, four Chant Claire guest artists and 25 Chant Claire Chamber Choir members, will fill the Cabot stage. Joining them are six percussionists, two pianists, and one conductor, performing the thrilling score in a reduced chamber orchestration by Orff’s protégé, Wilhelm Killmayer.

In true “Skylight style,” the clarity of the action and immediacy of emotion will take precedence. Says Skylight Artistic Director Ray Jivoff, “Audiences will be riveted by this Carmina. Each musical moment is connected to an action onstage.” Stage Director Ponasik elaborates: “Carmina will speak to you in a way that is immediate, direct and instantly relatable. We are bringing Carmina Burana up close and will see ourselves in the performers onstage. Their experiences are ours.”

This guide is available online at skylightmusictheatre.org
Composed by Carl Orff

Carl Orff was born on July 10, 1895 in Munich to a musical family. He showed an extraordinary proclivity for creative endeavors from an early age, beginning piano lessons at five and (with much assistance from his mother) writing his first novel at eight. As a child, he was enamored with theatrical performance and frequently staged puppet shows for his family. At sixteen, some of his first compositions, settings of German poetry, were published. It was also at this age that he began to write large-scale works for voice and orchestra, including a setting of texts by Nietzsche and an opera in the style of Debussy.

From 1912 to 1914, Orff attended the Academy of Music in Munich, where he found the curriculum old-fashioned and overly conservative. In 1917, he was drafted into military service, fighting in World War I until he was nearly killed in a trench collapse on the Eastern Front. Debilitated and unable to continue his service, he took positions as Music Director at the Court Theatre in Darmstadt and the National Theatre in Mannheim.

Orff returned to Munich in 1919 where he shifted the focus of his education to an intense study of the old master composers of the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1924, he co-founded the Günther School, an educational institution specializing in dance, gymnastics and music. For the next several years, Orff balanced teaching and composition, but it was not until 1937 that he achieved major success with the premiere of his magnum opus, Carmina Burana.

Orff married four times. His first wife, the actress Alice Solscher, bore his only child, Godela, in 1921. His second wife was the German music therapist, Gertrud Willert; his third was the novelist Luise Rinser. Orff remained married to his fourth wife, Liselotte Schmitz, until his death, after which she became the chairwoman of the Carl Orff Foundation for 24 years.

A major point of controversy in Orff’s life is his association with Nazism. Though not a member of the party himself, Orff is often considered to have been insufficiently resistant to Hitler’s rise during the Third Reich: he kept his grandmother’s Jewish ancestry a closely-guarded secret and composed music for A Midsummer Night’s Dream after Felix Mendelssohn’s music was banned because he was Jewish.

Following the conclusion of World War II, Orff was questioned by the American authorities about his possible connections to Nazism. In order to maintain his social standing in postwar German society, he fraudulently claimed that he had been a founding member of the White Rose resistance movement, a claim that could not be disproven since Kurt Huber, Orff’s one-time friend and the actual founder of the movement, had been executed in 1943. This lie was especially ironic because Orff had previously refused Huber’s wife’s plea to use his influence with the Nazis to intervene on her husband’s behalf, an act which he came to deeply regret.

In his later life, Orff continued to compose, though none of his works attained Carmina’s popularity. He died of cancer on March 29, 1982, aged 86.
Many composers excel in the realm of purely instrumental music, but Orff’s music always contains a theatrical component. In the mid-1920s, he began to formulate the conception of his aesthetic ideal: a unification of music, theatre, visual arts, poetry and dance in a single work of art. This concept, termed *Theatrum Mundi*, was an attempt to reinvigorate modern music by returning to the sensibilities of Greek tragedy, which employed a similar synthesis of the arts. In this respect, *Theatrum Mundi* has much in common with Richard Wagner’s notion of the Total Artwork and with very early opera, both of which also emulated the Ancient Greek ideal.

Indeed, Orff’s most profound compositional influence is undoubtedly Claudio Monteverdi, whose *L’Orfeo* (1607) is the earliest opera still regularly performed today. Orff was also heavily influenced by Igor Stravinsky, and the similarities between *Carmina Burana* and a work like Stravinsky’s “opera-oratorio”, *Oedipus Rex* (1927) are striking: both inhabit the middle ground between opera and concert piece, both make use of pared-down neoclassical harmonies to convey blunt emotions with clarity, and, unusually for a 20th century work, both are sung in Latin—a language, in Stravinsky’s words, “not dead but turned to stone.”

In addition to composing, Orff also developed a highly influential method of musical education known as The Orff Approach (*Orff Schulwerk*). The basis of this approach stems from the commonalities Orff discerned between music, language, and movement, which he described as “elemental.” The Approach consists primarily of structured improvisations on specialized instruments, many of which are percussion due to Orff’s belief that rhythm is a fundamental component of human expression. Though the Approach can be practiced by children of all skill levels, its kinesthetic nature lends itself especially well to the development of coordination and motor skills in special needs children.

Today, the Orff Approach is taught around the world, with professional associations in America and New Zealand. Though there are slight differences in methodology, its worldwide application is a testament to Orff’s belief in human potential: as Orff himself put it, “Every human being has an artist inside them. This possibility can either be encouraged or destroyed. My guiding principle has always been to encourage.”

**List of Works by Orff**

- *Lamenti* (adapted from Monteverdi)
- *Orpheus* (1924/39)
- *Klage der Ariadne* (1925/40)
- *Tanz der Spröden* (1925/40)

**Entrata** for orchestra, after

- “The Bells” by William Byrd (1928/41)

**Orff Schulwerk** (Learning Pieces)

- *Tanzstück* (1933)
- *Gassenhauer*
- *Trionfi* (“Triumphs”)
- *Carmina Burana* (1937)
- *Catulli Carmina* (1943)
- *Trionfo di Afrodite* (1953)

**Märchenstücke** (“Fairy tales”)

- *Der Mond* (1939)
- *Die Kluge* (1943)
- *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (1952/62)

**Bairisches Welttheate**

- (Bavarian world theatre)
- *Die Bernauerin* (1947)
- *Astutuli* (1953)
- *Comoedia de Christi Resurrectione* (1956)
- *Ludus de Nato Infante Mirificus* (1961)

**Theatrum Mundi** (Total Theatre)

- *Antigonae* (1949)
- *Oedipus der Tyrann* (1959)
- *Prometheus* (1968)
- *De temporum fine comoedia* (1973/77)
O Fortuna

O Fortune, like the ever-changing moon, you always wax and wane. Life is brutal, then pampers us. Poverty, power, it melts them like ice.

Fate, savage and empty, you are a whirling wheel. Covered in shadows and veiled, you bear down upon me. Now my back is naked through the sport of your wickedness. The chance of prosperity is no longer mine: Man is always beholden to Fortune’s whims.

Without delay, pluck the strings! Since Fate strikes down the brave, join with me in lamentation!

Fortunae plango vulnera
I mourn the blows of Fortune; she has taken back her gifts. Opportunity is rightly described as having hair on her forehead, but a bald patch follows on the back.

On Fortune’s throne I sat elated. Now I have fallen from the pinnacle, deprived of my glory.

The Wheel of Fortune turns; I sink, debased. Another is raised up. Let him beware of ruin!

Veris leta facies
The happy face of Spring comes; the army of Winter is conquered. Praised by the sweet sound of the forest, Flora rules. Apollo lies in her lap, covered with flowers.

The gentle West Wind breathes nectar-scented breezes. Let us rush to compete for love’s prize.

The sweet nightingale sings with harp-like tones. The serene meadows smile. A flock of birds rises up. The chorus of maidens promises a thousand joys.

Omnia sol temperat
The sun warms everything. A young man hastens to love. The boy god rules over him. Spring’s rebirth bids us rejoice; And in the Spring of your life, keep him who is yours.

Love me faithfully! Mark my loyalty! I am with you. even when I am far away. Whoever loves in this way is turned on the wheel of torture.

Ecce gratum
Behold! Violet flowers fill the meadows; the sun brightens everything. Now let sorrows depart!

Summer returns and Winter’s rage recedes. Snow and ice flow away and Spring sucks at the breast of Summer.

Wretched is he who doesn’t frolic under Summer’s right hand. Let us be at Venus’s command, rejoicing at being the equals of Paris.
Olim lacus colueram
When I was a swan,
I dwelled on lakes, I was beautiful.
The spit turns round;
I burn fiercely on my pyre;
the waiter serves me.
I lie on the tray and cannot fly;
I see the gnashing teeth.
Poor wretch! Black and well roasted!

Ego sum abbas
I am the Abbot of Cockaigne
and my friends are the drunks and
gamblers. Whoever seeks me in the
tavern will leave stripped of his
clothes, he will cry: “You have taken
the joy from our lives!”

In taberna quando sumus
When we’re in the tavern, we don’t
think about dying; we gamble!
Let’s see what happens here,
where money is king:
Some gamble, some drink,
Some behave loosely;
some win clothes, some lose theirs.
Everyone throws dice to win wine.
The boozers drink:
first for the wine merchant,
then for prisoners,
three times for the living,
four for Christians,
five for the departed,
six for sisters of loose virtue,
seven for the soldiers,
eight for the errant brethren,
nine for scattered monks,
ten for sailors,
eleven for men quarrelling,
twelve for those doing penance,
thirteen for those on journeys.
Mistress and master,
soldier and cleric,
man and woman,
servant and maid,
industrious and lazy,
white and black,
adventurers and homebound,
fools and scholars,
the poor and the sick,
the exile and stranger,
Young and old,
bishop and deacon,
Sister and brother,
mother and crone:
hundreds and thousands drink.
Money goes too fast when everyone
drinks without restraint.
They sponge off us
and makes us poor.
Curse them!

III - COUR D’AMOURS / COURT OF LOVE

Amor volat undique
Love flies everywhere,
seized by desire.
Young men and women come together.
The girl without a lover
harbors the depths of night
in her inmost heart.
It is pure bitterness.

Dies, nox, et omnia
Day, night, everything is against me.
The maidens’ chattering
makes me weep and sigh.
O friends, make merry!
Have mercy on me in my misery.

Your beauty makes me weep
but your heart is ice.
One kiss would restore me to life.

Stetit puella
A girl stood in a red dress.
If anyone touched it, the dress rus-
tled.
A girl stood like a little rose.
Her face shone
and her mouth bloomed.

Circa mea pectora
Many tortuous sighs reside in my
heart on account of your beauty.
Your eyes shine
like a flash of lightning.
May the gods grant what I desire:
to unlock the bonds of her virginity.
Send a message, send a message.
My beloved does not come.

Si puer cum puellula
If a boy lingers with a girl in the cellar,
Love rises up,
and boredom is driven away.
A game beyond words begins:
a game of arms, shoulders, lips.

Veni, veni, venias
Come! Don’t let me die.
Beautiful is your face, the gleam of
your eyes, your hair!
Redder than the rose,
brighter than the lily,
you are my constant pride!

In trutina
In the wavering scales of my heart,
lust and chastity hang in the balance.
But I choose what I see
and submit my neck to the yoke;
to a yoke so sweet I yield.

Tempus est iocundum
It is the time of joy!
I am all afower, all afire with love!
I am heartened by my promise;
I am downcast by my refusal.
In the winter, a man is sluggish;
in spring, he is wanton.
My innocence encourages me;
my shyness holds me back.
Come, my pretty!
Already I die of love.

Dulcissime
Sweetest!
I give myself to you fully!

Ave formosissima
Hail, fairest of women, precious jewel!
Glory of maidens, noblest of maidens!
Light of the world, rose of the world!
You are Blancheflour, Helen, Venus.
The manuscript which forms the basis to Orff’s cantata is a collection of some 254 poems, dating from the Middle Ages, on themes ranging from the cruelty of Fate to the renewal of springtime. The title Carmina Burana, given by literary scholar Johann Andreas Schmeller as the designation of his 1847 edition, translates to “Songs of Beuern,” a reference to the site of the manuscript’s discovery. Taken collectively, the anthology stands as the most comprehensive surviving compendium of medieval lyric poetry in existence.

The manuscript was discovered in 1803 in the library of Benediktbeuern, a monastery located in Upper Bavaria about forty miles south of Munich. It was transferred to the Bavarian State Library in Munich in 1806, where it rests today. In 1870, a previously undiscovered segment known as the Fragmenta Burana, was unearthed by literary scholar Wilhelm Meyer.

The exact date of composition is not known, but the poems appear to have been written in the 11th or 12th to the 13th centuries. Likewise, though the manuscript’s individual poets are largely anonymous, its authorship is generally regarded as a group of clerics known as the Goliards. Highly educated and critical of medieval institutions, the Goliards were wandering minstrels whose bawdy poetry subverted notions of chivalry we associate with the Middle Ages.

Like the cantata, most of the manuscript’s poetry is in Latin (the lingua franca of learned men at the time), with scattered fragments of Middle High German and Provençal, a now-archaic form of French. Marks designating stressed and unstressed syllables are present on every page, and about a quarter of the poems are accompanied by neumes, a form of rudimentary musical notation.

It is a reasonable inference, then, that the manuscript was intended to be sung or read aloud. Indeed, from all outward appearances, the Carmina Burana manuscript resembles a breviary, the compilation of psalms and readings which were recited throughout the church year. But, due to the often-irreverent nature of its contents, this distinctive format may have been designed as an elaborate visual pun.

Scattered throughout the manuscript are eight beautifully-rendered illustrations on topics pertinent to the texts: The Wheel of Fortune; a peaceful woodland scene; a young man presenting his lover with a flower; a double-paneled illustration portraying two scenes from the Dido and Aeneas myth and four tavern scenes, depicting men drinking, throwing dice, playing backgammon and playing chess, respectively.

It’s important to note that the sequence of poems as they are presently configured is not the order in which they were originally compiled. Rather, the current ordering was presumably completed when the volume was rebound in the 18th century, and the resulting collection, for all its virtues, is jumbled and incomplete.

Of particular note is the sheet that presently serves as the cover page: the famous poem, “O Fortuna,” and its corresponding illustration, The Wheel of Fortune. Formerly located elsewhere, the page was likely given such a prominent position due to its thematic importance and the grandeur of its illustration.

When reconfigured in their original sequence, the poems can be grouped into four major sections by virtue of their similar content: Moral and Satirical Poetry, Songs of Love and Nature, Gaming and Drinking Songs, and Religious Dramas.

One of the eight illustrations in the Carmina Burana manuscript, this one depicting men playing chess
In 1934, Orff acquired a copy of the Schmeller edition of the manuscript, and was immediately riveted. Determined to compose a cantata using its poetry, he enlisted the aid of a friend, the law student and archivist Michel Hofmann.

Together, they chose twenty-three poems to receive a musical setting (with two excerpts from one poem serving as the basis for two different movements in the cantata). Often, only a portion of a given poem was used, as in the case of “Veris leta facies,” in which three of the poem’s four stanzas were musicalized, and “Dulcissime,” in which a single line of text forms the basis of an entire (albeit brief) musical movement.

Furthermore, it appears that Orff was either unaware of or intentionally ignored the melodies as notated in the manuscript itself, and the resulting music he composed bears no resemblance to the plainchant which would have originally accompanied much of the manuscript’s poetry.

When assembling the poems into a libretto, Orff and Hofmann made significant structural changes, cutting, pasting, and rearranging to suit their preferred musical and dramatic trajectories. The finished product is comprised of five major sections: Fortune, Empress of the World; In the Spring/In the Meadow; In the Tavern; Court of Love/Blancheflour and Helen; and a reprise of Fortune, Empress of the World.

The opening, Fortune, Empress of the World, consists of two of the manuscript’s Moral and Satirical poems. In the Spring contains texts from the section on Love and Nature (with the exception of “Chramer, gip die varwe mir,” which is derived from a speech given by Mary Magdalene in the manuscript’s Religious Dramas).

In the Tavern unsurprisingly draws heavily from the Drinking and Gaming section of the manuscript (with the exception of “Olim lacus colueram,” repurposed from Love and Nature). In Court of Love, Orff returns to the poems on Love and Nature, followed by a concluding reprise of the cantata’s first movement, “O Fortuna.”
**Rota Fortunae: The Wheel of Fortune**

The *Rota Fortunae*, or Wheel of Fortune, is a widespread aesthetic motif that appears in many works of art and literature from antiquity to the medieval era and beyond, symbolizing the unpredictable and often volatile nature of Fate.

The concept likely originated in Babylon, but also appears in India, and was later developed in Ancient Greece and Rome. In the Middle Ages, the trope found its way into the works of such diverse artists and writers as Dante (c. 1265-1321), Boccaccio (1313-1375), Chaucer (1343-1400) and Jean Miélot (?-1472), as well as inspiring the tenth trump card of the Tarot deck.

In most incarnations, a woman, representing Fortuna (the Roman goddess of Fate) or Tyche (her Greek equivalent), is depicted spinning a wheel which controls the destiny of humankind.

In the illustration found in the *Carmina Burana* manuscript, the Wheel has four sides – *regno* (I reign) at the top, *regnavi* (I have reigned) descending, *sum sine regno* (I am without a kingdom) at the bottom, and *regnabo* (I will reign) ascending – representing various stages of human fortune or misfortune, as the case may be. Artists and writers in medieval times preferred to focus on the Wheel’s negative aspects, cautioning that the potential for disaster was omnipresent, even for those at the top.

The *Rota Fortunae* appears frequently in the *Carmina Burana* manuscript, but Orff further heightened its significance by virtue of its placement within the cantata’s structure: two of the poems which describe the turning of Fate’s Wheel in explicit detail, “*O Fortuna*” and “*Fortunae plango vulnera,*” form the textual basis of *Carmina*’s first, second, and final movements.

Musically, Orff’s pervasive use of abrupt dynamic shifts from *piano* to *forte* and back again recalls the erratic nature of Fate’s fluctuations. And though the Wheel is only one of many symbols found in the cantata, the shattering musical language used to evoke its ferocity attests to its power to shape our destinies from birth to death and everything in between.