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MUSIC; Orff's Musical And Moral Failings

By RICHARD TARUSKIN

DON'T look now, but Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra are teasing us again about music and politics. In recent concerts they have given us politically excruciating but musically attractive cantatas by Franz Schmidt, who toadied to Hitler, and Sergei Prokofiev, who did it to Stalin. As a follow-up, one might expect a program of musically excruciating but politically attractive works.

But no, we don't need the American Symphony for that. Such pieces are all over the map, what with Joseph Schwantner's banalities in praise of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ("New Morning for the World"), John Harbison's in furtherance of Middle East peace ("Four Psalms"), Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's in defense of the environment (Symphony No. 4: "The Gardens") or Philip Glass's on behalf of every piety in sight (Symphony No. 5: "Requiem, Bardo, Nirmanakaya"), just to name a few.

Instead, the same formula, with its implied torture to our collective conscience, will be ridden again, pitting politics everybody loves to hate against music many hate to love but find vexingly irresistible. Under the title "After 'Carmina Burana': A Historical Perspective," the orchestra is sponsoring a daylong symposium next Sunday at LaGuardia High School near Lincoln Center, and a concert on May 16 at Avery Fisher Hall, devoted to Carl Orff's "Catulli Carmina" (1943) and his rarely heard "Trionfo di Afrodite" (1951).

Together with "Carmina Burana" (1936), which, as it happens, Zdenek Macal and the New Jersey Symphony will perform beginning on May 16 at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, these two cantatas -- or, as originally intended, choral ballets -- make up a trilogy called "Trionfi," first performed at La Scala in Milan in 1953. Widely regarded as a magnified (or inflated) and popularized (or dumbed-down) sequel to (or knockoff of) "Les Noces," Stravinsky's choral ballet of 1923, "Trionfi" stands as a monument to . . . what? The triumph of artistic independence (and prescient accessibility) in an age of musical hermeticism and conformism mandated by the cold war? The persistence of instinctive affirmation of life in an age of thermonuclear threat and existential disillusion? The survival of Nazi-inspired artistic barbarism under cover of classical simplicity?

The possibilities don't end there, although these three have had vocal exponents, and they will probably get a heated airing at the symposium. But why, exactly, has the Nazi taint stuck so doggedly to Orff, who (unlike Herbert von Karajan or Elisabeth Schwarzkopf) never belonged to the Nazi Party? Is it because two-thirds of his trilogy was very successfully performed under Nazi auspices? If being loved by the Nazis were enough to damn, we would have to take leave not only of Orff, and not only of Wagner, but also of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. Is it because Orff's cantatas are the only musical fruits of the Third Reich (apart, perhaps, from the later, less popular operas of Richard Strauss) to survive in active repertory today? Then why do we tolerate all that Soviet music?

Or is it merely because the Nazis offer an "objective" pretext for dismissal to those who subjectively disapprove of Orff's music for other reasons: reasons having to do, could it be, with prudery?

Unlike Prokofiev and Shostakovich, Orff never wrote music in actual praise of his Leader or explicitly touting a totalitarian party line. Prokofiev's "Toast to Stalin," performed by the American Symphony in December, is fairly well known. Shostakovich's film score for "The Fall of Berlin" ends with a resounding paean to the dictator. (It will take a heap of ingenuity to find hidden dissidence in that one.) Both Russians also wrote plenty of Communist mass songs to order. Orff's controversial cantatas, by contrast, set medieval German poetry (in Latin and Bavarian dialect), and classical texts by Catullus, Sappho and Euripides in the original languages, along with additional Latin lyrics by the composer himself, a trained "humanist."

The worst Orff can be accused of is opportunism. He accepted a 1938 commission from the mayor of Frankfurt to compose incidental music for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" to replace Mendelssohn's racially banned score. But even here, an

extenuating case can be argued. Shakespeare's play had long attracted Orff. He had composed music for it as early as 1917, and he added more in 1927, before there was any Nazi government to curry favor with.

Shabbier than anything he did under the Nazis was his behavior immediately after the war. An obvious beneficiary of the regime, one of only 12 composers to receive a full military exemption from Goebbels's propaganda ministry, Orff regaled his denazification interrogators with half-truths and outright lies to get himself classified Gray-Acceptable (that is, professionally employable) by the Allied military government.

The "Midsummer" score, he assured them, was not composed under orders (true only insofar as a commission can be distinguished from an order). "He swears that it was not written to try to replace Mendelssohn's music," reads the official report filed by the American officer in charge of political screenings, "and he admits that he chose an unfortunate moment in history to write it." Orff also maintained that "he never had any connection with prominent Nazis." The truth of such a statement depends, of course, on definitions: of "prominent" as well as "Nazi."

But these prevarications pale before the whopper Orff put over on his personal hearing officer: Capt. Newell Jenkins, a musician who had studied with Orff before the war and who later became familiar to New York audiences as the director of Clarion Concerts, a pioneering early-music organization. Orff convinced Jenkins that he had been a cofounder of the White Rose resistance movement and that he had fled for his life into the Bavarian Alps when the "other" founder, the musicologist Kurt Huber, was exposed, arrested and executed in 1943.

Orff and Huber were well acquainted: they had collaborated on an anthology of Bavarian folk songs. As Huber's widow has testified, when Huber was arrested, Orff was terrified at the prospect of guilt by association. But his claim to that very "guilt" in retrospect has been exploded by the historian Michael H. Kater in his recent book "Composers of the Nazi Era."

Not every recent commentator has been as scrupulous as Mr. Kater. Alberto Fassone, the author of the Orff article in the second edition of The New Grove Dictionary (sure to become the standard source of information on the composer for inquiring English-speaking minds), colludes with the composer's exculpating equivocations. Orff told his screeners that "his music was not appreciated by the Nazis and that he never got a favorable review by a Nazi music critic." Mr. Fassone elaborates: "The fact that 'Carmina Burana' had been torn to shreds by Herbert Gerigk, the influential critic of the Völkischer Beobachter, who referred to the 'incomprehensibility of the language' colored by a 'jazzy atmosphere,' caused many of Germany's opera intendants to fear staging the work after its premiere." Case dismissed?

Not so fast. Gerigk's paper was the main Nazi Party organ, to be sure, and the critic was a protégé of Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi ideologist. But another reviewer, Horst Büttner, a protégé of Joseph Goebbels, waxed ecstatic after the 1937 premiere about "the radiant, strength-filled life-joy" Orff's settings of bawdy medieval ballads expressed through their "folklike structure." And that opinion won out. By 1940, even the Völkischer Beobachter was on board, hailing "Carmina Burana" as "the kind of clear, stormy and yet always disciplined music that our time requires."

Phrases like "strength-filled life-joy," and the emphasis on stormy discipline, do begin to smack of Nazi slogans. Through them we can leave the composer's person behind and go back to the music, which is all that matters now. To saddle the music with the composer's personal shortcomings would merely be to practice another kind of guilt by association; and in any case, Orff is dead. His works are what live and continue to affect our lives. Even if we admit that "Carmina Burana" was the original "Springtime for Hitler," with its theme of vernal lust and its tunes redolent (according to a German acquaintance of mine) of the songs sung in the 30's by Nazi youth clubs, can't we take Hitler away now and just leave innocent springtime -- or, at least, innocent music?

Sorry, no. The innocence of music is for many an article of faith, if often an expedient one. The German conductor Christian Thielemann, recently embroiled in discussions over whether he really called Daniel Barenboim's dispute with the Staatsoper in Berlin "the Jewish mess," sought refuge in the notion. "What has C sharp minor got to do with fascism?" he asked a British interviewer. But that is like asking what the letter F has to do with fascism. It all depends on what letters follow it -- that is, on the context. Sing the "Horst Wessel Lied" in C sharp minor -- all right, that tune is in the major, but just suppose -- and the key can have a lot to do with fascism.

But there are more sophisticated ways of asking the question. The American musicologist Kim Kowalke notes that Orff first employed his primitivistic idiom, the one now associated with his "Nazi" pieces, in songs predating the Nazi regime, to words by the eventual Hitler refugee Franz Werfel and by the eventual Communist poet laureate Bertolt Brecht. Armed with this information, Mr. Kowalke seeks to challenge a position that many, this writer included, have taken: "If the musical idiom

of 'Carmina Burana' derives from settings of Brecht's poetry, can it inherently inscribe, as Brecht would argue in general and Richard Taruskin would assert in particular, a 'celebration of Nazi youth culture'?"

YET surely Mr. Kowalke knows that his italicized word loads the dice. There is no inherent difference, perhaps, between music that accompanies leftist propaganda and music that accompanies rightist propaganda. But one may argue nevertheless that Orff's music is well -- nay, obviously -- suited to accompany propaganda. What makes its suitability so obvious, one may argue further, are indeed its inherent qualities. And such music, one may conclude, can have undesirable effects on listeners, similar to those of propaganda.

The first point -- that Orff's music is "obviously" suited to accompany propaganda -- is corroborated by its ubiquitous employment for such purposes even today. Not all propaganda is political, after all; and most people who recognize Orff's music today do so because of its exploitation in commercials for chocolate, beer and juvenile action heroes (not to mention Michael Jackson's "Dangerous" tour). Alex Ross has argued in The New York Times that the co-optation of "Carmina Burana" for sales propaganda "is proof that it contains no diabolical message, indeed that it contains no message whatsoever." But change the word "contains" to "channels" and Orff is back on the hook. His music can channel any diabolical message that text or context may suggest, and no music does it better.

How does it accomplish this sinister task? That's what Orff learned from Stravinsky, master of the pounding rhythm and the endless ostinato. Repeat anything often enough, Dr. Goebbels said, and it becomes the truth. Stravinsky himself has been accused of the dehumanizing effect we now attribute to mass propaganda, most notoriously by Theodor W. Adorno in his 1948 book, "Philosophy of New Music." But Stravinsky's early music, though admittedly "written with an ax" (as the composer put it to his fellow Russian exile Vladimir Ussachevsky), is subtlety itself compared with the work of his German imitator.

And yes, "imitator" is definitely the word. "Carmina Burana" abounds in out-and-out plagiarisms from "Les Noces." The choral yawp ("niet-niet-niet-niet-niet!") at the end of "Circa mea pectora" (No. 18 of the 25 tiny numbers that make up Orff's 40-minute score) exactly reproduces the choral writing at the climax of Stravinsky's third tableau. Another little choral mantra ("trillirivos-trillirivos-trillirivos") in Orff's No. 20 ("Veni, veni, venias") echoes the acclamations to the patron saints halfway through the second tableau of Stravinsky's ballet. And these are only the most blatant cases.

In "Catulli Carmina," Orff aped the distinctive four-piano-plus-percussion scoring of "Les Noces," upping the percussion ante from 6 players on 16 instruments to 12 on 23. Surrounding a central episode in which the story of Catullus's doomed love for Lesbia is danced to an accompaniment of a cappella choruses, the piano-cum-percussion clangor accompanies torrid bust- and crotch-groping lyrics by the composer: real "pornoph ony," to recall the epithet The New York Sun lavished on Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District" in 1935. (In the noble tradition of Krafft-Ebing, at least half of Orff's Latin verses are left untranslated on record jackets I've seen.)

Finally, in "Trionfo di Afrodite" Orff copied the actual scenario of "Les Noces," a ritualized wedding ceremony, although the music now harks back to Stravinsky's more decorous mythological period with echoes of "Oedipus Rex" and "Perséphone," along with an unexpected fantasy in the middle on the Shrovetide music from "Petrouchka." Even the most seemingly original music in "Trionfo," Orff's imaginary equivalent of the lascivious Greek "chromatic genus" (to which he sets the bride and groom's lines), turns out to be a Stravinsky surrogate, derived from the scale of alternating half and whole steps that Stravinsky inherited from his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, who got it from Liszt.

Even if one agrees with Adorno's strictures about Stravinsky, though, one must also allow that the degree of barbarization represented by Orff's leering rewrite so far exceeds Stravinsky's as to amount to a difference in kind. When "Les Noces" is actually performed as a ballet, especially in Bronislava Nijinska's original choreography, the visible characters behave with what a contemporary folklorist called the "profound gravity" and "cool, inevitable intention" of ritual. They march off to the wedding bed in a kind of robots' lockstep, symbolizing the grip of remorseless, immemorial tradition that ensures the immortality of the race even as it diminishes individual freedom of choice.

By contrast, the penultimate scene in "Trionfo di Afrodite," to a text by Sappho, may be the most graphic musical description of the sex act ever put on paper. Every sigh, moan and squeal is precisely notated, so that despite the ostensibly recondite text in a dead language, even the dullest member of the audience will get the titillating point. (At least Orff was an equal-opportunity orgiast: his bride wails and whimpers as much as his groom, whereas in "Les Noces" the bride, silent at the end, is just the groom's "nocturnal amusement.")

STRAVINSKY'S repetitions are offset by rhythmic irregularities so that they elude easy memorization and remain surprising even after many hearings. As a result, the overall mood of "Les Noces" and "The Rite of Spring," his loudest pseudo-aboriginal scores, is grim, even terrifying. Orff's rhythms are uniformly foursquare, his melodies catchy, his moods ingratiating. His music provides what the Australian musicologist Margaret King recently called "an instant tape loop for the mind," something that, grasped fully and immediately, reverberates in the head the way propaganda is supposed to do. As Mr. Ross put it, even after half a century or more, Orff's music remains "as adept as ever at rousing primitive, unreflective enthusiasm."

Is that a reason to love it or to hate it? Everybody likes to indulge the herd instinct now and then, as Thomas Mann so chillingly reminded us in "Mario and the Magician." It is just because we like it that we ought to resist it. Could the Nazi Holocaust have been carried off without expertly rousing primitive, unreflective enthusiasm in millions? Was Orff's neo-paganism unrelated to the ideology that reigned in his homeland when he wrote his most famous scores?

In 1937, the year in which "Carmina Burana" enjoyed its smashing success, the National Socialists were engaged in a furious propaganda battle with the churches of Germany, countering the Christian message of compassion with neo-pagan worship of holy hatred. And what could better support the Nazi claim that the Germans, precisely in their Aryan neo-paganism, were the true heirs of Greco-Roman ("Western") culture than Orff's animalistic settings of Greek and Latin poets?

Did Orff intend precisely this? Was he a Nazi? These questions are ultimately immaterial. They allow the deflection of any criticism of his work into irrelevant questions of rights: Orff's right to compose his music, our right to perform and listen to it. Without questioning either, one may still regard his music as toxic, whether it does its animalizing work at Nazi rallies, in school auditoriums, at rock concerts, in films, in the soundtracks that accompany commercials or in Avery Fisher Hall.

Photos: Carl Orff. (Friedrich Rauch/Camera Press)(pg. 1); Igor Stravinsky in Venice, circa 1957. (Marvin Koner/Columbia Records); Michael Tilson Thomas conducting the San Francisco Symphony in Stravinsky's "Noces," the model for Orff's "Trionfi," at Carnegie Hall in February. (Chris Lee)(pg. 35)